

It was the year 1912 and I was living in Estonia, one of the Baltic Provinces of Russia. I was 20 years old and a student of the Imperial University of Jurjew, one of the eight universities of The Russian Empire. My two cousins were nurses and they were going to Tiflis, Russia, to work for the Red Cross. They thought I could find some work during my vacation. I certainly needed the money because my family was very poor and I thought it would be a bit of an adventure for me also. I met my my cousins half-way at a railroad station. We were midway on our journey when we heard that the German Army occupied Estonia and I would be cut off from my home.

We arrived in Tiflis and then we went on to Batum. We had to cross the Black Sea. The Black Sea was mined and it was very dangerous crossing it. When we landed in Trabezond, my cousins got jobs in a hospital, immediately. I did not fit into any specific place, but I got a job as a clerk. I had to sleep in a dormitory with many other women. There was no privacy in the dormitory and we were served last, and had to eat leftover food.

I was assigned to an office where I had to fill out blank forms - a routine clerical job. I felt superior to the soldiers who were assigned there, who could only read and write. They sensed that I felt superior to them and teased me about it. It was not hostile teasing, but annoying. For instance, they nailed my books to the table and there was often something wrong with my chair.

It had just happened that the personal secretary of

the chief of the entire district drank himself to death and the president of the division was looking for a replacement. He was told that a girl who was a university student was available. It turned out that the head of the district was a graduate of the Imperial University of Jurjew. I got the job as his personal secretary. I worked for him for one season.

My situation changed like magic. I was given a private room in one of the Arab homes and I had a first-class seat during mealtime. Suddenly, I became ill with malaria, but again I had the best of care in a hospital where my cousins were nurses. Soon after that the city was shut off because an epidemic of the plague broke out.

The rich Arabs had wonderful homes surrounded by tall walls. All the garbage was usually dumped outside of these walls. The area was infested with rats. The rats were as big as dogs and they ran around the streets freely. A hunt of the rats began and the people were paid for catching them. Yet the surrounding countryside was beautiful. Near the sea there were swamps, but a bit away from the swamps were magnificent mountains.

While I was in Trabesond, I tried to find Jewish people. I found a Jewish family, but we could not communicate with them because they spoke a strange language. By using a few Hebrew words we made ourselves understood. The veterinary doctor in charge of the horses was Jewish and so was the bookkeeper. There was a young man, an engineer. What his function was, I do not know exactly, but he was Jewish also. Once he asked me to go to

a meeting where he was to entertain the soldiers. He started out by telling them jokes about Armenians and other nationalities. I was certain he would be killed, when suddenly he started telling jokes about Jewish people. The jokes were so funny that it saved the evening for him.

Finally, the Russian Army withdrew from Trabezond and the Red Cross division was closed. I was to return to Estonia. There was no change - only large paper bills. The only way I could get paid was to get a joint check with the veterinary doctor. Thus we were forced to travel.

Together we found ourselves on a large steamer. Groups of Russian soldiers were designating houses. There was a spirit among them of revolution - a revolution against the intelligentsia whom they blamed for the war. All during the trip the soldiers held meetings, discussing what to do with the intelligentsia. I and the veterinary doctor were the intelligentsia. They did not know if they wanted to kill us or throw us into the sea. Luckily they did not carry out either of their threats. After we arrived in the Crimea, we exchanged the check for small paper money, with considerable loss, and were then able to separate. One of my cousins fell in love with a Greek gentleman and she and her sister went to Greece.

I continued my journey to reach Estonia. For a long time I did not know where I was going. I hoped I was going home. Soldiers were coming home from Germany on trains (train-cars for 8 horses and 4 men). They had to sit on their baggage for

comfort. Whenever we reached a train station they would go for tea. Usually, they would treat me to a glass of tea. I could not refuse to drink from the same glass because they would have felt insulted and I did not have money to buy my own tea. Sometimes they would get tired of the slow-moving train and then they would decide to run the train themselves. When they came to the decision to run our train themselves, I would get off and wait for the next train.

Finally I boarded a real passenger train. I was very pleased to sit down and there was a place for me to keep my baggage. Once the station master must have felt sorry for me; so he took me to the car that carried the mail and told them I was a relative of his.

Once a drunk was on the train. He decided that I was against the government and ordered me to get off the moving train. He threatened to kill me. He did have a gun. I prepared to jump off as I had no choice. Luckily the train stopped for a moment and I got off safely, but my baggage was left on the train. I went through a field and found a Jewish home, where I stayed overnight. The next morning I returned to the railroad and boarded another train. The train stopped in Minsk, a Jewish city which was part of "The Pale of Settlements." At the time it was occupied by Germans.

In Minsk, I started to look for a Zionist family, as I myself was a Zionist. I found the family of Kaplan. There were four older daughters and a little girl of eight. The Kaplans



asked me to teach the eight year old to speak German in return for one meal a day. This agreement was fine with me. Mrs. Kaplan arranged with a rich Jewish woman, who had a house, to let me have the maid's room. The woman supplied the linen. There was running water and a bathroom. In return for the room I did small household jobs.

I learned that the German Police Department was looking for a translator to transcribe orders to the population. The Chief of Police was a kindly man. He was glad to find someone who spoke German well.

I was amazed at the orders given by the German police to the population. There was some sense to an order that people must walk on one side of the street in the right direction - on the other side of the street in the opposite direction. It was forbidden that old women should get off the sidewalk and urinate on the curb - but when it said, "Alle Abortions platz müssen ausgereinigt - werden," I was amazed that Jewish people, with so many kids around, should have so many places where abortions were performed.

Tho the Chief of Police was a kind man, I cannot say that about "Komendature" where all Jews had to constantly register. The Jews, according to custom, had to wear hats when entering a room - the officers of the Komendature would use switches to knock the Jews' hats off so as to leave bloody welts on their foreheads. Their contempt and cruelty had no end.

I met many nice young people in Minsk. There were a

brother and sister who invited me to their family, where I could take a bath. Mrs. Kaplan was very eager to get me some material as a gift and let her seamstress make some dresses. I was too proud to accept it. With some of the money I earned I got myself some more simple clothing. I advertised that I wished to teach German. A former Jurjew medical student, who was stationed nearby as an assistant doctor, got in touch with me, asking if I needed some money. I refused.

I found a job as a kindergarten teacher to take a group of pre-school children to a playground where we fed them and entertained them. It was heartbreaking to see the children. In the morning they would get a glass of tea and a piece of bread. At noon we would take them to a soup station where they would get soup made of potato peelings. While we were in the garden, there were other women outside cursing us because their children were not admitted. As I walked the children to the soup kitchen, my group was swelling - I closed an eye.

It was more difficult for me to live with the Kaplan family - to see the eight year old refuse good food when others were starving.

The work of the kindergarten group was supported by a Jewish organization called "O.R.T.". It stood for the Russian words meaning "an Organization to Improve the Health of the Jews."

The man who managed the money was a young director (a doctor) (the money was collected from the Jewish public). The kindergarten teachers hated him. They felt he could give more for the children

and I did not blame them.

One day we decided that the children needed a bath badly, but the teachers were certain the director would consider it a luxury. They asked that I should try to approach him since I was new.

I approached him. He said there was no money for a bath. I would not let go - I told him cute stories about children; he was a doctor - how about hygiene? When he gave me money for the bathhouse, I asked how about towels - shall we come out wet? When he gave me money for towels, I teased him, saying, "Do you realize that I also will get a bath?"

I was surprised that the teachers, instead of being glad I got the money for the bath, accused me that I was seductive with the doctor. They made me feel as if I prostituted myself to get the children a bath.

The day came - Friday morning - when we marched to the bathhouse. The mothers had prepared a bundle of clean clothing for every child. The bathhouse was for all of us and there were only two peasant women.

Did the children have a wonderful time! They even did not cry when I scrubbed their heads with soap that went into their eyes.

One of the peasant women went out first. She looked into her bundle and started to scream: "Thief! Thief!" - accusing the woman who went before her of having stolen her money. She was so upset that she tied a little apron over her naked body and ran down the street.



The Jewish men were just closing their stores for the Sabbath. They chased the woman to return to the bathhouse. When she returned, she found her money intact.

The time came when the Germans also occupied Estonia and I could go home. At the train many of my friends saw me off. Mrs. Kaplan finally persuaded me to take a parting gift - a little watch. The teacher gave me a pound of coffee for my mother. (Coffee was unobtainable at the time). The O.R.T. doctor was there with a bouquet of flowers. At the time I thought he was there to spite the hostile teachers.

On the German train I learned my mistake in translating "Ein abortion platz" - was on the train for a toilet.

As I write this note, I wonder whether I was not mistaken that the O.R.T. doctor came to see me off to spite the teachers. He probably was glad to see me get home. He probably did appreciate that I did not approach him with hate and also that I had a sense of humor.

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