

Chicago might not have been a hub of Jewish life at the turn of the century. But enough Jews did gather there, after greeting the New York shores, to make the Windy City an important town within the Diaspora. First from Germany, then from Poland and Russia, they came — leaving behind the hatred of the old world and hoping to find in the new one a life which had eluded them for centuries.

One such person stepped off the train that summer of 1895. Ephraim Greenberg* stood in bewilderment with his wife, his five children, and his entire possessions, the last pathetically sealed inside one suitcase. Nestled in the pocket of his long black cloak was a slip of paper with an address: his uncle's. The man had promised him work, which Ephraim hoped would be the beginning of a promising new life.

It was July and hot, even hotter than the steamcooker that was New York. Ignoring the ice cream vendor, who loudly hawked his tempting wares at a cart under the timetables, Ephraim steered his family and baggage through the terminal. Midwesterners — farmers in dirty overalls and businessmen in straw hats and tapered suits — eyed this foreigner keenly. Ephraim could feel their reaction. But he was used to it. At least these people didn't throw things at him, which was quite the norm in his home town of Lvov, Poland.

The family walked instead of rode. Carriages and streetcars were plentiful, but Ephraim was eager to save the few dollars he had earned in New York and stashed away inside

New Life In A New World

By CHAYAH SARAH CANTOR

** This is a true story; only the names are fictional.*

his suitcase. He did not know yet when he might be working in Chicago, though his uncle, a factory foreman, had offered "a great job — you'll be a millionaire compared to what you'd make back home." That was what the letter had said. Uncle Max, or Moshe as he had been called in Lvov, had booked passage out of Hamburg back in '81, in the wake of the great pogroms.

That was fourteen years ago. And indeed, it appeared that Uncle Moshe, or Max, had done well. Money had poured into Poland, with postcards of fancy buildings supposedly housing thousands of European Jews. Some even dwelled in mansions, his uncle said. The lure of the chance to live like a human being had finally prompted Ephraim to book third-class passage to America, the *Goldene Medina* (Golden Land).

His Uncle Max awaited him in a three-story wooden structure, propped up by wood that still carried the scars of the Great Fire which had swept Chicago nearly two decades

ago. By American standards, the place was no mansion; by Polish standards, it was a palace.

Uncle Max, who sported a handlebar mustache, pleated pants, and matching white vest, gaped at this greenhorn (new immigrant), whose wedding was the last time they had met. Chomping his cigar, the older man offered his nephew refreshment, which Ephraim turned down after questioning the *kashrus*.

His uncle roared, "Not to worry, kid. We got butchers here. The stockyards are in Chicago, you know. This is a great town. Paradise compared to New York."

Uncle Max introduced Ephraim to his new employer, a blond-haired, blue-eyed, fourth-generation Yankee. Ephraim whispered, "Does he know about Shabbos?"

His uncle's smile faded. "Yeah. Don't worry. I told him you'd be willing to work extra the other days."

Ephraim was tempted to ask about *yom tov* as well, grateful that the next one was still a ways off. But he held his tongue. At least he was



One such person stepped off the train that summer of 1895.

being given the chance to keep Shabbos. In New York, where he and his family had stayed for ten weeks, he had been fired ten times because

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of his Sabbath observance. Here he had found a job that just might be permanent.

Yet, after three weeks there,

Ephraim began to wonder just how long he could stand the conditions. The factory and its environs were scarcely better than what he had left

behind on the Lower East Side — grimy, overcrowded, and overwhelmed by tenements. He himself worked at a loom in the back of a warehouse that smelled like a stable.

The hours — fourteen a day — barely allowed him time during the week to see his wife and family. Because of Shabbos, he had to stay on till long after dark. In pitch blackness he would make his way home and, after evening prayers, collapse into bed.

Through the good offices of his uncle, Ephraim managed to rent a four-room apartment in a monstrosity overlooking the shanties of the Jewish "ghetto." But the rent was reasonable — three dollars a month — and his apartment at least lay on the ground floor, allowing him easy access. In addition, it contained a small porch, just diagonal from an abandoned construction site. Sometimes, while reclining on a Shabbos afternoon, Ephraim spotted stray dogs sniffing and scratching through the debris.

Scenes like this brought to mind the villages "back home" — the peasants sprawling in the gutter and sleeping off their drinks, the remains of food left in the streets, which were picked at by humans and animals alike. Sadly Ephraim would remember his oldest son, Shraga, dead by pneumonia.

But he couldn't forget the good scenes either: the *cheder*, where, earlocks swaying, he had long ago pored over the alphabet. The smells of challah and unquestionably kosher food had filtered in through the windows of the school.

Ephraim now used part of his earnings to hire a *melamed*, a religious studies teacher, for his children. The

teacher lamented to Ephraim how, in a neighborhood of thousands, so few wanted to be Jewish. The elders chattered in Russian, Polish, German, and Yiddish, but sent the younger ones to public schools to learn English. Be American — that was the slogan. No, more than a slogan: it was an obsession. In

But soon he was faced with a more pressing problem. It occurred to Ephraim, as he broke his fast after Yom Kippur: were he back in Poland, he would be erecting his succah at this time.

exchange it offered a whole new life.

Life is better here, Ephraim reminded himself. He might even some day live in that illusory mansion. But deep down he wondered if it was worth the price.

Life, new or old, continued. Soon the days grew shorter, accompanied by cooling temperatures and gusts of northern winds. Ephraim fretted over having to approach his boss about the coming holidays. No doubt he might have to put on his walking shoes.

To his surprise, his boss grudgingly agreed. Ephraim had proven himself too good a worker to

lose, even if for seven days. During the Rosh Hashanah service, held in a *minyán* above a shoe store, Ephraim thanked G-d for the favors He had granted the Greenbergs, and pleaded with Him to maintain a decent livelihood for himself and his family.

But soon he was faced with a more pressing problem. It occurred to Ephraim, as he broke his fast after Yom Kippur: were he back in Poland, he would be erecting his *succah* at this time.

He put down his slice of bread and wandered to the porch. Directly above him rows of balconies from the fire escape were stacked like bookcases. During the bright summer days they offered shade; during the fall they created an obstruction — a legal obstruction which prevented him from building a *succah* on the porch.

"Ephraim! Where are you going?" called his wife Leba as she ladled some vegetable soup.

"To the roof," Ephraim answered. He threw on his coat and swung open the door.

Some five stories above, Ephraim nearly collided with lines of laundry, which extended from a rafter from one end to the next and dangled low, nearly touching the asphalt. A pair of women jabbered, and one of them pointed at the Jew in black and snickered. Hiding his revulsion, Ephraim went downstairs. No, he could not build a *succah* there, either. Not that he would want to.

Back home, he returned to his porch and gazed outward, and suddenly brightened. The construction site, occasional home to the stray dogs, abutted his apartment building. Was it possible that the two could legally merge?

It was hard to tell which was the bigger monstrosity. The site, which confronted Ephraim every day, was pitted with divots from work long ago started and never finished. Apparently, the story went, a building was supposed to have been built over the lot and the area now occupied by Ephraim's apartment building. But whatever construction had been done was razed by the Great Fire. The project had been abandoned and Ephraim's building built in its stead.

So the site lay, collecting abuse — dirt and dust from the harsh fall weather, garbage from drunken neighbors. Occasionally, like a shrine, it attracted vagrants, even criminals. Children stayed away, calling it haunted.

This, Ephraim decided, was where he might celebrate the holy festival. Clutching a lantern, he walked forward. Quite a few times he stumbled, and when something under his boot squished, he winced. He expected to find a robber or, G-d forbid, a murderer, waiting behind a board to strike. Nevertheless, Ephraim ventured as far as the center, so that he ended up straddling two mounds of bricks.

The place definitely lived up to its reputation. The entire earth was scaly, like a fish, and caked with fossilized waste. One area sparkled glassily under the moonlight, catching his attention. It was there, he decided, that the ground was the

most level and suitable for a *succah*.

Carefully Ephraim walked back. For probably the first time since he had come to America, he truly wished he were back in Poland, building his *succah* walls amidst a courtyard filled with Jewish gaiety.



That evening, Ephraim, Leba, and five sleepy-eyed children lugged lanterns and shovels into the dirt and debris.

“**W**hat on earth?” The landlord rubbed a nose red with broken capillaries while he listened.

“I would like to lease the construction site,” Ephraim repeated. “Please. It is part of your

property, isn't it?”

“Why, yes, but . . .” The landlord shook his head in wonder. “Why, man, no one in his right mind sets foot there. That whole place shoulda been boarded up years ago.”

“Well, then, I'm lucky, aren't I, that it wasn't?” Ephraim smiled. “I'm willing to buy it off of you, sir.” He smiled more broadly.

The landlord shook his head. “I haven't got the *time*, man, to clean up that place. You'd need a good six months just to get all the junk and who knows whatever else out of there.”

“I can do it in three days,” Ephraim wheedled. “Once it's mine, my family will help me. I won't trouble you at all, sir.”

The landlord snorted, “You people. Already bewitchin' me with your strange ways. All right. You can rent the place for another two bucks a month. But I want four bucks now, deposit!”

“Four dollars!”

Ephraim echoed. But he stared at the calendar on the landlord's wall, a reminder that he had little time left in which to build.

He left and returned with the money. “I'll pay you the two dollars with the rest of the rent,” he said. “I guess I'll have to put in another hour a night at the factory. But I'll pay you — don't you worry. I'm a man of my word. In fact, I'd appreciate a written contract.”

“All right,” said the landlord. “The lot's yours. But I still wonder what on earth you want it for.”

"To build myself a mansion," answered Ephraim, grinning.

That evening, Ephraim, Leba, and five sleepy-eyed children lugged lanterns and shovels into the dirt and debris. Together with Yosel, the eldest surviving son, Ephraim pulled away a particularly stubborn board, letting loose an avalanche of smaller pieces.

In the interim a crowd had gathered. Other tenants, as well as neighbors from the adjacent shanties, came to stare, poke each other, and jest. A gust of cloudy wind drove them indoors, leaving the immigrant family to its antiquated Old World customs.

"Ta! Look!" called his second son. He pointed to the ground Ephraim had traversed earlier and the shards of glass that were sprinkled along its surface.

"So sweep it up," Ephraim replied.

"Aw, Ta, do I have to?" the boy whined. He had already grumbled over missing the next day's baseball game. "It's so much work."

"In Poland you didn't mind doing it."

"But this shiny glass here looks too pretty."

"A *succah* will look even prettier."

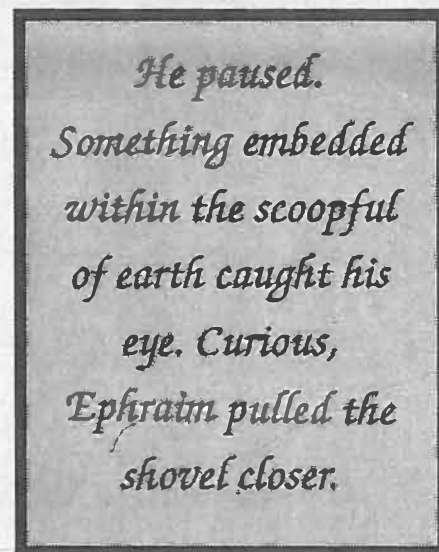
"I want Feivel to see what he's doing!" his wife snapped. "Why, in this dark he might cut himself."

"There seems to be an awful lot of glass too," Feivel added.

Ephraim sighed. He had wanted to get this over with by the end of the evening. Otherwise he might not be able to erect the *succah* until his last shift and the last minute. However,

his son wasn't the only one refusing to cooperate. The moon had sneaked behind a cloud, as if also trying to get out of its job.

"All right," he said. "Tomorrow morning, before I leave for the factory, I'll help Feivel brush it all away. I think the landlord might lend us an



extra broom." After I said I wouldn't bother him, he thought nervously. He stared at the sky and added ominously, "I just pray it doesn't rain."

No such luck. Water gushed down the next day, turning the site into molten clay and washing away the woody foundation. The children, nestled indoors and helping their mother peel potatoes for the holiday meals, laughed at the miniature flood, saying they should build an ark, not a tabernacle.

Alas, one person did not share their amusement. Coming home from work late that night, Ephraim stopped to survey the muddy ruin and clenched his teeth in frustration. An evening's work wasted. It was the only evening he could spare,

considering the additional hours he had to put in at work just to pay the rent increase. But somehow, for the mitzvah, he knew he'd have to make the time.

Early the next morning, however, the sun shone, bright and refreshed. Ephraim yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, wishing he could have stayed in bed just one more hour. His sons, too, forced themselves awake, while standing over the new hills and ignoring a pair of laundresses who had stopped to gawk.

"We'll have to level this ground good and solid," Ephraim began. He plunged the blade into the lumpy soil, softened by the previous day's rain.

He paused. Something embedded within the scoopful of earth caught his eye. Curious, Ephraim pulled the shovel closer.

A ring. A rusty but identifiable gold, the band gleaming under the morning light. On top of the band lay a diamond, and Ephraim hastily brushed off the dirt.

"Hey, Ta! Look!"

Feivel was pointing to the glassy particles. In the daylight, some of them turned out to be metallic. All were encrusted in the soil, which had loosened after the downpour. Ephraim bent down and plucked out one of them.

A brooch. This one was silver, and shaped like an arrow, with a sapphire inlay.

"For land's sakes!" one of the laundresses exclaimed. She dropped her load and advanced, stumbling over the ruts. Other pedestrians stopped to stare and came closer.

Feivel and Ephraim began sifting wildly through the dirt. One by one,

watches, necklaces, bracelets, and coins emerged, until at last they lay in one glittering heap.

The laundress was now hovering over the pit. "Why, I declare! Sally, c'mere. Will you get a load of this?"

Her friend waddled over. She too gasped. Behind them, pedestrians tiptoed for a better view.

"I think there's more," Feivel said, pointing. He, his father, and his brothers were now wide awake. "Isn't this the place we saw the other night? I thought it was glass."

"Quick! Fetch me a rake, somebody!" panted Ephraim.

The laundress hurried away and returned with the instrument. The others fell to their hands and knees, foraging through the slush.

A gentleman in a bowler hat and mud on his pants said, "You don't suppose they were left there by some lowlife, do you?"

"Wou'nt s'prise me in th' least," hollered a maid. "This ol' place was always a hang-out for 'em."

"I always did thought it was jinxed," her friend replied. Then she laughed. "Sure don't look like it brought bad luck."

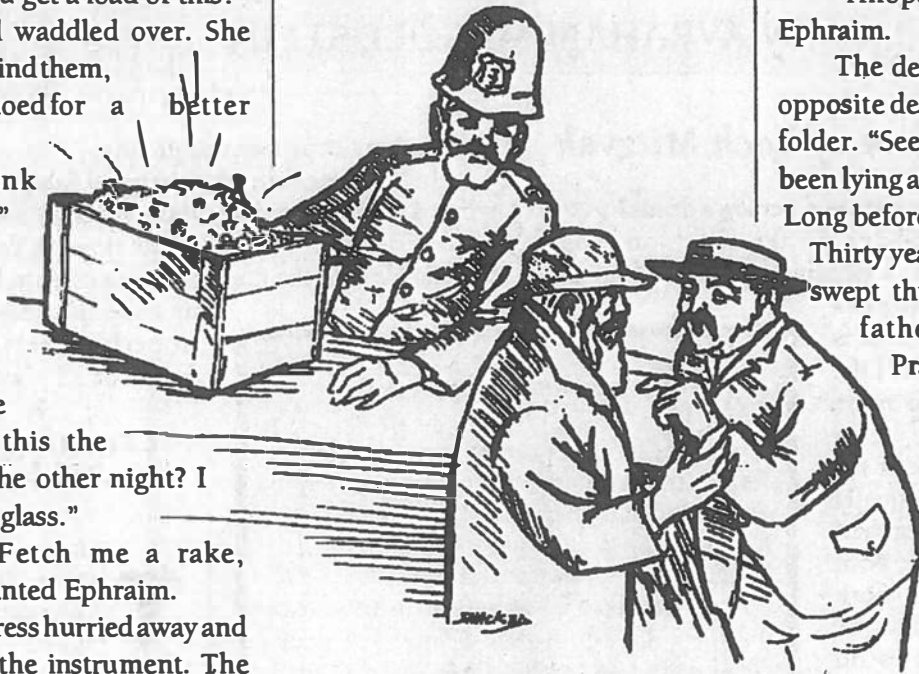
Ephraim paused. "Maybe . . . " Herose. "Might this be some robber's loot? Maybe he hid it here and planned to come back."

The crowd sobered. The man in the bowler hat dropped his coins. "Who knows what he might do if he does come back?"

The others moved away. One of the laundresses cried, "There's no

use waitin' to find out. I'm callin' the police!"

"Amazing," the sergeant whispered.



**"You?" Ephraim cried.
"Beg your pardon, sir, but it's me.
I leased it."**

At the police station, the sergeant sifted through the ornate remains. It was late afternoon; Ephraim had never made it to work. Instead, he had spent a busy day at the construction site, where the men in blue helped him uncover the rest of the treasure. Now it was confiscated — "for legal measures," the sergeant explained — while Ephraim and his landlord waited by the desk anxiously.

Standing next to the sergeant, the detective picked up a gold watch and studied the inscription on the back. "To my dear son Richard. Love, Mother. April 28, 1865."

"What do you think?" the

sergeant asked.

The detective put down the watch. "What do I think? Well, it looks like we have an open-and-shut case."

"An open-and-shut case?" asked Ephraim.

The detective sauntered to the opposite desk and raised a yellowed folder. "See this? This here report's been lying around since we was kids. Long before I got into this business.

Thirty years ago a rash of robberies swept through the Midwest. My father told me about it.

Practically every high-class family between here and Ohio lost something."

The detective sighed. "For thirty years they looked and looked. Finally they gave up. I don't know what ever happened to the robbers. Prob'ly they

killed each other and one of 'em buried the loot in that there site. Most likely, some of 'em got killed in the fire. Or when the fire wiped out the building, they kinda got discouraged and left. Who knows?"

"What about the original owners?" the landlord asked. "Shouldn't they be notified?"

"Can't even track 'em down at this point," the detective answered. "At lot happens in thirty years. Some, I reckon, passed away."

"So what becomes of all this?" Ephraim asked.

The detective grinned. "Well, sir, since it's been thirty years, and since no one can claim this stuff . . . I do believe that . . . finders' keepers?"

"I imagine it goes to the owner of the property," the sergeant said.

(Continued on Page 28)

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(Continued from page 15)

"Well, that's me, of course," declared the landlord happily.

"You?" Ephraim cried. "Beg your pardon, sir, but it's *me*. I leased it."

"Leased it?" cried the landlord.

"Yes," answered Ephraim. "You do remember our agreement, don't you? The four dollars I paid for the corner of that building? And the additional two dollars a month? I have the contract to prove it."

"But I still own it!" declared the landlord.

"But you entrusted me with the responsibility of cleaning it, saying it's mine," Ephraim said pertly. "It's specified right there in the contract."

"It seems rather strange, sir, that you leased only a corner of the building," said the sergeant. "A dirty, vacant lot. What on earth for?"

"To build a mansion!" Ephraim retorted.

"To rob me!" the landlord thundered. "Why, this . . . greedy, thieving Jew! Just like the rest of his kind! I'll sue! I'll sue!"

*The judge rapped
his gavel once,
twice on the edge
of the table.*

"Well, that settles it, then," replied the detective. "Take it to court."

The judge rapped his gavel once, twice on the edge of the table. At one end of the courtroom Ephraim rose, flanked by his lawyer and his Uncle Max.

Ephraim uncomfortably sported a three-piece suit of black silk and a white shirt of matching fabric. On his feet a pair of shining shoes had replaced the dusty boots he had brought with him from Poland. Both attire and attorney had cost him a pretty penny — a penny he still technically didn't have to his name, after months of litigation. Rather, it belonged to his uncle. But Uncle Max gladly obliged. He, more than anyone, was determined to see Ephraim win.

Ephraim was extremely grateful to Uncle Max. Not only did his uncle lend the necessary funds but, since the lot was closed for legal dispute,

he even allowed Ephraim to build a *succah* in his backyard. Uncle Max even helped build it — something he hadn't done in . . . well, fourteen years. And they celebrated in grand style, reminding Uncle Max of the Old Country.

"Mr. Ephraim Greenberg," declared the judge, "the court has decided that the lease signed by you and approved by Mr. Andrew Sullivan is valid. According to its terms, the corner of the building where both parties dwell was to be considered the property of Mr. Ephraim Greenberg. Hence, whatever was found there through the efforts of Mr. Greenberg is considered his lawful property."

A whoop went up through the back of the courtroom. Leba jumped up in joy, followed by Feivel and the four other children. The laundresses, who had come to watch along with several tenants of Ephraim's building, hugged her in joy. All of them had sided with this immigrant, whose court case represented their own hopes and dreams for a new life.

Proudly Ephraim stepped out, shaking whatever hand was offered. And he thanked G-d, who had apparently thanked *him* for observing the mitzvos no matter what the cost.

Later, Ephraim Greenberg moved into a mansion. A real one, with dozens of rooms, built of fine masonry. His other mansion, the *succah*, he lovingly built each year, in a special place at the back of his estate. He never again had to worry where to erect it.

He never again had to work overtime, either. In fact, he never again had to work. He traded in the sweatshop for a new life. **JB**

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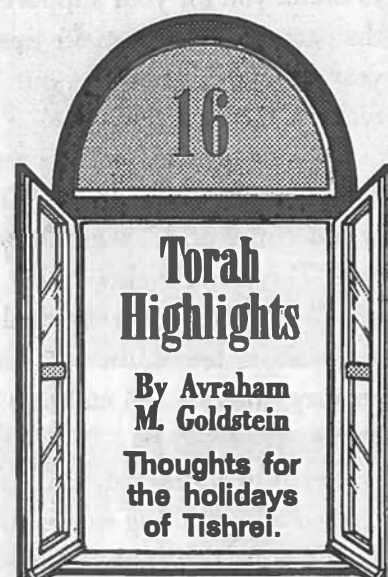
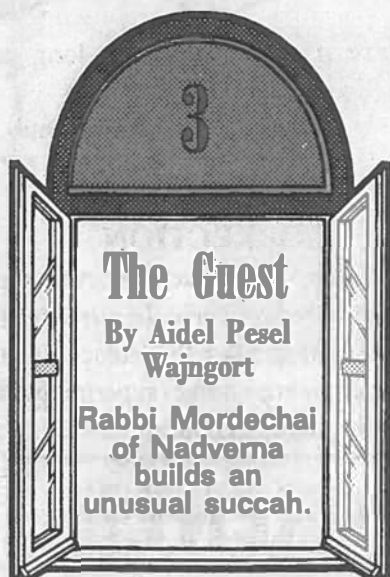
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TO OUR READERS

As we begin the fourth year of *The Jewish Reader*, we would like to thank you for your support in the past. We plan to make this year an enjoyable one for our readers, old and new.

All your favorite sections are back — “News In Review,” “Our Wonderful World,” “Our Story,” and “Torah Highlights.” Also, in the Cheshvan issue, a fictional series about Jewish life in 17th century America will make its debut.

Meanwhile, the Tishrei issue is packed with exciting stories. In “The Guest,” a wealthy host is puzzled by a chassidic rebbe’s strange behavior at Succos. Turn-of-the-century Chicago is the site of a new immigrant’s battle to remain religious. Finally, the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev occurs in Tishrei. “Heart and Soul” is a biography of this great chassidic master, who is famous for his optimistic portrayal of the Jewish people. He constantly pointed out their good attributes and called on Hashem to help them.

With the dawn of the New Year, we wish all of you a *Kesivah vachasimah tovah!*

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MAIL ROOM

Fan of Ohr HaChaim

I really thought your stories about the Ohr HaChaim were very good (Sivan). The story of how he had to leave his home (“The Silence and the Exile”) is one of my favorite Jewish Reader articles. I hope you’ll have other stories like that in the future.

My friends who don’t get your magazine are always coming over to

borrow it, which is fine, as long as I’ve finished!

Shira Taub,
Brooklyn, NY

CORRECTION

In the Sivan issue, the cover was not described properly. In memory of youths who died in the Holocaust, it depicted Hebrew names superimposed over the faces of children.

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