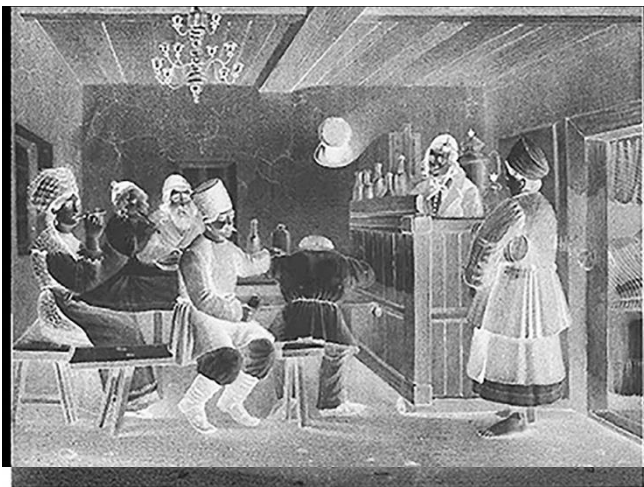


Chapter I: Getting to America

In the winter of 1886, Simon Wernick and his teenage daughter, Rebecca, stopped at a tavern during a peddling trek around Vilna Guberniya, one of the many governmental subdivisions in the vast Russian Empire. He made his circuit with a horse and a buggy that held his wares along with anyone who was traveling with him. Rebecca's three older sisters, Betsy, Leah, and Gitel, were not with them on that day. In the Pale of Settlement, which was the defined, restricted area in which Jews were allowed to live, it was not unusual for merchants like Simon to bring their children or wives with them on sales rounds in the countryside.

A tavern was a logical and fairly protected place for this father and daughter to stop because the proprietor would have been someone like himself, a Jew. There were many places along his route where he could have found some welcome because, at this time, almost sixty percent of all taverns in the Pale were owned or overseen by Jews. These taverns served people living in these communities including wealthy aristocratic landowners, poor peasants, soldiers, Cossacks, and Jews.



CABARET JEWS (TSELOVALNIKI?)

Jankiel in Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem, Pan Tadeusz

Courtesy of the Esther M. Zimmer Lederberg

Memorial Website <http://www.estherlederberg.com/home.html>

The Cossacks were fierce mercenaries who were loyal to the Tsar and his local administrators, and who were generally feared. During this era, Cossacks were charged with carrying out the Tsar's orders, which included keeping the peace while periodically instigating peasants to perpetrate violence against Jews. There was good reason to be afraid and wary. Any misstep could end in retribution on an individual or a whole village.

On this winter day, among the roadhouse patrons were a number of Cossacks. Everyone recognized them, knew their reputation, and kept their distance. It was bitterly cold outside, and Rebecca sat near the stove to warm herself. She was a handsome, strong-

looking girl with no shoes. Maybe she had taken off her shoes to thaw her icy feet, or maybe she didn't have any shoes at all.

One of the Cossacks noticed her and his powerful status gave him the right to approach without asking permission. He broke away from his compatriots and lunged aggressively towards Rebecca. When he began to touch her, she instinctively tried to stop his advances and slapped his face hard. Terrified at what she had done, she fled out the door without her father and without shoes. She ran barefoot for miles in the snow to her familiar shtetl and hid behind the house's stove—the *pripetchik*—using it, naively, as protection. If the Cossack had decided to pursue her, the house and oven would have offered no shelter. Simon followed in panic, not knowing where she had gone, but was greatly relieved when he found her safe at home. No one had followed her.

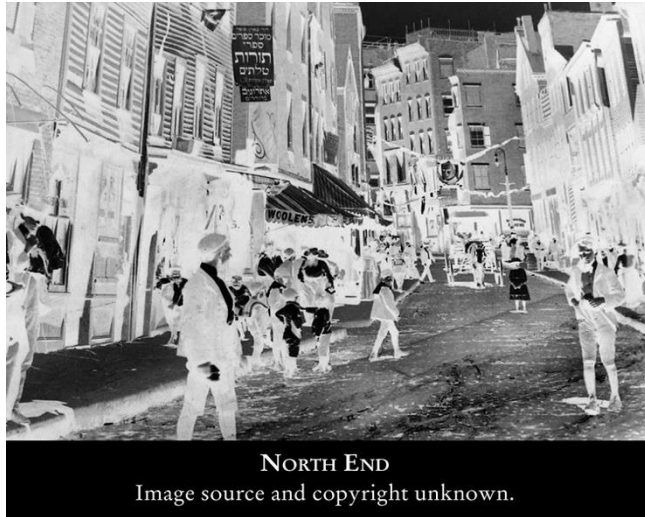
The Wernicks' living arrangement was similar to that of tens of thousands of poor Jews. Shtetls were small, self-contained settlements with at least one shul (synagogue), a marketplace, tradespeople, and hundreds of residents living in fragile harmony with hostile neighbors, maintaining a Jewish life, and feeding their families in an ever-present, threatening environment. Conditions were generally deplorable. Rebecca, her mother Hannah (known as Anna), her father, and seven siblings shared a tiny one-room, dirt-floored dwelling. Their livestock lived inside with them.

Other than this story of fending off the Cossack, Rebecca's early years are blurred, surrounded by vagueness and imprecision. Any details about her childhood and early teen years come from the few memories that she recounted to her children and what they later reported. Yet this one incident provides a telling clue about Rebecca's strong will, her instinctive drive for self-preservation, and her intense need to be in control of her own life.

The episode in the tavern may have been the pivotal incident that convinced Simon it was time to leave for America. He had already seen too much misery and uncertainty about the future for Jews. Anti-Semitism had always been a threat in Lithuania, as it was throughout the Russian Empire. Jews were limited in where they could live, certain occupations were closed to them, and only a few were allowed to own property. The imperial authority exploited long-embedded hatreds to encourage local populations to threaten and attack Jews. It became clear to Simon that there was no prospect for his family there. He also knew that once they left, there would be no going back. Despite the risks, uncertainties, and fear of the unknown, Simon packed a few belongings and headed towards a new beginning. He went alone with plans to bring the rest of the family to America as soon as possible.

By the time he began his journey in 1887, railroads could take travelers long distances, sparing them endless days of walking or travelling by horse and wagon. Steamships had cut Atlantic crossings to two or three weeks compared to a month or more in sailing vessels. Steamship companies had agents selling passage tickets in major cities. Still, although the Tsarist regime from time to time encouraged emigration, or at least looked the other way, it was a frightening journey to undertake. Jews and other emigrants defied the laws, often fleeing at night in order to avoid Russian border guards and roving highway gangs. They bribed officials to let them leave.

Simon, who was in his early 40s, embarked alone from Hamburg on June 12, 1887, on the steamship *Rugia* and arrived in New York on June 25. The *Rugia* made a direct crossing to New York with an inspection stop at Le Havre, France. Simon was examined and processed at Castle Garden at the tip of Manhattan, because



Ellis Island didn't open until April 1890. When he sailed into New York Harbor, he saw the Statue of Liberty, which had been dedicated the previous year. Simon's whereabouts for the eighteen months between his arrival in the summer of 1887 and the winter of 1889, or why he chose to settle in Boston, are unknown. He was probably drawn there because he knew a Vilna *landsman*—a fellow Jew from the same district—who had arrived previously and who shared his particular history and religious practice. In the 1890 Boston City directory, he is listed as a grocer at two addresses: 81 Prince Street and 158 Salem Street in the North End.

In the North End there were Lithuanian and Russian shuls, some traditional and others more progressive. Several Lithuanian shuls had founders and members from Vilna. In 1889, about twelve shuls or minyans (a religious group of at least ten men) were close to Prince and Salem Streets. Simon would have wanted to live and work within walking distance of a very traditional house of worship. He was a biblical scholar with passionate and rigid views on what it meant to be a Jew. He wanted to be in a community of like-minded men.

At this time, Boston's North End was a tightly packed neighborhood filled with immigrants that started arriving in different ethnic waves in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The Irish had arrived in the 1840s to escape the great potato famine. They were largely unskilled laborers working on the railroads, in maintenance and construction, or as domestic help. Jews began to arrive in the mid-nineteenth century and made a living in skilled work such as tailoring and garment manufacturing. Many were peddlers or operated small shops. Italians started coming in the 1860s and mostly worked in commercial fishing, shipping, and later in subway construction, and they too were peddlers and shopkeepers, selling goods that reflected their old-world culture. With the massive late

nineteenth century influx from Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire, almost one-third of the North End's population was Jewish.

Once Simon had found a place to live and a way to earn a living, he began to send money to his family in Russia so that they could emigrate. His oldest daughter, Betsy, came next to join her father and look after his personal and household needs. The three next oldest daughters came together a year or so later: Leah (Lea), age eighteen; Kate (Gitel), age sixteen; and Rebecca (Rivke), age fourteen. Passenger lists gave approximate ages and census data is unreliable, so these ages may not be exact. Other records suggest that Rebecca was a bit older than what had been recorded at her arrival in America.

To get to America, the sisters made their way to Hamburg, Germany. Their route was likely from Vilna to Kibarty, Lithuania, to the German border crossing at Eydtkuhnen, roughly 125 miles from Vilna. If the sisters had taken the steam locomotive train to the German border, the journey could have been as little as four to five hours. If they walked, it would have been many days. Eydtkuhnen is where many escaping Jews crossed over, leaving Tsarist Russia forever. It was the largest border town where the German government had established a control station. Here immigrants were examined for potential health conditions before beginning their seven-hundred-mile trek to Hamburg. Well before the sisters arrived at the border, a small number of Jews had decided to stay in Eydtkuhnen and offer help to those who were traveling through on their way to America. They provided food, shelter, and familiar conversation.

Once the sisters passed their physical examinations, they crossed the border and walked or traveled by train or cart to the port at Hamburg. Throughout their travels, there was the threat of assault, hunger, robbery, injury, and even death. The young women were helped by networks of friends or family members with connections to their Vilna community. They carried very little with them: some food, maybe a change or two of clothing, and a blanket. They slept in a pigsty at least once. In total, they journeyed close to nine hundred miles over many weeks to get to Hamburg where they would board a ship for the new world. Although they were just a tiny trio of emigrants clinging to each other for comfort and safety, they were surrounded by a vast forward-moving wave of people with the same driven desire to be free and determined to create new lives.

Merging with the flow on June 18, 1889, the three sisters boarded the ship *Prague* which deposited them in Glasgow, Scotland. At Glasgow they embarked on the *Furnesia* to New York, where they arrived on July 6, 1889. Then they took the train to Boston to join Simon.