

From Kielem to Bluefield

NATHAN PLATNICK

A CHILDHOOD IN LITHUANIA

I was born on July 8, 1899, in a small Lithuanian town named Kielem, about ten Russian miles from the East Prussian border. My parents were Joseph and Ida Mary Platnick.

My earliest memory comes from the age of four, when I saw my father lying on the floor with candles all around him — an old Orthodox Jewish custom for the dead, before the actual burial ceremony. We were reared by our mother, who made a living, or rather eked out a bare existence, by selling dairy products. I remember her rising up early every morning and going down to the dairy farms, where she bought milk and delivered it to her customers by means of two buckets suspended from her shoulders with a yoke. The buckets were connected with rope to the yoke in much the same fashion as one sees in Holland. After delivering the milk, she would again return to the dairies, where she bought additional dairy products and retailed them out from her home. As well as I can remember, she worked approximately fifteen to eighteen hours a day, leaving at about six o'clock every morning, and at times working until twelve midnight and longer. When we grew older and wanted to go to work, if work was available, she refused to listen to us, but insisted instead that we attend *heder*, or Jewish religious school. Thus, as well as I can remember, we lived, or existed, until I reached the age of fourteen.

With my brothers Benjamin, David, and Philip, I attended *heder*, while my mother worked to support us. My sister Bessie, who at the time of our father's death was only about one year old, stayed

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at home. Later, as she grew up, she helped our mother with the household chores. An older sister Dora also helped with the household duties until about the age of fifteen, when relatives sent fare for her to come to the United States. During the summer, when we hardly had nighttime, I well remember that the sun would begin to rise in the East, about twelve midnight, as night fell in the West.

In the summertime, we used to walk down to the river about four A.M. — the water was real warm at that time of the morning — with other local boys, to swim and otherwise have fun, as youngsters will. In the wintertime, when night fell about three P.M. and daylight came about nine A.M., we used to gather around the single gas light that the town had installed and go ice skating. At times the snow fell so long that it was impossible to leave the house for days. The fun that we had, of course, had to be between the times that we were required to study. At times we were required to study and go to *heder* as much as twelve hours daily. I also remember that my brother Ben, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, learned the watchmaker trade and somewhat supplemented my mother's income, or at least managed to support himself to a certain degree. My brother Philip left for Germany when he was about fifteen years old. He learned dentistry there, thus managing to contribute to his own support. When I reached the age of thirteen, I entered the *yeshivah*, or Hebrew theological seminary, from which, as one progressed, one entered the "talmudic academy." The *yeshivah* performed the functions of teaching and preserving the traditional Jewish religious curriculum and of educating Jewish youth to become judges and teachers. Thus my life went along smoothly, if one can call it that, until I reached the age of fourteen.

I remember one particular day when I came home from the *yeshivah*. My mother and my older brother were discussing the United States. I was told that an uncle of ours, who lived in Bluefield, West Virginia, and another uncle, who lived at the time in Roanoke, Virginia, were willing to send us the fare to come to the United States. I was asked what I thought of the idea. At first, I did not cherish the idea. I feared that I would have to give up my talmudic studies. As I kept thinking of the idea, however, it appealed to me more and more, and I actually became very enthusiastic.

I remember that my mother then wrote to my uncle in Bluefield and asked him to send us travel tickets, so that we could come to America. We had heard so much about America in Europe and believed that it was really a land of milk and honey.

SAILING FOR THE PROMISED LAND

One day in the summer of 1913, we received tickets for all of us to come to the United States — for all of us, that is, except my brother Philip, who at that time was in Germany studying dentistry. However, we had a problem. We could not obtain the passports essential not only for the purpose of leaving the country, but even for traveling from town to town. We boys could not, in any case, obtain permission to leave Lithuania, then as now under Russian domination, until we had first served in the Russian army. It was necessary, therefore, to make arrangements with smugglers to sneak us out of the country. It was, of course, also necessary for my mother to dispose of what few personal properties she possessed. Finally — I believe it was in the latter part of August, 1913 — my mother packed up everything we owned in one or two large packages, and we set out in a covered wagon for the German border.

I remember that we reached a small inn about four miles from our home town. Not having enough money for all of us to stay in the inn, we arranged for my mother and sister to sleep in the inn, while we boys, after having been served a supper of pumpernickel bread, butter, and hot tea, went to sleep in the wagon. It rained that night, and I could hear the raindrops on the canvas covering all night. It made such an impression upon me, as a little boy, that even now, when I hear raindrops on a roof at night, I am carried back to that covered wagon on the way to the German border. The following night we slept in a farmer's hayloft near the German border. That was as far as we got, for — as far as I can remember the story — the smugglers disagreed among themselves, and one of them, it seems, reported us to the guards. We were suddenly surprised by the appearance of Czarist border police, who rounded us up that night and marched us to the border police headquarters. We must have been quite a sight — a widow with four children,

the oldest of whom must have been about fifteen and the youngest about ten.

I realize now that even the soldiers felt sorry for us, because, when we arrived at their headquarters about two A.M., they served us hot tea, pumpernickel bread, and butter. The following day we were marched back, on foot, to a nearby town, about six miles from the border, and placed in jail to await a hearing before the local magistrate. That was on a Friday, and of course we faced the possibility of spending Friday night — the Jewish Sabbath — in jail. Exactly what happened I don't remember, but, at any rate, we were sent back to our home town that day and spent the Sabbath there. Needless to say, everyone felt sorry for us and did everything to make us as comfortable as possible. As we had nothing of our own, our few belongings having preceded us to the border, the townspeople kept us and fed us. A few days later we made another — and successful — attempt to smuggle ourselves across the border. Had we not done so, I believe that we might have been sent to Siberia.

The day after we crossed the German border, I awakened in a small East Prussian town and for the first time in my life saw a train. I also noticed a small, beautiful booth in the distance and, being inquisitive, headed for it to see what it was. Luckily my brother Ben called me back. Had he not, I would have been sent back to Russia, and my family would, of course, have followed me back. The beautiful little booth turned out to be the Russian guard post. Finally, after traveling by train, we arrived at the German seaport of Bremen and were quartered in the Bremen immigration house, where we awaited the arrival of the boat which was to take us to the United States. Bad luck, it seems, was still following us, because my younger brother David contracted trachoma, an eye disease, while we were waiting for the arrival of our boat, and we were advised by the authorities that David would not be able to leave Germany until he became well. That meant either that all of us would have to remain, or that my older brother Ben would have to remain with David, while we were permitted to leave. Not having enough money for all of us and fearing loss of the fares, we were forced with heavy hearts to leave Ben and David at Bremen, while we sailed for the United States.

As I look back upon the picture now, I can well imagine the feelings of my mother, and the heavy heart with which she sailed, leaving three sons in Germany, one to study dentistry, and the other two because of illness, and she herself being helpless to do anything about it. Be that as it may, we finally sailed for the promised land.

BAD LUCK IN BLUEFIELD

It seems that ill fortune had not left us even then. Arriving in Camden, New Jersey, after having traveled for two weeks on what I believe to have been a combination of freighter and passenger boat, we were stopped and told that we could not proceed to our destination in West Virginia. My mother was asked: How could a mother leave her children behind? And what kind of a mother was she anyway, if she could find it in her heart to leave two boys in Bremen, Germany, the oldest of them not even sixteen? All her explanations — how heartbroken she herself felt in leaving them, because it was beyond her control — were of no avail. We were held until a full investigation had been made and only then permitted to proceed. We left Camden and stopped for about a week in Roanoke, Virginia, to see our uncle, who at the time had a farm. From there we proceeded to Bluefield, West Virginia, arriving there about the first day of October, 1913. Our uncle met us at the station and brought us to his home on Bland Street.

I entered school that winter — a boy fourteen years of age, entering grade school and attending classes with first graders, who were only about six years old. To climax the whole affair, I could not even speak the language. Nevertheless, I thought that our troubles were over, but hard luck still followed us. Four months after our arrival, my uncle died, leaving my ten-year-old sister, my widowed mother, and myself strangers in a strange land, with no money, no visible means of support, and no ability even to speak the language.

In addition, we were left in midwinter with neither food nor coal in the house. It was, I believe, late in January, 1914. After enduring about forty-eight hours of hunger and cold in the house, I finally ventured outside. I don't know why, but I decided to take a

walk, with the hope, I guess, of finding something, I don't know what. Suddenly I stopped in front of a movie theatre, known at that time as the Elk's Opera House. The door was partly open, and a cowboy-and-Indian picture which was playing attracted my attention. I was very fascinated by it, but, not having any money, I watched it from a distance in the hall. I saw people going to the cashier buying tickets and of course envied them. As I looked toward the cashier's box office, something on the floor caught my eye. It looked like a dollar bill. I went to it quickly and purposely dropping my handkerchief, bent over and picked up the bill—a ten-dollar bill! I then bought a ticket, went into the theatre and enjoyed the show very much. When I arrived home about ten at night, I found my mother very upset, wondering what could have happened to me and unable to inquire, because she knew no English. I explained to her why I was late, which of course calmed her. At any rate, we were able to buy food the following day. After that, as well as I can remember, we found some money in the house and somehow managed to survive that winter.

In April, 1914, my two brothers arrived in Bluefield. You can well imagine our happiness. My older brother went to work for a man who had purchased my uncle's business from the estate. That gentleman stayed with us, paying my mother for room and board, which, together with the small wage that my older brother received, sustained us until 1915, when the purchaser of the business decided to leave and for a small sum sold the business to my older brother. He operated it while my younger brother and I went to school. In the meantime, I had obtained a job for \$2.50 per week. That, together with what we earned in my brother's small business, somehow pulled us through.

I realized that it was not fair to let my brother bear the brunt of the burden in supporting the family, even though I was helping somewhat with my job, working before and after school hours. In 1917, therefore, I decided to leave school. I had just finished the first semester of the ninth grade and joined my brother in the business. My younger brother David helped us before and after school. That same year the United States entered the war. Our business was rather a small one, but we somehow managed to earn a living.

UPHILL AND DOWN

Our business was known at that time as a junk business. We started out by going from house to house, buying junk. At first, we carried most of it on our backs. We went up and down the hills of Bluefield, buying old stoves and other discarded metal items. I remember that we used to buy old cook stoves, dismantle the loose parts, like doors and lids, and carry them down the hills in a box or bag. The balance of the stove we carried downhill on our backs. That went on for some time, until we were able to buy a "billie goat" wagon, which we pulled up and down the mountains, loaded with scrap iron and other metals. I remember that we used to coast up and down Bland and Federal Streets — sitting atop the wagon and guiding it. There was very little danger of running into anything, as I doubt very much if Bluefield had more than a dozen or two automobiles.

As time went by, my brother Ben bought a horse. Knowing very little about horses, he found out later that the horse was blind, and so at times we had to lead the horse, instead of guiding him. This was so especially at night, when we came in from the nearby coal-field towns. As business increased, we bought another horse and considered ourselves very fortunate. In 1916, we added to our assets a "T" model Ford pickup, which we used to clean up and polish for family pleasure rides on Sundays. In the wintertime, we would park it on Bland Street, so that we could push it downhill to get it started. Later, we added another truck to our treasure.

In 1920, we decided that, instead of laboriously sending scrap iron on wagons and trucks to a rail siding, we could eliminate a lot of extra work and increase our business by renting a yard and a building on the North side of town. However, after we had rented a property known as the Becker and Payne property and signed a lease for it, scrap prices declined considerably. Unable to make a living from scrap, we entered the coal business, buying and selling coal, retail, as well as hauling coal for other concerns. Many were the days that we spent fifteen and eighteen hours loading coal from hopper cars into trucks. Since the siding was the private property of the Norfolk and Western Railway Company, we were not al-

lowed to drop the bottom doors and load our trucks from the bottom of the railroad cars; that would have blocked up the siding, and the local shifters would not have been able to move their cars in and out for other concerns. We had, therefore, to unload the railroad cars by staying in the hoppers and throwing the coal over our heads into waiting trucks. Then we would deliver it and unload it into private or commercial basements. Later, as scrap prices picked up, we again entered that field and for a time handled scrap iron and metals as well as coal. I remember that we used to load scrap iron into railroad cars by hand. The smaller pieces we would throw over our heads into the railroad cars. To handle the larger pieces, we built a boardwalk from the ground to the cars and carried the heavier pieces up the gangplank all week long.

Meanwhile, my brother Ben traveled up and down the coalfields, buying scrap iron and metals from the coal operators. He would load his purchases into railroad cars and ship them to Bluefield for sorting. He also purchased old boilers and equipment as well as old tipples and plants, which he himself used to cut apart with electric torches and load into cars. David and I stayed in Bluefield, where we purchased scrap locally and otherwise ran the business. Later David, too, went to the coalfields and into other industries to help Ben with his work, while I took care of the local yard. When our business increased and we found our yard inadequate, we rented a yard in nearby Bluefield, Virginia, from the Camerons, to make our handling of the scrap more efficient. We continued to progress and, in 1928, bought part of the property known in Bluefield, Virginia, as the Graham Furnace. We moved our scrap operations there.

SURVIVING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

We were doing very well, when the depression of the early 1930's hit the country. It seemed then that, no matter how hard we tried or how hard we worked, it was of no avail. We even entered the retail automobile business to supplement our business, but had little success. Still, we did manage to support our families. Our families all moved into the same house. My brother Ben, with his wife and a young son about four years old, and my wife Edna and

I — we had just been married — moved in with my mother, my younger brother David, still single, and a younger sister, Bessie, who died in 1931. All this was done in order to cut down expenses, and we all got along very nicely, somehow managing until things began to pick up in 1935, when Ben, who had himself built his own house, moved out. I myself later built my own home and moved into it in 1936. David, being single, stayed with our mother in their home on Walton Avenue.

After the depression of the 1930's, business advanced again, and our business, too, increased from year to year. In 1938, we decided to consolidate our operations and moved all of them under one roof, at our plant in Bluefield, Virginia. There we began to expand, but not only in dismantling plants under the supervision of David and Ben. While I tended to our plant in Bluefield, Virginia, we also added new and used structural steel to our line of welding and fabricating steel. This, too, increased from year to year. In 1955, Alvin Platnick, Ben's son, a graduate of the West Virginia Engineering School at Morgantown, who had been doing government work in Washington, D. C., joined the firm and took charge of our company's engineering department. The years which followed found us building bridges, tipples, and structural skeletons for industrial structures.

We had come a long way from Kielem.

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