

## Now An American: The Autobiography of Louis E. Singer

I was born on December 17, 1871, to a poor father and mother. They had a boy [me] and two girls older than I. We lived in a small town in White Russia (Byelorussia) by the name of Koidanove. When I was eight years old, our family increased with two more boys and three girls — altogether eight children. We all had to eat, but our food was mostly rye bread, a very little butter, cheese, and herring. For Saturday my mother baked white bread, and we had some meat. My father worked on a freight depot about ten miles from town and was seldom home. He used to come home Friday and stay over Saturday; on Sunday he had to go back. My father's father lived with us in the same house and was the chief adviser in the family. He was a Hebrew teacher, and his private students came every day to our house, which was used as a *cheder*, a classroom for religious studies.

When I was five years old, my grandfather wrapped me up in his *tallis*, his prayer shawl, and he carried me in his arms to a *cheder* to begin learning *alef, beis*, the Hebrew alphabet and elementary Hebrew studies. The *cheder* was in the teacher's house, which had three rooms. One room was a dining room and a kitchen, one was a bedroom, and one housed the *cheder*. We were eight boys with our rabbi in a small room six hours a day. Our food for all day was a piece of rye bread, and a piece of herring or dry cheese, and cold water to drink. For dessert, we used to get pinches and were punished with the rabbi's strap for any little thing. After six months, I was able to read, and my grandfather accepted me in his *cheder*, in a higher class. From grandfather's *cheder*, I went to another teacher to study Talmud. That was too hard for me, so I protested against it. I told my parents that I didn't want to become a rabbi.

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Louis E. Singer died in Duluth, Minnesota, on December 30, 1958, a fortnight after his eighty-seventh birthday. His grandson, Rabbi Merle E. Singer, who serves Temple Sinai in Washington, D. C., brought this memoir to the attention of the editors.

We had two rabbis in town, I told them, and they both were starving. I would do better to work for a living, I said.

#### YOU HAVE A BETTER HORSE

One day I told my mother that I would like to go to Minsk, the capital of White Russia, with a population of about 200,000. I asked Berl, the *balagola*, or drayman, who had a horse and wagon. He used to go every week to Minsk, so I asked him to give me a ride. I took a piece of bread in my pocket, and on Monday morning we left for Minsk, about thirty miles from Koidanove. We came there in the evening, and I was surprised to see such a nice town with two- or three-story buildings. I marched through the streets, looking in the store windows, and was attracted by one window with nice books. While I was looking, a Jewish man came out and asked me if I wanted a book. I told him that I would have liked one, but had no money. He said, "Come in, and I will give you one." He asked me if I could read Hebrew, and I said, "Yes, I can read Yiddish and Russian, too." "How old are you?" he asked. I told him I was ten years old, and he was surprised that, at the age of ten, I could read and write three languages. He asked me what I would do when I finished school. "You can never go to college as a Jew," he said. "The Russian government allows only 2 percent Jews in college or universities. But if you will change your religion to Christianity, you could live in any city you wish in Russia, and you will be able to go to college, and you will have a good education. You can be a doctor or an officer in the army, and if you wish, I will give you some money to buy some nice clothes and I will take care of you until you will be twenty-one years of age to go to the army." I told him I would go home and talk it over with my parents. He gave me three copies of a book, called in Hebrew *Brith Chadosho*, meaning "New Testament." I promised him to come back whenever I had a ride with somebody. When I came home, I told my grandfather about it and gave him the three Testaments. He took them from me and threw them into the stove. "Well, son," he said, putting his five fingers in his beard and wrinkling up his forehead, "that man is a missionary, and he wants

you to change your religion, and he wants to pay you for it. When you trade horses with somebody, and they pay you the difference, that proves that you have a better horse." My grandfather's explanation appealed to me, and I didn't go back to see the missionary any more.

When I was about sixteen years old, I went to work in a factory, where they prepared bristles for brushes, paint brushes and other types. I earned only two rubles a week. I worked for that small pay for about two years, then, went to the Ukraine, to Zwiwil, a very nice town, with a much warmer climate than White Russia. The people lived richer lives. I worked there until I was twenty-one years old, and then I had to go to the army for two months' training. It was no pleasure to be a soldier as the food was dark rye bread, sourkraut, and meat which was not fit to be eaten. I had to buy sausage with my own money. One night it was Sukkos, the Feast of Booths, and I went to the synagogue. When I came back, I was told that the officer had been looking for me. I thought I would be punished for leaving without a permit. I asked the officer what he wanted me for, and he told me that I had won a watch which he raffled. The cost of the raffle was five kopeks.

I was the only Jew among twenty-five Russians, and I was the only one who could read or write. I was the secretary for my officer, whose name was Antosh. Since I was his secretary, he was very good to me. He used to tell me to be at ease when we marched or used guns in drilling. After two months in the Russian Army, I went back to Zwiwil to work in the bristle factory. The manager of the factory was a man by the name of Baskin. Mr. Baskin and his wife Rachel became my friends, but after I had worked there one year, the factory closed, and all the workers went back to their homes. Mr. and Mrs. Baskin went back to Telshi, in Lithuania, and I went home to Koidanove.

I used to correspond with Mr. Baskin, and once I received a letter from Mrs. Baskin that Mr. Baskin had gone to America. She said that she knew a girl from a nice family, and if I would come to Telshi, she would introduce me to the girl. The girl's father said he would give me 300 dollars for a dowry. I told my parents about it, and they advised me to go. I went by train to a little town by

the name of Luknik, and from Luknik I went with a drayman and came to Telshi late at night. I went to Mrs. Baskin's house, and the next day she went with me to see that girl. She introduced me to the girl's father and mother. The girl came in later and she was a nice, sensible girl, but not very good-looking. I found out later that the girl was sickly and had a weak heart. We made an engagement, and I wrote my father and mother about it. We set the wedding three months later. I stayed in their house after the engagement. One night the girl came home and fainted and got paralyzed. She lost her speech and the use of her legs and hands. They had a doctor for her, but he could not do anything for her. I felt terrible about it. The girl's father asked me what I would do. I said that I would go home to my folks, and he started to cry. He said that he liked me: "I wish you to stay with us and marry [my other daughter] Rachel."

I agreed to stay, because I had pity on the father and mother. I wrote a letter home and told them everything, and they advised me to stay there and marry my fiancée's sister Rachel. My father and grandfather came to the wedding. My mother could not come on account of her poor health. About a month later, I went to work in the same town in a bristle factory and earned five rubles a week. In those days, that was good wages. About a year later, I became a father to a baby boy. My house expenses got bigger, and five rubles a week were not enough to live on. My wife's brother was in America, so I wrote him that I would like to come to America. He advised me to come. I left my wife and baby with her parents, and I went to America.

#### SAFE FROM DANGER

I came to New York in June, 1897. My grandfather's brother met me and brought me to his house. I stayed in New York eight days. He took me to the train to go to Piedmont, West Virginia, where my wife's brother lived. On the way to the train, I was initiated by an Irish bum. I wore a stiff hat, and he recognized a greenhorn. He broke my hat with one slap, and my uncle told me, "Now you are an American." I came to Piedmont and stayed about

one week at my brother-in-law's house, but he didn't have anything for me to do, so he sent me by train to Hagerstown, Maryland, to his uncle Ruben Leib Levine. Mr. Levine was peddling with a pack on his back. The goods he peddled were dry goods, and he distributed them among the farmers in West Virginia. He made me up a pack of dry goods and notions. The pack weighed about twenty-five pounds more than I weighed. He took me out to the country and told me, "When you come to a house, knock on the door, and if the people ask you what you want, open your pack and say, 'Madam, buy.'" And he told me how to ask them if I could stay overnight.

The first week was very hard because I could not speak a word of English. Once I came to a house while they were eating. The woman asked me if I had had my dinner. I thought she was asking me if I wanted to eat. I nodded my head to indicate yes — and went without dinner that day. Another time they asked me if I wanted to eat, and I shook my head no, and that wasn't good either. So I made up my mind not to say anything, and maybe they would find out what I wanted. Little by little I started to understand English. I had my regular places to stop overnight and to eat.

Once a month, after the twentieth of the month, I used to peddle along the railroad tracks on the Baltimore and Ohio Rail Road, because the workers on the track had payday. One Friday in Tunnelton, West Virginia, I wanted to make a short cut by going through the tunnel. That way I would save one mile. The tunnel was about one mile long, and I asked the watchman if any trains would be coming by soon. He said no trains were to come for about two hours. There were two tracks, one going east and the other going west. I walked on the track east to face a train if it came, but when I was in the middle of the tunnel, I heard a train coming. I felt the vibrations, and it was too dark to see anything, so I didn't know on which track the train was coming. I lay down between both tracks, face down with my pack on my back. In a few minutes a freight train with coal rushed by, filling the tunnel with smoke. When I felt the train was gone, I got up, but found the last car had torn a hole in my pack. My uncle knew that I had gone into the tunnel and was sure I had been killed by the train;

he was ready to go and pick up my remains. He had a black beard and his tears rested on his beard. When I came out of the tunnel, he was overjoyed to see me. The next day we took the passenger train and went to Hagerstown for *shabbos* (Sabbath). I went to the synagogue and said a prayer to God, the prayer you say when you come out safe from danger. On Monday, I went back to West Virginia and had my regular overnight stops with the farmers.

One night I came to a West Virginia town and was told that a Dr. Bower wanted to sell his horse because the horse had become blind. I bought the horse and also a wagon and harness for fifteen dollars; altogether it cost me thirty dollars. That was a relief for me. I got a bigger stock of dry goods, and besides I used to buy produce from the farmers. I had a chance to make more money this way. Once, when I had to cross the Potomac river with my blind horse, the water was very swift, and when I was in the middle of the river, I heard somebody cry, "Hay, hay, stop!" — which I did. There was a house by the river, and a woman was sitting on the porch. When she saw me coming toward a whirlpool, she sent her boy to warn me to turn to the right. In the Civil War, she said, a soldier had gotten in there with his horse, and they had never come up, as there is no bottom in that whirlpool.

Not long after that, I had a letter from my wife. She was getting ready to come to America, because the baby had died, and she could not stay home any longer. About three months later, she came. I didn't have any rooms yet, so we stayed with our uncle and aunt for two weeks and then found a three-room apartment for fifteen dollars a month. We bought a table and chairs, a bed and a kitchen stove for about twenty dollars. My wife came in the spring of 1899. I left her in Hagerstown and went back with my horse and wagon to West Virginia. I started to make more money and was able to buy and sell. I received a letter from my brother Gershon that he had been called to go to the army. I told him not to go to the army and that he had better come to America. He came in 1900 to Hagerstown. I took him on my wagon to work with me, buying and selling in the farming country. A short time later, we sent a ticket to my sister Bessie and my brother Chaim. We took Chaim to work with us together.

My sister met a boy in Thomas, West Virginia, and they got married. After my sister's wedding, my brother Gershon went to New York, and I opened a clothing store with a partner in a small town by the name of Hamilton, West Virginia. Sam was about three years old, and Lena about eighteen months old. The business in Hamilton didn't pay for two families, so I wrote a letter to my brother-in-law in Hurley, Wisconsin, about my problem, and he advised me to come to Hurley. My brother-in-law gave me a line of dry goods, and I made up a bundle of piece goods and went out peddling amongst the miners. Business was good. Our second daughter was born in Hurley, but by then we no longer wanted to live in Hurley. Because my brother-in-law had moved to Duluth, we moved to Duluth, too. We had rooms at the corner of 8th Ave. East and First St., where Issy was born.

I was peddling most of the time in the Iron Range, Two Harbors, and Cloquet, Minnesota. I was the family pioneer in America, as I brought over two brothers, two sisters, and their children to America. To Duluth, I brought Nathan Singer and family and his brother B. Singer and his family, then some cousins and some friends. I opened a peddler supply store in Duluth, and when business was better, I took my brother-in-law as a partner, and for two years we managed to make a living. When the business went bad and didn't pay for two families, my brother-in-law dropped out. I remained in the business, and when Sam and Issy were out of school, I took them in the business, and we made a success.

#### I LIKE MY BREAD COLD

My two brothers and myself always sent money to our father and mother. After my father passed away, we kept sending to our mother every month. When the First World War broke out in 1914, we could not send any money to our mother and sisters. We could not get any mail from Russia during the war. In the meantime, my mother died, mostly from starvation, as they had lived on potatoes, cabbage, and beets, but no bread or meat. My sisters and their husbands died, and they left five children, three boys and two girls. One sister and one boy were living in Poland.

When the war was over in 1918, I received a letter from my sister Rifka asking me to send some money for her and her boy, and for five children from my other sister. I wrote to my brothers Chaim and Gershon about it, and we sent them some money, so they would be able to have something to eat. I made a proposition that one of us should go over and bring them all to this country. I suggested that I would go, provided my brother Gershon would stand the expense. My wife said that she would like to go along, because she wanted to see her sisters. We left Duluth in March, 1922, and stayed in New York about two days. We took a boat in New York and went by way of England and Germany to Kovno, the capital of Lithuania. From Kovno, we went with a Ford to Telshi, where my wife's two sisters came out to meet us with tears of joy. The next Saturday morning, I went to the synagogue with my brother-in-law. Telshi was a nice town, with a population of about 4,000 — 9 percent were Jews.

After I had a good rest for a few days, I left my wife in Telshi and went to Kovno to arrange to bring over my sister and the children from Poland to Lithuania, which was not very easy because Poland and Lithuania were not friendly. I was advised by the ticket agent to go to Poland and bring them to Lithuania. I hired a man and a horse and wagon to take me over to Vilna, Poland, where my sister was. On the wagon with me were the drayman and two more passengers, an elderly woman and a girl about ten years old. We came to the border about six P.M. and asked the Polish officer at the border for permission to cross the line. He answered that we would have to wait till tomorrow morning when his officer came. My fellow passenger could talk Lithuanian and Polish, so she asked a farmer near the border if we could stay overnight in their house. She had asked an old farmer woman, who said that she had only two beds, one for herself and one for her two sons and a soldier who slept on the floor. If we were willing to sleep on the floor or on the benches, we were welcome. In size, the house was about twenty-five feet square — just one big room with a brick stove which took up a big part of the room. There was a long table with long benches around it, but there were no chairs and no electric lights. At night they had a little kerosene lamp.

At seven o'clock, the farmer woman's two sons came home, big six-foot babies, and the soldier who slept there and ate his supper. She put a loaf of black rye bread and a big dish of potatoes, about half a bushel, and a big earthen dish of sour milk on the table. Those three boys ate it up in about ten minutes. My fellow passenger took a piece of bread from her bosom. She offered me some of it, but I said, "No, thank you." I was hungry, but I like my bread cold. She then gave some to the girl. I took off my coat and used it for a pillow. I lay on one bench with my clothes on, and the woman and the child used the other two benches. The benches were twelve inches wide. Besides us in the house, they had a newly born calf, an old dog, as it was too cold for it outside, and two or three chickens under the brick stove. After everybody went to sleep, the little kerosene lamp continued to burn. A few times during the night, I heard the woman on the bench groaning, "Oh, my sides hurt." About five o'clock in the morning, I heard the roosters in the village crowing. I got up and went outside to catch a little fresh air. It was still dark, and the stars were still shining bright. It was too cold to stay outside. I opened the door to go back in the house, but I couldn't stand the smell from the kerosene smoke and so many people and animals and the smell of the three men who had eaten up a half bushel of potatoes and sour milk. I stayed outside till it got light.

The Polish officer came, and the woman asked him to permit us to go to Vilna, but he refused, and we had to go back. We hired a farmer, and he took us to a town they called Wilcomir. I inquired where I could get somebody to go to Vilna and bring my sister over. I paid a man three dollars, and he promised to get them over in about four days to a hotel. On the fourth day I came to the hotel and asked the keeper if a family had come from Poland. They had come, he said, and were eating now in the other room. I did not want to disturb them, so I stood outside while they ate. When I came into the room, my sister saw me and screamed, "Brother!" She cried for joy. The hotel man told me he had no place for all of us to stay. I took them one by one to my hotel, and the next morning we all went to Kovno to a hotel. The steamship agent told me that they would have to be examined by a doctor before we left.

The next day the doctor put his o.k. on all of them except the youngest boy, who had scabs on his head. The doctor said he couldn't cure him, and we would have to take him to Germany. We left the boy with one of the girls to take him to Germany, and we all went to Paris, France, and to Le Havre, where we took a ship to America. The boy and his sister stayed in Germany about four weeks, and then they came to New York.

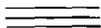
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**FAMILY** correspondence, diaries, memoirs, scrapbooks, photograph albums, naturalization papers, military medals, and personal souvenirs.

**JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL** minute books and transaction records: fraternal, cultural, social, and philanthropic.

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