



WOMEN'S LEAGUE

FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Women's League Shabbat 2017/5777

P'ri Yadehah - The Fruit of Her Hands

Reading

My Polish Grandmother

by Edward Field

Grandma and the children left at night.
It was forbidden to go. In those days
The Czar and his Cossacks rode through the town at whim
Killing Jews and setting fire to straw roofs
While just down the road the local Poles
Sat laughing as they drank liquor.

Grandpa had gone to America first
And earned the money for the rest of the family to come over
So they left finally, the whole brood of them
With the hired agent running the show,
An impatient man, and there were so many kids
And the bundles kept falling apart
And poor grandma was frightened of him.

She gave the man all the money
But she couldn't round up the kids fast enough for him
They were children after all and didn't understand
And she was so stupid and clumsy herself,
Carrying food for all of them and their clothes
And could she leave behind her pots?

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Her leg hurt already; they were always swollen
From the hard work, the childbearing and the cold.

They caught the train and there was a terrible moment
When the conductor came by for the tickets;
The children mustn't speak or he would know they were Jewish,
They had no permits to travel—Jews weren't allowed
But the agent knew how to handle it,
Everybody got shmeared, that means money got you everywhere

The border was the worst. They had to sneak across at night.
The children mustn't make a sound, not even the babies.
Momma was six and she didn't want to do anything wrong
But she wasn't sure what to do.
The man led them through the woods
And beyond they could hear dogs barking from the sentry hut,
And then they had to run all of them down the ravine to the other side,
Grandma broken down from childbearing with her bundles
And bad legs and a baby in her arms,
They ran all the children across the border
Or the Guards might shoot them
And if the little ones cried, the agent said he would smother them.

They got to a port finally.
Grandpa had arranged for cabin passage, not steerage,
But the agent cheated them and put them in the hold
So they were on the low deck looking up at the rich people.
My momma told me how grandma took care of all her children
How Jake didn't move anymore he was so seasick, maybe even dead
And if people thought he was dead
They would throw him overboard like garbage so she hid him

The rich tossed down oranges to the poor children—
My momma had never had one before.

They came to New York to the tenements
A fearful new place, a city, country people in the city
My momma who had been roly –poly in slow Poland
Got skinny and pimply in zippy New York.
Everybody grew up in a new way.
And now my grandma is dead and my momma is old
And we her children are all scattered over the earth
Speaking a different language and forgetting why it was so important to go to a new country.