was so dreaded that the peasants actually held funerals for their conscripted sons.

The aura of doom surrounding military life was exacerbated by the method employed in raising an army. Because there was no regular conscription in Russia at this time, the government simply demanded a certain number of recruits from landowners and villages as the need arose.[11] Men between the ages of twenty and thirty-six were faced with the possibility of recruitment without notice, and this kept the population in a constant state of anxiety. The roundup of conscripts was accompanied by scenes of violence and despair with men fleeing into the woods, followed by peasants and soldiers armed with cudgels and ropes to catch them. Captured recruits were guarded like convicts, usually arriving at the depot in chains. Those who were fortunate enough to escape found no shortage of sympathetic households in which to hide - that is, until the government established severe injunctions against harboring evaders. A family caught concealing a recruit was forced to furnish two substitutes, and if none could be provided the two most implicated in the crime were sent to Siberia.

Although military duty was reduced to five years by Alexander II (1856-1881) it continued to be an enduring source of antagonism between the regime and its subjects. The introduction of a lottery system lessened the agitation created by the constant possibility of being drafted, but regulations prevented Jews from being admitted to military academies, becoming officers or holding other positions of responsibility. Moreover, unlike their comrades who could reside where they pleased after discharge, Jewish soldiers were forced to return to a life of second class citizenship in the Pale. (Certain circumstances freed men from service in the army: families with either one male or a father with three children were not subject to recruitment - one of the reasons perhaps why people married so early in Russia. Families also had the option to pay substitutes to assume the places of recruits, a practice which was popular until 1876 when the tsar declared that recruits could only be substituted with men of the same faith.) By the time of Alexander III's rule and the introduction of the infamous Temporary Laws in 1882, the government issued a ruling holding the entire family responsible for the failure of a conscript to report for duty, even if the man had emigrated or died. A fine of 300 rubles was levied (a veritable fortune to many families), which applied only to Jews, and if this was not paid, the government auctioned the household goods to collect it. The year after 1,200,000 rubles were paid on behalf of four thousand conscripts who "failed to appear," entire families packed up and left Russia for good.

It was during the reign of Alexander II (1856-1881) that the underpinnings of the traditional Jewish way of life began to erode. The Vilna rabbinate continued to vigorously oppose the advance of secular knowledge, but this could not prevent the intellectual reformation that was gradually occurring. Many young Jews abandoned religious orthodoxy and instead focused their energies on the deteriorating social conditions that resulted from the continuation of the tsarist regime. Although conditions temporarily improved during the early years of Alexander's rule, the movement toward further liberalized policies was suspended after the Polish insurrection of 1863 which many Jews supported in exchange for promises of emancipation. A previous attempt (1831) to end the Russian domination of Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine lead to the establishment of a military government, and hangings, imprisonment or exile to Siberia for the perpetrators. The 1863 attempt caused tsarist authorities to impose a harsh series of measures designed to suppress all nationalistic elements in the society and to assimilate the minorities into the cultural mainstream as rapidly as possible.

The principal, but not exclusive, object of these policies were the Poles, who posed the greatest threat to the Russian administration. The Polish and Lithuanian languages were replaced by Russian in the schools, Polish was eliminated from official correspondence and even removed from shop signs. When edicts failed, land and property were confiscated and suspected resistors were imprisoned or exiled to Siberia. By 1865 Jews and Poles could no longer buy land and it was not until 1885 that peasants of Polish origin were allowed to buy farms exceeding 2.7 acres in size. In 1864 the governor of the Lithuanian province believed that "within a dozen years Russian nationality would establish itself firmly in the country."[12] Instead, in the years 1864-1914, nearly 25 percent of the population of Lithuania emigrated, mostly to the United States.

By the early 1880's waves of racial violence incited and then condoned by the government were used as an excuse for massive new restrictions on Jewish civil rights. These restrictions, introduced through the Provisional Regulations of May 3, 1882 (which became known as the "May" or "Temporary Laws"), governed Jewish economic activities, occupations, property and residence rights, military service requirements and educational opportunities. Including the legislation already in place, over one thousand articles scattered through fifteen volumes of the Russian Code (to which were added ministerial instructions and secret circulars) governed the Jews.[13]

With the advent of the Temporary Laws, Russia confirmed her status as a medieval state within modern Europe. Although serfdom had been abolished through the Emancipation Acts of 1861, as late as 1894 more than 80 percent of Russia's citizens were still classified as peasants and an equal portion of the population was illiterate. Most people lived on the edge of destitution amidst conditions so primitive that fewer than one out of twenty people reached the age of sixty. Infant mortality rates in the villages were as high as 66 percent and of those who survived to adulthood to work in the factories, one out of every two died before the age of forty-five. Farm laborers earned only twenty-four kopeks a day (twelve cents at the official exchange rate of 1900) - a wage that constantly kept them at the brink of starvation. In the cities, factory owners wielded absolute authority over workers who usually earned in one month what their American and English counterparts earned in one week. A man could barely survive under such conditions, but if he had a wife and children they too were forced into the mills just to avoid starvation.

This atmosphere was the catalyst for the formation of groups of Jewish workers who met secretly to discuss the inhuman conditions found in Vilna's factories and shops. In 1897 these workers ultimately formed the Bund, a quasi-socialist labor organization. The original intent of the Bund was to effect economic changes in the relationship between factory owners and workers; however, it soon adopted a revolutionary charter after recognizing that the

Jews would still be subject to tsarist oppression even if all of their demands for better wages and working conditions were met.

The Bund was opposed by Polish revolutionaries who believed that all insurgent activities should be directed toward achieving an independent Poland. Jewish employers, rabbinical authorities and Zionists also opposed the Bund for economic, religious and nationalist reasons; nevertheless, within a few years the organization gained 30,000 members in the Pale where extensive printing activities were conducted and self-defense groups organized to counter the pogroms.

The atmosphere of civil unrest intensified when the Japanese launched a surprise attack on Russia's Pacific Squadron on January 26, 1904. As the months dragged by, the war's impact on an already depressed economy became severe. The call up of reservists first affected the industries in which they were employed and then caused a boomerang effect when domestic income began to falter and other industries laid off thousands of workers. Within a year dissidence had spread to the point that nearly every industry in Russia had been closed down by strikes on one or more occasions. Unrest was not limited to the cities as peasants began joining political organizations, helping themselves to their landlord's grain and timber and eventually burning down estates.

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Within this environment lived the Alperowitz ancestors. They were a family of timber men: Reuben Alperowitz was a forest surveyor by trade; his sons and the husbands of his daughters were also engaged in a variety of timber-related occupations in an area which was renowned for its forests. The Alperowitz family lived in the village of Sosenka in the southeastern region of the Vilna gubernia. Its location on the west bank of the Viliya River (from which Vilna, which this river passes through, took its name) made it an ideal vantage point for its residents to supervise the movement of logs down the waterway.

The village itself, whose name derives from *Sosna*, the Polish word for "pine," may have been established by a *graf* (landowner) of the region. Beginning in the early 17th century the Polish nobility created nearly nine hundred townships on their estates in Lithuania, granting to the inhabitants timber and farming rights to the surrounding area. In the 19th century these lands were often leased for exploitation by the residents or by local capitalists who employed the residents to manage the harvest of timber. (A typical arrangement permitted anybody to cut timber upon payment to the landlord of one ruble per tree, a fee which allowed the buyer to cut down "what, where and when he wanted for an entire year."[14]) The only accessible reference on the subject indicates that Sosenka was situated on lands belonging to the Bohdanowicz family;[15] however, the manor nearest to Sosenka was that of Starzynki, a mile or two to the east. This estate included large tracts of forest and its own adjacent village which bore that graf's name.

Sosenka was inhabited almost entirely by a handful of peasants according to the earliest account available. In 1865 only eighty-five inhabitants were recorded there, including seventy-nine emancipated peasants, three servants employed in the manor house (at Starzynki?), one discharged soldier and two members of the *schlachta* (nobility) who were residing abroad at the time of the count. There is no official mention of Jews, but measuring by its population Sosenka would not be classified as a *shtetl*, which usually held from 250-300 families.[16]

By 1890 there were some thirty houses and 226 inhabitants, but a 1933 map of the Vileika district indicates Sosenka as a small village that had barely grown in forty-three years. One road still served a community of thirty-five or so dwellings. The closest railway station was located in Vileika, ten miles to the west, but this was not established until 1904 when the Shedletz-Bologoe line was built.

Sosenka's origins are understandably difficult to determine; certainly no facts survive as to exactly how the Alperowitz family arrived in such an obscure place. Presumably Reuben or an ancestor settled there because of their association with forestry. Their origins notwithstanding, typical villages of the area were very rustic or primitive depending upon the locale. According to one observer, cottages were

> generally made of stone and boards, plastered over and covered with a coating of whitewash and are covered with a straw roof, frequently green with growing moss. Between the rows...runs the unimproved thoroughfare. Twenty and thirty of these cottages and a few trees comprise a village. In one room, which is generally neatly whitewashed, the entire family live, eat and sleep; in another...dwell the cows, pigs, chickens and geese. There are roughly carved chests and a couple of deep alcoves in the better class of homes, each containing its gigantic wooden bed piled with gorgeously colored rugs and immense feather pillows. The great brick or stone stove is the most conspicuous object of the interior, frequently serving as a bed during the long winter nights.[17]

The territory surrounding Sosenka was reorganized numerous times under a series of complex governmental structures. The third and final partition of Poland (1795-1797) resulted in the establishment of three western gubernias which the Russians originally designated as Lithuania, Belorussia and the Ukraine. These gubernias were divided into smaller administrative districts in which local governments were headquartered. Vileika, ten miles west of Sosenka, was annexed by Russia in 1793 and during the third partition it was promoted to the rank of a district town in the Belorussian gubernia. More towns were added to the Vileika district, which in 1842 was transferred to the Vilna gubernia. After these new boundaries had been established, Sosenka, which had been incorporated in the original Lithuanian gubernia at the time of Russian annexation, found itself in the southeastern region of the Vilna gubernia, within the Vileika district. Further reconfigurations occurred as a result of political and administrative circumstances, most notably after the Polish insurrection of 1863. Among other measures taken to promote Russification of the area, the authorities discontinued use of the name Lithuania (although Nicholas I had established the same prohibition fifty years before, the name had continued to be used even in official documents) and divided the region into six smaller gubernias including Vitebsk, Minsk, Mogilev, Kovno, Grodno and Vilna. Boundary lines were redrawn several more times over the next eighty years culminating in the 1940 Soviet re-annexation of independent Lithuania. As a result, Sosenka is now incorporated within the Vileika *raion*, Minsk *oblast* of the Belorussian SSR.

By virtue of its location in the Pale of Settlement near the border of the Vilna and Minsk gubernias, the population of the Vileika district was predominantly a mixture of Lithuanians, White Russians and Jews. Changes in government and the migration of peoples brought different cultural influences to the area, the most forceful of which was Russian, but most inhabitants became Russianized in very superficial ways. The Alperowitz immigrants, for example, spoke Yiddish, applied Polish spellings to their names and told their children they were *Litvaks*. They neither referred to nor considered themselves as Polish or Russian. As for their attitudes toward the Russian government, as SAD remarked in her memoirs, "I always thought that my father [Israel Alpert] never learned the language of the country of his birth, but in reflection, it is possible that it was so repulsive to him that he never, in my presence, ever indicated that he knew a word of it."

Despite its minute size Sosenka still managed to have a synagogue, but it did not have a Jewish cemetery. The closest one, located a few miles away in Ilya, must have been established prior to 1882; after the institution of the Temporary Laws, Jews were forbidden to acquire land outside village boundaries for such purposes. There was a rabbi, Aaron Alperowitz (Reuben's son-in-law), but according to one former Sosenkite, Lena Koplovitz-Kaplow, "there were only a few Jews... so when there was a major religious question they went to Ilya where there were more Jews."[18] Size, however, was not the only factor accounting for Ilya's religious authority. Although its 829 Jews comprised 58 percent of the total population in 1897, the community reflected in the glory of its long departed and controversial rabbi, Manasseh ben Joseph. Here also had lived the legendary Valentine Potocki who became known as Abraham ben Abraham, the "righteous convert." Potocki, a Polish Count who had converted to Judaism, was discovered living in Ilya by the authorities, who then burned him at the stake when he refused to renounce his new faith.

Sosenka also had a priest to serve the Orthodox residents. Although the population generally lived in religious harmony, another member of the Koplovitz family, Sarah Rubin, reported that Sosenka was not immune to conflicts. On one occasion it was discovered that a crucifix was missing from the Christian cemetery and the village Jews were accused of stealing it. A mob gathered demanding that the cross be returned, but when the Jews could not produce what they did not have, the scene began to grow violent. A relative of Sarah's managed to escape by swimming across the river to summon help; however, the incident had been resolved by the time the Cossacks, who usually came to wreak havoc, not restore order, had arrived on their horses. A little girl had taken the crucifix to play with.