



Sussman and Manya Russakoff

Sussman Russakoff

All his life Sussman Russakoff heard the siren call of heaven by way of earning thirteen thousand mitzvahs (points for doing good deeds), just as some heard the dire forecast that parents in America must save for their old age because in America children do not take care of parents. Apparently some parents earned the good will of children one way; others earned it in another, even though the parents all came from Russia.

In the town of Starodub, White Russia, pious Jews were poor, but they had many children to make sure there were some to say kaddish (the prayer for the dead) when the parents died. Thus children began to work as Sussman did when he was about five

years old in the house and at nine all through four years in a Baron de Hirsch School. The apprenticeship consisted of observing the watch repairer after the evening meal in his uncle's house. At thirteen he graduated from elementary school where he was Russified (learning Russian, arithmetic, geography, penmanship, and the translation of the books of Moses into Russian); was bar mitzvahed (accepted into the Jewish community as a man responsible for his own behavior); and left home to work in a distant city to avoid working for relatives.

Although relatives formed a link between cities, they could take advantage of young men by paying low wages, demanding longer hours and more duties than usually asked of strangers, and giving more close supervision than necessary of the meager social life available on a Saturday. On the other hand, relatives and friends of relatives often made the only social life available in these *shtetlach* (little cities).

For Sussman, the first city, Ekaterinaslav, was a source of relatives, future wife, friends, Russian plays and concerts, books, and even Yiddish plays (which were performed when they were labeled German). There were beautiful synagogues to visit too. He even joined a revolutionary group, young people who met in each other's homes to read forbidden pamphlets.

After five years, however, he got homesick and went back to visit his family in Starodub. The visit only reinforced his desire to leave this poverty-infested, no-opportunity village. Learning of a job in Briansk, a city where Jews with special privileges could live and prosper, he departed from Starodub so that he could be near his girlfriend and avoid military service.

When Sussman was five, he was hidden in his grandmother's deep cellar to avoid being killed in a pogrom. In his travels to cities from home, he met the peasants who could be turned from human beings into vile savages by vodka. Why should he spend four years in the Russian army to protect them and their graft-taking government officials? During the Russo-Japanese War, Jews were accused of helping the Japanese, to explain the Russian defeats. The anti-Semitic threats, "Kill the Jews," and "Destroy the anti-Christ," were heard louder than before. Recruiting of men in Sussman's class was starting when he decided he would leave for America before he was called up. He arrived in Boston twenty-four hours before the peace treaty between Japan and Russia was signed in Portsmouth, New

Hampshire. Had he known the war was almost over, he probably would not have left.

Before he came to the United States at age twenty, he had already been a partner in a jewelry business that involved traveling from one mining village to another and had a business of his own, employing his younger brother, Louis. He was an expert watch repairer and had earned a better than average wage. He hated to leave his sweetheart, but he felt sure he could manage to bring her to America after a while.

For a Jew to obtain a valid passport in peace time was difficult, but during the war it was impossible. He went to Vilno, where his six sisters lived, and found an old man who put him in touch with an agent who smuggled people across the border to Prussia. He could not even apprise his family of his intentions or bid them farewell. The harrowing trip by night through cold, hunger, and fright, hidden by hay in sleighs drawn past police inspectors, was still vivid forty years later when he wrote it all down for his children. The gouging Poles who were supposed to help the escapees, the crying babies, the march through the piggery in the cold windy night, the delousing station, and finally the wonderful Russian bath were all part of the escape. Even the rejection of admission to America by the doctor who said he had trachoma was not a complete loss, for it led to the Rothschild Shelter in London, where he met a kind old man who found him a job in his son's jewelry store. He was alert enough to find the *White Star Steamship* Line doctor in Liverpool who diagnosed his problem as "tired eyes" and cleared him for passage on the *Cymbric*, sailing for Boston.

Many immigrants associate the crossing of the Atlantic with nausea, insufficient food, poor air, illness, and overcrowding, but for Sussman it was a pleasure. For the first time he did not have to sleep on the floor. Each person had a bunk and ate at cloth-covered tables. They had tasty vegetable soup, herring, and potatoes. Even in Starodub food was not as good or plentiful. They danced and sang all day. Since the grouping was by nationality, both Jews and non-Jews mixed if they were able to communicate. When first- and second-class passengers joined the steerage group and brought oranges and candy, the trip could go on forever. No one complained when the ship was delayed three days by a storm. Sussman was elated to arrive in Boston away from the *gardavoy*s (police border inspectors), but the trip

to New York by overnight ferry was a horrible introduction to the land of the free.

Again, the relatives were found. An uncle owned a butcher shop in Brooklyn. A stranger lent Sussman a nickel and showed him the subway that would take him there.

This household was crowded with five relatives who had arrived recently, but his cousins offered to place him in a clock factory. Not unlike Soviet Jews today, Sussman had a plan of his own. He collected sixteen dollars due him from the ship company and borrowed money to buy tools by convincing his uncle he was a good risk. After he worked for a man several days at two dollars per week plus room and board, he realized he would have to learn English. He bought a Russian-English self-education book and became a valuable employee at fifteen dollars per week in a second job.

When he refused to work on Yom Kippur, the fast day of the ten-day new year holiday, he was discharged. The next job entailed a two-hour travel to Yonkers from the East Side where he lived to be near his friends. He hated the filth, the overcrowded tenements, the evil smell, and the endless flights of stairs to ugly quarters in Manhattan. The job in Yonkers was among strangers and soon gave out when the owner of the store went bankrupt. His friends would take him along to see Jewish plays—later critiqued in heated discussions at the home of one couple, the Targovniks. There he met Harry Edelman, the man who lured him to Skowhegan, Maine.

During his first year in America, Sussman wrote his sweetheart but received few letters from Russia. After he lost the job in Yonkers, he went back to work for his second employer, who assured him he would be able to observe Yom Kippur. Here too he found mail from Europe. His girl, Manya, had joined her brothers in Paris after the postwar pogroms. She had been working as a dressmaker most of her young life and expected to earn her own way to America too. Sussman was so glad to hear from her that he sent her a prepaid ticket, rented a room in her friend's house, and acquired a guitar. Her arrival was a cause for celebration with songs and feasting. As a couple they made many friends. Sussman had to pay for Manya's board and room as well as his own because she could not produce the quantity demanded of clothing workers in shops. Her quality was not appreciated when piecework was the determiner of income. They

were young, and no close family could attend the wedding, so they simply went to city hall and were married. Although in 1906, there was free love, even the anarchists did not influence the Russakoffs. "The most heated of these burning individualists, the one who advocated free love, the destruction of capitalism and so on, when he became a contractor with the shop where he worked, he always turned out to be the worst slave driver and exploiter of labor!" Sussman said.

Meanwhile Sussman had lent Harry Edelman, a much older man, twenty-five dollars when he told Sussman that he was told by his doctor to leave New York for relief of his asthma. Harry had a girlfriend in Skowhegan, Maine. He repaid the loan and then sent a Swiss watch to Sussman to repair. The postage cost more than the repair would have cost if it were done in Maine. When he questioned Harry about this, he wrote that Sussman should come to Maine to see what he thought about opening a jewelry store there. Timing was perfect; Sussman had just learned a baby was on the way, and he knew he did not want to raise a child on the East Side of New York. His employer argued Maine was a backward state, not progressive, and had few Jews, but Sussman left after Christmas in 1906. He took the boat to Fall River, then to Boston, took the train to Waterville, and then changed trains to Skowhegan.

"When I arrived, the air was beautifully clear and frosty. The snow as white as snow could ever be, and as one walked on it, it responded with a crispy, clear singing. Its song was one of welcome to me," he wrote in his memoirs.

Harry, who hung around the railroad station anyway, greeted him and took him to his kerosene-lit apartment. To Sussman, who was sick of the East Side, tired of running for the El, the ferry, and the cross-town cars, weary of the pushing and shoving, and the screaming of the alley cats, this was heaven—serenity and peace. He didn't even feel the cold!

He was surprised to find two large jewelry stores downtown and a small one on Madison Avenue. Maybe there were enough people to support another store! He found a store that had been abandoned and was available for renting. It had living quarters above the store, and the new owner was offering to put some furniture in for twenty-five dollars per month. So impressed was he that he engaged a man to put shelves and a work bench in the store and gave the owner a deposit.

When he returned to Manya after a few days, he found her depressed. A so-called friend had told her men were so fickle that they often went on a trip and never came back. She snapped out of her depression, though, at the excitement of getting ready for the move. Infant clothing was unavailable ready-made; she bought cloth and sewed diapers, nighties, etc. In Russia all this was unnecessary because babies were wrapped tightly like mummies and only unwrapped once in a while. Manya bought linens, towels, dishes, and other housekeeping items while Sussman gathered alarm clocks, leather chains, dollar watches, rings, and locket. Some businessmen extended credit.

When he went to his employer to pick up his tools, he found the store had been robbed, and his tool bag was found empty nearby. The police were sure he had emptied the safe to start his own store in Maine, but his former employer insisted he could not have done this. The police released him, and he went home to pack. Although some boxes were shipped, they carried a good deal of baggage to save shipping costs. When they arrived in Skowhegan, they were ready for their pioneering adventure.

Sussman and Manya were welcomed by Harry Stern, his wife Sara, and the Goldbergs, who needed another couple to join their card parties. The Russakoffs had no time for anything but work because they wanted to open their store on January 12, 1907. He had hoped for sales of twenty-five dollars per week, but the worsted mills were on strike, and his business was bad. The large stores told customers that Russakoff could not be trusted—he would probably pull the jewels out of a watch and replace them with brass. Sussman's explanation that it would cost five times the value of the jewel to do this finally countered this slander.

The cost of rent, coal, and wood for heating (eight dollars per cord) was soon depleting their savings. He knew he could go back to his employer in New York, but Sussman was determined to succeed. "As to the higher aspects of life, there was little here for us. Socially it was dead; there was no one with whom to exchange an intelligent word. Certainly, I was never interested in the junk-dealing, which was the occupation of our local acquaintances; all we could do was play an occasional game of whist."

"Customers were satisfied with my work even though they were afraid to pronounce 'Russakoff'." People were sentimental about old clocks and watches. They'd bring them to Sussman rather than to the larger stores, who probably charged more.

The baby Joseph came July 26, 1907, with the help of Dr. Stinchfield. He inspired the most business they'd had so far and changed their luck. From that day progress was slow but steady. As soon as they had a few dollars, they brought over Sussman's brothers and sisters. Even a loan at the bank was executed to bring one brother. Then the parents came. They stayed with Sussman and Manya but just long enough to get reacquainted and then left for New York.

In 1908 Rebecca was born. Manya had a sewing machine. They bought a dining room table and six chairs—nothing was purchased until there was money to pay for it. To his parents Sussman seemed very prosperous. They asked for a large sum of money to open a grocery store in New York, where they'd be near a synagogue and could speak Yiddish to their customers. When he suggested they use their own money and borrow from local personal loan companies, his father threatened to go back to Russia. Sussman wrote to him reminding him of the pogroms he left behind and pointed to the liberty he had to travel and to make his own decisions. If he preferred to go back, he certainly could, but "The soil of America was worth a little suffering."

When the third child was five weeks old, Manya took the three children to New York to visit relatives and friends there. She was glad to come back to Maine, where they were not crowded into small rooms and the children had plenty of good, fresh air and were not exposed to the danger of the streets.

The neighbors had helped with the birth of Elizabeth when Sussman was in the store. But in a small town neighbors can also be destructive. Once when he was working on clocks in people's homes in the evening, Manya was told he was not in the store for three nights in a row. While she was tied to the house with the children, he was supposedly gallivanting around. It took a lot of heartache and tact to iron this out.

Meanwhile, Clyde Smith, who was in a mail order publishing business then (and later a senator from Maine), made Sussman an offer that he could not refuse, on a lease of a larger store. The increase in rent was frightening, but Smith believed his business would increase so much that it would pay to move his business there. If not, the rent would be as low as his present rent. Smith was right.

Sussman joined Odd Fellows, Eagles, and the New England Order of Protection. Occasionally he took time from his store to attend a meeting. He also carried insurance for his family.

Ida, the fourth child, was born in 1912, when again the store was moved, and the family moved to a better house.

A Mr. Sagarin brought his family to Skowhegan on a shoestring and was unable to make a living. He convinced Sussman that he knew how to market potatoes. At that time Green Mountain potatoes were produced and collected in two potato houses. Buyers would sell farmers fertilizer to take a mortgage on the crop to be paid off at prevailing prices at harvest. The farmer had no chance to get ahead. Even the scales were crooked. When Sussman offered ten cents more than the dealers paid and the use of the city scale, he attracted more farmers. Soon the dealers called him a goddamned Jew who would cheat and short-weigh. Although it was obvious the farmer was being paid promptly and honestly, the anti-Semitism worked, and eventually Sussman left the business, and the farmers lost their farms. Some of the finest people in the area, like Sewell Smith and his daughter Margaret Chase Smith, were in this business, but most of the dealers were dishonest.

In 1915, Abraham, the fifth child was born, and the family then moved into their first purchased home. Sussman had no intention of buying a house, but he went by the ten-room house when it was being sold at auction and bid. He was completely astounded when he won the house for \$1,906. He did not even have the deposit, but Mr. K.A. Butler arranged to buy the house through the bank to settle an estate, without a deposit.

It took \$1,000 to improve the house, but now they had a real bathroom, a white kitchen sink, stone wash tubs, a hot-water-heating system throughout, and a purchased cement floor cellar. Manya sewed everything she and the children wore and planned the food purchases carefully until the mortgage was burned. Then the building that the store was in was put up for sale by Mr. Bisson. Sussman bought that too. There were no specific time payments—he paid as soon as he had the money.

Louis, the brother who had worked for him in his store in Russia, came to Skowhegan to establish residence (three years) for a divorce. He criticized the family for their style of child-rearing and usurped the role of store owner. Sussman had been planning to open a store in Waterville anyway with the idea of rearing the children in a more Jewish environment and with the possibility of sending them to Colby College. The plan failed after the Waterville store opened because Louis, divorced, was drafted in World War I. Sussman worked one day in Skowhegan and every

other day in Waterville, repairing watches and selling jewelry from 7 A.M. to 9 or 10 P.M. He owned an Overland, one of the first cars in Maine, but the roads were too rough and muddy to drive it. Trains between Skowhegan and Waterville were more reliable.

As World War I was drawing to a close, he was driving home when he heard fire sirens from all directions. He learned this was to signal the end of the war! He leaned on the horn all the way home to Skowhegan only to find out this was a false rumor. The real armistice was proclaimed a week later. The town was so excited by the rumor that a large bonfire was started in the middle of downtown anyway. "There was such joy and gladness; people sang, snake-danced, and blew on horns, real and toy."

Soon Louis was discharged from the army and became engaged to a bookkeeper he met in New York. She was shrewd enough to write to Dun & Bradstreet to check on the financial status of S. Russakoff before she agreed to marry Louis.

Walter F. Robbins, the owner of a fine jewelry store in Skowhegan, decided to retire after thirty-five years and offered to sell his luxury-type fixtures to Sussman. According to his customers, Mr. Robbins had been accusing that goddamned Jew of every nefarious trick in the business ever since he opened his first little store. Sussman told Mr. Robbins that he never wanted to see his fixtures in his store no matter how little they would cost.

Dr. Borden bought the Oxford Hotel while he was inebriated and could not meet the payments. He was arrested for drunkenness and sent to the state hospital in Augusta. When he came back, no one would lend him money to meet the payments. In desperation he appealed to Sussman to become his partner in the form of manager, leaser, rent collector, and signer of checks. For three years this worked, and then Sussman conceived the idea that F. W. Woolworth might want to open a store in space he had to rent. When he managed to secure a lease from that company, prosperity threw Dr. Borden into another spree of buying—he bought the lease of the hotel and the drug store to make sure he had alcohol and a place to consume it when he was thrown out of his home. Again he was sent to the state hospital. When he returned, Sussman bought out his interest with the help of Mr. Butler at the bank.

Music was important in this household. Joseph and Rebecca played the piano, and Elizabeth played the violin. Abraham and

Archie played the trumpet (Archie played first trumpet at Julliard School of Music in New York). Joseph had his own band in college. In fact he took first prize of \$45 in his freshman year, graduated first in his class, and was accepted at Dartmouth College before he was sixteen. Elizabeth dropped out of the New England Conservatory when her violin teacher died. She married a furniture dealer.

Rebecca attended Wheaton College and graduated from Boston University. Elizabeth played in trios, winning second prize in academics at Burdett College. Ida graduated with honors from Radcliffe, where she attended on a scholarship and later was director of the Jewish Vocational Service in Boston that she helped to develop. Abraham became a doctor specializing in chest diseases. Phillip graduated from the School of Optometry at Columbia and practices in Skowhegan.

When Sussman bought his first car, an Overland, in December of 1918 in Waterville, he told Louis to take driving lessons and drive to Skowhegan, where he could teach Sussman to drive. Louis drove it into town, touching all the cars parked downtown. The bent fenders announced he had a car. He was so proud of himself, however, that he took the Russakoff family and his mother for a ride in the evening to visit the Bloom family in Madison. When the family emerged, the car, parked on an incline minus the emergency brake, rolled down as it brushed a telephone pole and lost both right doors. Uphill the car had difficulty; instead of shifting to second, Louis always managed to shift into reverse. On the way home he managed to do this in the dark. "The car's downward journey into a ravine with a stream at the bottom of it was stopped by a boulder which stood in the way and refused to budge. The back of the car had actually passed over it, but the front axle locked and held." No one was hurt. "The front put its eyes, the lights to the sky, counting the stars, no doubt."

During this ordeal, the grandmother had already said many prayers and made remarks that were critical of those who had enough money to buy a car. When it was towed back, repaired, and put in the garage, he covered it with cheesecloth. "Whenever I walked through the garage on the way to feed the chickens, I was afraid to look at this Overland, which, like a dog, had to visit every object it passed."

Later, he learned to drive it, and the family enjoyed trips to Lakewood Theatre, Old Orchard Beach, New York, and Gardiner, Massachusetts.

Times were good. Sussman bought an adjoining store and a building in Waterville. Then came World War II and Louis's death. His widow sold the store in Waterville without telling Sussman (who needed the merchandise for the Skowhegan store), thereby incurring his unmitigated wrath. The banks were not above overcharging on mortgages or foreclosing, depending on the ignorance of finance and haphazard bookkeeping of the immigrants. Russakoff almost lost all his property to a bank, but a friend he'd helped to open another bank came to the rescue.

Later he told the director of the first bank, "When you refused me that loan, you insulted everything in me. I had paid you up on five parcels of property, never a day late. When you refused me that loan, I felt I was not considered better than some drunk, liar, or cheat. My honesty, morality, clean living, and past record brought me no consideration. I wasn't looking for money at lower rates of interest, I had always done business here and wanted to continue."

Fires in college dorms, especially when twelve boys were suffocated in a fire at Colby, made Sussman decide to move to Boston. Joseph was at Dartmouth, and Rebecca at Wheaton.

He regretted not pursuing jewelry as a profession, despite the advice of one of his wholesalers that he could not compete with the dishonest people in the business in Boston.

The building of apartment houses appealed to him; he could get outdoors—away from the watch repairer's bench.

"I never dreamed of how much fraud was tied up in this kind of business." He could tie up lots by putting a small deposit down and then sell them to builders at a profit. He had two apartment houses but wanted a third. When the 1929 crash came, he lost them because he could not meet his mortgage payments. By 1938 he lost everything he had mortgaged.

The twelve years in Boston weren't completely lost—the children attended Hebrew school and could associate with Jews. The children attended colleges while living at home. Joe, Beck, and Elizabeth were married. Ida was working. Abe was in medical school, and Phil was a bar mitzvah. Archie was young enough to change schools comfortably.

Sussman was welcomed back to Skowhegan in the jewelry business by old friends and younger folks. The installment

business and style change to smaller watches changed the way he had to conduct business, but after eight months on his own (he does not credit anyone with help during this recouping of his business), Manya came back with Archie and Philip. Manya was ill and died soon after. But she had been able to go to Paris twice to see her family before WW II. "There were no Nazis then, but there were plenty of Jew-baiters," said Sussman.

Jews in Russia and other European countries were not allowed to engage in industry and agriculture—they could not own land. It was frequently necessary to resort to bribes and cunning in order to just stay alive. Sussman was proud that he "had been able to show that not all Jews are junk dealers and money gatherers."

Sussman wrote about changes he had seen and lived through. One area of great progress was the way to illuminate a room. When he was small, the primary way was to have a chimney with a hole in it; in this would burn two or three pieces of fine kindling wood; after this came the tallow candle; then was the wick in a glass of oil, the kerosene lamp; and finally came gas. Electric light bulbs were globes containing carbon points that had to be replaced regularly.

"I have seen oxen harnessed to draw carts. I have traveled in covered wagons; horses waded in knee-deep mud.

"What drudgery it was to keep the house warm in winter. Wood had to be cut, hauled out of the woods, sawed, split, piled up and covered, and carried upstairs after it had dried.

"Stinking sulfur matches looked like a comb. I broke one off and scratched it across the seat of the pants, leaving a shiny streak on the cloth. The match would sizzle and fume, with an odor that curled your nostrils.

"My greatest joy would have been if my folks had come to this country before I was born so that I could have had the benefit of at least an elementary school education. Even to peddle papers just to go to school."

Nostalgia set in during his last years. "Even amidst the poverty, sickness, misery, blindness, prostitution, thievery, and murder in Russia—every city had a beautiful park, a carefully landscaped place with shrubs, trees, and flowers, benches, lovers' lanes, and music stands for open-air band and symphony concerts.

"The buildings, government and commercial, were ornately decorated like museums. Market centers were for farmers to sell their produce, horses, straw, eggs, firewood, chickens, etc. At the head of the square stood the city scales.

"People amused themselves by dancing in one corner of the square. Ice cream and sunflower seeds were hawked. Singing in groups was common. When they were young, the Russian people drowned their hardship in song, and when they grew older, in vodka. We wore ragged clothing and always went barefoot in summer. Hardly anyone had stockings."

He finished his memoirs in 1953 and died December 29, 1967—his eightieth birthday. Archie, the youngest child, diagnosed at the Mayo clinic as a patient with intestinal ulcers, was devoted to his mother. He had learned to repair watches from his father and took care of him in his last years. Archie managed the jewelry store in Skowhegan and proved the old saying wrong about children neglecting parents in their old age. Sussman's granddaughter, Dale Russakoff, reports for the *Washington Post*. Philip still practices optometry in Skowhegan.