

MY MEMOIRS  
by  
SAMUEL CRONSBURG

My name is Samuel Cronsborg. In Yiddish, it is "Shepsil." I am continuing my memoirs after those of my sister, Ida.

In the back of my grandfather's house in the village of Selisht, there was a garden with a fence around it. One day, I was wandering in the garden when suddenly, there appeared a lot of frogs. I was terrified, and being too small to climb over the fence, I cried until a neighbor heard me and rescued me. I still hate the sight of frogs.

One day, when we were having dinner, we noticed our little girl cousin was wandering around the room and smacking her lips. All of a sudden, she collapsed on the floor. When they picked her up, they knew the reason - she had been at the liquor bottle.

At an early age, I went to Hebrew school. In the winter-time, when it got dark, a young man who was called "Belfer" would conduct the children home, lighting the way with a lantern.

My father's job in Russia was working the woods marking certain trees that were to be stripped of the bark which was then used in the tannery. In the winter, it was an awful job. He decided to emigrate to America and was finally able to leave Russia.

It was a harder job for my mother to bring up us kids all by herself. One day, my mother was carrying a chicken to be slaughtered, when it got away from her and went under the porch. My mother crawled under the porch after it and scratched her hand on a rusty nail. It became badly infected. She went to the only doctor in the village. Although he tried to heal it, it became worse, so she went back to the doctor who told her that the hand had become so badly infected that it would have to be amputated. Can you imagine the trauma? The doctor's wife was a nurse. She intervened, insisting that they try a drastic remedy. The doctor agreed. He told her that they would have to use carbolic acid. No anesthesia was available and she was in terrible pain until it finally healed.

My father had three brothers: My Uncle Yiddel dealt in eggs that he bought from local farms and then resell them in town. I was told that his lunch would consist of bread and raw eggs. Uncle Sam didn't want to be drafted in the Russian army, so he shot off his trigger finger. Uncle Jack was drafted and was sent to Japan to fight the Japanese. The Russian Army was badly defeated and Uncle Jack escaped to San Francisco. From there, he went to Baltimore where we had relatives and, finally, he went to Fayetteville, North Carolina where he opened a clothing store since our Baltimore cousins also had clothing stores there. Uncle Yiddel emigrated to Portland where he stayed for several years. He then moved to Los Angeles, CA where his wife had relatives.

My father finally accumulated enough money so that we could go to America. We left the village of Tuchin in a wagon that was filled with hay. We slept on benches until we finally arrived in the city of Rovno. What a surprise it was for us to see that the streets were paved with bricks. We finally left Rovno. Our next destination was the city of Bridy on the



Austrian border. I believe that Ida was wrong about the length of time it took us to cross the Atlantic. I believe it was more like twenty days. I think I was the only one in the family who was not seasick. I would walk across the deck to the galley to get a kettle of hot water, so that we could have tea. It wasn't the storm that delayed us, but the fact that the ship had sprung a leak. The water was up to the second bulk where everyone huddled. I can't remember if I was scared. The men put on talismans and tefillim and prayed. The ship stopped in the middle of the Atlantic and blew her whistle till finally another ship came alongside and gave us extra pumps. Somehow, they must have made some makeshift plugs and we were able to continue slowly to America.

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There was an incident that I will never forget. All the steerage passengers were told to go on deck so that the cabins could be aired out. The sailors were swabbing down the deck and it was very slippery. After a long time, we were told that we could go down - women and children first. It was then that I first saw German cruelty. A woman asked a young man to carry her child down. A sailor thought that he was trying to sneak down first, so he belabored the young man with a large rope until he fell down. The woman rushed over and rescued her child.

Meanwhile, my father was looking every day in the Maritime Section of the newspapers for the ship named "Brunderberg." At last, he saw that the ship was going to arrive in New York instead of in Portland. We were finally escorted from Ellis Island to Union Station in Portland, where our father met us.

We lived for several years in a small flat on Hampshire Street. Finally, we found a larger flat on Fore Street. It was a three-family house. The reason why the owner built it on Fore Street, where there were bootleggers and prostitutes, was that he wanted to be near his junk shop. Incidentally, years later, the owner had to tear down the house as he couldn't rent it on account of the ill-repute of the street.

When my father came to America, he stayed for a while in Chelsea, Mass. with my mother's sister and her husband Mr. Gold. He didn't stay with them very long. He moved to Portland because he knew some friends from the same town in Russia.

We bought a three-family house on Monument Street, with Ida helping out by assuming the mortgage. Pa opened up a second-hand furniture store on Washington Avenue. He always had difficulty making a decent living. He had to close the store frequently on account of illness. After quite a few years, Ida paid off the mortgage.

My father didn't want to belong to the shul on Newberry Street, so he and some of the men rented a small house on Fore Street. As the membership grew, they bought a lot on Cumberland Avenue. Every member contributed as much money as he could and every member signed notes and the bank gave them sufficient money to start building a shul. They built a very nice brick building.

At about that time an immigrant Italian artist came to Portland. He was very talented but he couldn't find work. When he saw that the shul was being built, he offered to do some artistic painting on the walls.



He offered to work at such a ridiculous price that it was a shame not to hire him. Around the walls, he painted the signs of the Zodiac. On the ceiling, he painted a blue sky and stars. It was a wonderful job. Even the members who knew nothing about art, were ecstatic. It was a real masterpiece. After several years, the walls became dusty and a little dirty. Some of the stupid members decided to repaint everything by covering the beautiful paintings with color. Pa was shocked to have them spoil a work of art, but he couldn't win. They finally agreed to save the ceiling, if he could find somebody who could clean it without spoiling the painting. Years later, as the membership dwindled, they had to sell the building. It was resold several times and finally it was torn down.

Most of us immigrant kids had to find some sort of job, either to help out the family's meager income, or to have a little spending money. Most of the boys started out by selling newspapers. We made a penny for every paper we sold. I got up at six A.M. and went down to the newspaper warehouse and bought fifty papers and walked up from Monument Square to Longfellow Square near the Y.M.C.A. and stayed until I sold them all. I would run home and have my breakfast. Pa would ask me to say a short prayer and I would comply and then run off to school. I had to buy a vendor's badge for fifty cents. I usually gave half of my earnings, but he refused so I told him to save it for me. To my surprise, when I decided to go to Boston U., he gave me \$500.00 every cent of which I had given to him.

One morning, after I had sold all my papers, a fat cop asked me for my badge. I told him that I left it at home. He walked me to the Police station and left me sitting on a bench. I wasn't scared, just mad. In a little while, the Chief of Police walked in and asked me what a little boy was doing there. When I told him, he found the cop and he certainly bawled him out. He told the cop to get a car and take me home; wait until I had my breakfast; take me to school, and apologize to the principal and give him the reason why I was late.

I was getting tired of working for fifty cents a day. My stand was in front of the Y.M.C.A. building and I was getting friendly with everyone in front of the Y...but a lot of good it did me. One day, a young man who was a part-time elevator operator in the Y told me that he was quitting his job. When I asked the Y secretary for the job, he asked me how old I was. I told him that I was 14 and he said that I had to be 16..so I told him I was 16. He laughed and told me to bring my birth certificate. I told him that in Russia they did not issue certificates and begged him for the job. He finally agreed on the condition that I told nobody that I wasn't 16.

I worked from 3:00 to 6:00 P.M. and all day in the summer. The elevator was hydraulic and was operated by pulling two steel ropes and by wearing leather-palm gloves. One day I came in early and as nobody was in the gym, I played basketball by myself. As I was perspiring, I took a shower and then went to work running the elevator. Then I noticed that my arm was stiff all the way to my hand. I was really scared. A Dr. Abbott who was one of the most famous orthopedic surgeons in the northeast, came in and noticed that I was operating both ropes with one hand. When I told him how it happened, he told me to shut off the elevator and come into his office. He strapped me in a chair and manipulated my arm a few minutes.



He then gave my shoulder a jerk and, presto, my arm was as good as ever. There was no charge. One incident happened when I was operating the elevator with a lot of people in it. The elevator wouldn't stop but kept going up and down. The passengers were getting scared. I finally decided that I should do something. I told the passengers that as the elevator approached the ground floor, I would open the gate and dive out. As I was wearing the leather gloves, I wasn't even scratched. I went down to the basement and told the engineer about the problem. He knew the reason. Probably, one of the kids had thrown a towel into the brake gears so that it couldn't mesh. He pulled out the towel and the elevator was O.K. I went back to the elevator and was the hero of the day.

The next summer, I asked for a raise. In order to get a couple of dollars more, they said they would have to take it up with Board of Directors. After a couple of months, I realized that they didn't ask the Board of Directors for the raise. I figured that I was already a professional, so I told them that I was quitting. I didn't have any trouble finding jobs as an elevator operator. I worked in about three places and if I didn't like the job, I would get another one.

Portland had a sheriff who was the bane of the bootleggers because he couldn't be bribed. One afternoon as I was coming home from the Jewish bakery with a bag of Challahs, I was walking on Federal Street on the side of the wall of the Eastern Cemetery, a man jumped off the wall and grabbed me. I realized that it was Mr. Doughty, the Sheriff. When he realized that the contents of the bag was soft, he apologized.

The next summer, some of my friends persuaded me to try construction work. The pay was good because of the war, and there was a shortage of men. We had to join the Union for \$5.00. An Italian contractor had a lot of work around the city. He didn't want to hire boys, but the Union man insisted that for every man he got, he had to hire a boy. At the end of our first day on the job, the contractor made out our pink slips as soon as we left. The Union man knew what the man was doing, so he sent us to various jobs for the same contractor. When the foreman saw us a few days later on the job, we were fired again. The same procedure went on all summer. On some of the jobs, we worked only three or four days. Our final job lasted a whole week. It was a Government job on Peaks Island. We would ride over on a submarine chaser, sitting on a narrow part of the deck. We enjoyed the ride because it was unusual. The pay that summer was very good.

After graduation from high school, I decided that I would like to go to Boston University. The school told me that I would be able to find a job evenings so that I could afford to go to school during the day. That was no help. Any job that I could get would require me to work all night. It was impossible to go to school days. As I had to pay \$300.00 for tuition, plus room rent, books and meals, the only solution was to apply the amount for a year at evening classes. In spite of working days at low-paying jobs; going to school nights, and studying late at night, it was still tough, even working at home during the summers. I managed to work for two years and go to school, but then I had to quit and go home. I was heart-broken. There was no way that I could go on. It was the time of the Depression and jobs were scarce.



I found a job working as a bookkeeper for a Beauty Supply company. After a couple of months, the owner realized that there wasn't enough bookkeeping for me. He suggested that I should spend part of my time selling their products to barber shops. I would get a commission plus my salary. They used to make their own tonics and also sold the national brands. When the barbers learned that the owner's brand contained more pure alcohol than the national brands, they couldn't get enough tonic to supply all the winos who lined up to buy the tonic. As it was prohibition, the winos knew how to siphon off the alcohol. As a result of this, I was making three times as much as my salary. I overdid myself. When the owner realized what a gold mine he had, he let me go and gave the job to a relative. Such is life!

I finally obtained a job as a clerk with Sulkowitch Hardware. The pay wasn't too bad for the hard times. The first year, I and the other clerk received the munificent raise of \$2.00 a week. The following year, as business was bad, there was no raise. I was thinking of quitting and looking for something better.

Meanwhile, I met Rose and fell in love with her and courted her. As Rose lived in Bath, Maine and I didn't work on Saturday, I used to take the train every Friday evening and spend the time with her until I had to take the last train home. I came home around one o'clock. I think Pa knew the reason, but he never asked me.

I will describe one incident of many that happened in the hardware store. They had a trap door in the floor through which heavy stuff was lowered to the cellar. One day, we had a 50 lb. cask of zinc that had to be lowered into the cellar. Jack Goldblatt, the other clerk, was in the cellar to receive it. The boss tied a rope around the cask of zinc. The rope was a pulley, and I was upstairs to pull it from the floor in order to lower it to the cellar. All of a sudden, the rope slipped from the cask of zinc. We yelled to Jack to get out of the way. He saw it coming but he wasn't fast enough to get out of the way. The zinc slammed into a wooden barrel full of orange shellac. Jack was splashed with the orange shellac from head to foot. Fortunately, the Municipal Bath was in the Armory next door. Jack went to the Armory and for a nickel he got a towel and a piece of soap to take a shower. The clothing store next door knew Jack's size, so they sent him a complete outfit of clothing. Jack was so angry that he went home for the rest of the day.

I couldn't see any future in the hardware store. While I was still working there, I went looking for a better job but with no luck. Every firm said, "Sorry; no opening just yet." Meanwhile, Pa was getting letters from my uncles in Fayetteville asking me to come to work for them as they were very busy and they really needed somebody they could trust. What could I lose? So I wrote to Uncle Sam asking what kind of a proposition they could make me. A letter came back promptly offering a decent salary and a share of the profits at the end of six months. I decided to take a chance. They sent me the fare to Fayetteville. My Uncle Jake had a separate store in his house. In another store nearby, he and Uncle Sam were partners. On week days, they weren't busy, but on Saturday, which



was market day, they were very busy and hired six young fellows to help out. We usually took in about \$1500. that day. At the end of six month of my servitude, I was looking forward to my bonus. Lo and behold! that Friday Uncle Sam got into an argument with Uncle Jack and they split up. Uncle Sam left for St. Louis. I opened the store but none of the helpers would come to work as they didn't like Uncle Jake. What a pickle I was in, trying to run the store by myself and waiting on about six customers at the same time. At noontime, Uncle Jake came over and brought me some sandwiches. At the end of the day, I counted the money I had taken in by myself and it came to about \$900. When I gave my uncle the money, he couldn't believe his eyes. When I asked him what I should do, he said that he would give me a \$5.00 raise and get somebody to help me run the store.

I said, "The six months are up; what is my share of the profits?" He said, "I didn't promise any such thing. If Sam promised you, then let him pay you." I was so mad that I asked for my pay and fare to N.Y. As I was quitting, he thought it over and said that at the end of six months, I would get my bonus - all of it.

I said, "Alright, but I want it in writing." He said, "You don't trust your father's brother?" I said, "No." He said, "Absolutely no." So I took my pay and fare; ran to my rooming house; paid my rent; packed my suitcase; sent Ida a telegram telling her that I was coming to N.Y. and caught the last train to N. Y.

Sitting on the train, I felt let down. I said to myself, "It probably is for the best. 'Uncle Jake, you did me a favor without knowing it.'" All at once, I realized that Rose would never want to live in Fayetteville, and even if she agreed to, we would be very unhappy there.

When I came to Ida's house, she opened the door and looked at me with surprise. Just then, a boy came with my telegram - ten hours late. The next day, I went job hunting. I had heard about a large hardware store on the Bowery. It was called Curzin Hardware...a million dollar outfit. I went into the store and applied for a job. After some questioning by the boss, I was hired. I was given a section of the store, buying, selling, etc. A few weeks later, I was given charge of another section, and a few weeks after that, I was given still another section. I was really up to my ears trying to take care of it all. One day, Mr. Curzon came over to my section and put his finger in the corner and showed me a dirty finger. It certainly was unwarranted. I was really furious. I won't repeat what I said he could do with his finger. I thought that he would have a stroke. He walked away without firing me or saying anything. For three days, he walked by me and I felt that I was getting dirty looks, but he never spoke to me. All the help were scared to death of him. I didn't like the situation or the atmosphere. So on the third day of that week, I went into his office and told him that I would like my back pay as I was quitting. He wanted to know why. So I told him that all his help were scared to death of him. In fact, I heard him bawl out a clerk in front of a customer. I thought it was very degrading. He said to me that he didn't think he ought to be a diplomat in his own store.



He told me to tell the cashier to give me a full week's pay and take the rest of the week off to cool off and come back the next Monday. I decided that as jobs were scarce, I would swallow my pride and go back.

Riding to work, I saw a very nice-looking hardware store in the Bronx. I went into the store and applied for a job. Mr. Rosen, the owner, told me that he didn't have a vacancy just then, but invited me to have breakfast with him. While we were eating, he asked me where I had worked in N. Y. I told him that I had worked for a while for Curzin Hardware, but that I didn't like the owner so I quit. He looked at me for a minute and said he didn't blame me for leaving that S.O.B. and that he had been a partner with him.

He excused himself to make a phone call. Then he told me that he had called his brother who had a rubber factory, but that his brother had no opening of any kind that would suit me. We talked for a while and when he learned that I had accounting experience, he asked me if I would like to work in his office. He had two girls who worked in the office, but needed somebody to audit their work and take care of the Accounts Receivable. I was very happy to accept. The office was very crowded with desks and filing cabinets, but I managed to squeeze in. After I had worked there for about two years, Rose phoned me that her father had passed away and could I come for the funeral.

Mr. Rosen was one of the kindest men that I had ever met. When I told him that I had to go home, he expressed his sorrow. When I told him that I might not return, he said that whenever I should decide to come back, there would always be an opening for me. He gave me a full week's pay, and I left the same day.

After the funeral, I moved to Bath. Rose's mother was the hardest-working woman that I ever met. Rose was working as a bookkeeper at the Congress Shirt Factory. Her young, twin sisters were still going to school. Her mother had two grocery stores, of which her father ran one since he was in poor health and could not work at his job as a blacksmith. So, it was decided that I would take over the other grocery store. After the period of mourning, Rose and I were married. About a year later, Sidney was born. I can't forget that day. There was an eclipse of the sun. All the hospital personnel considered it a good omen and had a good time with the home-made cherry wine that we furnished.

The depression was still on and not long after that, the Bath Shipyard and other industries closed up. Most of the family men left to seek jobs elsewhere, leaving their families to subsist on reduced incomes. The first ones to go were the small groceries as they couldn't give credit. People shopped for cash at the A. & P. I was finally forced to close the store and live with Rose at her mother's on Rose's salary. I tried selling insurance, and being a stranger in a small town, it didn't pan out very good, so I was lucky to find a job in a large hardware store in Portland which called for commuting to Portland every day. One second-hand car that I had bought, conked out on me. The next one was wrecked by a driver who fell asleep.



Fortunately, I was not hurt. It was a tough two years, especially in the winter - in the snow, sleet and fog. I don't know who suffered most - Rose or I. Meanwhile, the twins graduated high school and moved to Hartford. It was hard to leave Rose's mother, but finally we moved to Portland. We found an apartment on Vesper street and moved in.

I worked for the Maine Hardware for about seven years. With the small raises that we received, we managed to get by, but when illness came around, my income was insufficient to save much. I was getting desperate and felt that I had to do something.

A had a friend, Arthur Levin, who had been working all his life at Shaw's Supermarket. I didn't know how much money he had, but I had heard that his wife had inherited quite a bit of money. I approached Arthur with the idea of going with me into the hardware business. I didn't have much money, but I would furnish the expertise, if he could raise most of the money. Another factor was that his wife's uncle Mr. Shur, had a vacant store near the City Hall. Arthur liked the idea and decided to go along. He contributed \$5,000. All I could contribute was \$500. We talked to the manager of Emery-Waterhouse who thought it was a good idea and would give us credit for a starter stock. I approached factory and jobber's salesmen and they promised to take care of me. We had a carpenter build shelving and nail-bins. Getting a paint line and wallpaper was no problem. Getting a line of hardware became more difficult as the war had started and most of the jobber salesmen couldn't take on any new accounts.

Nevertheless, we had a grand opening. We could sell all the hardware that we could get. We couldn't get enough hardware to do enough business to support two families. About that time, Shaw's lured Arthur back. Now the problem was that I couldn't buy Arthur out. If we liquidated, we wouldn't get ten cents on the dollar. It was a stalemate. Arthur's wife held the purse strings and she was adamant. For a settlement, we finally went to her cousin who was a lawyer, Barnett Shur. The agreement was that I should pay a certain sum every week and if I skipped even one payment, they would foreclose. I had to agree. It was a tough situation. I begged and scrounged around all the jobbers in Maine, Boston, and even a friendly salesman from New York and managed to sell all the goods that I could get and for several years we managed to do very well.

One thing that was uppermost in our minds was to save enough money for at least two years of Sid's college education. Shortly afterwards, a local locksmith retired and I bought his key machine and key blanks. I told Sid that the lock business was his and maybe the income would be a help to him while he was in college. In a very short time, Sid was able to master all kinds of lockwork. He even tackled the tough job of fixing door checks. His greatest achievement was when our large electrical cash register conked out and the cash register company wanted \$100. to repair it. Sid took it all apart and put it together. It worked like new. I was very proud.

After several years, we bought the house on Brighton Avenue. Then came Urban Renewal to our neighborhood, and for ten years, the engineers made plans and tore them up, to keep their jobs I think. For a period of several years, the landlords in the neighborhood wouldn't do any repairs because they expected the houses to be torn down. The tenants wouldn't do anything for the same reason. The whole neighborhood went to pot.



In addition, the malls opened up and all the small stores suffered. Our business kept shrinking. Meanwhile, while Sid was in high school, he worked very hard at various jobs in the summertime and saved all his earnings. He joined the high school orchestra playing on a violin that belonged to Burt Orden's father. As graduation time approached, Sid practised playing a classical piece on his violin for the graduation. We didn't know that he had a solo part and didn't even notice it on the program until he stepped on the stage. He stood calmly until the audience quieted down and then nodded to the accompanist who was his violin teacher. Rose, who recognized the piece, almost broke my fingers until he finished playing without a single false note. I can't tell you how thrilled we were.

Sid entered the University of Maine in Orono. He also worked for a locksmith in Brewer, a town near Orono, every week-end.

Still, the business kept dropping off and I was getting very depressed sitting all day with hardly any customers opening the door. I tried everything, but to no avail. I tried selling the stock to other hardware stores, but they weren't interested as they had plenty of stock. Rose was now working full time for the engineering firm upstairs of the store. The only solution I saw was to give the stock to the Salvation Army. I was in the hospital and Rose couldn't run the store.

Finally, a friend, Ruth Shapiro, in Boston who knew everyone in the hardware business sent us a jobber. All he could offer us was 10 cents on the dollar as he was too old to peddle the stock himself and had to turn it over to two other peddlars. We accepted the \$500.00 for a \$5000.00 stock, except for the key machine which we sold to the locksmith that Sid was working for. He paid us more than what I had originally paid for it.

Thank God that about that time, a cure was discovered for T.B. I was in the hospital for seven weeks taking 36 pills daily. I came home to recuperate in bed. Dr. ~~Imachin~~ came every evening to give me shots sometimes as late as 11:00 o'clock when he had finished his rounds at the Jewish Home for the Elderly. After years of recuperation, I prayed daily that I should be able to see Sid graduate college. Thank God I was able to do that.

Shortly after that, Sid married Helene Wolfson. Probably a year later, Michael was born and we were very happy grandparents. Sid had a very difficult time securing a good position. All the large industrials were reluctant to hire him as he might be drafted into the army at any time. Finally, ~~he decided not to wait to be drafted and enlisted in the~~ *he had a college deferment* army. He was sent to Fort Dix and from there, to Fort Campbell in Kentucky. He was then shipped overseas to Germany where Helene and Michael joined him.

When Sid's tour of duty was over, he came home on a troop ship. When it docked in New York Harbor, we were there to meet him. Words cannot express our joy and happiness to see Sid, Helene and Michael. Although my memoirs contain some hardships, I am thankful to say that our lives were filled with love and happiness.