



Elizabeth Eichelbaum (lower right) with her sisters Ethel and Zeena and their grandmother.

Journey from Russia Elizabeth Eichelbaum

I was born in Odessa, Russia, (now Ukraine) in 1910. My passport says that I was born in Kiev, but that was a mistake because my mother always told me that it was Odessa. I was about eighteen months old when my mother left for America and left my two older sisters and me with my grandmother. As far back as I can remember, we lived in somebody's kitchen in a back street. We lived right next to the synagogue.

My mother's sister and her family lived in a beautiful house on the main street. Off the main street next to their house, my uncle had a store. They carried flour, sugar and other grocery items. I remember they were the first ones of the people around us who installed electric lights. People from all over town came there just to see the miracle of the electric lights. The reason that I remember it was because it fascinated me to see the lights go on just by pressing a button. I must have been about five years old.

I was five and one-half years old when I started to go to school. Zeena was two years older than I. Ethel was the oldest, but had a private tutor because she was a delicate child. She had bronchitis and she was very thin. My grandmother worried about her health. Ethel was a bookworm and she was always in the attic of the flour mill, which was next to my uncle's house. I heard that it was his brother's business. Ethel was always in their attic reading books. If my grandmother was looking for her, she always knew where she would find her.

Next I knew that the First World War started and everyone was scared. A whole bunch of kids and I used to go to the field to

pick wheat. One day we saw a lot of soldiers passing by on horses. We were scared and after they passed, we ran home and told everyone that we saw all these soldiers. It created a disturbance among the people and everyone was worried. Every once in a while we'd hear a gun shot and we lived in fear. When we heard warning that the soldiers were coming we'd hide in someone's basement. We lived in a small town called Hoderkov. Because of the war, we stopped getting money from my mother. There was no more mail so there wasn't much to eat. My grandmother had a step-daughter in Kiev who was very old and not in good health, so Ethel went there to take care of her. Ethel was about ten or eleven at that time. I heard that she sold sugar in the black market to make a little extra money besides the little she made taking care of the old relative. She sent us money to my uncle's address because where we lived we probably wouldn't have gotten it. She also sent Zeena and me some shoes because she knew we needed them, but my rich aunt kept the shoes for her children and we had rags wrapped around our feet. I believe that the reason she kept the shoes was that even if money was available the stores were all closed. I heard that many people buried their money and other valuables underground for the future. Many homes were already burned down. My aunt resented my mother so she took it out on us. She had a little house in the back of her house which she rented to strangers. She did not want us near her. Everyone thought that she should have let us live there but she was angry because my mother left us with her mother. She preferred that her mother should live with her and help her raise her children. I always heard people say "What kind of mother leaves three small children and goes to America?" Her reason for going was that she was too proud to be at the mercy of her family. She had two old parents and she worked since she was ten or twelve years old. She had a couple of sewing machines and some people working for her and she worked right along with them to support her old parents.

She met my father through her married girlfriend. My father came to visit her girlfriend's husband. Her girlfriend introduced them and it was love at first sight. She was sixteen and he was twenty-nine. One day at work some heavy weight was lowered from an upper window as he was passing by. It fell on his head. There were no warnings as they post now. I don't know if

he went to a doctor or he thought the pain would go away. There was only one doctor in the whole town. As time went on, my father got worse and died.

With problems all around her and no one to turn to, my mother's life became unbearable. She heard of the land of opportunity. She decided to go to America. It took a couple of years to save enough money to send for us, and when she did, it was too late. The war had started. My grandmother sold whatever possessions she had, and we were on our way. When we had to cross the Russian borderline, it was closed, so we had to turn back. While we were hiding in someone's basement with many other people in our small town, my grandmother got sick. She was too old to be cramped up in a basement, plus the lack of food. She died in that basement. When the firing stopped and it was safe for us to get out, the people around us buried my grandmother. It was the first time and the only time that I ever saw preparations for a burial. From then on, death was all around us and became a daily catastrophe. I remember one incident that I hear people talk about. The enemy rounded up a bunch of men, locked them up in a barn, then set the barn on fire.

After my grandmother died, Zeena and I had no one to turn to. In spite of the fact my aunt did not want us, we wound up with her. There was a typhus epidemic. It was a very high fever and people were dying like flies. My aunt's two older daughters and my uncle were bedridden with typhus. My aunt made Zeena work very hard. Russian winters were extremely cold. She would send Zeena on many errands. The Dneper river froze and it was hard to get water. She would send Zeena to bring many pails of water. I don't remember from where, probably a well.

One day, my aunt got real angry at us and she chased both of us out of her house. We didn't know where to go. We knew that my grandmother had a step-daughter at a different part of town, so we went there. The house was evacuated and the only one who was there was an old woman who worked for them as a maid. She let us in, but there was no heat or furniture and she had very little with which to keep us warm. She must have been there because she had nowhere else to go. I remember we sat cooped up in a corner on the floor and we tried to sleep. Early in the morning, we went back to my aunt's house to see if she'd let us in.

She did, but she had already arranged to send us to Kiev to be with Ethel. Evidently, she got in touch with Ethel because she was at the train station waiting for us. We came in a freight train with no windows or seats. We were only two children and a train full of soldiers. There was no toilet and I had a nervous stomach because I was always scared. The train made a stop in the middle of nowhere. I don't know if they stopped because I had to go or if they just stopped, but I got off. The wind was so strong that I could barely keep my balance and I couldn't go, so when I got back in the train I messed myself up. With no ventilation, I smelled up the box car. The soldiers got angry and they started to holler to stop the train and throw us off. One soldier got in front of us and began to plead with the others to let us stay because we were orphans. He might have been from our town and knew us or about us or he might have just been a kind human being. Zeena and I occasionally used to talk about this incident and we would laugh, but we never spoke about it to others. We were too ashamed. When we saw the movie "Dr. Zhivago," with the scenery, the trains, and the cold water, it brought back memories of our trip to Kiev.

When Ethel picked us up at the train station, she did not know what to do with us. She couldn't take us to where she was because she was taking care of a sick old lady and they lived in just one room with a kitchenette. She only found a place for Zeena. She begged my aunt to keep me a little while longer until she found a place for me. I was somewhat of a problem. I think I had a head cold. My head was full of sores, and my feet were sore from frostbite. She took Zeena to an orphanage. After a couple of weeks, Ethel came and took me to the same orphanage where Zeena was. She left me there and I layed in bed and cried for days. Zeena was already adjusted. The place was on the main street, and before Zeena came, the place was full of adults. Many had died, and we were told that the bathrooms were full of dead bodies and some were stored in an outside garage, until it was safe to go out and bury them. They later cleaned out the place and turned it into an orphanage. I remember once a woman was lying on the ground near the back entrance of the orphanage. It was a hot summer day. We were warned not to go near her because she was dying of typhus, and it was very contagious. For hours, the flies were

buzzing on her and no one did anything for her until she died. Then someone removed the body. These sights never left my mind.

Food became very scarce in the orphanage and some of the kids got sick. They were bedridden. One day, Ethel came and brought us food, but with all the bedridden children, we started to feed the sick children with the little food that Ethel had brought us. We felt bad, but we knew that it was more important to feed the sick.

Because of the stories that we heard that dead bodies had been stored in the bathrooms, the children made up stories that they heard voices when they would go in the bathroom, and all of us went along with these stories. It got so that we actually were afraid to go to the bathroom. The teachers were puzzled but we all agreed that we heard voices, which I am sure no one heard. Gradually, these fears faded.

It was a fabulous estate surrounded with acres of land full of fruit trees. We actually lived on fruit because there was nothing else to eat. The war was on at the time, and all of a sudden, half our building was given over to the soldiers. In a way, it was a protection for the children because they guarded the building all night.

When the American reporters came back to the States from Russia after the war, they reported what they saw there, and mentioned the fact that three children in an orphanage had lost contact with their mother who lived in New York. They included our names and the rest of the information Zeena had given them. My father's brother, who also immigrated to New York years back, read it in the Jewish paper, and he immediately called my mother.

One day Ethel came to us and told Zeena and me that an agent from America came to see her and that mother gave him money to bring us to America. Zeena flatly told her that she was not going, and I, without knowing what Zeena had said, told her the same. For the first time in our lives, we were happy and felt secure. Ethel got us together, and she cried. She told us that we had to go. She was so young and so loyal to the responsibility that was imposed on her. She understood so much more than we did, yet there was not that much difference in age. Not only did she

have to shift for herself, but she had us to worry about. We both gave into her and next we knew that we were going to America. Time was limited and I had to tell the people who were in charge of us. I explained that we had heard from my mother and that she had sent for us. They told me that they were not allowed to let me go and if I did go, it would be without their knowledge or consent. Ethel came for me, and since I had no belongings to take with me, I just walked out.

We met our agent and the group that we were to travel with at an appointed time and place. We started our journey in covered wagons. There was no such thing as stopping to eat in restaurants in the small towns which we traveled through, so we bought food to eat along the way. The private homes in which we stopped to sleep provided breakfast and dinner. The roads were rough and bumpy, not paved. We crossed the border line to Romania and we were supposed to hide until morning. Our agent paid off the troops who were to patrol that area until we reached a safe destination. For some unknown reason to us, while we were hiding in the attic of a barn, a new born baby started to cry and we were caught, which meant that we would be sent back. I don't know how long they kept us in a nearby village. It was winter and they picked a very cold frosty day to send us back. We were supposed to go by row boat, but the river was so icy that the towns people refused to row the boats for fear that they could not make it across.

I heard that they got some of the men drunk and made them row us back. Every one in our group was afraid to get in the boats. Some cried and begged them not to send us back at such a dangerous time. They finally got the first row boat filled and all the others were praying for them. When they made it across it took some of the fear out of the others. We all returned and remained in a small town near the border. The next time we crossed the border line there was no problem. All traveling arrangements were made by our agent. He supplied us with whatever personal money we needed, as instructed by my mother.

Our first stop in Romania was again in a small town. It seemed that we stayed there for several weeks. Whenever we stopped anywhere for a certain length of time Ethel began to inquire about who to go to for a cure for the sores on my head.

She was afraid that they might not let me in to America. In the small towns they mostly knew of home remedies. One woman was recommended to give me treatments. She would mix up some egg yokes with other things unknown to me and whatever her remedy was it almost got rid of all the sores on my head.

I always heard that my mother was a very good-looking woman, so I pictured that a beautiful princess wearing an evening gown would greet us when we arrived in America. Why an evening gown? In our travels through the big cities we used to take long walks and look in the store windows, I would see the mannequins wearing gorgeous gowns, so I thought that rich people wear evening gowns all the time, especially in America (fairy land). Instead my mother had no idea as to the exact time of our arrival. When she opened the door, she was wearing a house dress, and certainly did not look her best. She was shocked to see us and became very emotional. She cried, she embraced us, and when she finally calmed down all three of us examined the premises and we quietly mumbled our disappointment to each other. The building belonged to my grandmother, my step-father's mother. It was a three-floor tenement house. We lived on the first floor, which was one flight of porch steps up.

After being there a few days we told my mother that we wanted to go back to Russia, we don't like America. No doubt she was hurt. She sat down with us and talked for a long time explaining to us about what a hard life she'd had and how hard she worked to save the money to bring us to this country. The cost ran into thousands of dollars which then was like millions now. She told us that she is still working very hard and that we will have all duties to perform to help out. She gained our sympathy and we knew that we were here to stay.

Elizabeth Eichelbaum earned a Master's Degree in Education, with emphasis in art theory from Wayne State University when she was 81 years old. She is now, at the age of 87, pursuing a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology at the University of Tennessee. She lives in Knoxville, TN. This memoir is excerpted from her autobiography-in-progress.