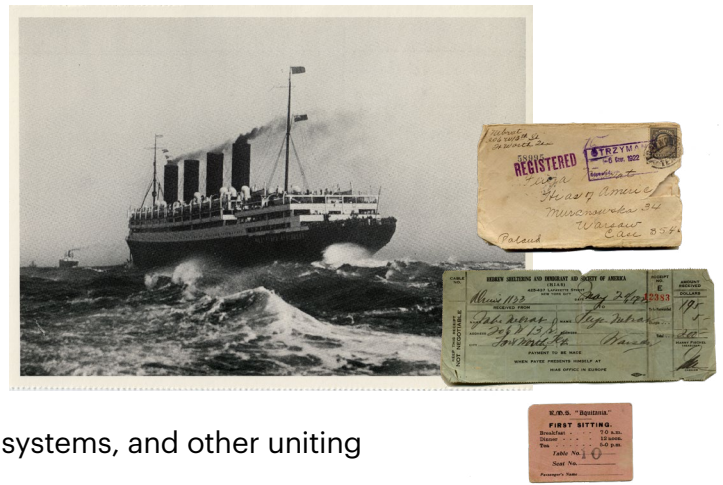


Reva's Story

Below are some terms you may encounter in this lesson or find useful.



Culture The beliefs, customs, values, arts, language systems, and other uniting features of a particular society, group, place, or time.

Discrimination The unjust or prejudicial treatment of people, especially on the grounds of race, religion, age, or gender.

Ellis Island An island in New York Harbor, southwest of Manhattan, that was the chief immigration station of the United States from 1892 to 1943.

Heirloom A valued family possession handed down from generation to generation.

Heritage Customs and items handed down from one's ancestors; or a characteristic, culture, or tradition from the past.

Immigrants People who leave their country of origin to live permanently in another country.

Immigration A process of leaving one place for the purpose of permanently settling elsewhere.

Judaism A religion and a culture that follows rules and traditions based on the Hebrew Bible, called the Torah. Like other diverse cultures, Jewish people have special foods, traditions, holidays, and languages. There are also values that many Jewish people (and many other cultures) try to live by, such as welcoming others, taking care of the earth, and teaching and learning.

Pogroms A Russian term, originally meaning "riot," that came to be applied to a series of violent attacks on Jews in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Refugee A person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Revolution The attempt by many people to end the rule of one government and start a new one.

Shabbat The Hebrew term for "Sabbath"; a day of rest and reflection. In the Jewish tradition, Shabbat begins every Friday night at sundown and continues until Saturday evening at sundown.

Steerage The lower deck of a ship used to provide the cheapest accommodations during travel, often for immigrants to North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Above: Photos of the *Aquitania* and boarding tickets courtesy of Paulette Nebrat Greenberg



[Listen on YouTube](#)

Reva's Story

Introduction

Welcome to the Skirball Cultural Center's Roslyn and Abner Goldstine School Programs. To learn more about our *Visions and Values* classroom curriculum, visit **skirball.org**.

The story you are about to hear took place over one hundred years ago. It comes from a treasured member of the Skirball community, Paulette Nebrat Greenberg. This true account follows Paulette's aunt, Reva Nebrat. Reva was a Russian **immigrant** who came to the United States with her family in the 1920s. Her experience mirrors the harrowing challenges many immigrants to the US have faced, and the courage people bring with them on their journey to find a new beginning.

Chapter 1

My family is from Russia, from a village called Berdichev. I was born there in 1913. My father, Yankel, was a shoemaker and my Mama, Feiga, stayed home with my two older brothers, Abe and Sam—and me, the baby sister. Mama did the housework, she swept the dirt floors, and cooked all our meals with whatever food she had on hand.

After synagogue, where we went to pray and study, my brothers played hide-and-go-seek and stickball outside with their friends. Walking home, we listened to the sounds of the river nearby. We lived a simple life, but it was also a scary time. Our family is Jewish, like many others in our town. Across Russia, many Jewish people experienced **discrimination**. It felt like we weren't welcome there anymore.

Even before I was born, Jewish communities like ours were attacked simply because of our beliefs. These attacks, or **pogroms**, were happening all across Eastern Europe. Mama and Papa wanted to protect our family and spent many nights talking about places we could go to live safely.

Sometimes Papa would bring home the newspaper and read stories to us about the Great War and all the fighting going on around the world. It seemed that everyone was fighting someone else somewhere and all my parents kept talking about was war, war, war.

One evening, Papa told us that he was going on a journey to a country called "America"—across the ocean—to hopefully find a better, safer life. As soon as he was settled there, he promised to send for us.

Somehow, Papa got a passport. I didn't know what a passport was, but Papa said it gave him permission to travel. I didn't want Papa to leave, but I knew he had to. The day he left, I couldn't

stop crying because I didn't know when I would see him again. I already missed his calm voice and the way he laughed when he watched us play together.

Once Papa was gone, my Mama, Abe, Sam, and I went to live with my *bubbe*, our grandmother. I continued hearing stories of war and fighting for the next several years. I would later learn that this was the start of the Russian **Revolution**.

Soldiers marched into our town. Some nights when I was in bed, I pulled my blanket over my ears to not hear their footsteps. When they knocked on our door, Mama kept us safe. She had us hide in the cupboards to stay out of sight.

Food was scarce and many people in town were hungry. Mama had even less food to cook for us. We didn't always know what we would have to eat. Sometimes we only had bread, other days, it was a simple broth with a few pieces of carrots. I really hated carrots.

Some blamed Jewish people like me and my family for these problems. Many stores were set on fire and burned to the ground. As days went on, attacks against Jewish people got even worse. Broken glass was everywhere and crunched under our feet. Then, the soldiers set our synagogue, our place of worship, on fire! That's when Mama knew we had to leave.

I had to be brave and swallow my tears as I left my home. I kept thinking that if we leave, how would Papa find us?

We had to be very careful. We'd have to leave without anyone knowing.

Mama hired a guide to take us across the Russian border and into Poland. Maybe once we got there, we'd try to get in touch with Papa somehow.

We could only take one small suitcase because we knew our journey would be long and difficult. We only took the most important papers, like our birth certificates. Sam and Abe wrapped a few family photographs in a handkerchief. I took my doll because I couldn't leave without her.

Mama took our candlesticks for lighting at **Shabbat**, our Friday night family dinners. She packed her favorite pair of small blue and silver earrings. She had gotten them from her mother when she was a young girl about my age. We put all these things in a suitcase and left our home for good. As Mama closed the door behind us, I whispered goodbye to the only home I had ever known.

Chapter 2

We took the train from my hometown of Berdichev and rode for days to the border near Poland. Our guide told us that once we got there, we had to jump off the train in the middle of the night because we didn't have permission to cross into Poland.

I still have a scar on my knee from when I jumped off that train. I remember running to Mama and my brothers and giving them a big hug.

Once we got into Poland, we had to walk all the way to Warsaw, the capital city.

It was almost two hundred miles! It took us over a month to get there. We walked, and walked, and walked.

We drank water from streams we passed and picked vegetables from fields to eat. I had always hated vegetables, especially carrots, but I learned that when you're hungry, anything—even carrots—tastes good. Some nights we got help from other Jewish people and slept in their synagogues, a place we could go to worship and for warmth. Other nights, we slept in the woods with our clothes for blankets. I often wrapped my jacket around me and pretended it was the blanket I had left behind.

Eventually, we got to Warsaw.

We went directly to an office called the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a place that helped Jewish **refugees** like ourselves. The woman at the desk told us that Papa had already contacted them! I jumped up and down and saw my Mama smiling for the very first time in weeks. We found out that Papa had sent some money and a letter telling us where he was. He was living in the United States, in a place called Texas.

Texas? I didn't have any idea where that was! What was a kid like me going to do in a place called Texas?

We were so happy to know that Papa was safe! With the money he sent, we were able to buy tickets for the ship that would take us to America.

It had been nine years since we had seen Papa.

Chapter 3

On a warm spring day in 1922, we traveled north to a city by the sea. In front of us was the biggest ship I'd ever seen.

We were one of hundreds of families on board the *Aquitania*, one of the largest steam ships that traveled between Europe and the United States. Those with the least expensive tickets traveled in **steerage**, the lowest deck of the ship, where it was often crowded with people and had no windows for fresh air.

We were lucky to afford our tickets in second class. This meant Mama, Abe, Sam, and I could stay in one tiny room together. We also got tickets for daily meals so we knew we wouldn't be hungry anymore. My brothers and I would play with other children on board and peek through the windows into the first-class dining room. We saw people dressed up in fancy clothes, and my eyes grew wide seeing the silver spoons and teacups on tables.

Weeks passed, and on July 1, 1922, we finally arrived in New York Harbor. Before us we saw a statue of a woman with one arm stretched up high holding a torch in the air. Later I would learn it was called “The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World.” Mama said we are now in a place where we don’t have to hide our beliefs and will have an opportunity for a better life.

As I looked up at the Statue of Liberty, I realized that we brought with us more than *things* that fit into our small suitcase. We carried our memories of Berdichev, our Jewish traditions, courage in our hearts, the hope that our lives would be safer, and that we would see Papa again. That hope is how we really survived.

We had arrived at **Ellis Island**. My feet hurt from the journey, and we now had to stand in long lines waiting to answer questions and be looked at by doctors. We were surrounded by other families. I looked at girls who wore clothing different from mine. I couldn’t understand some of the languages they were speaking. I huddled next to Mama and wondered how I would ever make friends in this brand-new country.

Once our inspection was finished, we were sent on our way. As we walked, I saw a wall of people waiting to greet the newcomers from our ship. Many people were waving, including a tall man with a beard. It was Papa!

He hugged Mama so tight I thought she was going to disappear. His eyes grew wide as he looked at us. “You’re so tall!” “I can’t believe how big you are!” He kept saying how proud he was of us.

He hugged us one by one. I kept stroking his beard, which had turned grey. He looked bigger and taller than I remembered, but his voice was calm and steady as it always was.

We were finally all together again.

We took a train to Texas where we’d be living. While we were on the train, someone offered me a banana. I didn’t know what it was or how to eat this fruit. It was this strange yellow thing with thick, heavy peel. I looked around at my Mama, Papa, Abe, and Sam, and took a bite. I thought, “If America is this good, I am going to like it here.”

Closing Credits

This project is a part of the Skirball Cultural Center’s Roslyn and Abner Goldstine School Programs. It was produced by Anna Schwarz and Lori Nierzwick, and voiced by Francine Kubrin. Mixing and sound design by Kara Hart. This story was recorded by Mike DeLay at Real Voice LA. And of course, thanks to Paulette Nebrat Greenberg for sharing her family story, which continues to inspire.

Name: _____

Reva's Story

Stories help us **honor memory** and show the value of learning from the past to create a better future.

What did you learn about Reva and her family?

1. Why did Reva and her family leave their home?

2. What were some of the challenges they faced?

3. What might they have felt on their journey?

4. What did they pack in their suitcase? Why were these items important to the family?

5. What are your hopes for Reva and her family? What do you want to happen next?



Photos of Reva and her family courtesy of Paulette Nebrat Greenberg

Name:

Connecting the Past to the Present

Think about what Reva and her family carried with them on their journey, both the material things and their values, skills, language, traditions, and memories. Now think about what is important to you.

What values, skills, languages, traditions, and memories do you carry with you wherever you go?

What items would you want to bring to a new place because they matter to you?

Optional: What aspects of your heritage (celebrations, customs, and traditions) might you pass on to the next generation?

Jewish Immigration Map

Jews have lived in the United States since before the nation's founding. They have come from many lands, seeking prospects of economic opportunity and refuge from persecution. With them, they have brought their ancestral beliefs, practices, and traditions. As of 2020, these Jewish immigrants and their descendants comprised 2.4 percent of the US population, numbering more than seven million people.

