Chapter 5. Coming to Philadelphia

I

At Union Station Malvina, Dina, and Josy stood on the platform. With the Tecotskys, the Grodskys, Celia Kirson, her sister Frieda, and the Liphs all there to bid them good-bye, they waited for the train to come in. Their hearts were full of memories as they prepared to take leave of Chicago. This had been their first home in America. Here Jacques and Malvina had arrived as immigrants, unable to speak English, but with hopes, anticipation, and dreams for what lay ahead. They had lived here happily for the past fourteen years and had established their own American life-style, forging deep personal attach-

ments to friends, family members they had never known back in the old country and, indeed, to the city of Chicago itself.

Although the day was bright and sunny, everyone's heart was heavy with the sense of farewell. Dina and Anna Tecotzky, Elizabeth's mother, hugged each other and wept openly with the realization that they would probably never see each other again. The train rolled in to the station at last and, by the time it finally pulled away, it was almost noon. Almost forty-eight hours of travel lay ahead before they finally arrived in Philadelphia. The car was a Pullman. Malvina hired two berths. She climbed into the upper one after settling Dina and Josy into the one below. Spending the night on a moving train was exciting, a real adventure for a six-year-old.

Soon after the lights were turned down, Josy heard snoring from a near-by berth.

"Mother!" she called out shrilly, "I can't sleep! The man's making music!"

"Sh! Go to sleep!" Malvina snapped in a heavy whisper.

"But he's making music, Mother, very, very loud music!" Josy called back even more shrilly.

"Not another word!" ordered Malvina, desperate lest these remarks provoke confrontation with a total stranger.

"But, Mother!" whined Josy.

Determinedly Malvina climbed down from her bunk and ordered Dina and Josy to change places. Now, as Josy lay next to the window further from the noises inside the train, she forgot about the snoring. Distracted for the next hour or two by the sights outside, she watched the towns, one after another, fly past. The sight of passing villages and rolling countryside was enchanting. From time to time, the train came to a complete standstill, waiting in the middle of a railroad crossing for a light to change. The idea of being in her pajamas in the middle of the night in the center of some small town, watching people pass back and forth just a few feet from her window and completely unaware that she was watching, excited her enormously. It was like being in a completely new world, strange and somewhat exotic.

Eventually, she fell asleep to the rocking of the railroad car. She dreamt of other children in miniature roofless wagons, open to the sky, each wagon hooked to the back of the next in an endless line. The whole chain looked like a long freight train, traveling just as she was doing. But in her dream all the passengers were her own age. She imagined that they were all exploring enchanted, adventurous new worlds together. For the moment

they became her brothers and sister, fulfilling the longing for siblings of her own.

The next morning after breakfast, Malvina gave the porter a couple of dollars to hook up a table between two pairs of facing coach seats. With her mother and grandmother looking on, Josy spent almost the whole day drawing. She sketched dozens of pictures, filling sheet after sheet of paper, all illustrating the scene she had dreamt about the previous night. The image of children traveling in a convoy of small roofless attached wagons consumed her thoughts for a long time to come.

On the second night she again watched through the window for more small-town scenes, but the train had already crossed into Pennsylvania, and all she could see were the forests of the Allegheny Mountains lit by the moon.

About eight o'clock the next morning they pulled into North Philadelphia Station. Passengers gathered their luggage and prepared to make their way up the aisle to leave the train. Suddenly, at the far end of the railroad car, Josy spotted her father, who had come inside to look for them. It had been several months since she had seen him, and both Jacques and Malvina had feared that Josy might not recognize him after such a long separation. They need not have worried, however. As soon as she spotted him, she shrieked, "Daddy!" Pushing her way up the crowded aisle, she rushed up to him and hugged him fiercely. His delight knew no bounds.

The other passengers smiled sympathetically, making way for Josy to pull him back to her mother and Dina, still surrounded by piles of luggage, unable to move amid the milling passengers. It was a scene none of them would ever forget.

II

Ben Margolius was waiting outside on the platform. He had come with Jacques to the station, bringing along his wife Liba’s cousin Ben Weiss, who had a car and drove them back to his house where, with the exception of Dina, they would stay until they found a place of their own. During this time Dina would remain with her son Ben and Liba.

Ben Weiss and his wife Celia moved their four-year-old boy Milton into their own bedroom with them so that Jacques and Malvina could sleep in his room. For Josy they placed a couple of blankets and a pillow on the floor in the hallway just outside her par-

ents' door. Before long a routine developed. Each morning about six-thirty, when Jacques opened the bedroom door, he would find Josy, still asleep, at the very top of the stairs. During the night she had gradually rolled over in her sleep, inch by inch, towards the staircase that led downstairs to the first floor. Each morning he would open the door just in time to spot her there and grab her seconds before she would have started to roll down the steps.

The Weisses lived on C Street near Roosevelt Boulevard. The nearest school was Feltonville Elementary at Rising Sun Avenue and Rockland Street. Here Josy entered first grade. Her teacher, an elderly woman with a quivering voice, called on her every day (along with the same three or four other children) to go to the blackboard, where she directed them to solve a simple arithmetic example in front of the class. Invariably, she singled Josy out, exclaiming in amazement, "My, what a nice tall girl Josephine is! Isn't she, boys and girls?"

Everyone would dutifully nod in unison.

"She really is tall, isn't she, class?" the teacher would persist.

Then, while Josy squirmed and fidgeted in embarrassment, the teacher would embark on a lecture about the importance of drinking milk.

"Drinking milk makes you grow very tall," she would explain. Then turning again to Josy, she would demand, "And how many glasses of milk do you drink each day, dear?" Blushing in embarrassment, Josy would reply firmly, "Three!"

"Only three, Dear?" the teacher would exclaim in astonishment. "But you're so very tall! Surely you drink more then three glasses of milk a day! Are you sure you don't drink four?"

And Josy, close to tears, would shake her head vigorously, wishing with all her heart that she might somehow disappear before the open-mouthed stares of the children gazing up at her from their seats.

Once the school sponsored a drive to collect money for the Red Cross. Her teacher appealed to the first-graders to contribute.

"Be sure to ask your mother for money!" she instructed. "Now if she says 'no' (and she might) then you are go to her pocketbook, open it up, take some money out, and bring it here to school. It's very, very important for you to help the Red Cross. I want everybody to bring in something, even if it's only a little bit."

Even at age six, Josy was appalled, understanding enough to realize that her teacher was actually instructing the children to steal.

III

The Sokoloffs were the first friends that Malvina and Jacques made after coming to Philadelphia, and they remained friends for life.

Simon was a distant cousin of Celia Kirson. Soon after arriving in Philadelphia, Malvina phoned the Sokoloffs. They came immediately to the Weiss's house to get acquainted.

They were warm-hearted people, generous and giving, always trying to help, and available in times of need. Simon and Emma had no children, but her unmarried sister Masha Gomberg lived with them. She too became very devoted to Josy's family and remained a close friend over the years.

The Sokoloffs mentioned immediately that a third-floor apartment was becoming vacant in the building where they lived. Logan, a middle-class neighborhood in North Philadelphia, was a lovely residential section only two miles away from Germantown, where Jacques worked at Honeywell-Brown (or Brown Instrument Company, as he always referred to it). They visited the apartment at 1101 Duncannon Avenue and decided immediately to move in. Thus the Sokoloffs became their neighbors as well as close friends.

The location offered a choice of two schools. The first, Logan Demonstration, was about a mile away on the other side of Broad Street, a large and heavily trafficked thoroughfare. Malvina was reluctant to have Josy cross it every day. The school had a splendid reputation: teachers were sent from all parts of the city to observe demonstration lessons there (hence its name). Many neighborhood parents, however, misunderstood this, and when they spoke about the place, they sniffed in pride with noses in the air, making it sound ostentatious that their children went to a "demonstration" school. This, plus the need for Josy to cross Broad Street twice a day, decided Malvina against Logan, and she decided that instead Josy should go to the David Bell Birney School at Ninth and Lindley Avenue, only four blocks from home. Here Josy entered first grade as soon as they settled into their new apartment.

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The entry to the apartment building that stood on the northwest corner of Eleventh

Street and Duncannon Avenue was up a flight of four stone steps with a narrow concrete platform on either side. In warm weather, several women from the apartments above would sit outside on these platforms knitting and gossiping. It was generally impossible to enter or leave the building without being looked over by this group, having one's appearance, dress, and family history discussed and openly analyzed in detail.

Mrs. Dickstein, the tenant from the fourth floor west, was the undisputed leader of the conclave. Dark-haired, wiry, and usually sniveling, she rarely had a good word to say about anybody. She was known to be the landlord's "stool-pigeon", who would phone him in the middle of the night to report if another tenant was moving out without paying last month's rent. For this information, it was rumored, she received a five-dollar-a-month reduction in her own rent.

The apartment house had an imposing appearance, with a well-cared-for front lawn divided by a curving paved walkway and shaded by large horse-chestnut trees. Four stories high, it housed two apartments on each floor. Before they would leave in 1938, Josy’s family would live in three of these eight apartments.

They moved first into the third floor west. It had a large living and dining room facing south, with a kitchen and two bedrooms looking north. The kitchen gave onto a narrow iron landing that led to a fire escape. This landing was fenced in so that one or two people could sit outside there on a hot summer night and look down on the back yards of the houses below, some facing Eleventh Street to the right, others Marvine Street to the left.

The Sokoloffs lived downstairs in the second floor east. It was pleasant and convenient having them in the same building. They were also friendly with the first-floor tenants directly below them, the Reiders. Dr. Reider was a Talmudic scholar at the School of Hebrew Studies of Gratz College. Bearded and absent-minded, he generally remained absorbed in his reading, oblivious to practical matters and most of his surroundings, while his wife tended to the mundane affairs of everyday living. They had a boy named Rafael, about a year younger than Josy.

One evening when Josy was almost seven years old and Rafael not quite six, Mrs. Reider went with the Sokoloffs and Josy’s parents to a concert. Dr. Reider, too immersed in his studies to even consider an evening out, offered to stay at home with the two children. He assured everybody that he could easily attend to both of them while continuing his reading. Reluctantly, Malvina and Mrs. Reider agreed.

"Here are Josy's pajamas," Malvina told him, handing Dr. Reider a small bundle.

"She'll probably be asleep by the time we get back, but it will be easier to carry her upstairs if she's already dressed for bed."

"Sure, sure," replied Dr. Reider absent-mindedly, already turning back to his books.

"Remember," directed his wife as they all went out the door, "at eight o'clock sharp, get them both washed, put them in their pajamas, and then tuck Rafael into his bed. Josy can sleep on the couch till we get home."

"All right! All right! Go already," he replied, deeply involved with his texts.

The group returned home close to eleven o'clock. Mrs. Reider went into the bedroom to check on Rafael. Suddenly she screamed.

"Where is my baby?" she cried out. "Where is Rafael?"

"He's in bed," answered Dr. Reider, looking up startled from his books.

But Rafael was not in his bed. Instead, sleeping soundly there securely tucked under the covers, lay Josy. With her long auburn braids resting over the pillow, there was no mistaking her for Rafael.

"Where is my baby?" Mrs. Reider screamed again.

"I put them both to bed myself," Dr. Reider assured her. "He must be in there!"

Mrs. Reider ran into the dining room. There on the sofa, uncovered and with no pillow under his head, lay Rafael, still dressed in his afternoon play clothes and shoes, curled up sound asleep!

IV

One of the "fixtures" of that block was the neighbor from the corner house at Marvine and Duncannon. Every afternoon at precisely the same hour and almost to the minute, he would appear just before dusk, embarking on his daily promenade. An elderly gentleman with a bushy gray moustache and neatly trimmed beard, he cut a stately figure in his huntsman's cap, tweed coat, and spats over highly polished shoes. Swinging his cane, he nodded politely to everyone, left and right, going just as far as the corner of Eleventh Street and then back. All the children would stop their games and stare at him in awe. He never spoke to any of them, just smiled, sometimes tipping his cap to an occasional adult he happened to pass. To Josy he represented the very essence of dignity and aristocracy, somewhat unreal, like a character out of a romantic novel. She never even got to find out his name.

Malvina did most of her shopping at Eleventh and Louden Streets (about four blocks from home) where a cluster of small stores, a bakery, a butcher shop, and Ulitsky's Grocery served the neighborhood. Josy sometimes accompanied her mother shopping and, at Ulitsky's, she would stand over the huge pickle barrel, inhaling the ecstatic aroma while waiting for Malvina to make all her purchases.

There was another grocer on Hutchinson Street, just around the corner from Lindley Avenue and across from Birney School. His name was Mr. Kivnick. Malvina soon got on good terms with him, and he delivered groceries to the house, something Ulitsky's refused to do. Whenever Mr. Kivnick arrived with the packages, he would take a few minutes off to catch his breath, have a glass of water after carrying groceries up three flights of steps, and converse for a while with Malvina. He confided his troubles to her. Routinely he unburdened himself about business, his family, the state of the world (especially conditions in Russia and Germany), and the never-ending antics of his son Arnold.

Arnold was eleven years old, and especially prone to mischief. On one occasion Mr. Kivnick, still in shock, was particularly indignant about how he had caught Arnold wasting toilet paper.

"He sits on the toilet," he cried, "and pulls and pulls and pulls the paper off the roll till it’s gone. Meanwhile I'm waiting outside to get in! Can you imagine! I saw him! Today he used up a whole roll all at one sitting!"

Every once in a while when she had an appointment and suspected that she might not get home in time to give Josy lunch, Malvina would ask Mrs. Kivnick if Josy could bring a sandwich and eat with Arnold there before returning to school in the afternoon. When his parents were both too busy with customers to come upstairs, their cleaning lady would supervise Arnold in the apartment above the store. Half-heartedly she stayed with him, using this as an excuse to sit and rest, caring little what Arnold did as long as he refrained from creating havoc. Periodically she would prod him to eat, but otherwise she just sat there, yawning.

Once when Josy was there at lunchtime, Mrs. Kivnick had apparently stressed to the cleaning lady that, no matter what, she must make Arnold finish everything on his plate. Accordingly, halfway through lunch, the woman leaned back in her seat and drawled, "You haven't touched your peas yet, Arnold."

“Yes, I have!" he retorted, smirking and lightly tapping a couple of peas on his plate.

Smiling indulgently, she admonished, "Yes, but you didn't pick them up with your fork."

"I did, too!" replied Arnold, lifting up a forkful.

The woman smiled again. "But you didn't put them in your mouth, did you?"

"Yes, I did," came the answer, as Arnold lifted the fork and shoved the contents into his mouth.

"But you didn't chew them," she observed.

"Yes, I did," he retorted, chewing the mouthful of peas thoroughly and noisily.

"Ah, but you didn't swallow them," she insisted.

"Oh, no, I didn't do that!" Arnold replied triumphantly, spitting the whole mouthful into the trashcan nearby.

Josy, a reluctant eater herself and long familiar with the ploys parents use to force food into their children, had been watching the whole procedure with interest. Now she stared at Arnold in wonder, agog with admiration!

V

By the time she had been at Birney for a week, she was reading without difficulty. Her teacher, Miss McVickers, was an elderly lady, kindly and gentle, with twinkling eyes and a spring to her step. She taught her lessons cheerfully, genially and lightheartedly, attending unflustered to problems as they arose.

One day early in her second week there, Josy suddenly realized that she could read. In a moment of exhilaration, she saw that she could move smoothly through her primer without help. Excited, she understood not only words, but the meanings of whole sentences and paragraphs. She realized with delight that she no longer had to depend on her mother or anybody else to read to her.

The thought filled her with awe. She had always loved stories, and becoming aware of this new self-sufficiency filled her with deep emotion. From that moment on she devoured books in her spare time, always keeping something on hand from the public library. Instead of the dreaded chore it had once been at the Chicago school, reading now became her favorite hobby.