

### Chapter 3 - From Russia to the Statue of Liberty

*“Despite their nostalgia for the scenes of their childhood and youth, having fled a despotic homeland to which there was no returning, they were quick to embrace America as their first true homeland.”<sup>51</sup>*

*“They felt themselves at the brink of a new era. In one swoop as it were, men stood liberated, naked of yesterday, aching for tomorrows fertile with limitless possibilities for human fulfillment in a world quit of ignorance, superstition, and despotism. (...) They unfurled the banners of common brotherhood on the highest plane of social idealism and pledged heart and mind to the promise of a new life...”<sup>52</sup>*

The fate of the Belarus town where Melvin’s father came from, Beshenkovichi, was even worse than that of Slonim: after the war nothing was left, all the Jewish inhabitants were killed and acts of war had ravaged the shtetl.

In February 1994, Melvin Sabshin attended a conference of Russian psychiatrists in Smolensk, not far from the Belarus border.<sup>53</sup> Realizing that he is not far from his ancestor’s birthplace, he requested help to go there and find his roots. “I picked him up in Moscow,” remembers Elena Mozhaeva. “He had come to Moscow all alone, and from a friend I knew that he was not in good health and that recently his wife had died.”<sup>54</sup> We agreed to meet at the hotel, and he would wait for me outside. When I came up to the hotel, he was already standing there: a tall lonely figure, with a huge cigar in the corner of his mouth. There was no doubt that this was Melvin Sabshin.”<sup>55</sup> Together they traveled to Smolensk.

In spite of his request to get a car to take him to his father’s birthplace, his Russian hosts initially did not organize anything. “He was all alone, and the bosses were not interested in him. There was another psychiatrist from Hamburg who was the center of attention, in particular of the Smolensk psychiatrists. They probably wanted something from him,

<sup>51</sup> *The Promised City*, p. 110

<sup>52</sup> *The Promised City*, p. 149

<sup>53</sup> *Sotsial’naya i Klinicheskaya Psikhatriya*, 2-1994, p. 158-9

<sup>54</sup> Edith Sabshin died in 1992

<sup>55</sup> Interview Elena Mozhaeva, June 6, 2009

because they were all around him, trying to make a good impression.”<sup>56</sup> Eventually an angry Mozhaeva was able to make clear to the psychiatric leadership from Moscow that their behavior is despicable, and that something needs to be organized. In the end, together with the Chief Psychiatrist of Russia, Dr. Aleksandr Karpov, and the psychiatrist Georgi Kakayev who offered his car, Mozhaeva and Sabshin traveled to Belarus, yet they found no trace of his father’s hometown. “Melvin was silent; it clearly made a deep impression on him. He was completely silent when we drove back to Smolensk, and when I looked at him I saw tears rolling down his cheeks.” The next day Sabshin and his interpreter visited the memorial at Katyn, where in 1940 the Soviet secret police NKVD murdered approximately 22,000 Polish officers, policemen and intellectuals. The visit made an enormous impression on them. Back in Moscow, it was eventually Elena Mozhaeva alone who saw Melvin Sabshin off at the Moscow airport – the Russian psychiatric bosses and Chief Psychiatrist Aleksandr Karpov never appeared in the airport VIP-lounge to say goodbye, as intended.<sup>57</sup>



*Jewish cemetery in Beshenkovichi, summer 2009*

Still, it is not true that no trace was left of the Jewish shtetl of Beshenkovichi. Via the internet, I find the story of a former inhabitant of Beshenkovichi, who in the early 1990s returned to find his roots. He found no trace of

<sup>56</sup> Interview Mozhaeva. The psychiatrist concerned was Dr. N. Koverk.

<sup>57</sup> Interview Mozhaeva