

During my second year at University of California, Davis, I took two quarters of Women's History. I wish that I could remember the exact details of the assignment, but the product was doing an oral history and then writing a biography of my maternal grandmother, Bassya Bibel.

For the first time in many years, I pulled it out of a file folder of "family documents" so that I could get the exact date it was written: March 2, 1974. Also for the first time in many years, I re-read the comments from the professor - and I think that they (minus the grade and the course specific feedback) are the perfect introduction to what you are about to read:

"Your grandmother is clearly a fabulous woman. You had a good subject to work with. I'd like to hear more about her! Watch that tendency to romanticize - though your grandmother doesn't need to be romanticized; her life is fascinating and touching enough on its own terms! I'd love to meet her!"

For many years before the revolution in Russia, the Jewish people comprised a large segment of small towns and villages much like the little town Anatevka depicted in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Under the Czar, restrictions were placed on the Jewish people and other minorities. These restrictions were enforced either by secret instructions to police advising repressive measures i.e. pogroms, or as legal public decisions, "Ukases", of the Czar. But, somehow the Jews managed to practice what was denied; mainly the worship of their God, and the education of their children. At the turn of the century, there were seven thousand schools and educational institutions which produced many rabbinical and Hebrew scholars. Language, religion, and culture are essential to the survival of a nation. Russian Jewry was effective in preserving all three, even under the oppressive rule of the Czar. The Jews existed as a secular culture in Russia — only a small percentage of the Jewish population adopted the mode of life and culture of the majority of the Russian population. The life for the Jew in Russia was not an easy one. Most were poor, their life opportunities and goals were politically restricted, and they lived in constant fear of pogroms and evictions. However they found solace and strength in their religion, and they made the best of the situation.

Such was the world that Bassya Maltzer was born into on January 17, 1908. She was born in Kopiegorod, a small town of about three thousand people, located in the southwest portion of Russia. Being a small town the people were very close: "...the whole town was like one family. If there was a death in one family, the whole town mourned. If there was a wedding, the whole town danced at it."

Among the Jews in town, there was a definite class distinction which was based, not on money (most were poor), but on the occupation of the man in the family. The lower class included the butchers, the shoemakers, and the cabinet makers — they were uneducated and the trades were passed from father to son. The upper class, to which Bassya's family belonged, was composed of the male scholars and their families. This distinction was first explained to Bassya when she was around nine

years old. Her grandfather requested that she refrain from visiting Fanya, the butcher's daughter: "When you go into her house, the language they use in that house is not the language we use in ours. They are butchers! We Maltzers are the society — not in money, but in dignity."

Bassya's grandfather was a very religious man, and a respected scholar — the town's people turned to him for spiritual, practical and financial assistance. He was president of the synagogue. By the age of nineteen, her father BenZion was a rabbi at the synagogue. However, being an idealist, he gave up his rabbinical position after one year, for he saw the hypocrisy of the people who came to the synagogue, and, instead of praying, gossiped among each other about business and personal problems. He then wanted to be a doctor, but being a Jew, this was impossible. So he studied and became a Certified Public Accountant for a sugar factory. He traveled all over Russia opening sugar refineries. However, he always remained an idealist and a scholar.

Scholars spent the day in philosophical discussions which brought in little money. That left the wife of a scholar to take care of the family economically. Bassya recalls that her grandmother "got up every day at 4:30 in the morning, baked her bread, washed the clothes, ironed, prepared breakfast. At 7:30 she was in her little grocery shop that she managed until 6:00 pm. It was remarkable. My grandmother never complained of all her hard work. She accepted it as a matter of fact. She was a woman and this was a woman's job."

Life was easier for Bassya's mother. Her husband was not only a scholar but also had a paying job. Bassya's mother did not have to work, she even had a maid. But she had no education and could not read. Her mother filled her time with socializing: "She loved to dress beautiful, and she had a beautiful figure and she wanted to display it. She had parties with men and women, who used to compliment her. This was her world; this was her joy."

As a child, Bassya was presented with two different roles: that of the knowledgeable, philosophical scholar who spent his life in lively debate, and that of the working or non-working wife who was oblivious to the world that existed outside of her four walls. As a child Bassya chose to model herself after the men in her family. She sat and listened to their discussions and tried to imitate these scholars. This was the life she wanted for herself.

When Bassya was eleven years old her father died of typhus. He was thirty-three years old. And when he died, her world stopped. Her mother had always been busy with her own life — it was from her father that she received love, and to her father that she bestowed love. So his absence left her very alone. She expressed this feeling in a later poem:

What a void  
he left for me

When he died  
at thirty three.  
I walked around like  
A stranger in a cold  
and strange land -  
With no one to really  
care or understand.

Soon after her father's death, her father's brothers and sisters, who were living in California, sent for the family. Bassya's grandfather sold his brick house and whatever else he could part with. When they (Bassya, her three year old brother, her mother, her uncle, her grandfather, and his wife) were ready to leave, her grandfather put all the money into a scarf and put it around her waist, under her dress. And so they set off on their long journey to America.

They reached the frozen river that separated Ukraine and Bassarabia. It was during the revolution and there were soldiers guarding each side, who were ordered to shoot anyone attempting to leave Russia. Bassya and her family waited until dark and then crossed the river, fearfully. Finally they reached the other side. When they arrived, Bassya screamed, "Grandfather, I lost the belt!" She was a thin child and it had slipped off. A girl crossing the river at the same time went back and was able to retrieve the money. Bassya asked not to carry the money anymore — "the responsibility is something I cannot take." The group then climbed into the back of a wagon, hiding under the straw, and were taken to a relative's inn in Bassarabia, where they stayed for eight months awaiting their passports. After this interval, they went to Antwerp and boarded the boat for the United States.

Bassya left Russia in 1920 at the age of twelve. She had grown up placing a high respect on the life that men led, and hoped to live such a life. She had heard "dirty Jew" for many years, and had learned to live as a second class citizen. She was also leaving a revolution behind in Russia — one in which women would come out with a new status — and going to a country where women had won the vote only after many years of struggle.

The travelers arrived at Ellis Island, and all went on to San Francisco except for Bassya and her mother. They were detained at the island for six weeks — Bassya's brother had died from measles during the trip across the Atlantic. Bassya was deeply affected by the loss of her younger brother: "There was God first, my father second, and my brother third. And I had lost my father and my little brother. And I lost God." At age twelve, Bassya, who had been brought up learning the importance of religion, cursed God and denied his existence.

Bassya and her mother then traveled the eight-and-a-half day train trip to San Francisco. When they arrived, they learned that the grandfather had died. The San Francisco relatives felt cheated — they had only wanted the grandfather to come in

the first place; they had sent for the others only at his request. Bassya felt their resentment and did everything she could not to disappoint them.

She started seventh grade at the public school knowing five languages, but not a word of English.

When she was fourteen Bassya felt a need to express herself, and to fill the need she began writing short stories and poetry. Though her family laughed at her, she continued writing.

Then someone informed her about a local dramatic company, the Yiddish Literary Dramatic Group. Bassya went to the San Francisco group, and, saying that she was eighteen, was allowed to join. She played both leading and other roles in many plays. The group took their plays to Stockton, Sacramento, Petaluma, and Napa. Bassya loved the stage and remained with the group for nine years. In this group she found fulfillment, and once again she found God.

After graduation from high school, Bassya attended Heald's Business College, and there she learned bookkeeping and secretarial skills. Her relatives paid her tuition in hopes that she would "make good." At this time, a cousin, Sol Friedman, was being very kind to her. He placed her on a figurative pedestal, and he truly loved her. Bassya was bewildered and flattered by his attention and, at the age of sixteen, she accepted an engagement ring.

Bassya and Sol were married in 1926 — Bassya was eighteen years old. Sol remained kind and considerate and would look up to her on the stage. But she was not happy. They had a beautiful apartment, but she felt, much like Nora in Ibsen's play, that she was in a "doll's house." Bassya had nothing in common with Sol — he was uneducated, he did not read books, she could not discuss things with him. She was in the same position in marriage that her father had found himself in. She thought that she would find fulfillment if she had a child and so she became pregnant.