

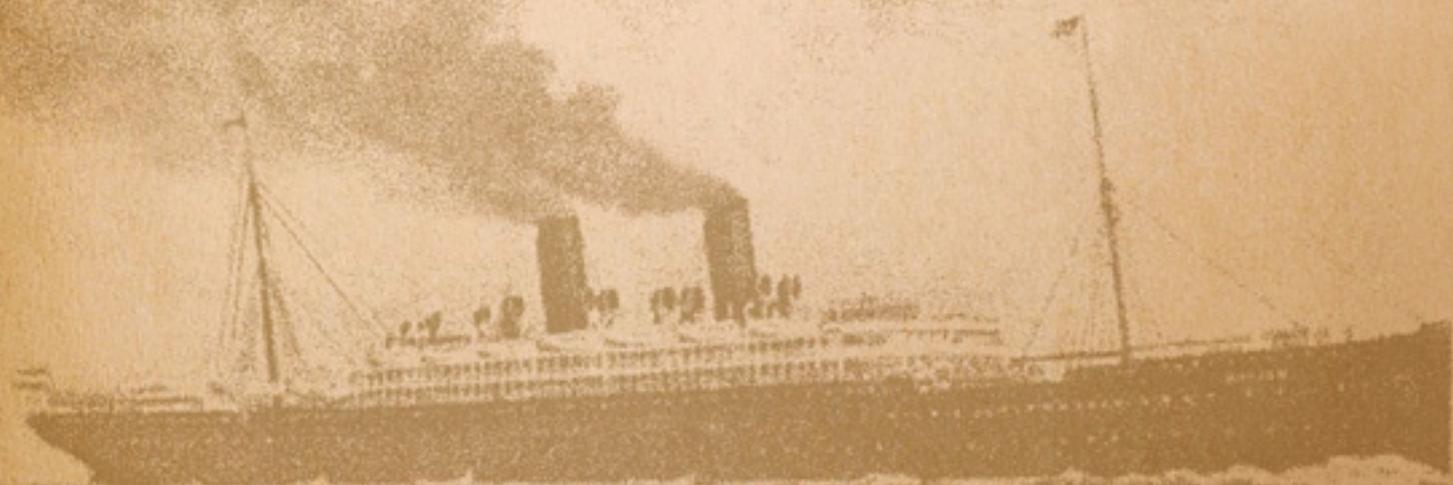


Bessie's

Pillow

A YOUNG IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY

— *Based on a True Story* —



LINDA BRESS SILBERT

Bessie's Pillow

A Young Immigrant's Journey

— *Based on a true story* —

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Bessie's Pillow

A Young Immigrant's Journey

by Linda Bress Silbert

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Unless otherwise noted, all photographs used in *Bessie's Pillow* were provided by the author. Because no photographs of Boshka Markman as a young woman are known to be in existence, the image of the young girl on the cover is derived from an early photograph of the author's mother, Bessie Dreizen's daughter Ann.

The image of the *S.S. Moltke* on the cover is a derivative of a photograph from the collections of the Gjenlevik-Gjønvik Archives and is used with permission.

Lovingly dedicated to the memory of
Ann Dreizen Bress
1915-2012

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

— *Emma Lazarus* —

New York City, 1883

in anticipation of the installment of the
Statue of Liberty

Prologue

New Rochelle, 1950



It wasn't my time to die back in 1906. The mobs, the murder, the rape. The blood running through the streets of the Pale. I escaped because it wasn't my time. Instead I lived—a young woman of eighteen years, I traveled to America and escaped the Pale.

This isn't the story of my escape. This is the story of my arrival and the journey of building a new life in a strange land. It's the story of one life's grief and happiness. Of struggle and success. Of the desperation and hope that drove me and countless immigrants to leave our homes and families behind and build again.

No matter what put us on that boat or what happened along the way, when we came to America, we did our best. For ourselves, for our children and for their children.

We would all have challenges, some greater than others. Sometimes indescribable happiness prevailed for me and at other times, I was forced to hide both my fear and my pain. Unlike so many, I was fortunate to have the opportunities I did and the people who were in my life. For that I am grateful. Especially for the people.

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Of one sort or another, no matter who you are, you will face many challenges. It is no different today. It will be no different tomorrow. But, whatever those challenges, know that I am with you, as are countless others long gone.

All will be well. Happiness will come again.

Part One
Leaving Home

1

Vilna, Lithuania 1906



I can't find Tateh or Mamaleh. I lost them in the crowd—we were separated while I was saying goodbye to our neighbors. All of us made the long trip to Vilna in my father's wagon.

It is early January and my breath condenses in the cold air. As I pull my coat closer around me, I am aware of people speaking in Russian, Lithuanian, even Polish. I hear Yiddish too, but in Glubokoye, where I grew up, we speak it only to each other and behind closed doors. Children run by me, brushing against my legs, while adults huddle and pray, holding onto each other knowing they will never see each other again. We are one of those families—Mamaleh, Tateh, my brothers and me. Just 18 years old, I am leaving today for America...alone.

Lithuania, once independent, is now part of the Russian Empire and within the Pale of Settlement, an area in which Jewish people are forced to live together like cattle.

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I hear a loud whistle, a warning that the train will leave soon, and I am frightened because I still don't see my family. I am not even five feet tall and it is hard for me to see over the heads in the crowd.

I push against people who reek of labor and servitude. Though the odor is awful, I understand—they have few clothes and are too poor to bathe often.

I, on the other hand, will be tidy throughout my journey from Glubokoye to Hamburg and then to America. My new skirt is made of gray wool, perfect for traveling. My shirtwaist is a lighter gray cotton broadcloth with pretty tucks on the bodice, a high collar, and sleeves buttoned at the wrist. A long dark blue cloak with a hood keeps the bitter wind from my face. I drew the patterns for my wardrobe myself. The dressmaker in Glubokoye who made my clothing told me I'd done a good job. I have decided that I will be a dressmaker in America.

Tears burn my eyes in the cold air. Panicking, I begin to run. Nothing I see is familiar. Before today, I only traveled to Vilna once—Tateh brought me with him on one of his trips to buy goods to sell. I'm sure Mamaleh disapproved of my going, but in Jewish households husbands make decisions about important things like who will travel. I don't think it is right for husbands to do all of the deciding. That time, however, because Tateh decided that I should go with him, I was very glad indeed.

I see Tateh ahead and continue to run even faster. I fall on a patch of ice and look up to see his gloved hand reaching out to me. My heart leaps—I love my father very much. I take his hand and he pulls me up. Our eyes meet and it is then that we both realize this may be the last time he will be there when I fall.

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It is late in the day and I am riding in the wagon with my father to make his deliveries. "Tateh," I ask, "why did you stop being a rabbi and start selling pots and buckets?"

My father smiles at my inquisitiveness. "Because I like to sell pots and buckets."

We ride for a long time in silence before Tateh speaks again. "Sometimes one cannot do everything one wants, Boshka. It is better for Mamaleh and your brothers and you for me to sell things than for me to be a rabbi. I sell things to keep you safe. Someday you'll understand."

I don't say anything, but though I am only twelve, I already understand. Too much. I know about the rabbi who was dragged from his house by the Czar's men and never seen again. I know about the pogroms. I know about the men conscripted and never heard from again.

"I can't imagine not being able to do things I want to do," I say.

Tateh smiles, but his eyes are sad. "I know, Boshka. I know."



After I brush myself off, I see Mamaleh off to the side, balancing my youngest brother on her hip while she holds the hand of another. Max and Jack, the two oldest of my four brothers, lean against a storefront apart from the chaos. As I walk toward them, I can see my mother is crying. She looks away, but when I reach her, I turn her face toward me with my hands.

"It's fine, Mamaleh," I say. "I'll be happy in America. And safe."

"Yes," she says.

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A gust of wind chills all of us and we shiver. Tateh points to the train. "There's not much time left." In response, my mother wipes her eyes and recites a litany of directives.

"Stay away from treif. You must eat what our people eat. The others may eat treif, but not you."

"Yes, Mamaleh."

"And beware of passengers on the train or boat with odd-looking eyes. They could have trachoma—they can send you back if you have trachoma."

"Yes, Mamaleh."

"Stay away from anyone or anything that looks suspicious. Use the good mind that God has given you."

I nod.

"Let's go over the plan one more time. Do you have the paper with the addresses?"

"Yes, Mamaleh," I say, patting the pocket of my coat. "When I get to New York, I will go directly to Lillian's house at a place called the Upper West Side. I will live with her and her husband, but if I am not happy there, I will go to our friends Miriam and Lou Schaffer. They live in a part of the city called Washington Heights."

I think of Lillian and Miriam. Lillian is my half-sister—she is Tateh's daughter too. After her mother, Tateh's first wife, died he sent her to New York to live with his sisters. Now that she is grown, he receives letters from her. She is doing very well in America—she married a German Jew named Lazar Bechhofer. He is very rich.

Miriam was my best friend in Glubokoye when we were children. Miriam and I were inseparable. We played together by the lake in the summertime and ran through the hills, giggling and jumping into the

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water when the boys weren't around. Lou is her older brother. She is now an American, living well-off like Lillian—with Lou, whom she says has made a lot of money selling coffee and tea. It seems anyone can be successful in America.

My father's voice interrupts my reverie. "Tell your brothers good-bye now, Boshka."

I nod and give each of them a hug. "Max...Jack..." I say, while holding both their hands, "I will send for you once I'm settled. I'll find a way to get you to America. You won't have to go into the army. I promise." They smile at me and nod, though I can tell they do not believe me.

I reach out to hug Tateh when someone taps my shoulder. It is a woman not much taller than I. "Excuse me. I hope you remember me from Glubokoye—I am Chana Dreizen. I couldn't help overhearing that you are traveling to New York. My son is there and I need to get something to him. I thought my cousin would be here, but I haven't seen her. I am hoping you will take it to him instead." She removes from a burlap sack a feather pillow embroidered with flowers. "I made it for him to take to America but he left it behind. He has written to me about it now several times."

Tateh responds to her. "Of course, we remember you, Mrs. Dreizen. Max and Jack used to play with your sons." He nods a silent approval for me to take the pillow.

The woman turns back to me. "Please find him and give it to him. I will write to him that you are coming."

I look down at the pillow—in the midst of the flowers, there is a Yiddish phrase: *May this pillow bring you peace*. I open one of my bags and push the pillow into it. "How will I find him?"

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“His name is Nathan. Nathan Dreizen.” She says his name again. “There is an aid society for immigrants in New York. The members of the Glubokoye Society will help you to find him. He lives in a town called New Rochelle.”

I am thinking that Lillian will know about the society. I repeat the name to myself two times, but decide I will probably forget it. I take out the piece of paper with Lillian and Miriam's addresses and write it down on the back.

Nathan Dreizen
New Rochelle

The whistle blows, this time much louder, and a conductor yells that the train will be leaving in less than ten minutes. Mrs. Dreizen thanks me again and kisses me on the cheek. Before she disappears into the crowd she adds, “Darling, it's a long trip. You are welcome to use the pillow if you like.”

Tateh takes one of my hands and Mamaleh takes the other. I cannot suppress the thought that they will not dance at my wedding and that Mamaleh will never hold my children on her lap. Tears stream down my face and soon we are sobbing like all the other families around us. The whistle sounds again and Tateh pats me on the back. “You must go now, Boshka.”

A man picks up my bags and valise, and I hurry behind him to the front of the train where the first-class cars are located. When I climb the steps to board the train, I look back, but I can no longer find them in the crowd.

2



When I am settled into my seat, I look out the window at a sea of sad faces and waving hands. I wonder for a moment if what I have will be enough in America, but then feel ashamed. I am carrying two lovely new carpetbags and a small valise. Many clutch sacks of food and small burlap bundles that hold all their worldly possessions.

In Glubokoye, mine was a better life than for some because Tateh has money. He sells hardware to the Russians and in exchange, they allow him to keep some of his money, though they tax him heavily and demand bribes. The government refers to Tateh as a “useful” Jew, and because of that, our family has not suffered the fate of many of the other families who live in poverty in the Pale.

Once it pulls away from Vilna, the train rolls along past fields of snow. Gray clouds whisk by and I lay my head against the window. An image of the pillow comes to me and I take it out of my bag. Sinking my head into its soft feathers, I close my eyes but I’m too excited and

Bessie's Pillow

anxious to sleep, so I sit up and pull out the Yiddish newspaper Tateh picked up for me at the train station.

In addition to Yiddish, I speak Lithuanian, Russian and German, and can read and understand Polish if it is spoken slowly. At home, I always spoke Yiddish with my family, but Miriam wrote me that this will change if I am to succeed in America.

It's been less than an hour and already I miss Glubokoye, my family, my friends, Tateh's customers whom I've come to know. As I look out the window, I can see hills and a lake that reminds me of Lake Berezvetshe. I think about Kopanitze, the loveliest area in the park where, when I was younger, I played with Miriam and neighborhood friends on Shabbos afternoons. Tears spring to my eyes and I quickly realize that I must force these pictures from my mind or I will be tempted to turn back.

To compose myself, I remember all that is not good in the Pale. After the uprising last year, the Russians conceded many rights to Lithuanians, but not to all of us. My parents thought surely we Jews would not be far behind, but I doubted it. A few months before, a teenaged Litviner boy had taunted me, rushing out to the road to throw stones at me as I walked home from school. His words were telling—he heard them at home or at school as he could not have thought of them by himself.

Jewish families in the Pale live in constant fear of the pogroms—the angry mobs of the Russian police, peasants, even men in military uniforms who storm drunk through the streets. The Czar encourages the torture, rape and killing of Jews. Forcing us to live in one place makes that easier for them.

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Once, while peeking through the cracks in our shutters, I saw a man in a uniform break down the door of my neighbor's house, drag Mamaleh's friend into the yard and begin to beat her with his fists. I looked away and put my hands over my ears, but not soon enough to avoid hearing her screams.

As Mamaleh often entreated me, I hid in my house when the mobs came to our town. If a group of them ever came near while I was alone in the house, I was to call out, as loudly as possible, the names of all the Jewish men I knew.

I force my mind back to the present. What will Lillian look like? Will she wear diamonds and gold, velvet gowns trimmed with lace? I'm nervous to meet her, but she is my sister and I'm sure she will welcome me. Lazar, her husband, has agreed that I can live with them so Tateh says he must be a fine person. I look forward to meeting him.

I am eager, also, to see one of the picture shows Miriam has written and raved about, like "The Great Train Robbery" and "A Gentleman of France." And I want to eat in American restaurants. I hope they are kosher—Tateh and Mamaleh will be disappointed in me if I eat treif.

After another hour or so, the train finally makes its first stop and I step out of the train for some fresh air. The journey to Hamburg will last three days and already I am weary. I remind myself that when I get there, I'll be one step closer to America.

3

Hamburg, Germany



I have arrived in Hamburg, where I will wait to be washed, disinfected and inspected by doctors and other officials before we embark. I'm told they are very careful because the shipping line will have to bear the expense if I am returned for any reason.

I'll be staying in a lodging house near the barracks that has ties to the passenger ships. I've heard that the lodging house has no single rooms so I'll have to share a room with strangers. I was hoping to go through the inspection process privately, but I am told even the first-class passengers are required to report to the barracks in two days.

I go back and forth between happiness anticipating my new life and sadness for leaving my old one. I am most sad when I see passengers traveling as families—mothers holding babies and minding their little ones while fathers, speaking Yiddish, smoke together and discuss politics in “the old country.” They may have been away from their home for three days but their home travels *with* them as long as they're together.

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A woman in the dining car tells me that we are to be washed and processed like everyone else. Because it will be close quarters, I could easily catch a disease from another woman. Another passenger on the train told me that first-class passengers go through the process in a separate room from third-class, which makes me feel less anxious, but only for a little while. At the next stop, an older man with a hacking cough climbs on. Everyone looked so nervous that the man ended up sitting by himself. It is obvious that whether first-class or third, a person can be rejected for the smallest flaw.

Finally, the train reaches Hamburg and we disembark. As I walk in search of the lodging house, I look around at the city. Stone buildings with peaked roofs stand tall and canals snake through the city. The streets bustle with people speaking many different languages but I hear mostly German. I'm surprised at the damp and windy coldness of Hamburg so different from the cold in Glubokoye. I realize that I've never been this close to the sea.

Other first-class passengers are in the lodging house with me, and I've had dinner with a few German ladies who will join their husbands who are businessmen in America. We all sit at one big table where kosher food is served on heavy platters. Large bowls are passed from one person to the next.

Speaking a crisp German Yiddish, they treat me like a child because I am small and much younger than they. They talk as if they're superior to me, as if I should feel fortunate that they've accepted me into their circle. They speak of selling goods as being a low occupation and laugh at the idea of a "useful" Jew. Instead of telling them about Tateh, I concentrate on cutting up my meat and potatoes. By the second dinner, I am offended that for two nights in a row they've

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discussed how disgusting the Russian Jews are right in front of me.

"*I'm* from Lithuania. *I'm* a Russian Jew," I say.

"Child," they respond, "you aren't at all like the filthy livestock crammed into the barracks. You are a little lady, and we will see to it that you remain so."

The ladies say that their husbands have purchased houses called "brownstones" in the wealthy German-Jewish section of New York City but that the Russian Jews live in poverty just as they do in the Pale—in Glubokoye and Vilna. When I hear this, I nearly choke. I thought everyone had an opportunity in America, even the poor—I wonder how it is that Lillian and Lazar are rich.

I excuse myself from dinner, complaining of a headache. As I walk away from the table, I hear one of them say, "Poor thing, she misses her family terribly." I do miss my family, but it is *they* who gave me the headache!

Since that first day on the train, I have been glad Mrs. Dreizen asked me to deliver the pillow. I curl into a ball and hold it against me until I fall asleep. During the daytime, I can distract myself by walking around Hamburg or listening to the gossip of the ladies at meals. But at night, I am lonely—having the pillow comforts me.

On the third morning in Hamburg, I am startled when the German ladies knock on my door, saying it is time for us to go through a disinfection and inspection process. On the way to the barracks, they are not so talkative.

We stand in line for more than an hour with other first-class passengers and then are herded into a huge room. I hear wailing. When I ask one of the women what is happening, she tells me that a third-class passenger has been turned away. The one named Rivka

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leans over and whispers into my ear. “Just listen to what animals they are!”

I don’t respond—I’m happy to be traveling in first class, but I can’t help feeling sorry for those in steerage. It’s obvious that some of the noise is nothing more than children playing and babies crying, but there’s no point in telling Rivka how I feel.

When it’s my turn, the processor takes my papers and examines them. “Go to room one, the ladies’ chamber,” he says in German as he hands me back my documents. I go up the stairs, following the crowd of women, and we wait in the hall for hours.

Boredom and hunger have replaced my nervousness by the time the inspector finally beckons to my group, directing us down another hall to a large room with a tile floor and benches along the walls. “You will undress so the women inspectors can bathe you,” he says. The door slams behind him and we all look at each other.

I’ve never undressed in front of strangers before and I doubt the other ladies have either. We look around at each other until an older woman begins to unbutton her shirtwaist, and the rest of us do the same. Soon we’re all standing with eyes downcast, trying to cover our nakedness with our arms.

I shiver and hug myself to keep warm as we wait for yet another hour. Finally, the inspectors—all of whom are large German women with square jaws—enter the room. They instruct us to stand in a straight line. The German Jews and those Russian Jews like me, who understand German, move without hesitation. The others follow our example.

The inspectors proceed to scrub every part of our bodies with harsh soap and cold water. I continue to stare straight ahead but

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shiver and blush as the woman cleans my private areas. She notices my reaction. "You must be cleaned thoroughly," she says. To her, it is merely a job—it is as if I am a lamp to be dusted or a spoon to be washed.

The German women work with diligence, spending equal time on each woman and then moving quickly to the next. When the scrubbing ends, the inspectors turn on the showers and we take turns rinsing ourselves. Once we finish, we stand dripping wet and cold until the inspectors give us each two rough towels.

A woman in charge barks commands. "Use one towel to dry yourself off. Put that towel in this container when you are finished. Use the other towel to wrap yourself in so you stay warm. We will take your clothes and wash them thoroughly and disinfect them. They will be ready by day's end." I sigh. I am not looking forward to more waiting.

In yet another large room, hundreds of us sit wrapped in towels on wooden benches like those in a train station. Rivka, Rebecca and Judith sit close to me gossiping about how fat or unattractive some of the women are.

"These women are nothing but yentas," I think to myself, and then close my eyes and wish Mamaleh were here with me. She would smile and kiss me on the forehead and remind me to be patient.

Next, doctors come down the line to inspect each of us. Shaking again, I stand up for my turn. The doctor smiles at me as he examines my face, looks inside my nose, mouth and ears. He taps and feels all over my body. "She's healthy," he says to the woman behind him with the pen and paper, and I finally relax. Once the examinations are finished, we receive water and a bowl of cold soup with potatoes in it. By now, I'm thankful for anything to eat.

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At the end of the day, the inspectors return our clothes, which now smell of disinfectant. We are told to report to the barracks in the morning, this time with all our possessions so they can be disinfected and inspected also.

I pass this inspection as well and return to wandering about Hamburg, looking into shop windows and watching the crowds of people. I eat dinner with the yentas each evening before retiring to sleep with the pillow snuggled close. And then early one morning, a foghorn awakes me, and I am happy—it is the big steamship that will take me to America.

4



I nearly cry when I discover we must go through another inspection and medical examination, but on the day of embarkation, everyone arrives early. I want to feel confident and look my best when I walk onto the ship. I put on my blue velvet dress and brush my hair one hundred strokes so it will be shiny. Yesterday, I paid a young man to polish my boots.

A carriage takes the yentas and me to the passenger hall with all of our possessions. They carry fewer bags than I—most of their clothes, hats, shoes, fine china, family photographs and more have been packed in large trunks to be stored on the ship. They do not know that I am carrying all that I own.

As we drive through the streets, I watch the people walking about again and a voice in my head speaks. “Stay in Hamburg,” it says. I scold myself.

Everyone pushes their way to the front of the lines for yet more waiting. Thank goodness, this time only our possessions are inspected.

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An official puts stickers that read “Inspected” on each carpet bag and my valise. A doctor briefly examines me and gives me a vaccination. He then puts a sticker on my passenger ticket that reads “Medically Examined,” pats my head, and moves on to the next woman in line.

Another official hands me a vaccination card and stamps my ticket. “United States Consulate-General, Hamburg,” it says. It’s official—I’m going to America!

My heart is sad for the immigrants who cry out when they don’t pass the medical examination. They look tired and hopeless as the police escort them out of the passenger hall. Most will be sent back home to the Pale.

As we walk back through the passenger hall, the police stop us one last time. They are looking for youths attempting to escape conscription, fugitives, and women who may have been kidnapped.

Outside, dinghies wait to carry us to the ship. Rebecca looks at the small boat beside us and frowns. “We have to get into this?”

“Just step down into it,” Judith answers, teeth clenched. Even she has grown tired of her friend’s behavior.

I ignore their bickering and step into the dinghy, concentrating on keeping my balance as the boat bobs up and down. Once seated on the wooden bench with my bags tucked securely underneath, I look out to sea. The *S.S. Moltke*, one of the magnificent steamships of the Hamburg-American Line, awaits us.

The bottom of the ship is painted black and has hundreds of windows. Two large black stacks blow gray smoke. I see an American flag waving from one of the masts. I get tears in my eyes again, but this time they’re tears of joy.

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Soon the dinghy is next to the ship and the yentas step cautiously onto the gangplank. I follow closely behind. Once aboard, yet another line forms and I wait impatiently, wondering once again if the lines will ever end.

Finally, it's my turn. A man holds out his hand and speaks to me. "Documents, little miss," he says in German. I give them to him, and he scans the manifest until he finds my name.

"Boshka Markman," he says, "you are in first class. Take these stairs two flights up where you will find a steward. He'll show you to your stateroom."

"*Danke*," I say as I take back my documents. Before I start up the stairs, I take one last look behind me and say goodbye to my homeland.

I climb the stairs and after looking at my papers, the steward leads me to my stateroom. I am somewhat embarrassed to be traveling first class but because I am a young woman alone, Tateh refused to allow me to travel in second class or in steerage with the poorest people. He'd heard that even in second class, people share rooms and sometimes other passengers steal things—even documents.

My room, which is painted a soft white, looks elegant in contrast to a dark wood dresser and carpeted floor. One half of the dresser has drawers for clothing and undergarments, and the other half has a sink and faucet. Built into the dresser at the very top is a mirror. I'm glad for the mirror, but it is so high, I won't be able to use it without standing on a chair.

A bed extends from one wall to another with a railing that can be raised to keep me from falling out if the seas are rough. Curtains hang in front of the bed for warmth. Completing the room are a settee with floral upholstery and a white rattan chair.

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There are three windows with wooden blinds and velvet curtains. I think I will be able to sleep well at night listening to the sounds of the sea.

The steward speaks to me in German. He looks at the two carpet bags and valise. “Miss, do you have other baggage?”

“Nein. Only these.”

“Very well.” He hands me a piece of paper. “At your leisure, please familiarize yourself with the first-class information and rules. The rules are also on the announcement board outside the dining hall.”

“*Danke.*”

“If you need anything, the other stewards and I are happy to attend to anything you want at any time. Enjoy your passage, and please remember dinner is in an hour at 6:30 p.m.”

He shuts the door behind him and I sit down on the settee. A wave of sadness washes over me—once again, I feel very alone. “Why can’t I be strong all the time?” I think to myself as I sniffle and wipe my eyes.

To distract myself, I pick up the first-class rules that the steward gave me and read:

FIRST CLASS CABIN NOTICE

Dining

Breakfast at 8:00 a.m.

Lunch at 12:30 p.m.

Dinner at 6:30 p.m.

A menu is printed for each meal. Seats at tables are assigned by the Chief Steward. A bell will be sounded 15 minutes before each meal, and a second signal at the beginning of the meal. Children paying half fare must dine at the children's table.

Staterooms

The staterooms have electricity. There are connections for an electric curling iron and an electric food warmer. Coffee, tea and milk can be warmed at night with the food warmer.

When the steamer is in port, please lock your staterooms.

Bathing

There are numerous bathrooms aboard.

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After a few seconds, I stop reading. I'll figure it out as I go. I'm too tired to read rules. I lie down on my bed and drift asleep, only to be wakened by the sound of a loud bell. I sit up, heart racing.

When I remember where I am and that it is only time for dinner, I lie back for a moment to calm myself and then step off the bed. I carry the rattan chair to the dresser and grab a brush from my valise. I hope I'm at a table with young people I can talk to and not with old ladies who will complain about the food and other passengers.

I step down from the chair, take a small purse from my bag and leave my stateroom. Halfway to the dining room, I decide that I'll take a walk on the deck after dinner and run back to get my cloak.

As I begin to make my way to the dining room again, I realize the *Moltke* has sailed. With all the commotion, I'd forgotten to watch the ship move out from the harbor.

I walk down the wooden hallway until I reach a grand hallway and a spiral staircase. A sign says "Smoking Room" with an arrow pointing downstairs. I continue to walk until I reach the first-class dining room. There's yet another line but it takes only a minute before I am at the front.

"Your name, miss?" says the man at the entrance.

"Boshka Markman."

He glances at a paper before him. "Table eight. The steward will show you the way."

I enter the dining room and am surprised at how large it is. Red velvet chairs line up perfectly with place settings at tables that must seat fifty people. Most people are already seated, laughing and talking.

The steward and I arrive at table eight and he pulls out the chair for me. At the other end, I see older couples and some single passengers

Bessie's Pillow

as I wait for others to fill up the seats around me. I take a sip of water, hoping it will keep my stomach from rumbling. A few Germans come, filling all but the last few open seats, and I take another sip of water.

The last of my table finally arrives—two women and a handsome young Jewish man, who immediately catches my eye. He sits down next to me and smiles.

“Hello,” he says. “I’m David.”

5



David speaks in German.

Flustered, I reply in Yiddish. “I’m Boshka. It is nice to meet you.”

He laughs and replies in Yiddish. “Where are you from?”

“Russia. I lived in a town called Glubokoye in Lithuania.”

He nods. “I know it. I lived in Courland, outside the Pale of Settlement, north of where you lived. Most Jews in Courland speak German. My grandfather escaped from the Pale and moved to Courland...” His voice trails off when he realizes he is rambling. “Do you speak English?”

“No. I know a few words, but that’s all.”

“Neither do I. Maybe we can study together?”

“Yes, that would be helpful.” I smile but I am nervous. Tateh would be concerned about my acceptance of the offer of a stranger. I decide I shouldn’t act so willing to study with him. “But I won’t study in the evening. Only during the mornings and after lunch.”

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I look at the menu and order sliced salmon without the sauce. David orders filet of beef. I ask him if the beef is kosher. "Don't worry," he says. "It's a matter of survival on this boat. We can't only eat fish. And you'll soon get tired of herring. At the breakfast buffet, there are three different kinds, but only herring. No other fish. At lunch sometimes there will be sardines on toast."

I make a face and he tries to reassure me. "The trip is long. God will understand. Look around you. Most of the other Jews are ordering the beef."

I do as he suggests and discover he's right—all around me people are speaking Yiddish and devouring beef. I consider it for a moment, but decide to stay with my original choice.

The other people assigned to our table talk and laugh and drink lots of wine and beer. I don't drink such beverages and I'm pleased to see David doesn't either.

As we continue eating, David tells me more about himself. He's a year older than I am, learned Yiddish from his grandfather, and his family owns a tannery in Liepaja, the capital of Courland. David is traveling to Chicago, a city far from New York, where he will help his older brother Joseph run his business.

"Joseph is my Tateh's name. He is a merchant too. What type of business is your brother Joseph in?"

David smiled. "He started a bank. It's quite successful now. He is going to train me to be the manager."

"That's a good opportunity."

"It is. In his letters, he speaks highly of America. He's traveled to New York and even San Francisco. I'm excited to be there with him, but I will miss Courland..."

Linda Bress Silbert

David looks down at his empty plate, and I offer him another piece of bread. I want to console him, but it's too forward, so I say, "I feel the same way. I wish my family were here with me."

"I didn't realize it would be so hard."

I nod. "Perhaps we can keep each other company until we get to America."

He offers a weak smile in response. "That makes me feel better."

Waiters remove our plates and glasses, handing us dessert menus as they make their way down the long table. I choose an ice. David watches others ordering fruit tarts and creamy puddings, even cake. Then he looks at me and orders an ice also. When we finish, David asks if I want to walk the deck before heading to my stateroom. "It's cold but we should be able to see the ocean by moonlight."

I'm tempted, but taking a walk with a young man I don't know, even if he is a Jew, would offend Tateh. "No, thank you. I can see the ocean from the windows in my stateroom."

He laughs. "I understand. My mother would scold me for being forward with a pretty young woman I've just met. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast. Perhaps we can study afterward."

Back in my stateroom, I lie in my bed holding Nathan Dreizen's pillow. The moon is bright and I can see the ocean far into the distance. I decide not to close the curtains and blinds so I will wake with the sun and in a matter of minutes, the sea rocks me to sleep.

About the Author



Linda Silbert

Daughter of Ann Dreizen Bress and granddaughter of Bessie Markman Dreizen, Linda Silbert was born and raised in New Rochelle, New York. When she was 11 years old, her family moved a few miles north to Eastchester.

Linda and her husband Al, both of whom have doctorates in education, are the owners of Strong Learning, Inc., a well-known tutoring company in the New York area. They are the award-winning authors of a variety of educational books and games, including *Why Bad Grades Happen to Good Kids* and its soon-to-be-released companion book, *Why Bad Grades Happen to Good Teachers*.

Bessie's Pillow is Linda's first novel.



For additional information about *Bessie's Pillow*
or to contact the author or publisher, please visit:

www.BessiesPillow.com



May this pillow bring you peace.

So reads the pillow entrusted, in 1906, to 18-year-old Boshka Markman as she prepares to board a train in Vilna, Lithuania. One of hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants who will leave Europe to escape persecution, she travels to America alone.

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LINDA BRESS SILBERT, granddaughter of Bessie Dreizen, was born and raised in New Rochelle, New York, where she, like Bessie's children, attended Trinity School. When Linda was 11, her family moved a few miles north to Eastchester.

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AS GLEANED FROM CONVERSATIONS
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