

The Wheel of History Turns

A 1990 memoir by Mike Maidenberg about his first meetings with relatives from Russia

It was last October. Kitty and I and Joe, Ted and Dan were bouncing along the potholed streets of deepest Brooklyn. The graffiti was giving way to signs written in Cyrillic.

As I drove along, three thoughts kept rising to the surface. One was the words in our prayer book about "that unbroken faith which links our generations one to another." A second was the title of the spiritual, "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" The third was a date: 1492.

We pulled up to a once imposing apartment house. Inside we rang the bell. We heard the elevator door close above us, and start down.

When it opened, out stepped a slender, handsome man of 35.

"Michael?" he asked.

"Victor?" I replied.

And so the generations linked, the circle closed, and the era begun in 1492 ended.

Yes, we all know the song about fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. But in 1492 the same monarchs who sent Columbus to the New World expelled the Jews from Spain. Here began the modern trail of tragedy and triumph that has marked European Jewry.

The removal of Jews from Spain led eventually to migration and relocation in Northern and Eastern Europe, from where my ancestors came to America.

My father's father was one of seven children, five girls and two boys. Only two came to America, my grandfather in 1906 and his younger sister 20 years later. On my mother's side, her forebears came a generation earlier.

All came to seek a better life. All were repelled by persecution and prejudice.

Those who stayed behind became part of modern European history, Russian history, Soviet history. They suffered through the slaughter of the Nazis and the dehumanization of the Communist system.

I have put the Maidenberg family onto a tree. Just looking at it tells the story. The Russian branches are narrow, cramped, starved-looking. The two American branches are strong, healthy, fruitful with children and grandchildren.

Through the years our family has kept up a flickering correspondence with our Russian branch. We stayed in touch with my grandfather's brother Joseph, his son Amnon, and with my grandfather's sister Malieh.

It was not until the relaxation of emigration restrictions that the younger generation of our Russian branch was able to leave. So it is that Victor Brener came here last July, and Vadim Rosenberg last December.

Victor's grandmother was Malieh, the youngest of the seven children. She died in 1980. She was only three when my grandfather left Russia.

Vadim's great-grandmother was Malkeh. She was the oldest of the seven. She was murdered by the Nazis in 1940.

The Great Wheel of History is turning before our eyes. The era of Russian Jewry seems to be coming to an end. Migration is rising as opportunity pulls and anti-Semitism pushes.

As for the family Maidenberg, Victor is living in New York, Vadim in San Francisco. I've met them both, and tried to stay in touch with them.

Vadim called me not too long ago, sounding as excited as a child with a new toy.

"I have a job!" he exulted. He is working as a computer programmer.

Two days later, a letter arrived from Victor. Good news, he wrote. "I have a job!"

I thought to myself, they are on their way. They are making it in America.

This has been a century of horror for Jews, and a century of great progress. We who have grown up in the freedom and stability of America can only count our blessings. It's wonderful to know we are being joined in America by the families of Victor Brenner and Vadim Rosenberg.

May their future be as fruitful as ours.