

Harry Needleman with Janice Levie
Harry and Bella

One of my earliest memories is of my father's mother pulling me on a sled through the snow on our dead-end street in northern New Jersey. A short woman with slightly blue- and purple-tinged gray hair, Grandma Bella brought us scraps of dyed beaver and other furs from her job in New York's garment district and gave us marshmallows. She also let me watch "The Arthur Godfrey Show" on her large box TV.

Grandma's English was very good, but her accent was somewhat amusing to our young ears. Have a "h'orange" or "h'eat a h'apple," she would tell us. If anything smelled bad she would say, "feh." Better yet was when something smelled really bad, when we might hear her utter the cherished triple "feh, feh, feh."

My grandparents were not wealthy, but somehow Grandma afforded jewelry, furs, and vacations. Each winter she packed up her mink stole and furs and headed south to Miami. Her husband, Harry, had died in November 1951, a few months before I was born, which is how Grandma Bella came to live in the large upstairs room of our family's small Cape Cod.

It was only through the stories she told my father and oldest cousin that I learned of the oppression and hardships that brought her from Ukraine to the United States and, finally, to our home.



Harry Needleman and Bella Weinstein were the children of skilled tailors in Kamenetz-Podolsk, Ukraine. Lieb and Surah Needleman's customers included the local theater group, for whom they created costumes. Shyah and Bruchah Weinstein's customers included Russian Orthodox clergy making their robes and other garments.

Growing up, both Harry and Bella worked in their parents' shops to learn the trade. Initially, Harry worked with his parents, and Bella joined them once they married in 1917. Sadly, there was little normal about life in the Ukraine in 1918 when Harry was 18 and conscripted into the Communist Russian Army.

The conditions in the army were miserable, food and clothing were meager, and the chances of survival slim. Harry deserted the army with other Jews from his hometown, where Jews and Christians lived harmoniously and many Christians hid Jews from the blood-thirsty Cossacks and other persecutors. Harry safely hid in his parent's attic whenever the Communist Russian army, Cossacks, or White Army passed through the town.

As news of captured and murdered Jews escalated, Harry and Bella encouraged their friends to put down their guns and flee to Romania. In 1920, Harry and two of his friends contracted smugglers to take them across the Dniester River to Khotin, Romania.

Bella became overwhelmed with anxiety the moment Harry kissed her goodbye. Bella feared the Border guards, who patrolled the Dniester searching for smugglers and evacuees. She was afraid that Harry would be captured or killed. Bella was pregnant and unable to risk the journey

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with Harry. She had to wait until her son was born and she had enough money to pay smugglers to take her into Romania. A week after Bella received word that her husband had reached Romania, she received a letter from Harry letting her know that the journey had gone as planned.

Harry and two friends opened a tailor shop in Lapconi, Romania. The shop was immediately successful. On her part, Bella spent days, weeks, and months in conflict. She longed to be with Harry but was overwhelmed by sadness at the thought of leaving behind her mother, father, and the Jewish community of Kamenetz-Podolsk. She was also still afraid of the river patrols, about crossing the river, and she worried about the safety of her six-month-old baby, Abraham.

In early January 1921, Harry's brother-in-law gave Bella the money she needed for the trip and she finalized the arrangements for her crossing. With one woolen bag strapped across her shoulders to carry Abraham and another bag that contained minimal essential needs, she tearfully hugged and exchanged "I love you's" with her family. Years later she learned of the indiscriminate killings of her Jewish friends who remained.

Three guides assisted her in her escape to the small Romanian river town Khotyn. The first part of the trip was a 17-mile horse-drawn wagon to the Dnieper River. She was dropped off with one guide for a short walk to the river. It was late at night, bitter cold, and the sky was overcast. There was a small boat waiting to quietly row them across the river. The guide welcomed the frigid weather since fewer border guards were likely to be on patrol.

The guide ordered Bella to keep her child wrapped across her lap face-down in his blanket with a small opening for him to breathe. The man rowing the boat did so with a deliberately slow, quiet motion. Any noise could endanger them all, and Bella was told that Abraham would be cast into the river if he made a sound. Thankfully, it was late at night, and Abraham remained asleep.

Bella was to have met a friend in Khotyn upon landing, but the friend was not there to meet her. Bella walked into a town about which she knew nothing with only an address and directions. In the early morning hours, two police officers approached her. "What are you doing out so early in the morning? Where are you going?" She told them the address of the friends she was visiting. The officers seemed skeptical but led the young woman and infant to the police station where they would be safe. Bella was placed in a jail cell until someone could verify her identity and her purpose for being in town. She gave the police the name and address of her friends, the Kamenetsky family, and played with her toddler to keep busy.

Yussel Kamenetsky arrived at the police station, talked with the officer in charge, and paid a bribe to thank them for their services. Bella and Yussel embraced each other with relief and walked to his home. Bella nearly collapsed when she finally saw Harry. After eight long months apart, they held each other in a long tight hug and shed tears of relief and pure happiness. Abraham had the biggest smile and hug for his papa.

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Yussel helped Harry find a small apartment for rent above a grocery store in Lapconi, where Yussel worked. The apartment was small but included a small kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom. Bella approved. It was a good new beginning for the young family and life became far less stressful than the one they left behind. They had to respond to an occasional inquiry from the local police and reported to Romanian authorities weekly, but this was a way of life they had known in the Ukraine.

Years later, Harry and Bella realized they had successfully navigated through a significant historical event, the 1917-1922 Ukrainian War of Independence. The Ukrainian Bolsheviks took control of the country and established the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic on December 30, 1922.¹ Once the Soviet Socialists had control life became more difficult with political prisoners sent to gulag prison camps. Millions died in Stalin's collectivization program Holodomor (Terror Famine or Horror Famine) from 1932-1933. Stalin's program of "death by hunger" led to mass executions and a famine killing an estimate of 3.9 million people, particularly on farms and rural areas for resisting collective farming.²

For Harry and Bella, though, the move made life simpler. Harry ran a tailor and furrier shop with two other men. The men were proud of their shop. They had steady customers and their business continued to grow. And so did Harry's family. On March 26, 1922, Bella gave birth to Samuel, after Harry's brother who was killed during attempting to escape the Ukraine. Harry saw a future for his family in Romania. His family was safe, his business profitable, and he lived among friends.

Bella had other ideas. She could no longer tolerate the intrusions from the local police and dreamed of moving to America. She wrote her brothers, Abe and Dave Weinstein, who migrated to America and lived in Brooklyn, New York. She received information about necessary documents, costs, visas, a U.S. immigration tax, departure ports, and ships for the voyage.

With persistence, Bella persuaded Harry that their family would be safest in America. She took on the role of managing the family finances and saved enough money to pay for the voyage and to get started in a new country. In July 1923, they bid a bittersweet farewell to their close friends and traveled to Constantinople, where they would board a ship for New York City. They had two suitcases, enough cash to purchase boarding tickets, and additional cash sewn into their coats. The plan was to initially live with Bella's brother Abe until Harry got a job and became financially established. The couple was not only planning and thinking of themselves; they were thinking of their four-year-old and 16-month-old sons.

They knew they would need to pass a literacy test, but that did not bother them. The most pressing challenge was the limitation of immigrants allowed into the United States. In 1921, President Warren Harding signed the Emergency Quota Act with immigration quotas enforced at Ellis Island. The number of individuals allowed entry was set according to monthly country quotas. This process came to be known as the midnight races where passenger ships raced to the U.S. at the start of each month to avoid paying a fine for bringing in immigrants exceeding a monthly quota.³

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In 1923, the U.S. admitted 335,480 immigrants. An immigrant backlash led to The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 set a limit of 2% of the number of immigrants originally admitted from a foreign county into the United States in 1890.⁴

Fortunately, Harry and Bella arrived in 1923, close to four months after their departure. Everyone on board was jubilant when the Statue of Liberty came into sight. Harry and Bella held each and their sons as they pointed to the large statue. The long trip across the Atlantic Ocean was over.

The Needleman's were among thousands of immigrants who stood in the long, winding line on Ellis Island waiting to be examined by a doctor, pass a literacy test, demonstrate they were financially solvent, had a place to live, and work skills. Samuel had become ill during the voyage, and so they were relieved when the doctor diagnosed and treated him for an upset stomach. The rest of the process was uneventful, and Harry was directed to where he could exchange their Romanian Leis for U.S. dollars.

Bella's brother Abe met them at New York City's pier. The family crowded into a taxi to the cramped apartment where they would stay indefinitely. Living arrangements were cramped. Harry, Bella, Abraham, and Samuel slept in one bedroom. They did not have to contribute towards rent but did help to buy food, clean, cook, and wash. Bella's brother Abe helped Harry get a job in the garment district with the Ladies Garment Manufacturer company. He also showed Harry how to navigate the subway system to commute to and from work. Bella started saving money so they could move into their own apartment. In March they found an affordable apartment in the Bronx.

Leaving the Ukraine and Romania saved their lives. During WWII the [German occupation of Ukraine](#) resulted in an estimated seven million people being systematically killed. Over one million Jews were under the Einsatzgruppen program, which conducted mass [shootings of innocent people into open pits. Most of the mass killings were performed](#) by local Ukrainian supporters in the western part of Ukraine under NAZI control.⁵

Like most of Europe, life completely changed for Jews in Romania during the war. In 1940, the Iron Guard conducted a campaign of looting shops, beatings, and torturing Jews. The government authorized actions, like the Iasi program, which killed one-third of a city's Jewish population in just seven days. Throughout the war, an estimated 280,000 to 380,000, or about half the country's Jewish population were murdered. Romanian Jews that survived the war were subject to very harsh conditions, loss of personal property, forced labor, and penalties under numerous discriminatory laws.⁶

When Harry and Bella fled Romania in 1923 they could not have comprehended the concentration camps or mass killings. When they learned of the genocide, they were shocked and depressed about what was done to the Jewish people throughout Europe, particularly the Ukraine and Romania. They were saddened for their parents and their friends who vanished. Yet, at the same time, they were grateful for the decisions they made and thankful for the chance to raise their young children in the United States of America.

Harry worked on a steady basis but still had ambitions of running

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his own business. With a few friends, he went into business starting the Ladies Suits and Coat Manufacture Company. Not used to working in such a large city, the competition was fierce. They did not have the volume to keep prices low. Their quality exceeded their competitors, but the fast-moving economy demanded production at a competitive price, rather than for quality. They had the right people, and the right skills, but lacked the cash to sustain themselves to gain product recognition and match competitor pricing. Harry and his partners had to close the company, along with their dreams. Sadly, Harry returned to the Ladies Garment Manufacturer where he worked until his death in November 1951.

Following Jewish tradition, a fifth grandchild was born into Bella's family by Abraham's wife, Joyce, delivering a baby boy in January 1952 they appropriately names Harry. As Harry and the other grandchildren grew, they would occasionally hear their grandmother say, "When I was young, I could do h'anything. I was strong as a h' ox."

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