

CHAPTER

6

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*A New Me*

About the next few hours I don't have a clear memory—just snatches of this and bits of that. It was completely meshugge in that harbor. I can't even begin to tell you of the activities I saw that day. Ships, boats everywhere—rusty steamers, gigantic cargo ships, big fat tankers, passenger ships, stumpy tug boats, and little fishing boats—millions of them, I thought. Boats loading cotton and grain, so that the air was filled with grit and dust. So many new sights, sounds, smells!

Orders were shouted at us in at least one language I didn't understand at all, one that I had already picked up a few words, and three that I knew quite well. Voices rose up in Yiddish, German, English, maybe Spanish—could have been Italian—definitely some Russian, and I don't know what else. Pure craziness.

“Come here!”

“Go there!”

“Stand in this line.”

“Hurry to the gate!”

Scurry, hurry, run, wait, sit, stand, open your bag, shut your mouth, touch your toes, stick out your tongue . . . *Vay iz mir!*

In the middle of this craziness, one inspector was to mark the true, new beginning of my life. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, made taller by his high-heeled western boots, and fiercer by the pistol he wore on his hip. He stood with a translator.

"Name!" he barked at me.

"Vi heistu?" said the translator.

"Meyer ben Yehezkiel. And Mister," I said to the translator, "Dis much Hinglish I'm understandink!"

"What is it—Meyer or Ben?" said the inspector.

"This 'ben,' it means 'son' . . ." I began to explain.

"OK, Benson," he said. "Meyer Benson. Better make it Mike. Welcome to America."

He handed me a document I could not yet read, shook my hand, and waved me on. Meyer ben Yehezkiel touched the soil of freedom, and Mike Benson began his American Dream.

So I am now Mike. Good. Well, a little bit good and a little bit not so good. I am now in America. I now have an American name. But what is this Mike Benson to do? Where is he to go? He still looks a lot like confused Meyer ben Yehezkiel to me!

Like yesterday I see it . . . I am standing in a street. Wagons, horses, handcarts, even automobiles—many more than I ever saw in Bremen! And people. Do you know, here I see my first brown people, Negroes? People, people—swirling around me, and I am standing. Do I go up the street? Do I go down? All looks the same. Nothing beckons. Still not moving, I see a fellow, a *real* American, I think, hurry toward me, hand outstretched. He reaches for my right hand, pumps it wildly, and, with a hearty, booming voice addresses me—in Yiddish!

"You boys understand Yiddish? No? OK, I'll tell you English . . . "*Shalom! Baruchha-bah!*" he shouts. "I am Isaac Weiss, representative of J.I.I.B., that is, Jewish Immigrants Information Bureau, and I can help you."

This country really is a miracle, I think. Yiddish? In Texas? Wants to help me? I accept.

He gathers together five or six of us new arrivals and leads us across the street, down the block, and inside a small storefront office. The office is crowded with many, many people dressed like my Mr. Weiss and some more fellows I recognize from the boat. Mr. Weiss offers us donuts—something new—and fruit. Yup, there sits a bowl of fresh fruit the likes of which I have never seen. Oranges and apples, grapes I recognize, but what is that funny, long, yellow thing? Yes, a banana! My first banana. I reach for one, begin to bite into the skin, when Mr. Weiss gently shows me how to peel it first. We are also offered a choice—coffee, tea, or pop. Pop? What is pop? I know tea. Good enough!

Mr. Weiss sits down at a desk and directs me to a chair across from him. He pulls out a long, official-looking paper and begins:

"Name."

"Mike Benson." New American name!

"Birthplace."

"Sherashov, Russia."

"Father's name."

"Yehezkiel ben Moshe HaLevi."

"Mother's name."

"Tzipporah bat David."

"Date of birth."

"Between first frost and first thaw, 5656."

"Education."

*Zayda Was a Cowboy*

I went to *cheder* in Sherashov from ages three to seven. I was, of course, a bar mitzvah. I can read my alef beyz. A little German. A few words Russian.

“Skills.”

“Everything. Nothing. I can learn.”

Am I a tailor? he asks me. Would I be wearing such a torn jacket and such silly pants if I were? Am I a cook? Hah! What a question! Am I a farmer? When would I have had any land to farm? What am I? I am an eager, willing *shtarker*. I am a strong back and able hands.

As soon as I say “able hands,” Weiss’s face lights up. We have an opening on a ranch.

“You’ll be a cowboy. Can you ride a horse?”

“Yes!”

In truth, I had ridden only our old dray horse. My papa would put me on his back sometimes, when we returned from milk deliveries, as the nag would steadily make his way to the barn after a hard day’s work. And I’d been on donkeys a few times. Never a real horse. But what could be the difference?

Soon Weiss is selling me on the idea of being a cowboy. One, he will buy me the new clothes I will need. Two, I will live in a bunkhouse, which is like a camp, and won’t have to pay for rent or food. The ranch will provide. Three, I will be working outdoors, under the bright Texas sky, on the healthy, open range. Four, I will earn three dollars a week.

Three dollars a week! Reason number four becomes reason number one. With that kind of money I will bring Papa and Mama and my brothers and sisters over in no time. Yes! I will be a cowboy!

Mr. Weiss suggests a bath first, then shopping for the clothes I will need as a cowboy. I am a little ashamed, for I

know that I must smell terrible from weeks of sponge bathing and little else on that boat. He accompanies me to a bath house, pays the twenty-five cents for me, hands me a towel and a bar of soap, and waits outside. I scrub long and hard and hate to put back on my stinky clothes, but I must. America may be a strange place, but no one here walks down the street in just a towel!

Rubbed red but smelling better, I greet Weiss and we go shopping. First we go to an "outfitter"—an outfitter yet with a Jewish name—Levi Strauss! What a country is this America! From Levi, Weiss buys me clothes like I've never seen. "Levis"—pants with nails? I am confused; "chaps,"—protection against the "brush"—I am mystified; "spurs"—"You'll give a little nudge to the horse," Weiss says. I give up! And more: boots with heels, a very beautiful plaid shirt, a leather vest, a red and white little square of material he calls a "bandana," and then, an honest-to-goodness cowboy hat—a "10-gallon" hat.

I say, "Mr. Weiss, maybe the black one—looks a little more like home."

He says, "Go for white, young man. This is a new world!"

I look in the mirror. A shock. I am seeing Mike Benson, Cowboy, U.S.A! My head spins!

Weiss says, "Let's burn these old, stinky clothes."

My tallis katan—my little undershirt with tzitzis—what I have never been without, is all about who I am and where I come from. This piece of home I'm not ready to leave behind yet. "This," I say, "I'll keep."

We pick up my little parcel—all that is left of my old life: my tallis, my tefillin and siddur, a letter from Mama, and two photos, fading more each day.

While I am becoming a “regular American,” admiring myself in every shop window as we walk along the main street, Weiss is leading me to a certain corner where a wagon will pick me up and take me to the ranch. As we stand, waiting, I see Weiss is restless. He has other “greenies” to settle. Do you know what greenies are? A greenie is a brand-new, just-off-the-boat person, who doesn’t yet know the ways of doing things in America. I think maybe we were “green” like not yet “ripe,” like a green banana or a green tomato. But then again, “greenie” is short for “greenhorn,” and I can’t imagine how that word came to mean a newcomer like me. Oy, English! What can I say? I’m still learning. Back to my story . . .

I tell him, “Go ahead. I’ll wait alone.” After all, I had been on my own for a long time now.

He shakes my hand, gives me a slip of paper with his name and address, where I can write if I have problems, wishes me a “mazel tov,” a cheery “zayt gezunt,” and is off. He is almost across the street when he remembers something. He comes back to me, hands me *ten whole American dollars!* and he says, “How could I forget this? Here is a welcoming gift from Rabbi Henry Cohen, his congregation Temple B’nai Israel, and the Jewish Welfare Society of Galveston, Texas.”

I am too shocked to do more than stare back and forth from the money in my hand to the slowly receding back of Weiss.

I stand on the dusty street corner and after a bit I begin to really take in this new country. These streets are paved, but so dusty they remind me a little of home. The buildings are low, one- and two-story; but unlike at home, these narrow houses and stores have fancy fronts and

look almost new. They are either painted wood—no house was painted in Sherashov—or made of a stone I do not know. Later I learn the word “stucco,” which is not really stone, but like a rough cement—very nice. I notice, also, a beautiful park and flowers. Flowers are everywhere, many flowers like I have never seen. They were gorgeous! They were something else that just amazed and surprised me. I saw flowers in the old country. Naturally I did. But not like these. Such size! Such colors! I think maybe a free land with free air to breath makes flowers grow in a special, Texas way. Of course, the streets that are paved in gold and the skyscrapers, they are in New York, not Texas; but New York can’t be too far away. After all, they are both in America.

I feel a little foolish in my cowboy clothes, but as I look around I see almost all the men dressed this way. Of course, I don’t see too many straggly beards like mine, but, yes, there are one or two. I must be honest. I called it a beard? Maybe a half-dozen wild, long hairs and a shadow on my upper lip. That was my beard.

I am standing on the street a long time and not one person has said, “Out of my way, Jew.” Or shoved me. Or spit in my direction. Men who pass by tip their hats and say, “Howdy.” What means “howdy”? Who cares? Soon I tip and say a “howdy” also.

In Europe they call America “the New World.” It is *such* a new world to me. I see so many different-looking people. Yellow, white, black, brown . . . different, but the same. This is America!

Hungry I should be by now, but I am too excited to notice. Everything is strange, unexpected. A new life in a new world. Was it only hours ago that I scrambled off that boat?

*Zayda Was a Cowboy*

Some more time passes, and a wagon stops before me. The driver jumps down from his seat, sticks out his hand, and with a big grin says, "You the new hand?"

New name, yes. New clothes, yes. New hand? I don't understand, but I nod.

"Hop in. I'm Luke. From the RVR Ranch."

"Mey . . . Mike Benson," I say, and I feel like I'm talking about a stranger.

"Grab your gear and let's go, Mike. We have a long list of items to pick up before we can set off for home."

So with my "new hand," I pick up my little bundle—now "gear"—climb into the wagon next to Luke, and we are on our way.