

# 1

## EARLY LIFE

I must find a way out.

The Russian Pale during the late nineteenth century was an isolated area, inhabited by Jews who had been legally authorized to settle there by the Czars. They made up 12 percent of the entire population of the area. Just prior to the assassination of Alexander II, in 1881, four million Russian Jews—about one-half of the entire world Jewish population—were confined to an area consisting of twenty-five northern and western provinces out of a total of eighty-five provinces making up the empire (see figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The Jews had been dislocated from crowded urban areas as a result of pogroms that were organized in massacres of helpless people.

Progressively more restrictive governmental measures were instituted, including expulsions from villages, censorship of the press, and mandatory conscription of Jewish children, sometimes for as long as twenty-five years. Almost 94 percent of all Russian Jews were confined to an area of about 386,000 square miles between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea.<sup>2</sup> Once there, they were confronted with severe deprivation and hardship. Allowed to engage only in commerce and crafts and barred from owning land, the Jews were considered citizens but had a second-class status within the population. They also sometimes worked in factory production, carpentry, plumbing, and other trades, while struggling to survive within a culture of raw and painful poverty.

Living in small, all-Jewish villages in semirural areas known as “shtetls,” thousands of which dotted the provinces of the Pale, most Jews had few ties with other Russian citizens. Under constant threat of violent attacks and pogroms from the outside world, these communities were united against the hostilities that could engulf them at any moment. The Jews lived in fear for their lives. And yet these villages were a world all their own, which provided emotional sustenance and community sup-

FIGURE 1

Map of the Pale



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port. They pulsed with the activity of daily life, including trading, education, and cultural pursuits.

The shtetls were vibrant communities oriented to otherworldly values. Jewish religious traditions, learning, and practices structured daily existence. They also provided hope for a better life and for a spiritual strength with which to cope with the atrocities regularly confronting them. Religious orthodoxy attempted to isolate the Jew from the external world, promising individual salvation and immortality, as well as the coming of the Messiah, who would protect and redeem His people. Religion also provided the structure for a communalism, uniting all against the petty harassment of the peasantry, the official terrorism of the czar and cossacks, and the acidic winds of modernism blowing from the West. In carrying out religious tenets, voluntary self-help organizations called *bevras* were organized by Jews to aid the sick, raise funds for the needy, and educate the poor. These groups, in addition to the synagogues, were the mainstays of the shtetls, providing a unifying community force.<sup>3</sup>

Religious traditions dictated every aspect of life in the shtetl. They decreed that men be scholars, thinkers, and teachers, while women confine their concern to home and family. Men received importance and honor from this noble undertaking, and it was entirely acceptable for a man to spend all day in the shul studying and praying, while his wife cared for the home and earned the money to support the family. Religious education was reserved exclusively for the men, while the women were expected to be observant and to set examples of reverence for the children and the community. Women were the responsible parties who carried the obligations. Honor and prestige for all came from performing *tsedaka*, acts of social responsibility. Although there were exceptions, these were norms of behavior to which the community generally adhered.

The period just prior to the turn of the twentieth century was an unsettling one, and despite rigid norms, the shtetl was far from stagnant. Into these closed communities, new and innovative ideas inevitably spread. The *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, called for the modernization of custom and thought in order to gain for the Jews equality with their Russian neighbors.<sup>4</sup> Modern ideologies were disseminated, from the *yeshivas* (schools) in the cities, where some Jews congregated, to even the most backward villages, by traveling students who educated the Jewish youth. Many of these young people often grasped eagerly at the new ideas and movements. While governmental persecution and repression were the norms, revolutionary ideas were brewing, and Jews excitedly formed new political organizations to implement them. Traditions were

challenged, and new ideas flourished. Thousands of Jewish immigrants left the Pale in search of a better way of life.

Into this world of transition Rachelle Peisoty (Rose Pesotta) was born on 20 November 1896. She was the second eldest of eight children, reared in Derazhnya, a small railroad town in the Ukraine. According to Rose, who wrote of her early years in her autobiography *Days of Our Lives*, life in this shtetl was idyllic, her upbringing peaceful and plentiful.<sup>5</sup> Although Jews did not generally fare well there, her family was an exception. Her parents owned and operated a small shop they inherited from Rose's great-aunt Sheba, who obtained it as a result of a change in one of the czar's edicts. The property also included a share of an inn and some land in town. In the store they sold flour, nuts, dates, and other staples of the Russian diet. Wealthy enough to hire a peasant girl to help out, the family could afford to have clothing made by seamstresses, and each child was outfitted completely for the Passover holiday.

As the family was atypical, so the village itself seemed somewhat insulated from the turmoil raging beyond its limits. Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Armenians, and Germans all lived side by side. Ethnic conflict had little influence on Rose's early childhood.<sup>6</sup> Among Rose's fondest memories was her *cheder* (school) teacher, "Kalman the melamed, the schoolmaster in the elementary cheder who was a *sblimazel*, or luckless one." She warmly described Judith, the ancient shroud maker, and Mendel, the tailor, who once worked on Sarah Bernhardt's gown and who had actually held his hands in hers. Her memories of childhood were charming and simple.

According to family folklore, the Peisoty family reverently observed every orthodox Jewish tradition. Indeed, the parents were so orthodox that the children's shoes were hidden on the Sabbath to ensure that none of them would break the rules of the day of rest. The family also prayed together every morning.<sup>7</sup> Rose's mother, Masya, shaved her head and wore a wig or *shaitel* (head wrapping) in order that she not be attractive to men other than her husband. The oldest boy in the family, David, was catered to by the sisters because, according to Jewish tradition, the son will say prayers (*kaddish*) for the dead parents. His status within the family is a prestigious one, especially as only a male can carry on the family name. Her father wanted boys and was displeased that six out of his eight children were daughters. Esther was the oldest child, then came Rose, Marishka (Miriam), Hannah, David, Luba, Abraham (Yoseler), and Fanya, who was born after Rose emigrated. Two other children died in infancy.

The girls were less favored than the sons, being expected to do the housework and to prepare for the Sabbath. They cared for each other

while Masya, their mother, cared for the shop. The eldest girls were responsible for the youngest, and all of the children were deeply involved with each other. They shared religious observances, sang in four different languages and danced the native style of each culture, and participated in public festivities. Rose's description of her childhood is filled with vivid images such as frolicking naked in the big river that ran through the town: "No one in Derazhnya owned a swim suit. We went into the water without either suit or self-consciousness. Though we disrobed in separate bath houses, boys and girls lined up together and dived into the river from the flume near the millwheel. We tried to outdo one another in water stunts."<sup>8</sup> She recollects public parties that became community celebrations. She remembers competing against local boys, demonstrating courage and initiative, qualities she felt served her well throughout her life. Her recollections were of prosperity and happiness.

But all was not bliss in Derazhnya. Rose's father was a dynamic, unconventional man, yet strict and somewhat rigid.<sup>9</sup> Isaack Peisoty was a well-respected member of the community. He married Masya, his second cousin, when he was twenty-six and Masya was sixteen; they had inherited the store at the death of Aunt Sheba. Isaack was not much of a businessman and spent a great deal of his time organizing self-help groups in the community, leaving Masya to do most of the hard work. Isaack set up a matsoh co-op during the Passover holiday, when it appeared that the matsoh bakers were going to exploit the Jewish consumers in the region.<sup>10</sup> Later he was the president of the *aksia* (free loan association). In addition, because he was educated in both the Talmud and secular education, he often acted as a lay doctor in the community, dispensing herbs and medicines. He was well loved by the locals, whom he treated with generosity and respect. According to Rose's eldest sister, Esther, however, Isaack was not quite as kind to his own children. Although Rose never spoke of this in her writings, Esther felt that both she and Rose were forced to leave home because of Isaack's autocratic behavior. Esther decided to leave home with her beau, Abraham Rubin, who was emigrating to escape the draft. She felt rejected by her father and wanted to escape his old-fashioned, authoritarian ways. When Isaack took Esther to the German border as she was about to leave for the United States, he merely turned to her after the long trip, looked at her directly, said, "Take care of yourself," and walked away. Esther never saw her father again and, some seventy years later, cried as she told the story.<sup>11</sup>

Rose's autobiography is replete with details such as having been spanked for poor penmanship while learning the alphabet in Hebrew and Russian. She also describes her brother David's special treatment. He was given better foods at the table because her father's attitude was that girls

FIGURE 2

Peisoty family, circa 1913, Derazhnya, Ukraine.



Hannah

Rose

Luba

Miriam

David

Masya  
and  
Yoseler

Luba

Isaack

Photo courtesy of Fanya Peisoty Bimbat.

were not worth bothering with. If Rose felt any resentment, however, she successfully succeeded in repressing it. She romanticized her family in all of her writings and avoided any criticism of her father. Instead, she remembered fondly reading to him as he lay ill in bed, while he instructed her in pronunciation and the historical background of what they were discussing. Rose portrayed herself as a dutiful daughter who thrived in the warm, nourishing atmosphere of the family and the shtetl.

Education was of the utmost importance to Jews, and the Peisoty family was no exception. Rose was first educated, as were her sisters, at home. By the time her education was completed, Rose was proficient in four languages. Yiddish, the language of the shtetl, was spoken at home. It was the language of wandering and life in exile. Hebrew was taught to all Jews as the language of prayer. It was the holy language through which one studied the Torah or sacred book. Ukrainian, Rose's third language, was the one that most Jews used in commerce and interaction with neighbors. Finally, Rose was taught Russian in order that she might read the classics and scholarly books. She enjoyed Russian folk songs and, in fact, sang easily in all four languages.

From 1909 to 1912 Rose attended Rosalia Davidoff's private girls' school near her home.<sup>12</sup> Her stay there, however, was interrupted by an accident that resulted in her father's subsequent illness and forced Rose to leave the private school. Thereupon, she received tutoring at home and read extensively in her father's library. Her tutors were former students of the *yeshiva*, who had learned of the ideas of the *Haskalah*. These young men traveled around the countryside, itinerant educators, passing on political and economic teachings as they roamed.

My sister Esther had met these students and had been fired by the contacts she made in Odessa, and presently she joined a circle in Derazhnya which was part of the democratic section of the movement designed to replace the despotic czar and all his feudal rule with a democratic system of government. Meetings of the group were held in several places—in the cemetery at the edge of town, in backroom workshops, and in a few homes. Esther took me along to some of these meetings and found a special use for me. I served as a carrier of leaflets. Being padded with them, I felt like a walking barrel. That was a precaution in the event of arrests, the theory being that a child could run away without being searched.<sup>13</sup>

According to Esther, Rose really did not know what she was carrying; she was inveigled into the work because she was young and immature.<sup>14</sup>

Rose's political education began with her reading of revolutionary



pamphlets her father had hidden in the attic and with her sister Esther's introduction to the radical circle. Esther, one year older than Rose, visited Odessa during the summer of her fifteenth year.<sup>15</sup> Odessa, a port city on the Black Sea, was teeming with art, theater, fashion, and new ideas. Once, after returning from her trip, Esther began to speak of evolution and revolution. Rose remembered her father saying, "Stop that kind of talk at once. If there's any such talking to be done in this house, I'll do it. Comb out that silly looking pompadour and take off those stilts before you break an ankle. Give the children their supper and put them to bed."<sup>16</sup> Isaack, a self-proclaimed Bundist and political activist himself, refused to allow political talk to go on openly in his home.<sup>17</sup>

Although Rose's father kept revolutionary pamphlets in his attic, he squelched any discussion at home, fearing for the family's safety. His fear was justified. Radicals were being persecuted by the authorities, and many were on the run to avoid incarceration. Since the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 by revolutionaries, all reforms were curtailed, and a period of absolute repression had taken hold. It was not the time to be a visible activist. But these forces did not dampen the girls' excitement and dedication to the movement. By age fourteen, in 1912, Rose joined the radical underground democratic circle and adopted an outlook that was to shape her life's work. These radical groups had begun to emerge under the reign of Alexander II, who had instituted modest liberal reforms, diminished censorship, and heightened expectations for greater improvement. When these hopes were not met with actions, various theoreticians and propagandists united to agitate for greater social change.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, Jews found themselves torn by conflicting claims. A new world, in the guise of radical movements or cultural progress, conflicted with hallowed Jewish traditions. Jews were bombarded with socialism, Zionism, and other major secular ideologies.<sup>18</sup> The strength of the family and the community organizations was being eroded, and the shtetl was losing its young people. Discussions of class struggle and revolution abounded. Socialism was stirring the masses, and many Jews felt compelled to join the revolutionary movements that were organizing to destroy the empire.

Among them was Rose, who saw herself as continuing in the tradition of the great revolutionaries who preceded her. She read the works of Mikhail Bakunin, the noted anarchist revolutionary and theoretician whose ideas were to influence her significantly. Bakunin, a believer in direct action, found his way to many of the barricades in Europe's revolutions. She studied Alexander Herzen, a leading figure in nineteenth-century



Russian radicalism. Herzen's ideas formed the ideological core of Russian revolutionary tradition: He detested and feared capitalism, abhorred the bourgeoisie and had contempt for the middle-class way of life, and wrote of the revolutionary potential of the Russian people. She also read of Vera Figner, a terrorist active in the *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will) movement, as well as other notable Russian women activists. Rose read voraciously of the historical antecedents for the movements that she joined, studying and familiarizing herself with committed revolutionaries who were imprisoned or exiled for their work.

Rose was also quite aware of the countless heroines who distributed propaganda, ran printing presses, smuggled arms, and fought for social reforms in Russia. These "new Jewish women" were Rose's role models; and at a young age, she tried to emulate them.<sup>19</sup>

Most fascinating of them were the women who had abandoned their well-cushioned life, and donning simple peasant garb, went *V Narod*—to the populace. Notable among them were Sophia Perovskaya, Sophia Bardina, Essie Helfman, Vera Figner, and at the turn of this century, Maria Spiridonova and Catherine Breshkovskaya, whose names are world renowned, and millions of others who went into exile and to their doom unknown, unsung, and undefended.<sup>20</sup>

Rose participated eagerly in the democratic circle, which was also a secret society. She often read to the illiterate members of the group, met with revolutionaries who were traveling incognito through her village, and discussed world events with her allies. Her political activism and her growing intellectual curiosity took their toll on her dedication to traditional daughterly roles. She admitted,

I went on doing the household chores and taking care of the children, but I began to believe I was leading a humdrum life. Esther's letters made me restless. My only escape from it was that I followed closely the current events in the daily and weekly papers.<sup>21</sup>

Rose led a double life—respectful on the one hand, rebellious and radical on the other. She began to question life as she knew it, remaining close to her family, yet striving for independence and identifying with those outside her family sphere. It was just a matter of time before this contradiction would be addressed.

The moment of decision came when Rose was betrothed, without her knowledge, to a neighborhood boy. Fifty years later Rose was to vividly remember that moment.

One morning, we were seated around the samovar at the breakfast table, and I was feeding the newest baby tapioca in milk. The other youngsters were smacking their lips and dipping their toasted cinnamon buns in hot cacao. Marishka, always whimsical, took a mouthful and burst into uncontrollable laughter, spattering liquid on all within range.

"What's the matter with you?" I wanted to know. "Are you crazy or what?"

"You're getting married!" she exploded, pointing at me.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's the truth. You're getting married. Dad said so last night."<sup>22</sup>

It appears that Rose's younger sister overheard her parents planning to marry off Rose to a neighbor's son just returned from the army. Rose recalled, "I had a few words with the young man and concluded without hesitation that he was 'not my type.' A feeling of outrage and revolt against this high-handed plan took possession of me. I determined that come what might, no such marriage would take place."

Later that night, she read aloud to her democratic circle recently smuggled revolutionary pamphlets. She was inspired by the vision of a just society, in the writings of young women like herself who could have chosen marriage and a traditional lifestyle but did not.

If I accepted my parents' plans, it would mean my marrying this returned soldier, keeping house, bearing children and getting lost in the narrow life of a market town, as had most of the girls I knew. They never had a thought outside their homes. The idea of such a future appalled me. All day, automatically attending to my tasks, I kept repeating to myself: "I must find a way out, I must find a way out. I must find a way out."<sup>23</sup>

Rose considered all her options. "I pondered the question of running away, of becoming a member of the revolutionary party. And if I did this, I would be pledged to take any order that might be given, doing whatever task was assigned to me, though it might lead to incarceration and the long trek to the Siberian wasteland. I weighed the possibilities: the service I might render to the people and the consequences to myself if things went wrong, as had happened so often with militant workers in the underground movement."<sup>24</sup> After considerable soul searching, Rose secretly wrote to her sister Esther, who emigrated to the United States

just a few years before. "Next morning I wrote her a long letter, pouring out my heavy laden heart. I set forth all the reasons why she must help me without delay, cautioning her not to mention to our parents that I had written her about my problem. 'Tell him you're lonesome for the family and want your sister with you. . . . Promise that if I don't like it in the United States you'll pay my return passage home. Please do it right away.'"<sup>25</sup> Rose felt so trapped, so desperate, that she resorted to a suicide threat "to make certain that Esther would not dismiss these pleadings lightly, I ended with a threat that she could not ignore. If I did not hear from her favorably, I would take carbolic acid and end it all."<sup>26</sup>

Although Rose was determined to escape the trap of an impending forced marriage, she decided to escape in a socially acceptable manner. In choosing between revolutionary activities and doing what many of her neighbors and friends had already done—moving to the United States under the guidance and protection of a family member, Rose picked the limited rebellion; she was attracted to revolution, but turned to her sister instead to save her from what was planned for her. Rose was pragmatic in this decision, much as she turned out to be later in her life. She extricated herself from a difficult situation carefully and within the reconcilable boundaries. She might have had revolutionary leanings, but she did not choose the revolutionary path; instead, she was a radical with clear limits. She would not engage in illegal or out-of-bounds solutions; she determined to find a way out, but in a manner that her family could accept and to which they could reconcile themselves. After all, her sister did the same thing several years before her.

Her father treated his eldest daughters unyieldingly, first Esther and then Rose, yet Rose was not angry with him. She spoke of him fondly and with only warm memories. Her youth was filled with some boredom and drudgery, but, as she said, it was unheard of for her to be directly disobedient.<sup>27</sup> In this, Rose's story contrasts markedly with the manner in which her later role model and close friend Emma Goldman recalls the departure from her own authoritarian father. Goldman, unlike Pesotta, portrays herself as a "'lonely and unhappy waif,' surrounded by 'hard and cold stone cliffs,' comforted only moments by servants, subject to the whims of her parents and loved by an older half sister who was herself little better than a galley slave."<sup>28</sup> She remembers feeling unwanted by her father and desiring always to escape the authoritarian patriarch's violent outbursts of temper. When Goldman's sister Helene prepared to leave Russia in 1885, Emma, who decided she could not bear losing her sister and wanted to run from her father, staged a dramatic scene: "[I] pleaded, begged and wept. Finally, I threatened to jump into the Neva, whereupon he yielded."<sup>29</sup>

Both Goldman and Pesotta wanted to escape the fate that awaited them if they were to remain at home; however, Pesotta chose to do so quietly, with planning and cunning, whereas Goldman agitated and created a scene. This difference in style played itself out continually during the lives of these two seemingly similar anarchist women. Pesotta chose to work within the union and within acceptable social institutions and mores, whereas Goldman went outside norms and institutions. In fact, although they came from similar origins, because of dissimilar upbringings and life circumstances their lives played out in quite disparate ways.

Pesotta's father might have been authoritarian; however, he was also an educated, well-respected leader in his community. Pesotta looked up to him and appreciated his accomplishments. Obviously, there was warmth and respect between them. He taught her to read and to think and encouraged her intellectual capacities, quite unlike what Goldman's father had done. To meet her own needs, Rose carefully orchestrated a plan that her father could not oppose, which was a pattern she was to repeat in later relationships with men in authority. She might disagree with them, but she would carefully create situations in which she could reach her own ends with as little confrontation as possible.

Rose proceeded with her thoughtfully laid plan:

And to guard against our letter carrier, Israel Sunshine, getting any hint of my appeal, I mailed the letter at the railway depot, handing it to a man in the mail car of a westbound train. At home I began to calculate how long it would take for me to receive an answer. Five days for mail to cross Polish Russia, Austria, and Germany and then about two weeks to New York, allowing for delay in the departure of a steamship for that city. 'Esther will act promptly,' I told myself, 'so I ought to have a reply in six or seven weeks.'<sup>30</sup>

As she waited for a reply, Pesotta quelled her anxiety by having her palm read by a clairvoyant, who told her that there was "a dispatch on the way to you. Something you have been expecting impatiently. Don't worry. It is coming soon and it will gladden your heart. . . All will end the way you wish."<sup>31</sup>

In just four weeks, a large envelope from the United States arrived. The letter and the steamship ticket to New York via Antwerp, Belgium, greatly disturbed her mother and father. They felt that Rose was abandoning them, and they feared that she was dissatisfied with them and her life in Derazhnya. It took nine months for her parents to give permission for Rose to leave; they finally agreed only when Isaack's mother decided

to also go to the United States. Rose was ecstatic; no forced marriage would occur, and a new life was to begin.

Rose was clearly moving in a radical life direction. She began to ally herself with others who believed that freedom could come as a result of dramatic social upheaval; she wanted a social order based on equality for all. Her father had already taught her about caring for humanity by his own charitable works in the community. The familial kinship of her home life, with its warm, friendly environment, prefigured the radical ideal she would later develop. But by his patriarchal behavior, Rose's father also created a need in her to fight back against perceived unjust authority with cunning and careful planning, a pattern of response to authority that was to manifest itself continuously in her life. Through the nurturance and warmth of a loving community and home life and the constrained rebellion against what she saw as a potentially mundane existence that would have been hers, Rose's psychological script was set for a lifetime of dedicated political activity. But it took much more to turn Rose into the committed radical she was to become.

From the assassination of Alexander II to the outbreak of World War I, almost one-third of all East European Jews emigrated to the United States.<sup>32</sup> In October 1913 Rose joined the thousands making the voyage. Once again she did what was acceptable. She escaped, but did so cautiously under the watchful eye of her grandmother. Her father accompanied both Rose and Babushka (her grandmother) to the German border, as he had Esther.<sup>33</sup> Isaack, fearful of Rose's being abducted and forced into prostitution by "white slavery," provided protection and guidance by accompanying her. In fact, his fears were justified: There was a growing incidence of prostitution in the immigrant Jewish community at the time. In New York City from 1913 to 1930, 17 percent of the arrested prostitutes were Jewish, out of an entire population that was nearly one-third Jewish.

At the border, Rose realized that she would probably never see her father again, and the two of them cried in each other's arms. She parted from him saying, "Father dearest, forgive me and please take care of yourself."<sup>34</sup> "In the last instant, as I looked up at him, he seemed all at once to have grown older. I stopped a moment, irresolute, then I forced myself to walk on, straight ahead. I had made my choice; there could be no turning back. The gate closed behind me, shutting out my past."<sup>35</sup>

Rose and her grandmother traveled in style. They bought second-class passage on the ship *Finland* from Antwerp, unlike most Russian immigrants, including Esther, who were forced to go in steerage. They carried with them a teakettle, tea, food, bedding for Esther, blankets

imported from Vienna, and a Caucasian wall rug with an image of a life-size tiger set against a black background.<sup>36</sup>

In her little bag Rose carried ten ruples (or five American dollars). Rose made acquaintances on the ship and began to enjoy her newfound freedom tremendously. Her second-class ticket even allowed her to enter New York without having to go through Ellis Island. At this time, during immigration procedures, her name was changed to Rose Pesotta. She was met at the Twenty-third Street dock by her sister, who immediately took her to the Ninety-eighth Street apartment east of Fifth Avenue. Rose was about to embark on a new life. She did so in a comfortable and well-attended style, a style that was to remain characteristic for her all her life. Rose chose to leave the oppressive quality of her father's decision making. She had, for the first time, confronted patriarchal authority and had won. She had made her escape.

Between 1881 and 1914, close to two million Jews came to the United States, most of them from Eastern Europe. They were, for the most part, members of family units who came to live with each other. Relatives followed relatives. The migration was also generally a movement of young people. By the time Rose joined the ranks, many who were well educated were emigrating.<sup>37</sup> Rose was part of the later immigrant group, arriving between 1905 and 1914. They were exposed to the reawakening of Jewish consciousness and enlightenment.<sup>38</sup> Although members of an ethnic group in flight, they arrived with an astute knowledge of politics and Jewish culture that was to influence their adjustment to American society. They came, as did Rose, with hope for a new life and with a dedication to making that ideal a reality.