

# A MAN IN A TRAP

(from a Book of East Side Memoirs)

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By MICHAEL GOLD

Why did I come to America?" asked my father of himself gravely, as he twisted and untwisted his moustache in the darkness. "I will tell you why; it was because of envy of my dirty thief of a cousin, that Sam Kravitz, may his nose be eaten by the pox.

"All this time while I was disgracing my family, Sam had gone to America, and was making his fortune. Letters came from him, and were read throughout our village. Sam, in about two short years, already owned his own factory for making suspender ends. He sent us his picture. It was marvelled at by everyone. Our Sam no longer wore a fur cap, a long Jewish coat and peasant boots. No! he wore a fine gentleman's suit, a white collar like a doctor, store shoes and a beautiful round hat called a derby hat.

"He suddenly looked so fat and rich, this beggarly cobbler's son! I tell you, my liver burned with envy when I heard my father and mother praise my cousin Sam. I knew I was better than him in every way, and it hurt me. I said to my father: Give me money. Let me go at once to America to redeem myself. I will make more money than Sam, I am smarter than he is. You will see!

"My mother did not want me to go. But my father was weary of my many misfortunes, and he gave me the money for the trip. So I came to America. It was the greatest mistake I ever made in my life.

"One should not do things through envy. There is a story in the Talmud that illustrates this. Once there was a man who owned a beautiful dog and a big ugly jackass. Every night while eating his supper the man would take the dog on his lap and feed it and stroke its head affectionately. The dog would kiss him and lick his face. The jackass watched this for a time, and became envious. So one night at supper time he entered the house and sat himself on the man's lap, too. He licked the man's face with his rough tongue, and embraced him affectionately with his legs.

"But the man did not stroke the jackass' hand in return, or feed him choice food. No, the man was very angry. He took a stick and beat the surprised jackass and chased him' out of the house. The moral of this is, do not envy other people's good luck."

## A LAND OF FUN

"But, children, I am not discouraged. I will make a great deal of money some day. I am a serious married man now and no greenhorn. But then I was still a foolish boy, and though I left Roumania with great plans in my head, in my heart a foolish voice was saying: America is a land of fun.

"I was not serious. But how full I was of all the Baba stories that were told in my village about America! In America, we believed, people dug under the streets and found gold anywhere. In America, the poorest ragpicker lived better than a Roumanian millionaire.

"I had seen two pictures of America. They were shown in the window of a store that sold Singer Sewing Machines in our village. One picture had in it the tallest building I had ever seen. It was called a skyscraper and at the bottom of it walked the proud Americans. The men wore derby hats and had fine moustaches and gold watchchains. The women wore silks and satins, and had proud faces like queens. Not a single poor man or woman was there; everyone was rich.

"The other picture was of Niagara Falls. You have seen this picture on postcards; with Indians and cowboys on horses, who look at a rainbow shining over the water.

"I tell you, I wanted to get to America as fast as I could, so that I might look at the skyscrapers and the Niagara Falls rainbow and wear a derby hat.

"In my family were about 75 relatives. All came to see me leave Roumania. There was much crying. But I was happy, because I thought I was going to a land of fun.

"The last thing my mother did, was to give me my cousin's address in New York, and say: Go to Sam. He will help you in the strange land.

"But I made up my mind I would die first rather than ask Sam for help.

## THE SPRING BED

"Well, for eleven days our boat rocked on the ocean. I was sick, but I wrote out a play called the Robbers of Schiller and dreamed of America.

"They gave us herring and potatoes to eat. The bread was like clay. And the boat stank like a big watercloset. But I was happy.

"I joked all the way. One night all of us young immigrants held a singing party. One young Roumanian had an accordion. We became good friends, because both of us were the happiest people on the boat.

"He was coming to a rich uncle, a cigarmaker who owned a big business, he said. When he learned I had no relatives in America, he asked me to live at his uncle's with him. I agreed because I liked this boy.

"Nu, how shall I tell how glad we were when after eleven days on the empty ocean, we saw the buildings of New York?

"It looked so nice and happy, this city, standing on end like a child's toys and blocks. It looked like a land of fun, a game waiting for me to play.

"And in Ellis Island, where they kept us over night, I slept on a springbed that had no mattress, pillow or blankets. I was such a greenhorn I had never seen a spring before, and so I thought it was wonderful, and bounced up and down on it for fun.

"It was there someone taught me my first American words. All night my friend Yossel and I bounced up and down on the springs and repeated these funny words to each other.

"Potato, he would yell at me and laugh. Tomato, I would answer him, and laugh. Match, he would say. All right, I would answer. Match, all right, go to hell, potato, until everyone was angry at us, the way we kept them awake with our laughing and yelling.

"In the morning his uncle came for us and took us in a horsecar.

"I tell you, my eyes were busy on that ride through the streets. I was looking for the American fun.

## WHEN DOES IT START?

"Nu, I will not mention how bad I felt when I saw the cigar-maker uncle's home. It was just a big dirty dark room in the back of the cigar store where he made and sold cigars. He, his wife and four children lived in that one room.

"He was not glad to have me there, but he spread newspapers on the floor, and Yossel and I slept on them.

"What does it matter, I thought, this is not America. Tomorrow morning I will go out in the streets, and see the real American fun.

## THE ELEVATED

"The next morning Yossel and I took a long walk. That we might not be lost, I remember, we fixed in our minds the big gold tooth of a dentist that hung near the cigar shop.

"We walked and walked. Nu, I will not tell you what we saw, because you see it every day. We saw the East Side. To me it was a strange sight. I could not help wondering, where are all the people running? What is happening? And why are they so serious? When does the fun start?

"We came to Allen street, under the elevated. To show you what a greenhorn I was, I fell in love with the elevated train. I had never seen anything like it in Roumania.

"I was such a greenhorn I believed the elevated train travelled all over America, to Niagara Falls and other places. We rode up and down on it all day.

"I had some money left. I bought two fine derby hats from a pushcart; one for Yossel, and one for me. They were a little big, but how proud we felt.

"No one wears derby hats in Roumania. Both of us had pictures taken in the American fun-hats to send to our parents.

## WHEN DOES IT START?

"This went on for two weeks. Then all my money was gone. So the cigar-maker told me I should find a job and move out from his home. So I found a job for \$5 a month in a grocery store. I lived over the store, I rose at 5 o'clock, and went to bed at 12 in the night. My feet became large and red with standing all day. The grocery-man, may the worms find him, gave me nothing to eat

but dry bread, old cheese, pickles and other groceries. I soon became sick and left that job.

"For a week I sat in Hester Park without a bite of food. And I looked around me, but was not unhappy. Because I tell you, I was such a greenhorn, that I still thought fun would start, and I was waiting for it.

"One night, after sleeping on the bench, I was hungry in the morning and I decided to look for my rich cousin. I hated to do this, but was weak with fasting. So I came into my cousin's shop. To hide my shame I laughed out loud.

"Look, Sam, I am here, I have just come off the boat, and am ready to make my fortune.

"So my cousin Sam gave me a job in his factory. He paid me 25 cents a day.

"He had three other men working for him. He worked himself. He looked sick and sharp and poor, not at all like the picture he had sent back to Roumania.

#### LAND OF HURRY UP

"Nu, so your father worked. I got over my greenhorn idea that there was nothing but fun in America. I learned to work like everyone else. I grew thin as my cousin.

"Soon I came to understand it was not a land of fun. It was a Land of Hurry-Up. There was no gold to be dug in the streets here. Derbies were not fun-hats for holidays. They were work-hats. Nu, so I worked! with my hands, my liver and sides! I worked!

"My cousin Sam had fallen into a good trade. With his machines he manufactured the cotton ends of suspenders. These ends are made of cotton, and are very important to a suspender. It is these ends that fasten to the buttons, and hold up the pants.

"Without these ends there could be no suspenders, and no one could hold up his pants.

"Yes, it was a good trade, and a necessary one. There was much money to be made, I saw that at once.

"But my cousin Sam was not a good business man. He had no head for figures, and his face was like vinegar. None of his customers liked him.

"Gradually, he let me go out and find business for him. I was very good for this. Most of the big suspender shops were owned by Roumanians who had known my father. They greeted me like a relative. I drank wine with them, and passed jokes. So they gave me their orders for suspender ends.

"So one day, seeing how I built up the business, Sam said: You shall be my partner. We are making a great deal of money. Leave the machine, Meyer. I will take care of the inside shop work. You go out every day, and joke with our customers and bring in the orders.

"So we were partners. I was very happy. I earned as much as thirty dollars a week; I was at last a success.

"So a match-maker came, and said I ought to marry. So I met your momma and saw that she was a kind and hard-working woman, and I decided to marry and have children.

"So this was done.

#### NIAGARA FALLS

"It was here I made the greatest mistake of my life.

"Always I had wanted to see that big water with the rainbow and Indians called Niagara Falls.

"So I took your momma there when we married. I spent a month's wages on the trip. I showed America to your momma. We enjoyed ourselves.

"In a week we came back. I went to the shop the next morning but could not find it. It had vanished. I could not find Sam. He had stolen the shop.

"I searched and searched, and my heart was swollen like a sponge with hate. I was ready to kill my cousin Sam.

"So one day I found him and the shop. I shouted at him, Thief, what have you done? He laughed. He showed me a paper from a lawyer proving that the shop was his. All my work had been for nothing. It had only made Sam rich.

"What could I do? So in my hate I hit him with my fist and made his nose bleed. He ran into the street, yelling for a policeman. I ran after him with a stick, and beat him some more. But what good could it do? The shop was really his and I was left a pauper.

"So now, I must work as a house-painter. I must work for another man, I am not my own master now. I am a man in a trap.

"But I am not defeated. I am a man with a strong will. I will

yet have another shop. All I need is \$300; and I will find this \$300 somehow.

"Yes! Yes! I will show my cousin yet! I will show the world how I can run a suspender ends shop!

"I will have no partners this time. I will work alone. I will show your mother how a man makes his fortune in America! Look at Nathan Straus! Look at Otto Kahn! They peddled shoe-laces when they first came here. I have had a better start, and should go further than them!

"I am certain to be rich! I will make a school teacher out of you, Esther! You will dress in a fine waist and a pompadour and be a teacher. Isn't that wonderful, Esther?"

"Yes, Poppa."

"And you, Mikey, will be a doctor! You will be what I should have been if I had kissed the priest's hand. It is a great thing to be a Doctor. It is better to have learning than to have money. I will earn the money, Mikey, and make you a Doctor! How do you like that? Will you do it?"

"Yes, Poppa," I said sleepily.



Mural by Diego Rivera—Photo by Tina Modotti

## ON THE BARRICADES