

## The Rockets Red Glare

By David Fox

It all started by accident.

One day, in 1989, my wife, my mother and father, and I went to visit my 89 year-old great-aunt, Aunt Sonia (nee Feitelson), the youngest of my grandmother Gitel's siblings and the last surviving member of that generation, lived by herself in a rent controlled apartment near Central Park in New York City. Very Americanized, she read the *New York Times* daily and was up to date on world affairs. Her apartment was nicely furnished with special family mementos, photos, and items from her travels to Europe with her late husband. There was a huge Russian samovar in her dining room. During our visit Aunt Sonia started to reminisce about her childhood in Mogilev and her travel to the United States.

As she started to talk about my great grandfather, Marcus Feitelson, who had first come to the United States in 1891, I did not want to stop her. And yet, I *did* want to stop her because I had recently bought my first VHS video camera, the big old ones not the new ones that fit in the palm of your hand. Before she could get into her story about her father making repeated round trips back to Mogilev, and fathering new children and bringing other children back to the United States, I asked her if she would mind if I video-recorded what she was saying. Aunt Sonia loved to relate her stories and readily agreed. I set her up in a comfortable chair and I put the camera on my shoulder. Ninety minutes later she was still talking and my arm and shoulder felt like they were falling off.

For that time in Russia, the Feitelsons were considered a well-off family. Her mother ran a meat business that provided meat to the Czar's Army. During the pogroms in Mogilev her family was offered protection in the home of government officials. However, her mother

(my great-grandmother) was a proud woman who told the government official that she would rather be in her own home with her own people. Fortunately, the family was not harmed in the pogrom. Marcus Feitelson and his older children had become United States citizens before 1900. Sonia, her mother and her sisters came to join their father in 1910. They did *not* travel on the ship in steerage! She showed me the photo of the family on the deck of the ship. Born in 1900, she was ten years old when she arrived in New York. The bands were playing gladly and fireworks lighted the sky. America, that great land, was



On the deck of the *Lituania*, July 1910, Front, Harry and Sonia Fytelson; rear, unknown cousin, Rachel, Golde and Gittel Fytelson (Feitelson, Faitelson).

welcoming her to her new home. The voyage made such a great impression that she still remembered the name of the ship's captain and maintained that he had a crush on her 16-year-old sister (my grandmother). The friendly Russian ship captain supplied my great-grandfather with Russian cigarettes on his trips to New York.

Many family members never immigrated to the United States and my great-aunt had tears in her eyes when she related how most of them perished in the

“Great Patriotic War.”

Marcus was a jeweler and made frequent trips back to Russia after the 1917 Revolution to bring back some of the Czar’s jewels to sell in the United States. The proceeds were used to support the new Communist government. During the short period when Leon Trotsky was living in New York City, great-grandfather played pinochle with him and Trotsky held my mother who was a baby in his lap.

That afternoon in 1989 so inspired me, hearing our family history like that, I started documenting my family genealogy. I joined the JGSGW, subscribed to Jewish

genealogy publications, expanded my personal library with lots of books, and got a software program. One of the early documents I was able to find, after many hours at the National Archives, was the ship manifest showing Aunt Sonia, her siblings, and mother arriving in New York in Second Class on July 4th, 1910. Sonia’s personal welcome was a fourth of July celebration in New York City. When I showed her the manifest she laughed and laughed.

What better day to come to the United States for the first time! □

## 350 YEARS OF AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

by Rabbi Thomas Louchheim  
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### 5765 Rosh HaShanah

During Passover especially, we recall: *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us out from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm.* During that enslavement, we learned about the hardships of servitude. As a free people, we learned the responsibilities of liberty and freedom. Our thousands of years of history have taught us the need to be spiritually strong, morally courageous, and physically secure—ever devoted to freedom not only for ourselves, but for all people.

In America, we Jews have been uniquely blessed with this freedom and this responsibility. As Jews, this year and this month, around the country, we celebrate our 350th anniversary here in America.

In early September 1654, 350 years ago, 23 Recife Jews were to become the first Jewish community in North America. Within the next century, other Jewish communities arose in Newport and Philadelphia in the North, and in Richmond, Savannah and Charleston in the South. From that moment until today, American Jews have been part of the American story—a story marked by idealism, sacrifice for freedom, and an increasing respect for human dignity here and around the world. We, sitting here this evening, are ever grateful for their contribution to liberty, culture and democracy. In 1790, President George Washington welcomed Jews as fellow citizens of a nation where “all possess alike liberty of conscience” under a government which “gives to bigotry no sanction.” Drawing on the words of the Hebrew prophet, Micah, he wrote: *May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.* This religious freedom, and civil liberty, which George Washington so carefully spelled out in his letter, has

been a beacon for Jews from the seventeenth century to today. From this freedom we have developed a unique American Jewish identity.

At the 250th anniversary of our settling here President Theodore Roosevelt wrote, on November 16, 1905. . . *while the Jews of the United States, who now number more than a million, have remained loyal to their faith and their race traditions, they have become indissolubly incorporated in the great army of American citizenship, prepared to make all sacrifice for the country, either in war or peace, and striving for the perpetuation of good government and for the maintenance of the principles embodied in our Constitution. They are honorably distinguished by their industry, their obedience to law, and their devotion to the national welfare. They are . . . advancing the interests of our common country.* And in the advancements of “the interests of our common country,” American Jews have certainly done much. We often think of the contribution of individuals. As the nation developed, so too did the Jewish Americans make their individual contributions serving as mayors, military officers, journalists, physicians and educators, dedicated to the democratic values of their new homeland.

Examples include:

Jacob I. Cohen (1744-1823), a German immigrant to Philadelphia; he enrolled in the Northern District City Guards in 1777 and fought in the South Carolina campaign of the Revolutionary War. Merchant, frontier developer (he hired Daniel Boone to survey for him), Revolutionary War patriot and observant Jew.

Haym Solomon, a great patriot and a financier of the American Revolution who extended credit without interest to members of the Continental Congress.

Mordecai Manual Noah (1785-1851), appointed Consul to Tunis by President James Madison during the War of 1812. He was the first Jew to fill a high diplomatic