



# A PITTSBURGH FAMILY'S SIBERIAN CHAPTER IN RUSSIAN HISTORY

by Jack Shore

UNCLE Jacob Sher in Siberia was often a topic of conversation in our family. My Grandma Clara Scherr often reminded me that he and I were named for her father. And my father often recalled memories of his brother Jacob. A letter from Russia was always a grand affair, especially when pictures accompanied them.

While a portion of Grandma's family stayed in New York after immigrating, by 1922 the bulk of the family was in Pittsburgh. My father came here in 1917 with his new bride to work in a Westinghouse war factory on Liberty Avenue. Our family has been in Pittsburgh continuously since then. My wife, Barbara Shore, got her doctorate at Pitt, and teaches there now. I graduated from Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) and am now president of a local chemical firm.

Our family has been known by four names over the years: Sher, Sherman, Scherr, and Shore. The first to come, my grandfather's brother, emerged from the immigration station at Ellis Island as a Sherman. Since Grandma had 11 children in all, 10 living in the United States, her heirs are spread all over the country. Grandpa died in 1923, and Grandma had a small neighborhood grocery for about a decade thereafter on Penn Avenue across the street from Arsenal Park.

This article was adapted from the research I did for a video tape recounting the story of Jacob Sher. The main details about his life in Russia were supplied by his son, Isaac Sher, now 73 years old and living in Siberia. I met him in 1991 for the first time. Some information about what has happened in the region in the last three to four years, surrounding events which led to our discovery of Jacob Sher's fate, came from newspapers there. General information about the Irkutsk region of Siberia came from a travel guide published in 1986 in Russia; I also consulted various books on



Photograph: Jack Shore of Pittsburgh with his cousin, Isaac Sher of Siberia, 1991.

Russian history in the twentieth century. A copy of the video tape I prepared, with footage of our trip to Siberia, was donated to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania's Jewish Archives.

Uncle Jacob Sher's "long road" from Belorussia to central Siberia starts more than a century ago. Only in the last few years have the details become known to his family, in both Siberia and Pittsburgh. What happened is so amazing as to suggest his was a highly unusual experience, but in fact, while every person's history is unique, the general circumstances were not. My uncle's saga is a chapter of family history repeated for many thousands of American Jews whose ancestors lived in turn-of-the-century Russia.

Jacob Sher was born May 15, 1891, to my paternal grandparents in Wladawka, Belorussia. Sometime before 1907, in search of work, Jacob moved to a nearby town called Bella Zirka. The work he did there is not known. But he did participate in the Communist movement, which brought him to the attention of the czar's police. He was arrested in 1907 and sentenced to seven years of exile in Siberia.

For nearly a century before that, since the Decembrist revolution of 1825, the road to Siberia had been called "Convict Highway." Each year more political exiles were marched over the road by the czars, but the pace accelerated dramatically after the 1905

Revolution. Convoys of prisoners marched with their legs shackled all the way to Siberia. It took two years for Jacob to make the trip, marching from town to town, and staying overnight in local prisons.

His first stop was Irkutsk, a city in a state or *oblast* also called Irkutsk, over 3,000 miles from where his marching began. There he served five years as an indentured servant in the home of a wealthy man. He was not permitted to leave, to change his job, or to marry. In 1911, he met the daughter of a family in exile, and when his term ended in 1914, he and Maria Feivishenko were married. Initially they lived in a little village near Irkutsk, but after the 1917 Revolution, they moved into the city.

Jacob was a hair dresser and barber and did quite well in Irkutsk, which to this day, with a population of about 500,000, remains Siberia's key industrial and trade city and its only major cultural, educational and research center. He owned his own home with out-buildings for a horse, which he kept just because he loved to ride. My wife, Barbara, and I saw the site of this house when we visited in 1991. The home had been removed just a year earlier to make room for a new housing development. The out-buildings were still there. His son (my cousin) Isaac showed us homes in the neighborhood similar to the one he had lived in as a boy. Jacob's first love was the game of chess, and there was always a board set up for friendly games. He would skip or delay meals when the chess

games were going. By 1922, Uncle Jacob and Aunt Maria had their fifth child. He went to the synagogue on Saturdays and Isaac remembers his father putting on the prayer shawl and phylacteries. Isaac studied Hebrew at the synagogue for one year before they left Irkutsk.

After Jacob was exiled in 1907, his father (my grandfather) Abraham Sher, immigrated to the United States. By 1910, the rest of the family from Wladawka was in the United States, and Jacob was the only direct family member left in Russia. Seven of Jacob's brothers and sisters were now in America, together with his parents, Abraham and Clara. My grandmother had three more children in America.

In 1925, Jacob and Maria decided to move the family to a small town named Kirensk. This was about 450 miles north of Irkutsk. My Aunt Maria's family was living in Kirensk and the move was probably made to be



A 1923 photo, still in family hands in Siberia, shows Jacob Sher's sister, Ida, with her husband, Hymen Herskovitz, and two children. After leaving Russia, many in the family, including the Herskovitzes, wound up in Pittsburgh. Stalin's police used such photographs and correspondence from U.S. relatives in the 1930s to charge families as "enemies of the state."

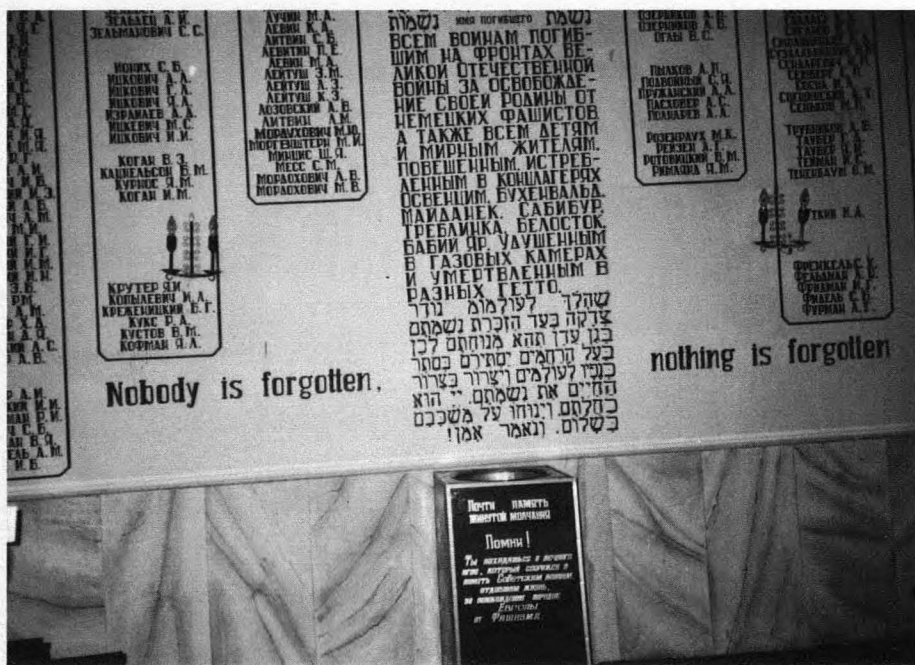




grad, received more Central Committee votes than Stalin, Stalin felt threatened. He subsequently arranged Kirov's murder, shed crocodile tears over the loss of his colleague, and ordered the NKVD, predecessor of the modern Soviet secret police, the KGB, to work with the militia to round up and dispose of dissidents. The purges generated on Stalin's order peaked in 1938.

In February of that year, at 2 in the morning, the militia came to Uncle Jacob's house and took him to prison. They took some pictures and letters from America as evidence. These were probably enough to convict Jacob of being an "enemy of the people." Isaac, when we visited in '91, insisted that Jacob was not politically active, and neither were the rest of the people in the immediate neighborhood who were arrested. Isaac rattled off a dozen names and pointed to houses where people picked up had lived. Only one man returned after being arrested. He returned in a week, having developed a nervous palsy in prison, and was dead in a month. In the little town of Kirensk, in 1938, an estimated 90 percent of the men were taken, many to be "disappeared" without further trace.

Kirensk is split by the Lena River. A ferry transports people, cars and trucks from one side to the other in the summer. The river is frozen for six months in the winter and people walk or drive over the river. After Jacob



Synagogue in Irkutsk, over a century old, with its poignant wall memorial.

was arrested, some people spotted the militia moving prisoners down to barges and shipping them off to other areas. Isaac suspected his father was among those shipped off. To check, Isaac, by climbing onto a porch roof near the jail, watched the work gangs that were taken out and returned to prison. Once, he spotted his father working. He called to Jacob, and since family members were not permitted to talk to prisoners, Isaac was arrested, and put into the NKVD building overnight. The next day, he was permitted onto the jail yard; an opportunity came and he skipped over the fence and took off for Yakutia, the

near the only family that the couple had in Siberia. They packed everything into a wagon and lived like gypsies for a month, traveling north. Jacob prospered in Kirensk also. During our visit, we saw one of the three houses that he lived in and two sites where the houses had been replaced. The last neighborhood they lived in was residential and the house was modest but comfortable.

The struggle for power between Stalin and Communist Party factions was continuous from the time of Lenin's death through the '30s. In 1934, when Kirov, head of the Communist Party in Lenin-

state adjacent to Irkutsk. In the first three days he walked about 150 miles, living on nuts that had survived the winter on the trees. This was late March or early April. Isaac supported himself in Yakutia with odd jobs and kept moving because he knew the police were after him.

In the meantime in Kirensk, Isaac's mother and four sisters were still at home. Each night, the militiamen got drunk and rode through their neighborhood shooting into the homes. It would start at 9 p.m. and go on until 2 a.m. They feared for their lives and they, too, fled to Yakutia, stopping in a town called Olekminsk, about 500 miles east of Kirensk. When Jacob was arrested, their passports were stamped "family of the enemy of the people." They lost their jobs, could not go to school, and were shunned by the local people, either because people believed them to be genuine state enemies or out of fear of association. By 1940, Isaac felt that the police were no longer looking for him, and having learned of the whereabouts of his family, he joined them in Olekminsk.

From Olekminsk, Isaac was drafted into the Russian Army for World War II, though he was not given training in the use of firearms, was not "trusted" to serve at the front, and was subjected to special punishment as an enemy of the people. His major duty was to hitch and unhitch the horses for horse-drawn field artillery. One day a horse kicked out Isaac's front teeth, broke his arm above the wrist, and kicked him in the leg. He still walks with a limp, and his arm is disfigured from having been improperly set.

In 1946, after the war, he sent letters to everyone he could think of to inquire about his father. No one had any information. There was no word of his father's fate until 1957, four years after Stalin's death. By then, his successor, Krushchev, was carrying out an anti-Stalin campaign, part of which was to review the cases of people arrested during Stalin's purges. Isaac was invited to the local KGB office and told that his father had died of pneumonia in a camp in 1942 and then had been "rehabilitated." The rehabilitation order, which had the effect of removing the family's "enemy of the people" official designation, reads:

The matter in respect of Sher, Jacob Abramovitch born in 1891 in settlement Wladawka formerly of Brest Litovsk State, before being arrested and jailed at city of Kirensk in Yrkutskaya, worked as a hairdresser.

He was ordered to be shot with confiscation of all properties. March 27, 1957 reviewed by the military tribunal of Zybaikal Military Area. The order of the Troika of NKVD of Irkutsk Oblast on May 19, 1938 is changed and the business with respect of Sher was cancelled for lack of a crime. Citizen Sher is rehabilitated. Chairman of Tribunal, Sub-Colonel of Justice V.P. Korichenko.

For three decades, Isaac and his family continued to seek further details about Jacob's death, but no further information was available publicly. Then in September 1989, a mass grave containing some 20,000 bodies was found near Irkutsk. Media reports said victims had been dumped into a deep ravine, and personal artifacts — clothing, buttons, etc. — indicated that the deaths occurred in 1937-38. This discovery occurred about three years after the start of "perestroika" and "glasnost," broad terms describing, among other things, the thaw in government attitudes toward public disclosure of state crimes. Although the bodies were said to be unidentifiable, Isaac assumed that his father was among them.

In March 1990, Isaac opened yet another chapter of conflicting official accounts of his father's fate. He visited the KGB office in Irkutsk to see his father's file. There he saw his father's "confession;" the signature was an obvious forgery, and the records also showed that Jacob was killed in 1938 and buried in the Irkutsk cemetery. The cemetery, however, had no record of his burial. In the fall of 1990, a memorial



Secret police building in Kirensk where Jacob Sher was taken in 1938. His body was found in a basement grave there in 1991.

## SIGHTS AND SOUNDS ALONG SIBERIA'S 'CONVICT HIGHWAY'

The following is an excerpt from an account in 1885-86 by American journalist George Kennan. In *Siberia and the Exile System* (New York, 1891), Kennan recounts the scene at the stone pillar along Siberia's "Convict Highway" which marks the end of the European continent and the start of Asia.

**T**HERE is no other boundary post in the whole world that has seen so much of human suffering and so many broken hearts. More than 170,000 exiles have traveled this road since 1878, and more than half a million since the beginning of the present century. In former years, when exiles were compelled to walk from the places of their arrest to the places of their banishment, they reached the Siberian boundary post only after months of toilsome marching along muddy or dusty roads, over forest-clad mountains, through rainstorms or snowstorms, or in bitter cold. As the boundary post is situated about halfway between the last European and the first Sibe-

rian *étape*, it has always been customary to allow exile parties to stop here for a rest and for a last good-bye to home and country. The Russian peasant, even when a criminal, is deeply attached to his native land; and heartrending scenes have been witnessed around the boundary pillar when such a party, overtaken perhaps by frost and snow in the early autumn, stopped here for a last farewell. Some gave way to unrestrained grief; some comforted the weeping; some knelt and pressed their faces to the loved soil of their native country and collected a little earth to take with them into exile. A few pressed their lips to the European side of the cold brick pillar, as if kissing good-bye forever all that it symbolized.

At last the stern order "*Stróisa!*" ("Form ranks!") from the underofficer of the convoy put an end to the rest and leave-taking, and at the word "March!" the gray-coated troop of exiles and convicts crossed themselves hastily all together, and with a confused jingling of chains and leg fetters, moved slowly away past the boundary post into Siberia.

was dedicated at the site of the mass grave discovered a year earlier. The *East Siberian Pravda* of September 29, 1990, reported:

THOSE PEOPLE WERE KILLED BECAUSE THE REGIME WANTED IT TO BE DONE. Investigation determined the following: our fellow men were shot there in 1937-1938.... The following words are inscribed on a tomb:

People, we appeal to your memory and your hearts  
Don't let our destiny become yours  
Motherland, remember all of us who perished  
innocently  
Be merciful and return us from non-existence.

Two months later, as renovations proceeded on a wine cellar in the basement of the NKVD building in Kirensk, workers found bodies. This was the cellar where Isaac had been held overnight 50 years earlier. In one area, 83 bodies were found, including those of three women. All of the bodies showed signs of brutal deaths — by stabbing and gunshot, and most of them, by beatings with a blunt object. Because only the top two or three feet of the Siberian ground ever thaws, the bodies were as if they had been refrigerated. Most were easily identified.

In February of 1991, the truth about Jacob Sher finally was revealed. Authorities notified Isaac that his father's body was among those in the cellar grave,

and Isaac confirmed it by seeing a photograph of the body. On May 26, 1991, a big ceremony in Kirensk marked the exhuming of the bodies and their burial in the Kirensk cemetery.

Also found was a list made by NKVD police of another 110 people buried in the cellar or adjoining grounds, and excavations are currently proceeding to locate them. One hundred or more other victims were loaded onto barges, killed, and dumped nearby into the Lena River. Roughly 8 percent of the small town of Kirensk and the city of Irkutsk was liquidated. Similar horrors are now being revealed all over Russia. Few families went untouched by the purges. Our translator's grandfather, for instance, was picked up in Irkutsk and never heard from again. Raisa Gorbachev mentions the similar fate of her grandfather in her biography, *I Hope*.

Our search for Jacob had started back in 1987, when a Russian emigre found a Russian family for a friend of ours from San Francisco by writing to postmasters in the cities where they were known to have resided. Our attempts along the same lines, however, were not successful. We were trying to figure out another avenue when a colleague of my wife's, Dr. Joseph Eaton, told us that he was going to a seminar in Russia. I asked if he could do anything about helping us find family. He said, "I



have been looking for a reason to visit the KGB, and this is it. Give me all the information you have, and we will see how good the KGB is." I gave him our meager information — compiled well before our own visit to the country — and some of it was inaccurate.

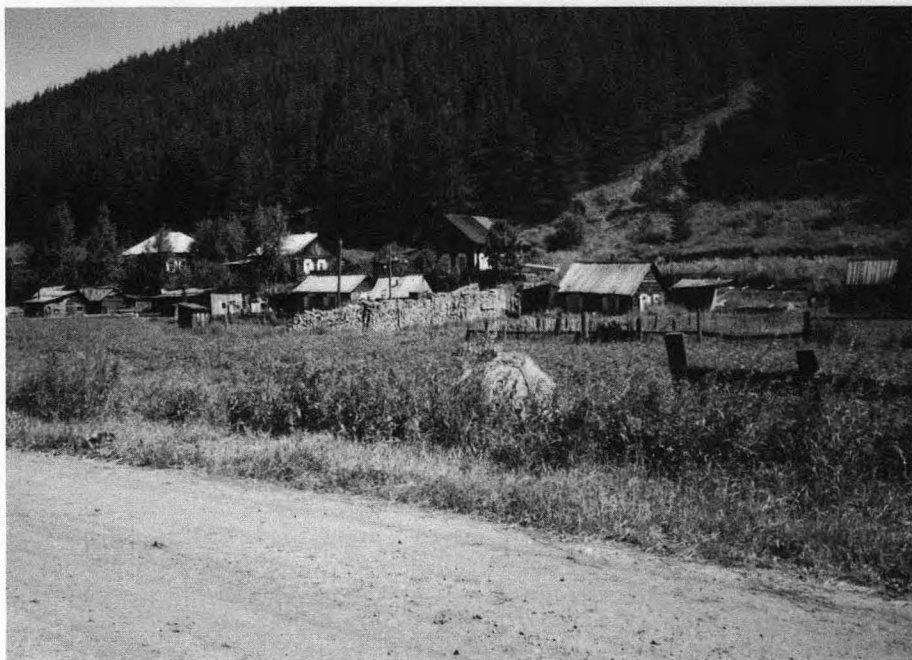
When he got to Moscow and inquired with his

Russian acquaintances about visiting the KGB, they told him to forget it — it would not help. At the seminar he met a man who was going to Irkutsk, and he was willing to take the information to the local people to see what could be done.

This man gave the information to a Mr. Bondarev, foreign relations officer for the city of Irkutsk. At that time, Mr. Bondarev was entertaining Jeffrey Miller, mayor of Eugene, Ore., who was visiting in relation to Eugene being a sister city to Irkutsk. (Oregon is also a sister state to the state of Irkutsk.) Mr. Bondarev immediately turned up a Sher family living in Irkutsk and asked Mr. Miller to transmit the information to Dr. Eaton at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Eaton called us and we picked up the letter and had it translated immediately. It was obvious that the names and dates did not agree with our data, but now I had someone to write to. I wrote to Mr. Bondarev and asked him to extend his search to the city of Kirensk, where we knew the family had lived in 1931. I also sent a copy of the picture of the family taken in 1931. As a last resort, we planned to run an ad with the picture in whatever paper circulated in Irkutsk. But two months after mailing the photo to Mr. Bondarev, I had a response from him, and he enclosed a note from Cousin Isaac. We then arranged our visit in 1991, which led to everything else we have found out about Jacob Sher.

After World War II, Isaac became a purchasing agent for a government housing construction firm. Now 73, he is retired, living on a pension while working as a watchman in the small

town of Ust-Kut, 100 miles west of Kirensk. In a few weeks, in December, Isaac and his sister Olga will make their first trip to America — to visit us in Pittsburgh. ■



*Top:* Kirensk, where the Sher family lived until Jacob's arrest, is a village in the heart of Siberia's vast forest. *Bottom:* Isaac and wife Valya Sher, with five grandchildren during the Shores' visit in 1991.