

This is the story of a fictional Russian Orthodox Jewish immigrant named Abramovich Popov from the time of his arrival, 1900, to 1937. Though I'm going to talk about lots of what happened during these 37 years of this young man's life (he was just 17 when he set foot on Ellis Island), I'm going to focus primarily on the prospects he had for economic success. I'd agree with you if you say that can be almost anything, which is why I'll be focusing on just three categories for economic success: role of government; living in a city; and possibility of ethnic/religious assimilation. Each of these three categories will get woven together alongside the rest of this creative narrative of Abramovich's life. I hope you enjoy this historical ride as we take a very brief look at the life of an immigrant at the turn of the century.

At the first sight of America Abramovich could almost feel the potential his new home had for economic and social success. What better place would there be than here? However the process of entering America through Ellis Island did not live up to his initial feelings. Interrogation was more like it, with many of his fellow steerage-mates turned away entirely, and another portion thrown into quarantine. At the final desk, the woman in front of him was turned away for not having a place to live, but Abramovich was let in even though he hadn't the slightest clue where he might live.

After finding a place to rent in the Lower East Side with some others from Russia, in total they paid \$84.00 rent (ILDs, 11), Abramovich went looking for a job. The general ladder of where Jewish immigrants lived climbed from the Lower East Side, to Brooklyn, to the Upper West Side, and finally to Harlem (VD, 99).

Abramovich's father was a minister and so Abramovich's experience as a worker

was based on what you could say, given the situation back home in Russia, was a privileged experience. Abramovich had been sent to America in hopes that he'd prosper and continue to build up a family in a better place. This expectation meant that working in any of the hard labor jobs available to a young Jewish immigrant would be a tough transition. Beyond that, American "corporations" ("what even are those?" Abramovich wondered) were monopolizing the influx of cheap labor immigrants and how easy it was to take advantage of them. When Abramovich started looking for his first job even immigrants who had been in America for years were competing with him. Ultimately he found a job as a machinist in a small factory that paid him \$6.00 an hour with a full 17-hour workday 6 days a week (Sunday being the day off, so he wouldn't be able to keep the Sabbath).

After a few months of living in America, he had sent very little money home and was starting to be told by neighbors that he was losing some of his authentic orthodox Jewish character. It was true: he had shaved his (granted minimal) beard, never kept the Sabbath so that he'd earn more money, wore "American" clothes based on what ads told him, spoke only "American English", and lost many other traditions. It got to the point where he couldn't even relate to new arrivals around 1904, when he made his first real leap from feeling like a newcomer to feeling at home in America.

As fate would have it, one afternoon in early 1908, Abramovich happened to be the person a woman asked for directions, one Marya Zotkin. He would describe it as coincidence, but Marya would say love at first sight. After that day Abramovich

would meet Marya outside of her workplace once a week to spend his evening with her. A few months of this and they decided to get married towards the end of 1908.

The wedding was attended by some of the friends of both Abramovich and Marya. The wedding took place in Abramovich's community, but after he and Marya were married he moved in to her tenement in Brooklyn. Shortly after their marriage Abramovich and Marya decided that to fulfill both their families' wishes they'd let themselves have children, or at least one child, seeing as having any kids was quite an economic investment. It wasn't until a year later (late-1909) that Abramovich finally got Marya pregnant. In February 1910 she quit her job and in March 1910 gave birth to a girl they decided to name Sofiya Zotkin. Hence began Abramovich's task of heavier workloads to support his family, back to the competition of the immigrant job market in the early 1900s.

Abramovich ended up keeping his day job as a machinist, but took up a night job with the railroad to cover the extended expenses of his family. He was pained to not be around his wife and daughter much, but felt that his financial contributions to their shared health and well-being were more important. Meanwhile Marya spent her days taking care of Sofiya, and either resting, cooking, or asking their neighbors to be quieter, as tenements were crowded and some had workshops in them (VD, 100), when Sofiya was asleep. Life was far from the ideal life they imagined America would give them, but they had hope that in time their little family (though they did plan on having more kids when finances allowed) would be given a place among the "Americans" around them.

As time went on Abramovich slowly was able to work a little less since their financial standing topped off around in 1913. He achieved a position of management in the factory he'd been working in since arrival and so that gave him a minuscule amount more money and lighter workloads. It was around this time that many of the industries were unionizing, and after holding out for a few meetings Abramovich gave in and joined his factory's union.

When she came of age, Marya and Abramovich discussed sending Sofiya to public school. In the long run the idea made sense, but what about finances and their orthodox roots? When Sofiya started school in 1916 she went along with some other children from their tenements. All the parents, all eastern Europeans, felt it was safer with the kids going together.

Right at about the time Abramovich decided Marya could find work, if she wanted to, their life got more complicated. In 1920 the government enacted restrictions on immigration that capped the number of eastern Europeans allowed in. At the same time the KKK was revived with Jews as a target (ITC, 9). This meant that all the parents were tempted to pull their sons and daughters from school, and those looking for employment (like Marya) weren't as interested in wandering the streets looking for places willing to hire them. Life went from being bearable to a nightmare as reports of Jews disappearing reached Abramovich's tenement (H, 673). The prospects for economic success were torn down the middle, on the one hand the government had given existing immigrants more job options by restricting immigration, but on the other hand the KKK was gaining political power and making the immigrants cower in their tenements.

Abramovich's factory had an established seasonal calendar (VD, 15). Over the months between March and September they would continually produce goods and sell off what they could. Over the winter, however, Abramovich guessed that 70% of the workforce was laid off. He was lucky enough to be beyond that tier, but the down times still hit him hard with less pay. The community his family lived in would change during the down times of the industry it coexisted with as well. When many of the workers were laid off annually community involvement might strengthen, but many of the local shops would lose sales, as their prime customer base would be struggling just to survive.

At the age of 17 (in 1927), the same age Abramovich was when he first arrived in America, it was decided that Sofiya would drop out of school to go with her mother to work in a small garment factory. Sofiya naturally hated the idea, but was old enough to understand that she should take up some weight in the family's finances (though she secretly wished her parents had not given up on more children when their finances were as grim as they were). The work was hard, and not at all personally rewarding, but she managed. At the same time Abramovich was helping to negotiate between the union he was a part of and his employer. The entire industrial world in the US was on the verge of the bust side of the regular boom-and-bust business cycle, but not many people were yet aware of the significance, especially in the immigrant community (H, 692).

In 1929 the projected bust occurred and as a result many businesses laid off most of the unskilled immigrants in the community, now the Upper West side, where Abramovich and his family lived. Unions helped to make it a little stickier to

lay workers off, but both Marya and Sofiya were among the many laid off from their workplace. Any economic prospects, especially that lead to prosperity, were wiped away in the course of one month. Abramovich held onto his job, as did some other management-level employees, with a much smaller paycheck. Nonetheless, as his wife and daughter had been laid off, he was not immune to the economic downturn. Expenses had to be cut, no more “expensive” items from ads that Marya and Sofiya kept buying, and even basic living needs had to be cut back. The first few weeks of what would later be known as the Great Depression were “downright depressing” as Sofiya put it for Abramovich, their family, and their entire community. Some of their less fortunate neighbors couldn’t hang onto their homes and had to move to shantytowns (H, 694). There were even a few days right after Abramovich became the only one providing an income, when his family had to rely on public soup kitchens for meals (H, 695).

Life during the next few months reminded both Abramovich and Marya all too much of their separate childhood experiences back in Russia. There wasn’t any governmental oppression, but the general lifestyle became “depressing” in the same way (going back to Sofiya’s description). Abramovich was the only one pulling in any income for his family, and one of just two doing so in his family’s tenement building. It wasn’t much of a relief for the immigrants to know that Gentiles were also affected, but at least it meant that there really wasn’t any easy way out of the downturn.

On top of his day job at the factory, Abramovich would spend countless hours with his family doing literally whatever would earn them some money. Nothing

seemed like it was working out, and every so often Abramovich would wonder if it would have been better if he'd been turned away like that woman in front of him at Ellis Island back in 1900.

The next few years, from 1935 to 1937, consisted of much of the same uncontrollable lack of economic prospects as the years between 1929 and 1935 had presented. The New Deals provided some support, but not without its disadvantages. In ways Abramovich was at the head of the caravan in terms of wealth, but the environment that constituted America as we conclude this paper wasn't economically viable for any individual of any social grouping. So Abramovich kept telling family and friends, even at his 54<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, that in the scheme of things everything was going to be fine.

In conclusion, the most important forces impacting economic success for Abramovich and his family were the role of government, and what life in the city was like. Naturally the government's continued ramping up of oversight and support, as well as the creation of the "corporation" and "trusts" that gave businesses tracks to expand and hire, was a huge component in the immigrant's economic success. The combined components of both New Deals were also a major piece of the government's role in the immigrant's life. Likewise, living in the industrial areas of the city meant that transportation to the workplace was easy and cheap. Life was hard, but most immigrants succeeded one way or another, including Abramovich Popov.