

AMSTON GRAIN MILL

AMSTON, CONN.

GRAIN, HAY
GROCERIES
GEN'L MDSE.

IRA TURCHIN

COAL, CEMENT
FERTILIZERS
BUILDING MATERIAL

The little Russian immigrant boy's eyes were wide with wonder as he stood near the heap of family bundles on the deck of the SS Rotterdam as she sailed into bustling New York harbor in the spring of 1906. His mother Musha and two younger sisters, Dora and Bella, stood near him.

The little family group had left Minsk, Russia, in July and had travelled by train (for the first time) to Rotterdam, Holland, where they boarded the big ship that was to bring them to America. Three years before, Ira's father had left Minsk for America and was already established in the second-hand furniture business on Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. Ira had been only five years old when his father, Abraham, had left and he scarcely remembered him.

The gangplank was laid down and Musha Turchin gathered her bundles and her children and started for the dreaded ordeal of immigrant inspection. Before the health inspections were over, the busy attendants had informed the father that his family had arrived and that he should come to Ellis Island and take them home.

Ira had been so busy studying his surroundings that he was startled when a strange, short man came and embraced his mother and sisters. Abraham reached out to shake hands with his son, but Ira backed away towards his mother. "Papa, he does not recognize you," laughed seven year old Bella. Musha prevailed upon her husband to leave the boy alone until he was less shy and soon the family was on Abe's furniture wagon clog-clogging toward their new home.

Ira was soon to know his father well. Soon he would know Abe's domineering spirit and ungovernable temper. Eventually, the father was to domineer once too often and cause his son to take desperate steps.

The children, of course, still wore their Russian peasant clothes and even though they now lived in an immigrant neighborhood, the majority of their new friends had already donned what they called "real Amerikan clothes". Dora and Bella especially were very conscious of their costumes. To Ira clothes made no difference. He never was vain about his appearance.

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even in his later years although he does appear to be quite dapper in his athletic club photographs. However, it was not long before the children had new clothes, for their mother was very clever with needle and thread.

Ira met many new boys and became very popular because he was game and could hold his own even against bigger fellows than himself in the gang fights which occurred frequently in the neighborhood. He quickly caught on to American games and developed a love of sports which lasted all through his life.

Through the summer, he picked up some English but in the fall, when he entered the first grade he realized that his English was very poor and became so sensitive about his accent that he spoke only when he had to, and even then only in monosyllables. Ira like school and he was intelligent, but his refusal to talk began to retard his progress. He was determined that he was going to be able to speak good English before he spoke any English at all. So he practised talking aloud to himself whenever he had the chance. It was a year before he spoke freely. In the meantime he learned to read.

Although he was only a youngster, he could read and write both Russian and Jewish and when his father's Russian customers and friends had any letter writing to do, they would ask the child to help them out.

After school, Ira helped his father in the store. He ran errands and learned how to refinish furniture. Often when Abe went out with the lumbering wagon to bring in a load of second-hand beds, dressers, chairs and tables, Ira went along. While his father packed the things onto the wagon he opened and searched all the bureau and table drawers. By now he had learned that often things were left in them. Sometimes he found little bits of costume jewelry, old dog-eared books, little pieces of pottery, pencils and paper, or even marbles. He never found anything of real value-- just boyhood treasures. He had a good head for business and often traded marbles for a jack-knife, or a gaudy pin for a baseball.

Three years after her arrival in America, another son was born to Husha. Ira was overjoyed. Now he would have a brother to play and fight with. As little Max grew up Ira helped him in as many ways as he could and after the second brother Morris was born, he watched over the two boys as if he were their father. He wanted them to become good athletes and students.

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He helped both of them with their home work and taught them how to play baseball, basketball and boxing. Morris liked sports almost as well as Ira, but Max preferred verbal arguments.

Ira graduated from public school in 1912 at the age of fourteen. He entered Boys High the next fall. In the one year he went to high school, he was editor of the school paper, played on the baseball team and was captain of the basketball team.

Ira had always been fond of drawing. In grammar school he had received excellent marks in art and he had won several medals in school art competition. Now he began to think seriously of art as a career. He explained his hopes to his father, but Abraham Turshen (the name had been changed by common misuse) was still using old world judgment. He did not realize that art, even industrial art, could earn a living for any man. He refused to even talk about it. Ira was terribly disappointed. Architecture seemed to him the only field he would ever want to enter. But his father had decided on a business career for him and was planning to send him to business school when the term at Boys High ended.

During the year Ira earned extra money by doing some sign painting and when spring came he began to play baseball. Here again the wills of father and son clashed. Abe could not see that the time his son spent playing ball was of any benefit to him; it would do the boy more good to work in the store afternoons. Frequently Ira sneaked out to play, and usually before the fourth inning, Abe would be at the field to order him back to the store. Ira never tired of telling how one day his father arrived at the baseball field just after he had hit a home run. Ira was running around the bases, and Abe, having no understanding of the game, thought that his son was running away from him and set out after the boy. Abe puffed up to home plate only a few seconds after Ira-- and Ira just kept running. To this day Ira does not know whether the cheers and cat calls which went up were for him or his father.

In the fall Abe gave Ira enough money to keep him in a business school for several weeks. Now, for the first time, Ira really seriously disobeyed his father. He took the money and enrolled in an art school for a commercial art course. Ira remained in art school until the money ran out. What was he to do now? His father certainly would not give him any more money and it was

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impossible for him to earn his own expenses. The only thing for him to do was to leave home, to get himself a job somewhere, to earn and save some money and then come back to school. So Ira left home at the tender age of fifteen and a half years.

He did not know that he was destined never to return to art school. He did not realize that the tide of circumstances would sweep him away, out of reach of all he hoped for, and that his career was to be in the business world in which his father so sincerely believed he had a place.

Ira at first started for the south. His first job was on a large peanut farm in Virginia. The owner of this farm, a sly, cruel old gent, refused to hire boys unless they signed a contract for six months labor. After the boys had signed, this Simon Lagree worked them hard for sixteen hours a day. Many of the boys working there were about Ira's age. After two months, Ira and his room-mate Alex were sick of their work and decided to escape. So boy fashion, they opened their room window one moonlite night and slipped out. They walked twenty two miles to Norfolk, Virginia.

In Norfolk they lived for a week on karo syrup and bread until Ira got a job at the American Can Co. Soon after, Alex got a job selling coffee and sand wiches on trains for the Union News Co. At American Can, Ira was promised a transfer to the art department. When time passed and no transfer came, he left his job. Alex helped him to get a job with the Union News and for a year and a half he also sold sandwiches and peanuts on the train. While he had been working he had been saving his money and in October of 1914 he decided to return home.

At home he found that his younger brothers and sisters had ransacked his boxes of treasured possessions, athletic medals, art medals, scrap books, copies of old school papers and little artistic objects which he had cherished and saved. Ira was terribly angry and discouraged. He managed to retrieve some of these things which he had so highly prized. Even when he was older, he could still remember the feeling that the loss of these possessions gave him.

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Soon after his return home, Ira got a job with a furniture store in Brooklyn. After working at this store a few years he was offered the opportunity by his father to buy and work a farm in Colchester, Conn. in a partnership with him.

After three years on the farm, Ira's jobs followed in quick succession. First, there was a job in a Providence, R.I. department store which lasted eight months. Then there was another eight months in a printing shop and finally he opened his own small floor-covering store in Astoria, Long Island.

It was only a short time after he opened this store that Ira's mother died. Ira was deeply affected by her death for there was a strong bond between these two. Musha Turshen had been both father and mother to Ira in the time between her husband's departure for America and the family reunion three years later. Ira realized that his running away from home and his disagreements with his father had caused his mother a great deal of heartache and worry.

Ira had never been very much interested in girls. Most of his spare time was still taken up by athletics and reading on architecture. One evening Dora brought a friend home. Sadie Gross was of Hungarian parentage. She herself had been born in New York City. She was quiet, dark and slim and had a dignified bearing which attracted Ira's attention. Dora introduced them and they were soon seeing each other very often. Eight months after they had met they were married.

The floor-covering store was prosperous and Ira managed to save some money. A half year after his marriage he heard of a business opportunity in a small Connecticut town called Amston, located just four miles from Colchester, where he had his farm. A general store was up for sale. Ira made a trip to Conn. to look it over and decided then and there to buy it. Of course, he had had no experience in selling groceries, grain, building material and coal, but he would soon learn! And of course the dwelling which went with the place was run down, without water, heat or electricity, but these things were mere trifles! He and Sadie could make a home here.

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So the bride of only six months left her cozy apartment, broke family ties and moved into a setting almost entirely different from anything else she had ever known. Sadie Turshen had pioneer spirit. She not only made a home out of a run-down house, but she stepped into the business with Ira and also found time to raise three children.

Many problems beset Ira and his wife. They had to learn Yankee philosophy and they had to rebuild the entire store and start all over again after the old rambling wooden store was swept by fire which burned and smoldered for weeks. However, one problem after another was overcome and today they are established in a growing business.

Few people today in the town and its vicinity do not know Ira Turshen. He has gained the respect and good will from every man and woman he did business with. Today he is a busy citizen in war time America. He works in his community in every way from storekeeper to air-raid warden.

Lotti Turshen
March 1, 1944