

# The Seven Sisters

## A SARANAC LAKE FAMILY'S SAGA

**I**n the spring of 1908 my great-grandfather Aaron Weinstock traveled to Saranac Lake, like thousands of others, seeking a cure for tuberculosis. His wife, Sarah, and their first daughter, Anna, born in New York City in 1907, accompanied him.

Over the next decade Aaron and Sarah (whose given names were Yehoshua Weinstock and Sonya Kotzba) would have six more daughters, all of them born and raised in Saranac Lake. My grandmother Eva, born in 1918, was the youngest of the seven Weinstock sisters.

They were, perhaps of necessity, a tight-knit bunch. "They loved each other and they fought like hell," says Lionel Arlan, a cousin who also grew up in Saranac

Lake. My grandmother was dragged to school at age four by her older sister Bess because there was no one to look after her at home (Aaron and Sarah ran a general store). The sisters often spent their afternoons wandering along the railroad tracks behind their house or skiing in nearby woods. Bess, who had a longstanding interest in the theater, as an adult wrote and directed a play, *A Pound of Lard*, set during the 1920s and 1930s. Largely autobiographical, the title apparently referred to the daily purchase of an irritating, poor-paying customer.

It is tempting to believe that the world

the sisters knew was as far from the village life of their parents as possible. They were first-generation Americans, immersed in an entirely different culture, language and way of life. Aaron and Sarah both came from a small town in what is today eastern Latvia. In the early 19th century, according to one historian, Rezekne was nothing more than "a run-down hamlet with a single street and 754 inhabitants."

In the early 1900s, though it had experienced rapid growth because of its reputation as a refuge for TB patients, Saranac Lake was still a small town. After passing through New York City, it may have seemed like a kind of homecoming for the Weinstocks. (Early photographs of Rezekne look strikingly similar to Saranac Lake.) Coming from a northern climate, they would have been accustomed to the long, cold winters. In addition, Saranac Lake was cos-

**A trio of Weinstock sisters skijoring on Mirror Lake, early 1930s.**

*Below: Ida (Weinstock) Haar, third from left, with her son and mother, Sarah, flanked by four of her six sisters, 1959.*



mopolitan and there was even a growing Jewish community. (Aaron would become vice-president of Temple Emanu-EL, a community center and synagogue.) For exiles who had fled an increasingly hostile Europe and were now afflicted with TB, the town provided a double refuge. As Philip Gallos writes in *Cure Cottages of Saranac Lake*, "For many ... the village was a place of hope, unlike any other place, the antithesis of a world of fear and rejection, a community of people, both healthy and ill, in which a man or woman with tuberculosis would not be shunned as a carrier of contagion but would be accepted as a human being."

The Weinstocks soon opened a general store on the first floor of the three-story apartment building where they lived, at the intersection of River Street and Lake Flower Avenue. "During the early 1920s our childhood world centered on River Street midway between Sporck's store at the Church Street intersection and Weinstock's store at the Lake Flower intersection," wrote John J. Duquette, whose family had an interior-decorating business on the same street.

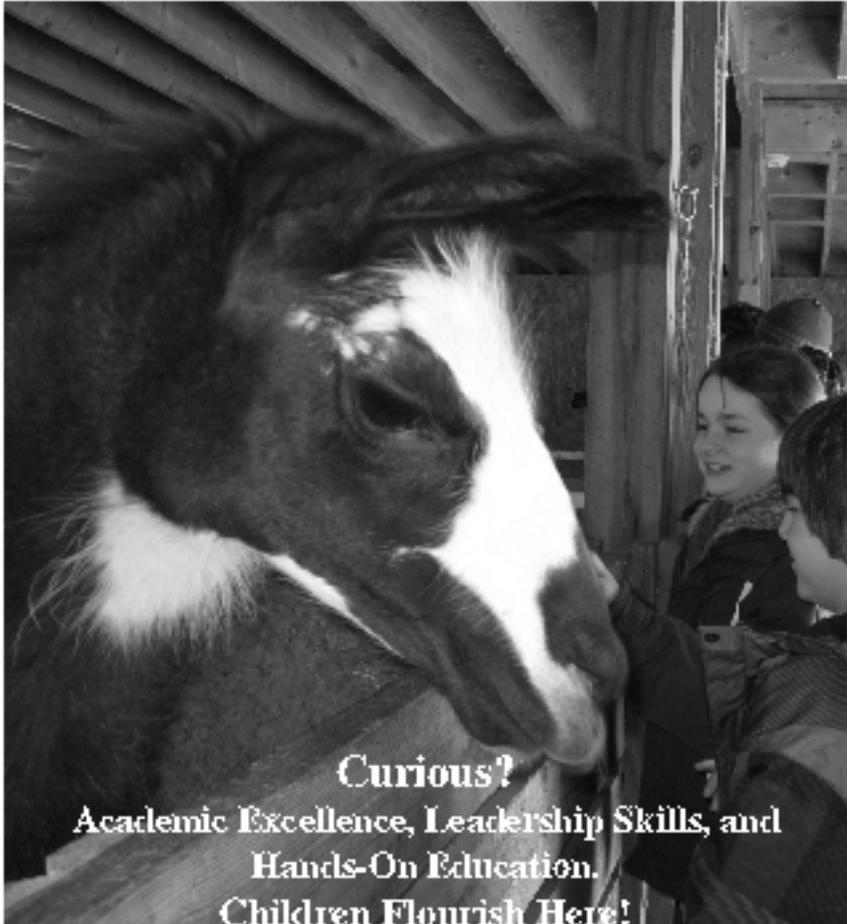
Other family members followed to Saranac Lake. Aaron's younger brother, Percel, also came in 1908 and was diagnosed with TB but didn't stay. He died of the disease three years later in a New York City hospital (after several years of treatment, Aaron was "cured" of the disease). Sarah's sister Mary and their niece Chana, or "Big Annie," both settled and raised families in Saranac Lake. Mary ran a boardinghouse for TB patients.

Lionel Arlan, Chana's youngest son, who was born in 1931, remembers the Weinstock household as a lively one where mostly Yiddish was spoken and some kind of family quarrel was always unfolding. Sarah was a kindly woman, he says, but "very opinionated when it came to her daughters." I wonder how she responded to the woman who, according to family lore, once asked, "How are you going to marry off seven home-ly girls?"

Strong-willed Sarah was forced to raise her daughters and run the store on her own after Aaron died of a brain tumor in 1926, when my grandmother was only eight. As the story goes, he suffered a stroke after climbing Ampersand Moun-

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tain in late summer 1925 and never recovered. He spent the last six months of his life in hospitals in New York City and wrote occasional letters to Anna, the oldest daughter. In one letter sent from Mount Sinai Hospital on September 30, 1925, he told her he was feeling much better and “would like to return to our sweet home and family.”

Whether he would have approved of the sisters’ first business venture we’ll never know. In 1931, in the early years of the Great Depression, the Weinstock sisters opened a high-end clothing store, the “Dolly Shoppe”—named after the third sister, Rebecca, whose nickname was Dolly—that sold the “smartest dresses, fine high quality hosiery, and underwear.” A large ad in a 1931 issue of the *Lake Placid News* announced the sale (“At Last!”) of newly arrived frocks from New York, pajamas made in “up to the minute styles,” silk chiffon stockings, evening gowns and “polo coats.” Two additional advertisements were published in June 1931, offering washable silk and shantung dresses, among other luxury items. The dress shop seems to have disappeared soon after. In 1933, Sarah also shuttered the general store and filed for bankruptcy. Its fixtures and stock were sold to creditors.

**The Old World values** of the Weinstock parents had given way to the fashions and accessories of the New World. The sisters came of age at a time when the clothing trade in America was growing rapidly. Photographs of my great-grandmother show a short, solidly built woman with an almost Khrushchev-like frame; she was usually wearing a simple dress and rarely smiling. My grandmother and aunts, on the other hand, had an affinity for high fashion, cigarettes and the good life. My Aunt Pat, the fifth sister, a commercial artist who designed layouts for mail-order houses including Spiegel and Aldens, eventually opened a fur shop on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Fur Her fared little better than the Dolly Shoppe. In a rather precarious financial position to begin with, the store was robbed not long after it opened and was forced to close.

The last of the Weinstock sisters to leave the Adirondacks was Ida, the second oldest and a graduate of the Plattsburgh Normal school who taught first grade at Petrova Elementary School in Saranac Lake. She and her husband, Maks Haar, a native of Krakow, Poland, would eventually rent the cottage behind their house on Riverside Drive to the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, who spent the last summer of his life in Saranac Lake in 1945. It was here that he worked on his final pieces: the Third Piano Concerto and the Viola Concerto. Ida and Bartók would take walks in the woods together and in the Haars’ guest book, Bartók and his wife inscribed the following: “We are happy indeed to stay in this wonderful quiet place.”

The final years of my great-grandmother’s life were perhaps not as peaceful. She left Saranac Lake around 1950 and spent much of the next 15 years moving from one daughter’s house to the next, staying as long as tolerably possible. The limit was usually about six months; the gulf between the old and new, with grandchildren who spoke no Yiddish and were largely assimilated into American culture, seemed only to widen. She stayed often at my grandmother’s in Philadelphia, where she died on June 12, 1966, at the age of 84.

For my father, Jay Federman, Saranac Lake was hardly even a memory. He visited twice as a boy—once when he was two, in 1946, when Ida and my great-grandmother were still living there, and again when he was 12. But it left enough of an impression that, in 1975, he and my mother, young doctors looking to join a practice and raise a family, visited the area. In a postcard to his parents showing a view of Lake Flower and the Saranac River, my father observed, “All the places between the road and the lake are being torn down and a park will come in their place, so 129 [River Street] is no more to be seen.”

Fittingly, my parents joined the medical practice of Frank Trudeau, grandson of Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau, pioneer of the fresh air cure and the reason why the Weinstocks ended up in Saranac Lake to begin with. 🌲

