

## THE RESCUE OF THE TAFT FAMILY FROM THE UKRAINE IN 1921–22

*Ronald Taft*

In April 1978 the Taft “clan” held a picnic near Melbourne, Australia. The invitation list included 144 descendants of Abram Tafipolsky, together with their spouses. A similar invitation list today would include 209 invitees, of whom 192 are currently resident in Australia, 167 of them in Melbourne (80 per cent). These numbers reflect the effect of immigration and strong natural growth over a ninety year period since the first Taft arrived in Melbourne from Ukraine. This paper, however, is not primarily an account of the life histories of the founders of the Taft family in Australia. Its focus is on a particular dramatic event, the rescue in 1921–22 of sixteen members of the family who emigrated as a group to Melbourne after surviving eight years of dreadful hardships and life-threatening events in Ukraine, comprising the World War, epidemics, famine, pogroms, the Communist revolution and the subsequent civil war and anarchy.<sup>1</sup>

### BACKGROUND OF THE TAFIPOLSKY FAMILY

The Tafipolsky Family lived for several generations in Southern Ukraine in various communities in the area between the Sea of Azov and the city of Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk). Family members had been in business — small retailing or manufacturing — since the 1870s. The Tafipolskys were staunch Jews of *Haskalah* (“Enlightenment”) orientation, were Russian speakers by preference — as opposed to Yiddish — and all were well educated, particularly the females.

Prior to the emigration of the family to Melbourne in 1922, three Taft brothers, the two oldest of nine surviving children, Grisha<sup>2</sup> and Misha, and a younger brother, Isaac, had settled in Melbourne. The latter (also spelt Aisak) died in 1912 at the age of 20 and played no role in the immigration of the family. In 1906 my father, Grisha Tafipolsky (also known as Hirsh and more formally as Gregory), then aged 26, arrived in Melbourne from Kiev where he had been employed in a factory as an accountant. Within a few months he changed his name to Harry Taft and established a business in Elizabeth Street as a stationer, specialising in post-cards. Subsequently the shop was moved to the corner of Collins Street and Centreway Arcade where its scope was expanded and it became a leading centre for the sale and servicing of fountain pens. Misha (known formally in Australia as Morris Taft) was trained as a pharmacist in USA and subsequently immigrated to Australia in 1909, when he was aged 28. He was employed at Cunningham’s pharmacy in Nicholson Street, Footscray, and also had a partnership in the fountain pen business. Grisha was married to Olga Mushatsky, from Melitopol in Ukraine, and Misha to Rosie Wittner, who was born in Melbourne and was the daughter of Arnold Wittner. Several of their aunts, uncles and cousins had emigrated to USA, like most of the Jewish emigrants from the Czarist empire, but the two adventurers, Grisha and Misha, preferred to strike out independently by going to a country which was almost completely unknown to Jewish residents of Ukraine. Their success in quickly seizing the opportunities offered by Australia to immigrants enabled them to sponsor and rescue the remainder of their family, as we shall see below.

### Establishing Contact

Between 1906 and 1916, letters, postcards, and photographs were exchanged between Grisha and Misha in Australia and members of the family in Ukraine, but this was abruptly terminated when the breakdown of the Czarist regime completely interrupted postal services. It is not difficult to imagine the desperation felt by Grisha and Misha as



news filtered out of the bloody civil war in Russia, especially in Ukraine, of occupation by Germans and foreign interventions (eg. by Poles and by French), of devastating pogroms against Jews, of confiscations and persecution of the *bourgeoisie*, and of catastrophic disease and famine. There were attempts from both the Russian and the Australian ends to get letters or telegrams through but these were unsuccessful.

### Yasha

The youngest Tafipolsky brother, Yasha, born in 1893, joined the Russian Army in 1914 and was a prisoner of war for three years. Like the rest of the family, he had had no contact with his Australian brothers, nor were they aware of his fate. One can imagine the surprise, relief and excitement when Grisha and Misha received a letter from Yasha sent from Constantinople (Istanbul) on 2 June, 1921.<sup>3</sup> In that letter, addressed to "H. Taft, Collins Street, Melbourne", Yasha wrote (in Russian)<sup>4</sup>

I am writing to you from Constantinople. How I got here is not important any more. [Yasha's amazing adventures will be briefly outlined below.] I have been away from home for 6 months now. ... Our family is all right, despite many worries — coups, epidemics, and other "charms" of the Revolution. ... Do not ask me how they have managed to survive ... I am not going to write about what we have lived through, and am only going to say that the pogroms of 1905 are nothing in comparison to what happened and probably what is going to happen ... From everything we had, there are only two houses left, and one of these has probably been sold by now ... [Then follows information about various members of the family.] ... The family decided to migrate to your country but were not able to get a letter through to you ... that is why I left home ... But the family is so big and the amount of money so small that without you no action is possible ...

Yasha stresses that it would be necessary to discuss personally with Grisha and Misha the practical aspects of the possible immigration of the family and that this would require his coming to Australia. (Telephone was not considered to be an option in those days.) He stated that he would be prepared to work his passage from Port Said to Australia as a stoker or sailor and that, because of the urgency, he would attempt to get a ship as soon as possible. He had promised the family when he left them that he would return to Russia by winter in order to help them survive. "... I caused a lot of grief to my family by leaving. That is why I have to come back to them with something absolutely definite."

In the meantime Yasha kept himself alive by using gold coins which he had smuggled out of Russia in buttons on his coat, but mainly by doing odd jobs, mostly illegally, with the help of false papers and the goodwill of other refugees. He gave a postal address in Constantinople for letters and telegrams but, in view of the length of time required for his letter to reach Australia he could not expect a telegram reply for at least four weeks or a letter for eight, a very long time for a man in a hurry.

The next letter from Yasha was sent two months after the first. By this time he had clearly received a telegram from Grisha advising him strongly to stay put until they could arrange his fare to Australia and an entry visa. However, Yasha had already gone to Alexandria in Egypt in order to seek a passage to Australia. In the bold, practical style which was typical of him, he had bribed a scaman in Constantinople to allow him to stow away in the hold of a ship sailing to Egypt. This second letter, sent from Alexandria on 8 August, states: "I was not able to avoid a few misadventures, but we citizens of the 'All-powerful Free Soviet Republic' have very long ago become used to *mit tzuers* (troubles), so it doesn't really matter." By a lucky accident he had met and was being hosted by an old family friend (Avram Nemirovsky) who had settled in Alexandria. Yasha was too impatient and too independent to take his brothers' advice to wait until help could arrive and he proceeded to Port Said to seek a passage to Australia.





*Yasha and Misha Taft  
in Roumania, 1922*

Yasha's third letter to Australia, sent from Port Said this time, is dated 19 October and is the final one in the series. He has just received a telegram from Nemirovsky in Alexandria reading "Come back immediately" and he speculates about the reasons for it. He concludes, incorrectly, that Grisha and Misha have decided that it is impossible to arrange for the immigration of the family to Australia and that he should just give up. Yasha expresses his determination to go to Australia anyway to discuss the matter. In desperation he writes "You do not know the whole situation. You can only see the whole situation when I am in Australia". However, he decided that he would concede and return to Alexandria. He even seriously entertained the possibility that, his mission having failed, he would then return to Russia like many refugees living illegally in Turkey and Egypt had had to do.

In Alexandria, Yasha received the most amazing news which radically changed his thinking: Misha was on his way and had requested him to meet him in Suez within a few days!

### **Grisha and Misha**

Yasha's first letter from Constantinople, dated 2 June, would presumably have been received early in July. Immediately the brothers started the process of applying for Australian immigration permits for the family with an intense sense of urgency. On 29 July 1921, Grisha (Harry Taft) swore a statutory declaration in front of the Lord Mayor of Melbourne undertaking *inter alia* "to provide an affidavit, permit and other necessary documents to enable Abram Tafipolsky and his family to land in Melbourne." With the support of this declaration, Grisha wrote an application to the Commonwealth Home and Territories Department requesting landing permits for 10 adults and 3 children.

It would seem from the contents of the documents, and from subsequent events, that Yasha had underestimated (a) the wealth of the brothers, (b) their willingness to undertake the support of the family, (c) their appreciation of the urgency of the situation and their determination to act positively, and (d) the opportunity which existed for suitably guaranteed persons to obtain permits. The speed with which the Department responded to the application is remarkable when compared with the present-day lag periods. The application by Grisha was dated 8 August and the letter from the Secretary of the Department was dated 15 August, just one week later! The speed of this response must have been partly due to the good impression which the Taft brothers made on the Australian officials, and it seems to reflect a basically sympathetic attitude towards the victims of the Russian Revolution. The positive attitude of the government could have partly reflected the success of efforts by the highly respected Jacob Danglow, Rabbi of the St Kilda Synagogue and President of the Ukrainian Jews Relief Fund, to publicise the urgent needs of the victims of the famine in Ukraine about which he, very diplomatically, drew a parallel with the great Irish famine. There appears to have been



a change of policy on the granting of visas to would-be emigrants from Russia, since, only in January 1921, the Australian Minister had stated that "the present policy is against letting into Australia migrants from Russia"<sup>5</sup> apparently due to fear of terrorists. In the meantime, the Government seems to have relented in the face of lobbying by politicians and business-men and some newspaper publicity which stressed the humanitarian side. Whatever the reason, the Home and Territories Department gave its maximum support to the Tafts' request for help. On 18 August, the Department cabled a letter to the Official Secretary in Great Britain listing the persons who had been granted the permits and requesting the Secretary to inform the British Consul in Constantinople about them. The letter also said that "If it is necessary for them to proceed to London for the purpose of joining a steamer for Australia, I shall be glad if you can arrange for them to be accorded any possible facilities."

At that time there were not many Jewish immigrants from Russia in Melbourne but they consulted with each other, exchanging information and ideas about rescuing their families.<sup>6</sup> The Taft brothers decided that, rather than bringing Yasha to Australia, Misha should go to meet him. They made the necessary arrangements as quickly as possible and Misha departed for London on the SS *Ormonde* on 22 October. This was a considerable sacrifice by him and, even more so, by his wife, Rosie, who was left with two small boys while her husband sailed off into the unknown, perhaps to be swallowed up in the maw of the Bolshevik beast. She was, not unnaturally, less than enthusiastic about the expedition. Misha, who was in fact a poor traveller, subject to sea sickness, undertook the trip at considerable personal and financial cost and was separated from his wife and children for eight months. He took with him letters of introduction from Rabbi Danglow and from the Prime Minister's Department: "Mr Taft is a well-known and highly esteemed citizen of Melbourne ... " Telegrams and letters were sent ahead to various parties, such as relatives and business connections in London, Yasha in Alexandria (see above) and to Z. Haber, representing the American Joint Distribution Committee in Bucharest. The latter were evidently able to make limited contacts with Russia and this proved to be quite valuable to Misha although they could not get through to the Tafipolskys. The Tafts' business agent in London (W. Calton) provided a useful address for communications, and sometimes for action. Another person who was contacted was Jacob Leib Komesarook (later known in Melbourne as Mendelson), who was actively working in London and other cities, to rescue his wife and child and close relatives who were, like the Tafipolskys, stranded in Ukraine and wished to join family in Melbourne. Komesarook's successful experience with various agencies, including British representatives in Russia, provided invaluable information for Misha.

One odd twist in the planning by the Taft brothers was the development by Grisha of a code for use in telegrams. It is not clear whether it was created in case the telegrams might have to be sent under the watchful eye of suspicious officials, or whether it was merely a money-saving device, but the result was a very elaborate code in which a pseudo-word was matched to each one of about 100 phrases. To illustrate: "Mush" means "Quite warm. It is cold. When dress warmly it is alright"; "Brevet" means "I have communicated with them, they know of my presence"; "Fronde" means "O.M. est une veuve" [why French?]. In the event, the many telegrams which still exist from Misha are mainly in plain English with the occasional puzzling non-word in the middle. However, one useful function which the code performs for the historical record is to give some indication of the possibilities which the Taft brothers were entertaining at the time about the future rescue. For example, there are separate code words for "I am going through ..." Italy, London, Rumania, Galicia, Latvia, or Constantinople.



### THE TAFIPOLSKYS IN UKRAINE, 1904-1922<sup>7</sup>

It is now necessary to give a brief report about the status prior to emigration of each of the Tafipolskys who were brought from Ukraine to Australia in 1922. The immigrants consisted of Grisha and Misha Taft's parents and their seven siblings' families, a party of thirteen adults and three children in all. These represented all of the immediate family who were not then living in Australia. The individual members of this large group were

Sara, aged 39 and Sasha, 28 (Alexander Boulatoff, later Bulate);

Frieda, 37 and Samoile, 37 (Samuel Poznansky, later Posenan) and their daughters Olya, aged 11 and Raya, 10;

Borya, 35 (Boris Taft) and Ettel, 35, nee Zeigermacher;

Raya, 32 and Borya Kasanik, 28 (Ber/Bernard Casan) and Misha, aged 2; Yasha, 28 (Jacob Taft) and Sima, 23, nee Morochovsky;

Clara (Taft, later Smith), 24;

Abram Tafipolsky, 74 (Abram Taft) and Sarah, 53, Abram's second wife, the mother of Yasha and Clara, nee Lazareff.

#### Immediate History of the Tafipolskys

In 1904, Abram opened a drapery shop in the township of Bozhedarovka, about 100 kms South of Ekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk) where they had previously lived for ten years. Members of the family helped full-time or part-time in the store during the periods when they were old enough and when they still lived at home. The business prospered so that after several years the Tafipolskys were regarded as the most affluent Jewish family in town. All of the boys in the family received *cheder* and Jewish day school education, while the girls all completed high school diplomas either by having tutors or attending gymnasium schools. Grisha and Misha played no part in the shop because they already lived away from home and then emigrated to Australia. The most constant and supportive of the children as far as the business was concerned was Borya. Sara helped in the shop for three years and then was sent away to Geneva to study Medicine. Frieda worked as a teacher until 1909 when she married Samoile who was a *feltshur* (a qualified medical practitioner, at a "sub-physician" level). She became a mother within a year after marriage and moved to Ekaterinoslav. Raya was trained as a midwife and nurse and married Borya Kasanik in 1919 when he came out of the Army. Yasha entered the Russian Army in 1914, was a prisoner-of-war in Hungary and could not return home until July 1918. Clara commenced Medicine at the University of Ekaterinoslav in 1917 and continued her studies to the extent that the civil disorders allowed.

The years 1917 to 1920 saw the near disintegration of the social and political institutions of Ukraine as a result of the Revolution, the collapse of the Russian Army, occupation by the German Army (one of the better periods for the Tafipolskys), the establishment and melting away of at least two conflicting Ukrainian nationalist governments, counter-revolutionary forces led by Denikin and supported by foreign expeditionary forces, "Whites", "Reds", "Greens", "Anarchists" and various roving bands of free-booters and pogromists. Like most communities in that region, Bozhedarovka was conquered and occupied by one authority after another, and sometimes there was no authority at all. As Jews and bourgeoisie in a small town, the Tafipolskys were at great risk of having their possessions looted or confiscated and, even more seriously, of being murdered or quasi-legally executed. On several occasions, only clever hiding or disguise saved the girls from being raped and more than once, they evaded roving bands

of Ukrainian terrorists and White Russian Army Cossacks who sequestered and looted their house. They lost a great deal of their belongings, but they managed to hide some of their money and possessions, inside walls and under the ground, to be used later to save their lives by buying false documents and other special favours, and to buy food. Food was a constant source of anxiety and on one occasion Yasha stole supplies from an army store at risk to his life; on another Borya T. and Borya K. together hauled home a large sack of potatoes from a farm where they had bought it by barter. On top of all this, perhaps the greatest threat of all was disease from the epidemics which raged in the area.

When the Bolsheviks gained control of Bozhedarovka they arrested Abram and demanded a huge ransom from the Jewish community to save him from execution. As happened more than once, Yasha was able to convince the local commissar of the rather doubtful proposition that he had served the cause of Russia and the Communist Revolution with great devotion, and his father was spared. Bozhedarovka had become too risky for the family, so they decided in October 1919 to move to the city of Ekaterinoslav where they would be less visible. Unfortunately the old problems of disease, starvation, looting and the danger of being murdered or killed by a stray bullet continued. The typhus epidemic struck Yasha, Frieda, Samoile and Sara, and the latter was on the verge of death. Raya was gravely ill from typhoid fever during her pregnancy and had breast abscesses after giving birth to baby Misha. But all managed to survive with the help of medical attention, nursing by family members, and the provision of food. Raya's baby was saved from starvation by Clara's devotion in obtaining cow's milk in a risky and costly expedition across town every day.

It was in Ekaterinoslav, in 1920, that the family decision was made that emigration to Australia was the only hope, but further wanderings were required before that could happen. Borya T. and Borya K. (Raya's husband) made several extended trips to Bozhedarovka at great personal danger, in order to collect or sell anything of value which could be salvaged from their abandoned property. At one stage even Sarah (mother) went there for some time in order to help.

Sara (daughter) had never returned home after qualifying as a doctor in Geneva and St. Petersburg. During the World War she had worked as a surgeon in field stations and afterwards was in charge of civilian and military (Red Army) hospitals in Ukraine, some of them quite close to where her family lived. By 1920 she was employed in an army hospital south of Kharkov, the Bolshevik capital of Ukraine. In the meantime, she had fallen in love with Sasha, a non Jew, who had been wounded while fighting in the Red Army. He also had had typhus. He was, first, Sara's patient, then her assistant, and he became her husband early in 1921.

The remaining members of the family were Frieda, her husband Samoile, and their two daughters. After having survived typhus, they moved to the city of Alexandrovsk (Zaparoze) in late 1919 where Samoile had obtained an appointment in a Jewish Hospital and a position in the Red Army as a medical officer. His hospital appointment gave the Poznanskys a privileged position which provided them with accommodation and, very importantly, food. An additional factor which proved to be very helpful in the emigration of the family was that his patients included some influential officials who felt obligated to him. By November 1920 the Communists had gained control of Ukraine and imposed a degree of law and order under the new Ukrainian Government in Kharkov but the severe famine conditions and disruption of public services continued. At least, internal communications improved.



In July 1920, the remainder of the family started moving one by one to Alexandrovsk for greater safety and to explore actively the possibility of emigrating to Australia as a unit. There they shared with the Poznanskys accommodation in the house of a *bourgeois* who now lived in his coachman's room at the end of the garden. The Tafipolskys were allowed by the Bolshevik authorities to occupy this large house because each section of the family was officially registered as a separate family. Unfortunately all attempts to communicate with Grisha and Misha in Australia failed. The family had nowhere to go and no way to get out of Russia. Some of them found employment; Yasha was employed as an electrical engineer at the power works, having managed to convince the authorities, falsely, that he was a qualified engineer on the basis of some practical experience which he had had as a POW in Hungary. Raya worked as a nursing assistant. Borya K. had employment in a government office for leather production and Borya T. still commuted to Bozhedarovka to salvage more moveable property.

### PLANNING THE RESCUE

#### Yasha's Odyssey in 1921

As we saw from his correspondence, Yasha, then aged 27, insisted that he should go to Australia to investigate the practicality of the proposed migration, although the rest of the family thought that it was too dangerous for him. He had no authority to travel, or an exit permit and other necessary papers, and he would have to leave the Soviet Union illegally. He left his job in Alexandrovsk and set out on his mission in late 1920 but, despite a fantastic degree of courage, resourcefulness, determination and *chutzpah* mixed in with a lot of luck, he took six months to reach Constantinople. His search for a permeable border took him on an epic journey, most of it in the depth of winter, through Kharkov, Rostov and Sochi to Baku on the Caspian Sea, involving falsified papers, a new name and life story, ejection from trains, riding outside in freezing conditions, former acquaintances met accidentally who were able to assist him, and employment in odd mechanical jobs which required his type of skill. He even repaired the broken typewriter which a document forger needed in order to help him. At one stage Yasha posed as a deserter from the Hungarian Army, using the few words which he had picked up in POW camp. He was not able to realise his hope of escaping through Baku to Persia, and eventually he found his way through the Caucasus Mountains to Batumi in Georgia, just across the Black Sea from Turkey. There he stowed away in the coal hold of a ship going to Constantinople, was nearly killed by the coal which was being loaded, and eventually reached his goal after also disembarking illegally. He estimates that there were 300,000 Russian refugees there — perhaps an exaggeration — all both helping and competing with each other. He received assistance in finding food and shelter and obtaining odd-jobs from Jewish aid organisations and from fellow refugees, with some of whom he had had connections back home.

Naturally one of the first things that Yasha did was to write to his Australian brothers. The correspondence which commenced in June 1921 has been described above and it culminated in a telegram calling on Yasha to meet Misha in Suez on 15–16 November. He boarded the ship there and travelled with Misha to Port Said so that they would have time to exchange information and plan their strategy for extricating the rest of the family. Misha advised him to stay in Port Said or to return to Constantinople while he, Misha, went on to London where he could explore and exploit the possibilities, through Jewish relief organisations and official representatives of Britain, of contacting the family in Ukraine and arranging for them to leave. Misha was quite prepared, if necessary, to try to travel to Russia but Yasha persuaded him that this was too dangerous and that if anyone were to return there, it would have to be the one with the greater recent experience with the system, and more immunity to the epidemic diseases. No doubt it



was also relevant that Yasha was single while Misha was a husband and father. Thus, Misha made arrangements in London to create a new identity for Yasha which would enable him to travel in and out of Russia if necessary. With the help of experts in the Port Said Jewish community and a little bribery, Yasha Tafipolsky was transformed into Aron Witner [*sic*] of Australia, complete with all necessary documents.<sup>8</sup>

Misha also arranged for Yasha, or rather Aron Witner, to receive an official letter, dated London, 22 December 1921, from Freeman & Co., Melbourne and London, food and crop importers-exporters, requesting him to investigate possible arrangements for the receipt by Russia of large quantities of "wheat and other cereals" in return for "bristles, flax etc" through Odessa or other Black Sea ports. Finance for his expenses were provided by the Company which, apparently, was a respectable business enterprise, managed by Leslie H. Freeman. It is not clear what led to Yasha's appointment by the Company, or whether it was fully genuine, but the effect was that the way was now open for Yasha to apply to the Soviet authorities for permission to enter Russia and travel within it and thus expedite communication with the family. Whether Yasha ever gave any satisfaction to Freeman & Co. is doubtful, but a letter from Mr Freeman dated 23 February 1922, asking him to come to London to report progress, suggests that he had not done so by then, and probably he never did.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime Yasha went to Alexandria from Port Said and waited there for further developments.

### Misha's Mission

Misha proceeded to London where he did all he could to assist Yasha and to gain information about the best way to make it possible for the family to emigrate. To this end, Misha did a lot of travelling, almost entirely by train. In the next six months, his mission was going to take him on a strenuous series of criss-cross journeys across borders, nearly all of which required visas to be obtained before the journey was begun. His passport from that period contains visas for transit or visits from France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Turkey, Greece, and Italy.<sup>10</sup> He went to Berlin in December where he met Komesarook who told him that he had successfully saved his relatives through the British Commercial Mission in Moscow. This Mission, which operated in conjunction with the British Foreign Office, surprisingly was able to function in conjunction with the Bolshevik Government despite Britain's intervention in the Civil War on the side of the anti-Revolutionary forces. Misha wrote to the Mission, on 27 December, enclosing the permits for Australia, and begging it to intervene with the Ukrainian authorities to allow the departure of the family. Misha reported to the Mission that he had set up a Bank Guarantee with the British Foreign Office. "Don't lose a day and spare no expense. Hours count when one is on starvation rations."

The first two months of 1922 were the critical ones for Misha's desperate efforts to pluck the family out of their hell of disease, starvation and terrorism. He established himself in Bucharest in order to get help from the Jewish Joint Distribution (JDC) Reconstruction Department which seems to have had some facilities for communication with Russia by this time through its office in Kishinev. Misha then arranged for Yasha (as "Aron Witner") to come from Alexandria so that they could plan further strategies. Yasha came by ship to Constanza in Rumania in late January. Misha requested Rabbi Danglow in Melbourne to appoint him the Australian delegate to the Ukraine Relief Conference in place of Myer Zeltner, but whether the latter agreed to this is not clear.

Unbeknown to them, a miracle had in the meantime occurred. A telegram arrived in Bucharest a few days later from the Australian High Commissioner in London, informing him that permission had been granted for the family to depart from Ukraine.



At first the permission referred only to four adults but, after Misha had protested, it was corrected two days later to *all* of the applicants — probably a typing error, “four” instead of “your”, but frightening all the same. On 28 January 1922, Misha cabled Australia “... Hooray. Family permitted leave Russia ... Kisses all round.” The key to success was undoubtedly the intervention by the British Commercial Mission which was extraordinarily helpful. Soon after they had received the plea from Misha in Berlin, the Mission had requested the Ukrainian authorities to issue the exodus permits and this was granted almost immediately. The Mission reported to the British Foreign Office on January 10 that it had telegraphed the Tafipolskys informing them of the permits and offering them any assistance. However, it took about two weeks for the news to reach Misha in Bucharest. The British Mission also provided a document to a Black Sea shipping line guaranteeing the payment of fares for the passengers, to be paid by the British Consulate in Constantinople. Obviously, they trusted the guarantee from Misha that he would repay the costs.

On receipt of the exciting news, Misha’s next problem was how to assist with the departure of the family and how to get them to Australia. Misha discovered that the British Consulate in Latvia had contact with Russia and he went to Riga on 6 February in order to make use of this. After that, in the middle of February, he went to Constantinople. Further correspondence makes it clear that some communications were exchanged with the family, either through the British Mission or the JDC. The family had been advised to make their way to Sebastopol and to use the British Mission guarantee of payment in order to get berths across the Black Sea. Misha (or Grisha) also booked passages for them on the SS *Ormuz* departing Port Said for Australia a few weeks later, 30 March, but, as we shall see, they could not get there in time.

It is now necessary to reconstruct what was happening meanwhile with the family in Ukraine during the critical months of December 1921 and January–April, 1922.

#### DEPARTURE FOR AUSTRALIA, 1922

The first hint that the family received of the active endeavours being made to facilitate their emigration came in about September 1921, in a postcard from Misha’s father-in-law, Arnold Wittner, from London which he was visiting. He, thoughtfully, had had the card written for him in Russian and, in a guarded statement, he informed them that Misha was on his way to Europe. As a result, the family began to make plans for departure, should that become possible. Sasha and Sara wished also to be included in the possible exodus, so after Sara’s discharge from the Army hospital in the middle of 1921, they also moved to the collection point, Alexandrovsk. To overcome family resistance, Sasha apparently converted to Judaism and he and Sara had a Jewish wedding, probably in Alexandrovsk. Somehow, information about Sasha was conveyed to Misha, perhaps through the JDC, or perhaps through the Quakers who are known to have smuggled out a letter towards the end of 1921, and an entry permit for Australia was obtained for him in December. In the middle of January 1922, the big moment arrived. The family was informed by the British Mission that the permits to depart were available for collection in Kharkov and that they then should proceed to the Port of Sebastopol to get a ship to Constantinople. Samoile, using his connections as a doctor, went to Kharkov to obtain them and final preparations for departure were speeded up. All property and possessions were assembled, some from various hiding places, and those which could not be taken with them were sold. All the while the famine raged on and the family had continually to husband its food supplies.

Further problems arose; Borya T. decided to become affianced to a medical colleague and long-time friend of Sara, Ettel Zeigermacher, who had obtained a position in an



infectious diseases hospital in Alexandrovsk. She was hurriedly added to the party of would-be immigrants but it is not known whether or how she obtained a permit to leave Ukraine. It is also not clear why Borya and Ettel did not marry before they left Russia, but possibly this was because her passport was in her maiden name and it might have become invalid if she had to change it.

As though there weren't enough problems already, Clara now arrived from Ekaterinoslav with her fellow medical student, Sima Morochovsky, who wished to join in the departure as Yasha's fiancée. Apparently, Yasha had told Sima before he left nearly a year earlier that he would come back to marry her, and since he had not come for her, she would go to him. As she did not have the necessary permit, Sima took on the identity of Yasha's sister "Sara Tafipolsky" for the purpose of exiting Russia.<sup>11</sup>

There was still a big problem to be solved; how to get transport to Constantinople. Trains to Sebastopol were full and subject to priority reservations, and it was nearly impossible to book passages on a ship from as far away as Alexandrovsk. By dint of bribery, bluff and string-pulling, courtesy of Samoile's influential patients, they managed to get passages on a train and on 9 February 1922 they commenced a journey to Australia which would take them more than another four months. With the help of a "tame" stationmaster, they were able to take with them a fair amount of luggage in which they hid valuable possessions, including samovars and other silver, the deeds of their real estate and large amounts of money — in completely worthless banknotes. In Sebastopol they found temporary accommodation while they attempted to obtain berths across the Black Sea. They evidently managed to send telegrams through the British Government to Misha, who was waiting in Constantinople, and on 22 February the latter appealed to the British Consul-General there to do everything he could to help the family who "were stranded in one of the most terrible famine areas". Misha made 200 pounds sterling available as a further guarantee. He also advised Grisha to arrange more funds and to apply for Australian landing permits for Ettel and Sima.

### **Batum and Yasha**

A further momentous crisis now arose for the party in Sebastopol. Sara, Sasha, Raya and Borya K. decided in the middle of February to "make a run for it", together with the latter's infant child, because their permission to leave was about to lapse and Sasha had no permit or passport at all. This reason can explain why Sara and Sasha broke out from the united party, but the decision of Raya and Borya to go to Batum must have been sparked by panic. Raya reports in her later reminiscences that they were fearful that Misha would abandon his mission and return to Australia. The breakaway party managed to find their way by train to Batum in Georgia with the intention of attempting to smuggle themselves across the Turkish or Persian border by one means or another. Food and accommodation were available there but they did not have money to pay for it nor the know-how to escape the trap of misery into which they had rushed. Somehow the family managed to transmit the news of their plight to Yasha, who, in agreement with Misha, went to the rescue as soon as he could. In order to get permission to enter the Soviet Union, he used his persona as Aron Witner and his letter from Freeman & Co., together with a little bribery. He joined a ship in Piraeus going to Batum via Constantinople and Sebastopol.<sup>12</sup> In Batum he found his sisters, paid their debts, and in his indomitable style, managed to get extensions to their exit permits and to arrange for Sasha to become "Jacob Tafipolsky" (Yasha, of course, did not need this identity as he was "Aron Witner"). Eventually, with the help of his status as a "businessman", and the goodwill of associates who were well rewarded, Yasha was able to obtain the necessary officially authorized documents and he was able to escort the party by sea to Constantinople in early April 1922, after three weeks of frantic efforts.



## Departure

After being stalled for about three weeks in Sebastopol, the rest of the family who had remained there were able to negotiate passages on a Turkish ship, although the captain was very reluctant to take them. He was impressed, however, that Ettel could communicate with him in French and, in the end, he accepted the letter from the British Mission guaranteeing the fares on arrival and at last they were able to depart from Russia. The Tafipolskys had broken through the prison walls which they had desperately been trying to breach in every way possible for the past year and a half! The party arrived in Constantinople in early March and settled down in a Jewish owned guest house (feliculously named Hotel Jerusalem) together with their "saviour" Misha. At last the terror and the physical suffering of the past five seemingly interminable years were virtually over. Borya and Ettel were married in the Constantinople Synagogue on 10 March.

The bookings for Australia on the *Ormuz* for 30 March were cancelled and the family stayed on in Constantinople in the hopeful expectation that the party from Batum would be able to join them. This hope was fulfilled when the travellers from Batum arrived in Constantinople about four weeks after the earlier arrivals. Yasha and Sima were reunited after sixteen months separation and were married in the Synagogue on 5 April.

Misha had had the exciting experience of greeting his parents and siblings, whom he had not seen for 13 years, at the wharf in Constantinople on their two respective arrivals. He then settled down to the task of arranging transport to Australia and tying up other loose ends. It fortunately proved to be possible to obtain bookings for the whole party on the SS *Ormonde* from Port Said to Melbourne, leaving 11 May. Misha had one final act of rescue to execute, to arrange passages for the family to travel from Constantinople to Port Said. Having successfully done this, he finally left Constantinople on 19 April, while the rest of the family went on their way to Egypt to await embarkation on the *Ormonde*.

Misha once more undertook the long train journey back to London so that he could make last minute arrangements, such as purchasing kitchen utensils for the family, and to wind-up some business matters. He also had to arrange genuine passports for some members of the family. He left London on 30 April for Paris and Toulon where he boarded the *Ormonde* on 4 May. On the return trip, Misha kept a regular "diary" — in the form of a series of loving letters to his wife Rosie — which provides a direct record of his thoughts and reminiscences.<sup>13</sup> He admits to being tired and emotionally drained. After leaving Port Said, with the family on board, his introspections reveal a great deal about his sentiments: "This morning we passed Suez where nearly six months ago I met Yasha and started our campaign. What a difference! The same *Ormonde*, the same Suez, the same me and the same Yasha. But the huge difference is that the *Ormonde* has its nose pointing South-East instead of North West."

Misha and Sara, who was highly pregnant, suffered greatly from heat exhaustion and sea sickness and they disembarked in Fremantle in order to take a train for the rest of the journey across Australia. The rest of the party arrived at Station Pier, Port Melbourne on 7 June 1922 to the loving greetings of Grisha and his wife, Olya, and a warmly welcoming group of other relatives and friends. Their saga was already widely known in the Melbourne Jewish community.

## AUSTRALIA

In anticipation of the arrival of the family, Grisha had purchased and furnished a house at 654 Inkerman Road, North Caulfield,<sup>14</sup> and the arrivals were distributed between this



and the homes of Grisha and Misha. A tutor was hired to teach English to the family at Inkerman Road, and subsequently they learned from books and from their brothers. On arrival, the name Tafipolsky was changed to Taft in all cases, much to Abram's disgust. Gradually they were all settled into homes and jobs but the experiences which they had undergone together meant that, for the next 12 years or so after their arrival, their social life consisted largely of mutual visiting.



*Some members of the Taft family, ca1923*

It now remains to outline very briefly what happened subsequently to the rescued members of the family.

The wives: With the exception of Clara, all of the wives (mother Sarah, Sara, Frieda, Ettel, Raya, and Sima) were fully occupied after their arrival playing nurturant and supportive roles as home-makers and mothers. They had three children between them on arrival and within three years five more were born. To their surprise and disappointment, Sara and Ettel's medical degrees from Geneva were completely discounted in Australia, nor was any credit given for the years of medical study which Sima and Clara had completed.

Clara: Grisha and Misha offered to put Clara through a full medical course but she demurred. She lived with her parents and took in out-work in the clothing trade and later worked as an office clerk. She married Isaac Daniel Szmied (later known as Daniel Smith) in 1941.

Borya T: Was employed in Taft's Fountain pen shop and was Manager until his death in 1966.

Yasha: Qualified as an electrician, and then went into business as a contractor, sales agent, service operator, and manufacturer. Eventually his business "Electro-Mechanical Products" was most successful and many immigrants to Melbourne were helped by him to get started. He was President of the Victorian Union for Progressive Judaism.

Sasha: Qualified as a B Grade Electrician. Then he and Sara became chicken farmers, first in the Jewish Land Settlement scheme in Narre Warren, and later they had their own chicken business in Melbourne.

Borya K (Casan): Was employed by H. Taft Co., first in charge of a leather goods shop and later, until he died in 1953, he was Manager of Hillcrest Hosiery, a Taft subsidiary company. His infant son Misha became an engineer, married Fayne Sokol and died at the age of 43.



Samoile: At first was employed as a pharmaceutical assistant in a chemist shop in Footscray. Then he ran his own business in photographic developing and printing and, finally, was a health consultant in Carlton ("the Russian Herbalist"). His daughters Olya and Raya attended school, worked as clerks and married Sideris Haniotis and Abe Horvitz respectively.

Abram: He was becoming increasingly deaf at the time of his arrival and never learnt to read, let alone speak, English. He spent much of his time, until his death in 1937, engaged in prayer and other religious activities.

In the introduction to this paper, reference was made to the 209 living descendants of Abram — together with their spouses. The descendants of the party that was rescued in 1922 provide 117 of these, the other 92 being descendants of Grisha and Misha.

## OVERVIEW

In June 1947 a gathering was held at the home of Misha and Rosie to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the arrival in Australia. It was a happy occasion<sup>15</sup>; the gratitude of the family was expressed handsomely to Misha and Grisha and the miracle of survival was reiterated over and over. The family had managed to survive the most appalling hazards which beset them during the horror years 1914–1922 without the loss of one man, woman or child. What reasons can be adduced for this remarkable escape? First and foremost, credit must be given to immense and continuing good luck. The incredible goodwill and helpfulness of the Australian and British Government officials was a second most important factor. But good luck and goodwill need help. The financial resources and the networks (eg. Arnold Wittner) available to the Tafts in Russia and Australia were also very helpful since they created possibilities that would not have been available otherwise. But the most basic factor was surely the human one: the self-sacrifice, energy and determination of Misha, Yasha's courage and ability to improvise, Grisha's generosity and organisational skills behind the scenes, and the perseverance and devotion of the Russian Tafipolskys to each other in pursuing the common cause of surviving and escaping. All of these factors contributed to the success of this large-scale operation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. The preparation of this paper was made possible largely through the unexpected discovery by Eugenia (Una) Blashki of a collection of relevant documents among the effects of her late father, Jacob (Yasha) Taft. These included letters, telegrams, and Australian and British official government communications. I thank Una for making them available to me.

<sup>2</sup>. The author of this paper is a son of Grisha.

<sup>3</sup>. All dates in this paper are based on the current calendar (Gregorian), not the Julian which was used in Russia until 1917.

<sup>4</sup>. The sentences have been rearranged by the author in order to make the flow more easily comprehended.

<sup>5</sup>. This quote is from unpublished diary notes made by Jacob Leib Komesarook who describes events which intervened between the refusal of his application for a permit for his mother, wife and child in January 1921 to the granting of the permits in May, together with assistance by the government to facilitate their immigration. I thank Lily and Sol Chester for making the diary available.

<sup>6</sup>. According to Price there were only 643 persons of all ages from the Russian Empire in Victoria in 1911. C.A. Price. *AJHS Journal*, 1964, Vol. 5, Statistical Appendix IIIa & IIIc.



<sup>7</sup>. The information in this section was largely obtained from the reminiscences given orally to the author and to other members of the family at various times. I have checked the contents of the paper with various descendants of the emigrants and I have interviewed Olya Posenan Haniotis, the only member of the emigrant party still alive at the time of writing. I thank them for their co-operation, especially my cousins Eric Taft, Anna Davis, Golda Isaac, Olga Bartak, and Una Blashki who have added comments to earlier drafts. One particularly rich record was a biographical essay on Yasha Taft written by the late Walter Krauss in 1983. Mr Krauss conducted several interviews with Yasha in connection with his MA degree in History at Melbourne University, 1975. Another valuable source was a set of reminiscences which Raya Casan (Kasanik) wrote down in 1962. I thank her grandson Peter Kloot for making this available.

<sup>8</sup>. Aron Wittner was the Hebrew name of Misha's Father-in-law in Melbourne; Aron almost certainly had agreed to the deception since the Wittner family were very co-operative in the rescue operation.

<sup>9</sup>. A letter in 1948 from Misha to Yasha, who was visiting England at the time, reveals that there had been recent friendly correspondence between Misha and Leslie Freeman, so apparently there was no long-lasting resentment.

<sup>10</sup>. Misha's passport from 1921-2 provides a record of his travels. My thanks to his daughter Golda Isaac for making this available.

<sup>11</sup>. There were sixteen years difference in the ages of Sima and Sara, but somehow she got away with the deception.

<sup>12</sup>. There is a family story that Yasha's ship berthed in Sebastopol just as the family was departing for Constantinople, and that Yasha recognized his mother and his fiancée, Sima, in passing.

<sup>13</sup>. This diary was kindly made available by Misha's daughter Anna Davis.

<sup>14</sup>. The funds to buy the house were advanced as a loan by Arnold Wittner.

<sup>15</sup>. Marred only by a housebreaker who looted all the women's handbags.