

Detail of "Russia in Europe," from A New Universal Atlas Containing Maps of the various Empires, Kingdoms, States and Republics Of The World. Philadelphia, 1848. From the David Rumsey Map Collection.

Eva (Chaya) Elenkrig was a seamstress who lived most of her life in New York City, but was born around 1890 in Zolotonosha, Ukraine. She came from a klezmer family and in her youth played the violin and balalaika. She was involved in socialist politics in her teen years. In 1916 she was working as a dressmaker in a tenement workshop in Manhattan when she slipped and fell down a dark stairwell and landed so hard she fractured her skull. She lost the ability to play music or to work steadily. After that she sued the building owner Henry Siebrecht and eventually won a settlement from him in 1922.

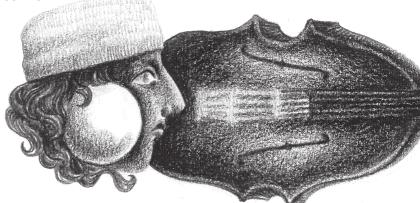
Although there are people alive today who remember her from her later years, I was curious to find out what I could about her early years as an activist and musician in New York, and about the aftermath of her accident. The following is what I have been able to put together, along with illustrations by Ava Berkson which bring to life some of the feelings and moments of Eva's early life.

Dan Carkner, Vancouver, 2024.

1. ZOLOTONOSH

Eva was born around 1890 in Zolotonosha, a cattle trading town near the Dnipro river in Poltava Gubernia, Russian Empire. The town was called the same in Yiddish, Zolotonoshe, or sometimes shortened to Zolotonosh. Today it's in Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine, a 40 minute drive north of the city of Cherkasy and two hours southeast of the capital. In the 1897 census its population was around 8500, of which 2500 were Jewish. The Zolotonosha of Eva's youth was becoming more and more connected to the outside world: a steamboat connecting it to Cherkasy was launched in 1881, and a railroad station was built in 1897. As a small town, it didn't produce many famous historical figures; the early Marxist Zionist writer Dov Ber Borochov (1881–1917) was born there, as was the legendary professional wrestler Ivan Piddubnyy (1871–1949).

Eva's father Yosef Tsvi "Joe" Elenkrig, a cornet player and bandleader, was born in around 1845 and her mother Feiga "Fanny" Kanewsky was born in in around 1850. The name Elenkrig is not a common one; according to Alexander Beider, expert on Russian Jewish names, Elenkrig is a variant of Eilenkrig, a name from Kiev and Vasilkov areas which means an oil cruet (a type of cooking oil container). Both parents were born in Rzhyshchiv, up the river from Zolotonosha. Eva's three siblings who emigrated to the United States were Rivka "Rebecca" (c.1875-1969), Avram "Abe" (c.1877-1965), and Yisrael "Isrulie" (c.1886-1940). At least three other siblings stayed behind:



Surah, Isaac and Chai Risal. It's possible there were more; child mortality was high in that era and many of the Jewish vital records from Zolotonosha have been lost.

In a way that was very modern for the era, Joseph taught his daughters as well as sons to play music, and had them perform in the family orchestra. We know that klezmer musicians in Eastern Europe were almost entirely male, with a few documented exceptions in the early twentieth century. According to a family history booklet shared with me by her living relatives:

"The children were each taught to play a different instrument as soon as he or she was old enough. When the orchestra plaved at

> weddings and other special events, the hosts sent troikas to pick them up. If they had to stay overnight, the men slept in barn but the women stayed in house."

The booklet says that Eva's older sister Rebecca was a talented violinist who played first violin in the family orchestra. It also says that Eva played the balalaika, something I was able to confirm in a newspaper advertisement, and she also stated during her court case that she had learned violin guite well from her father. As for the brothers, Abe was a cornet player and maybe played clarinet as well, and Isrulie played bass and maybe guitar.

> Rebecca's husband, Avram "Adolph" Yelin, was a dance master & instructor as well as tailor according to the family

his clients included booklet: Russian army officers and their wives. The booklet says that he "was attracted to Rebecca, who lived in a different village, because

he liked the way she played the violin."

He played an important role in the Elenkrig's emigration to New York.

ZOLOTONOSH-NEW YORK

As far as I can tell, Adolph Yelin was the first of the family to emigrate, going alone to New York in 1900. He brought over his wife Rebecca and daughter Augusta the next year. They settled on East 21st in Manhattan and Adolph became a tailor and clothing designer.

Back in Zolotonosha, Russian Empire politics were shaking up life in the town. During the First Russian Revolution in early 1905, armed revolutionary groups had been active in Zolotonosha and the state was very weak because of deployments in the Russo-Japanese war. After the end of the war in September and the release Tsar Nicolai II's October Manifesto, there was a wave of pogroms across the empire perpetrated by right-wing nationalists. Those right-wing groups, including the Black Hundred, equated Jews with social revolution and attacked them and their property in hundreds of cities and towns, including Kishinev and Kiev.

On 21 October 1905 mobs attacked the Jewish population of Zolotonosha, looting and burning down almost the entire town. The 1906 American Jewish Year Book estimated that 500 Jewish families suffered in the pogrom. Within a year Joe Elenkrig and half of his children left and were on their way to the United States. Based on the timing it seems likely that it was connected to the pogrom, even though the town was rebuilt and many Jews stayed behind.

The wave of Jewish emigrants who left after the 1905 pogroms and emigrated to the United States were more secular and socialist than those who came before. This seems to have been the case with the Elenkrigs as well, many of whom developed a longstanding affiliation with left-wing politics.

Eva and Israel arrived with their parents in August 1906, having sailed from Bremen; they probably showed up without much more than suitcases. They were initially detained by immigration as "likely public charges," meaning their ability to support themselves was doubted. But they were released the same day after a review and not deported. My guess is that they mentioned their brother-in-law Adolph Yelin who was already an established tailor in the United States. They settled on East 110th Street in East Harlem. By 1910 both Israel and his father Joe were working as musicians at balls. Abe, his wife Tamara and their infant son Max also emigrated to New

York at the same time, apparently traveling separately from Eva, her siblings, and her parents. Abe and Tamara settled in Brooklyn and Abe opened a barber shop, although he worked as a musician

as well.

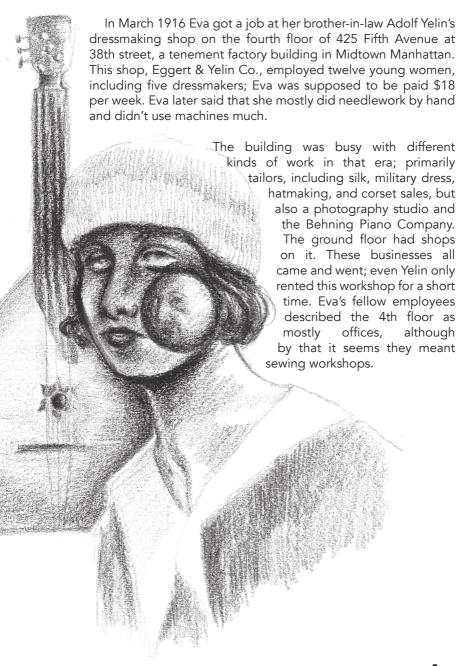
When Eva arrived in New York in 1906 she would have been around 16 years old. She would have experienced a radical culture shock going from the small town of Zolotonosha to the bustling and dynamic East Harlem. I wish I knew more about what she experienced during that time. Music, dressmaking and socialist politics were all part of it, but records of her first ten years in America is very minimal.

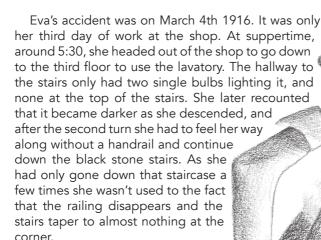
I did find one fascinating glimpse of Eva's music-playing in New York. In October 1909, advertisements appeared in a few local socialist Yiddish newspapers for a literary and music event being put on by the paper *Der Arbeiter* at the New Harlem Hall on East 110th Street. Editor & literary figure David Pinsky was the main speaker. Eva (listed here as Yeva Elenkrik) and an unnamed brother were part of the musical entertainment for the evening, playing balalaika and guitar.

In April 1913 Eva's brother Abe entered the studio at Columbia Records in New York and made the Elenkrig family name briefly famous in the niche world of the ethnic music market. He and an orchestra made up of of violin, tuba, piano, and drum recorded ten klezmer tunes with folksy names like "don't worry" (Nicht Gesorgt), "I miss Odessa" (Ich Benk Nach Odessa) and "mother is going to market" (Die Mame is Gegangen in Mark). The discs were marketed for the Jewish market as A. Elenkrigs Yidisher Orkester and for the Romanian market as Orchestra Romaneasca. These have been recognized by the U.S. Library of Congress as being the first klezmer orchestra recordings made in the United States.

I'm not sure how Abe, a barber and not a musician with much of a public presence, got recruited to be America's first klezmer bandleader. In 1915 he left Columbia for Victor Records and continued to record more klezmer pieces. He also collaborated on recordings with the singer Meyer Kanewsky, who was also from Zolotonosha and who I think may have been a relative or at least a close family friend.

Abe's father Joseph continued to be active as a musician until his death in 1915. I'm pretty sure a book of b-flat cornet duets published in New York in 1914 by a J. Elenkrig was his work. The book of duets was not klezmer music and was edited by Edwin Franko Goldman, a famous military brass band leader and composer.





She later testified that she lost her footing in the dark and started falling forward. She tried to hold on but her hand was wrenched off the post so hard it was sprained. She tumbled down and landed so hard she was knocked out.

A man working on the third floor in a silk business. Edward McKee, heard Eva scream from the stairwell. Followed by other employees from the silk shop, he ran out to find her sprawled at the third floor landing with her head on the floor and her feet on the bottom stairs. She was already unconscious and had blood on her face. He carried her to his shop and tried to revive her by "working her arms," but got no response. Another silk worker, Arthur Thompson, had helped carry her to the shop and agreed she had never regained consciousness during this time.

A local beat cop, Carl Handwerg, had been sitting on the toilet on the 4th floor when someone pounded on the door and said there had been an accident. He ran down to the third floor and found Eva on the table. In his testimony later, he claimed she wasn't unconscious at that moment and managed to give her name, age and address, although he described her as "hysterical." Another officer, Michael Walker, showed up soon after and also later said that Eva had been conscious for a time while waiting for the ambulance. I don't really understand why the officers disagreed with the silk shop employees about that. The lawyers argued about it for some time during the trial, and Eva's lawyer insisted they had probably got her name and background info from someone else.

One of Eva's fellow dressmakers, Anna Huber, agreed that Eva had been carried unconscious onto a table in the silk shop and that she was bleeding from the ear, mouth and nose. Anna waited with them until Eva was brought away to the hospital. Huber visited her in the hospital the next day, and found that Eva was still unconscious

Eva woke up in hospital a few days after her fall. Even then she spent a few weeks in and out of coherence, or as a sympathetic doctor testified, "she was not rational most of the time." Her injuries were very severe, including a fractured skull.

She said that when she first awoke in the hospital she would hear sounds like chopping or sawing wood. She had severe pain, especially on the right side of her head, on the right side of her body down to her hip and even to her foot. She permanently lost hearing in her right ear. She was discharged from the hospital after two weeks. At that time she was very shaky and couldn't walk on her own.

After five months, when she could walk on her own a bit, her doctor suggested she go and live in the country for a while, so her mother brought her there to recover. Her body pains went away during this time and she regained her footing.

In the trial, Anna Huber described a noticeable change in Eva: "She was happy at the time before the accident; she is entirely different now. [...] very nervous and depressed all the time." Eva testified about her nightmares during this time in her trial:

"I have such terrible dreams; it is something awful. And before I fall asleep, as soon as I close my eyes, I dream I fall, so I wake up with such fear, and when I do fall asleep I have such terrible dreams, I can never find my way. I am always wandering. I ask how to get to my house. I never know how to get home at all. [...] it is such a funny place, hills and everything, and I could not explain."

Eva hired a lawyer (Mr. Bangser) a few weeks after her accident, at the recommendation of her brother-in-law Adolph. Eva's motivations and feelings about it would not have been something they would make public, because it could be used against her in court, so of course it was not documented in the trial transcript. Eva's relatives who remember her thought her activity in socialist politics and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union were partly a reaction to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. So I can imagine she took up the case out of this sense of justice. Within months, her lawyer Bangser tried to sue someone who he thought was the owner of the building, but it fell apart when he realized he hadn't named the true owner. He only identified the real owner Henry Augustus Siebrecht in 1918.

Siebrecht was a German-born florist and landscaper who had arrived in New York in the 1860s. Because of his innovations he became very wealthy and well-connected by the 1870s and 1880s. He was called the "Father of Fifth Avenue" because his shop there was the first to open in the area, on the same location as the turn of the century building Eva was injured in. Among Siebrecht's clients and friends were J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. His contempt for the fact that a poor dressmaker was suing him was evident in his 1922 testimony and legal strategies.

As for Eva, she was in recovery and not working for a year after her accident. Eventually she was forced to look for a new job. Sometime in early 1917 she was hired by a sewing shop on Fifth Avenue in Harlem to do needlework, but she struggled and only worked there on and off for a month before leaving. In another shop on 117th Street in Harlem she likewise didn't last a month. In her words "I stayed home a long time again. Then I find another position. [...] That was on 19th Street and Broadway." This shop was more accepting that she would take days or weeks off if she was not up for working, so she continued on there.

While she recovered, she became active in socialist politics again. I found plenty of mentions of her in the *Weekly People*, the paper of Daniel DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party, where Eva was hosting Jewish Press Committee meetings at her place on East 119th Street. These were fundraising meetings held with the Jewish Socialist Labor Federation in late 1916 and throughout 1917, trying to plan the launch of new a Yiddish-language newspaper (the party's *Abend Blatt* had once rivaled the *Forverts*, the most famous Yiddish daily, but folded in 1902) as well as for the translation of DeLeon's works into Yiddish. The klezmer violinist Jacob Gegna, himself sympathetic to social justice causes, played one of the benefit concerts for this committee on Christmas Eve 1916. Unfortunately I don't think the new Yiddish SLP newspaper was ever actually launched.

By January 1917, although Siebrecht wasn't yet named in a lawsuit, he certainly knew about Eva's accident and sent a doctor and neurology expert, J. R. Hunt, to examine her for documentation purposes. She later recounted in court that he hadn't even asked about several of her injuries and that she didn't care for him very much.

In February 1918, having finally identified Siebrecht as the real building owner, Bangser filed a lawsuit against him, blaming him for negligent maintenance of the staircase and demanding \$25,000 for Eva's lost work, her permanent disability and "mental and bodily anguish." Siebrecht's lawyer responded in writing the following month, denying the allegations of negligence, blaming Eva for her accident, and denying that Siebrecht owned the building or had any direct interest or knowledge in what took place there. But the case seems to have been sidelined during this time, which explains why it eventually took six years to come to trial.

Bangser took a position as secretary to a judge and passed on the case to Mr. Henney; Henney's office only received the case in September 1920. They even had a hard time locating Eva, which delayed it further. The case was finally heard in court over a week in the middle of January 1922. During the months before the trial, knowing it was coming, Eva had gone back to the building on Fifth Avenue. She would later testify, "I went back myself. [...] I just went to see the building, whether it is just the same as the way I remember it." But she only observed the stairs from the 4th floor hallway. "I did not come down—I never go down the stairway again."

She lived through almost six years of not feeling well while she waited for the chance to seek justice from Siebrecht. At the trial, when she was asked if she still had nightmares she said "I never had a night's sleep yet; I should have good rest, and a night's sleep I did not have." Her family doctor since 1918, Isaac Goodside, had sent her to see a number of specialists in the intervening years without any luck and said "I found her ageing very rapidly lately, particularly after she says her case has become past repair."

During her cross-examination at the trial, Eva talked at length about the day of the fall, and her condition since. Siebrecht's lawyers regularly interrupted her answers about her injuries or disability and in their examination tried to make it seem like she was lying about the unsafe staircase or whether she remembered it at all. She also mentioned that she had lost the ability to play the violin: "I played very well. I was very well advanced." She admitted she had not played since her accident. Siebrecht's lawyers grilled several of the doctors who had seen her in the hospital during her recovery, trying to undermine the story from a medical standpoint as well.

Most of the trial didn't involve her directly. There was a steady procession of architects, city inspectors, witnesses, police officers, doctors, and so on. That's why there were hundreds of pages in the transcript talking about the stairwell and only a few paragraphs about her life or her subjective experience.

Most of the press coverage of Eva's court case was not very positive. I couldn't find any coverage of her accident back in 1916, either in newspapers or labour publications.

I was hoping to find something about it in *Gerechtigkeit* or *The Ladies' Garment Worker*, the ILGWU papers, but I couldn't find anything among what was available online. The main coverage appeared in English-language dailies in early 1922 during and after the trial.

One particular article must have gone out via a wire service, because it appeared in papers from Alaska to Hawaii to Ohio. Generally they were titled "Hearing and Taste Hurt by Fall, She Asks \$25,000," often with a photo of Eva in a fur hat, gazing defiantly. It was even translated to Yiddish and printed in Der Tog- "Mohnt 25,000 dolar far farloyrenes geshmak."

The line about Eva losing her sense of taste and smell came mainly from the testimony of Ely Jelliffe, a neurology expert who had examined her. But the rest is just the cruel spin of the writer: "Such is the cash value of her delight in bon bons and ice cream. But her taste in clothes, in fine laces and in luxury is unimpaired." Of course, Eva was not living in luxury and her injuries were much more real.

One of the articles written by a local reporter was more sympathetic, talking about her love of music:

"The tears gathered in her eyes and welled over as she told of her exile from her beloved realm of music. Her father was leader of a famous orchestra in Vienna and she had inherited, she said, a love of music and developed some ability with the violin.

Since March, 1916 [...] she had not played the violin, and had apparently lost her appreciation of music."

-New-York Tribune, January 13, 1922

Towards the end of the trial, Siebrecht himself was called to testify. He came across as a very confident, dismissive man. He denied being the owner of the building at the time of the accident; although he admitted having originally built it in 1903. According to him, he transferred ownership to his wife Emma a few years later and by 1914 to the newly formed Siebrecht Realty Corporation, of which his she was the majority shareholder. Any time any of the testimony or questions in the court referred to him as the owner or involved in some way, his lawyers would object.

But it eventually came out that Siebrecht had written letters to the Department of Labor back in 1916 calling 425 Fifth Ave. "my premises." In the letter, he was raging against the instructions to build fireproof barriers on the staircases, saying "This seems to me to be placing a terrible burden on me, without very much result." By the end of the trial no one had any doubt that he was the real owner of the building. The idea that a separate company owned by his immediate family were the true owners was soon shown to be a thin legal fiction. As Eva's lawyer put it, he "regarded himself as the true owner and conducted himself accordingly."

The case was decided in Eva's favour in March 1922. She was granted \$6,000 plus costs, but not the \$25,000 she had been seeking. Siebrecht immediately filed for a new trial, but the judge denied it. He appealed it, but in 1924 the Appeals Court decided that there was no basis to change the judgement.

I don't know much about what Eva did after winning her settlement. I know from her family that she continued to work as a seamstress and pattern cutter. They knew about her disabilities but they did not know about her 1916 accident or her court case.

A few years after the trial, Eva and her siblings reconnected with some of their old townspeople in New York in a fraternal organization called the Zolotonosher Friends. That group, a landsmanshaft organization, was officially incorporated in February 1924. It held social events, offered support to sick members, and organized burials for at Mount Carmel Cemetery. The JewishGen KehilaLinks page for the group says:

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"They weren't just a burial society, they were a lively group of lifelong friends, and a quasi-extended family. I believe the core group (including my grandparents, Rosalie and Adolph Messen) met in Paris in the years before and during World War I."

- Peter A. Klein, 2014.

Eva's brother Abe was chairman of a committee in the group at some point and all the siblings living in New York seem to have remained active in it into the postwar era.

Eva lived quite a while longer, passing away in 1984 in New York. According to her relatives who remember her, she was active in the Garment Worker's Union (ILGWU), and like many of its members joined the Communist Party in the interwar years. Her relatives remember her fondly. As far as they can remember she eventually retired from being a pattern cutter and may have lived in ILGWU housing in her later years.



Eva and her sister Rebecca, c. 1935. From Aviva Boedecker.

NOTES

This booklet was published with the support of a MJAC Alumni Grant.

I first read Eva's name in 2020 when I was researching her brother Abe Elenkrig. At that time I had just finished grad school and was researching and writing biographies of old American klezmer musicians to post to Wikipedia.

When I saw newspaper and legal bulletin articles about her court case, I didn't understand the context nor that she was Abe's younger sister, so I ignored them. This changed after I began a correspondence with an Elenkrig descendant on a genealogy site, Aviva Boedecker, who was descended from Eva's sister Rebecca and knew Eva as a child. She sent me an excellent family history booklet she had worked on which had a whole chapter on Abe and Eva's immediate family, full of photos and stories none of us in the klezmer world had ever heard about.

After that I tried to look for other traces of the Elenkrig family, in old Russian-language records and documents about Elenkrigs in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and over in New York and Philadelphia. When I went back and re-read the articles about Eva's court case, I could tell that she had been injured in the workplace and that it had set some kind of precedent in U.S. corporate law. I decided to write to the New York State Archives and in 2021 I got the whole 500-page transcript of her January 1922 court case against the owner of the building she was injured in.

I had hoped such a long transcript would have more information about the Elenkrig family, but it only had a few lines about her musical or family background. And Eva herself is barely heard in the trial; aside from a brief crossexamination, most of the trial was about the condition of the building or trying to establish the facts of her accident.

I became interested in Eva's life, but I could not find enough information about her early years. This booklet project gives me a chance to try and work through some of this information. I'm also very happy to have the opportunity to work with illustrator and multidisciplinary artist Ava Berkson whose work elevates this from an essay to something better.

Researching this booklet led me to read up on immigration history, WWI-era socialist politics, and the lives of Jewish immigrant women in New York as depicted in books like *The World of Our Mothers* by Sydney Stahl Weinberg. Many of the small tidbits of information I found about Eva's early life come from digitized newspapers on sites like Old Fulton New York Post Cards and Jpress, or genealogical documents on sites like Ancestry and FamilySearch.

For the page about Abe Elenkrig's recording career I relied on "'Fon der Choope (From the Wedding)'--Abe Elenkrig's Yidishe Orchestra (April 4, 1913)" by Hankus Netsky, a blog post on the Library of Congress site, and the passage about him in Henry Sapoznik's Klezmer!: Jewish Music from Old World to Our World.

I would haven't been able to do this without Aviva Boedecker, Eva's relative who complied a very thorough family history book in 2019, as well as her mother and aunt Ronda Larmour and Naomi Shiff who shared their memories of Eva.

Dan Carkner October 2024, Vancouver BC AVA BERKSON is a Montreal-based multidisciplinary artist with a special affinity for drawing and ceramics. Ava embarks on illustrative storytelling through elements of movement and dance. Drawn from her childhood in an Irish-Ashkenazi Jewish home, Ava is heavily inspired by Celtic folklore and knot work, Yiddish dance styles and Irish and Yiddish folk music. Ava currently resides in Montreal and is completing her Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts at Concordia University.

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