

# Trials and Hardships of Immigrants

Louis Mounier

*Louis Mounier (1852–1937), a humane and cultured artist from France, immigrated to the United States circa 1873 and later accepted a position helping to expand the cultural horizons of Russian Jews who settled in the farming colonies of South Jersey, in particular Alliance, Carmel, and Rosenhayn. In 1901, the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society employed Mounier to encourage adult education and training. He brought to bear an extensive knowledge and practice of the arts and history. With Mounier's help, the colonists expanded libraries, built social halls, and implemented extensive programs of lectures and music.*

*Mounier studied painting and sculpture at the Association Philotechnique in Paris where he received several prizes for his work. After his accomplishments in Paris, Mounier traveled to London, where he learned and mastered English. From 1878–1894, he directed an art school in New York City where he pioneered the training of aspiring painters to join the developing art industry. Later Mounier and his wife Gabrielle moved to Vineland, New Jersey, where he was appointed the Director of Educational Work in the Colonies. His primary goal was to enhance community life by sharing knowledge and artistic appreciation throughout the colonies.*

*Mounier's compassion for the Jewish immigrant community is evident in the following essay, written in 1913 and later published in The Vineland Historical Magazine in 1933. In touching detail, Mounier describes the arrival of Yenta Kleinfeld and her three children at the Bradway train station, outside of Vineland. They were on the final leg of the arduous journey from Russia to join Joseph Kleinfeld, who had arrived a year earlier in the nascent Alliance farming colony. On this dark, cold and rainy evening, December 31, 1883, their arrival was unexpected. Mounier narrates the ultimately happy reunion.*



In the afternoon of Monday, December 31st, 1883, snow was falling over all of the Eastern States north of Philadelphia. In the southern part of New Jersey, the temperature being just above the freezing point, the precipitation took the form of rain, a glacial rain, enough so as to cause it to remain on the ground almost as slush. A more dreary day could not be imagined. Snow would have lent its purity of tone, its mellowness, its relative warmth, as well as its beautifying curves, over every sharp edged thing or feature, and would not have drenched or soaked everything it touched, as did this driving, penetrating, chilling, rain. This was an instance of what a mere degree of temperature may do. At 31: beauty, softness, comfort; at 32: rain, slush, wet, bedraggled garments; depression, and misery.

Southern New Jersey, or South Jersey, as it is commonly called, is, and has been advertised, as well-nigh snowless; but while this is partly true, at times, its chilly, dreary, damp, and raw days, when rain seems colder than ice, make one often wish for a carpet of beautiful snow.

Bradway station (later on called Norma), where the events related in this sketch occurred, was situated three and a half miles west of Vineland, on the Central Railroad of New Jersey, just about at the center of the southernmost part of the State, in what used to be called the "Pine Belt" and "The Barrens," which originally were covered with coarse scrub-pines, but in that time were grown over mostly with black, red, scrub, worm-eaten, oak trees.

There was then but one house within a stone's throw of the station. To the northward, another house near a saw mill (a rustic, and even then, dilapidated affair), and a couple of farm houses in the clearing constituted the "village."

There were two trains daily: one in the morning, the other scheduled to reach the place at about six o'clock (or an hour earlier than it is supposed to do at present). When all went tolerably well, this train was usually only half an hour late.

On that last afternoon of the year 1883, rain was at its worst. It was pitilessly falling, not in torrents, but steadily and ceaselessly. There was enough of a Northeast wind to be distinctly audible, as it blew through the branches of the trees, the needles of the native pines, and the sered but tenacious leaves of the white and scrub oaks.

Barring this howling of the wind through the bleak forest, there was an impressive silence. It seemed that the day was to end, as the year was to close, with an absolute absence of human activities, of human noises, of human presence.

As the long twilight of December was imperceptibly creeping in, the dismal dreariness increased, and night alone could not possibly lessen in some degree, this depressing phase of Nature's unhappy moments.

On that night, it was almost seven o'clock when the train stopped at the station (then only a flag one, composed of a small platform but slightly raised above the ground).

Four passengers alighted: one poor woman and her three children. The night was pitch dark, particularly for those who had been in that two-car train, though to be sure, it was not the great brilliancy of its lights that blinded their eyes. When the conductor helped the woman to jump the last step, she felt as though she were falling into a bottomless chasm. However, the instant her feet touched the boards of that platform she became reassured. Then she heard the brakeman throw down a couple of big bundles, which by the dull thump one made as it struck the boards, betrayed the mattresses that immigrants usually bring with them, while the other, on the contrary, rattled and clashed, indicating cooking and household utensils brought over with much trouble for economy's sake.

No sooner had these been thrown down than the locomotive bell changed its coarse tones, breaking still more the silence of the

night, and the train resumed its desultory gait, and disappeared gradually into the inky darkness of the night, its red rear-lights becoming fainter and fainter, more so by the rain than by the distance.

It was so dark, even when the train light had vanished away and the eyes of the poor passengers had had time to grow accustomed to the night, that the trees did not so much as make an outline against the sky.

They now felt that some mistake had been made, for there was not a soul to greet them, no welcome sound, no foot-steps, no voices, no horse-hoofs' patter, which would have been so gladly heard.

The distressed quartet peered into the blackness of the night, but saw no signs of habitation. They were getting wetter every minute, though they could not see the rain. They had been dropped there on a platform which they could not even perceive. They groped all around them for a shelter of some kind, but as they reached its edge, were fearful of stepping off, those ten or twelve inches seeming an abyss to them, for that foot of space was invincible, and in their plight they retained no other feelings in their disconsolate hearts than those of despair.

They now missed the companionship of the few passengers who were on the train, and, though they had not said as much as one word to any of them and had not been noticed nor spoken to, when that train and its human crew and cargo and its lights became lost to their sight, they experienced an inexpressible feeling of forsaken loneliness.

They waited and waited, becoming more and more soaked, more and more chilled. Not a board to creep under! Nothing but a miserable shawl which the woman had over her head, and which she tried to share with the two youngest children. In less than a half hour this garment was wet through, and the rain was now running down their backs. They waited thus, and no one came. They were not only half frozen, but faint from want of food.

By this time they could dimly see to the northward a faint ray of light. This glimmer was seen only from some places on the plat-

form, for, between it and this feeble light which was in the kitchen of the Bradway farmstead, there was a chicken yard and coops.

They exchanged a few words in a strange and uncouth tongue. The children were crying softly and pitifully, and the poor woman was now silent and disconsolate. Her tears by this time had ceased flowing, but her intense and mute despair, the spasmodic wringing of her hands, would have been heartrending to behold, had there been enough light to reveal them.

At all costs they must do something. Seeing the uselessness of waiting any longer, they felt their way, guided by that glimmering light, and, wading through the mud—half tumbling into holes, bumping against a fence, now and then losing sight of that dim guiding star which grew scarcely brighter as they neared it—they, the four of them, finally reached the farmhouse without having been heard. They timidly rapped at the door and with throbbing hearts and countenances so pitiful that they haunted the owner of that farm to his dying day, they at last stood before human beings.

Words were exchanged by both parties, but they expressed nothing to the addressed party; they were both unintelligible, save for an unmistakable distress on one side, and kindness on the other. The wanderers were using the Yiddish jargon, the Bradways the English language.

However Mr. Bradway soon saw the situation; these people must be taken to their relatives, two and a half miles away, to Alliance, the new settlement of Russian Jews. The state of the roads and the weather, as well as the lateness of the hour now that the quartet had been warmed and partly dried, prompted him to proffer food and shelter for the night; but they either did not understand him, or manifested unmistakably their desire to be led to their husband and father.

Mr. Bradway had only an open farm wagon on which to place the four people, and their belongings which he had fetched from the platform while they were warming themselves around the kitchen stove. The dripping bundles on one end of the wagon and the passengers on the other, with but one cotton umbrella over



Joseph Kleinfeld at Alliance. *Photograph courtesy of Dick and Anne Kleinfeld Brown.*

them, Mr. Bradway and his strange load left the house in search of the husband's place.

The northeast wind was still blowing and the rain still falling. The poor woman, protecting her children as much as she could, was getting wet not only by the rain, but that part which should have been her children's share, soaked still more her already drenched garments by running over the umbrella. But what of the rain! They were soon to be in their new home.

Thus the strange load proceeded on its way through the darkness. The driver had taken a lantern which made the night appear the darker, but a sudden jolt of the wagon put it out. Under the trees, the wind and rain were not driving so badly as on that exposed platform, and around the Bradway place. The road now could not be seen, for it was at that time only a woodman's way, save that part of it which formed the century-old road from Willow Grove to Millville. It was dotted here and there with stumps of trees which now and then threatened to overthrow the wagon and its rain-soaked contents and occupants into the ruts, or the briars, or the sucker-fringed remnants of oaks and pines.

Four mounds, or "hills," as they are called in these regions of flat expanses and sand barrens, had to be gone over and descended. Those rather steep, though diminutive hills, at the time proved quite a strain for the horse and the occupants of the rough conveyance. The road makers since those early days have scraped them flat as the rest of Southern Jersey.

At last, a small hut-like house was reached, the inmates awakened and questioned. Ah! how sweet the sound of the familiar jargon seemed to those starving, half frozen unfortunates. Who could express the feelings of that woman when she, for the first time since she had left the big steamer and Castle Garden, understood what others said? But this was not the place!

However, though it was now about midnight, and in spite of their benumbed fingers, their chilled bodies, and an almost overcoming faintness, brought about by a long fast and exposure, they grew more and more certain that the end of their dreadful expe-



rience was near. Gladness born of intense expectation warmed up their hearts, renewed their courage, and also calmed their impatience. A few minutes more and they surely would meet their long absent, long missed, and long desired husband and father.

Presently: "Is this Mr. Kleinfeld's place?" spoke Mr. Bradway, rapping loudly upon the door of the second house they came to, and breaking again the stillness of the night.

"Ya! Ya!" was the response soon coming from a long-whiskered and long-haired head stuck out of a window hastily raised.

A confusion of guttural sounds and strange words drowned the voice of Mr. Bradway crying out: "Somebody's here for you," and in another moment the family of five were hugging and crying and kissing each other. Tears of joy were flowing freely, and sobs of gladness intermingled with noisy exclamations seemed to come from a crowd ten times larger.

Mr. Bradway saw he was no longer needed. He climbed into his wagon, unnoticed during the confusion of that gladsome meeting, and went back on the way to his home, happy to have been instrumental in re-uniting those unfortunate victims of barbaric and sanguinary Russians, in the very last hour of the old year, and the wee first one of the new, which would truly begin for them a new existence in a new world. And his heart was really full of the spirit of those words of the season just ended, "Peace over the earth, and good will among all men."

L. Mounier, 1913

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