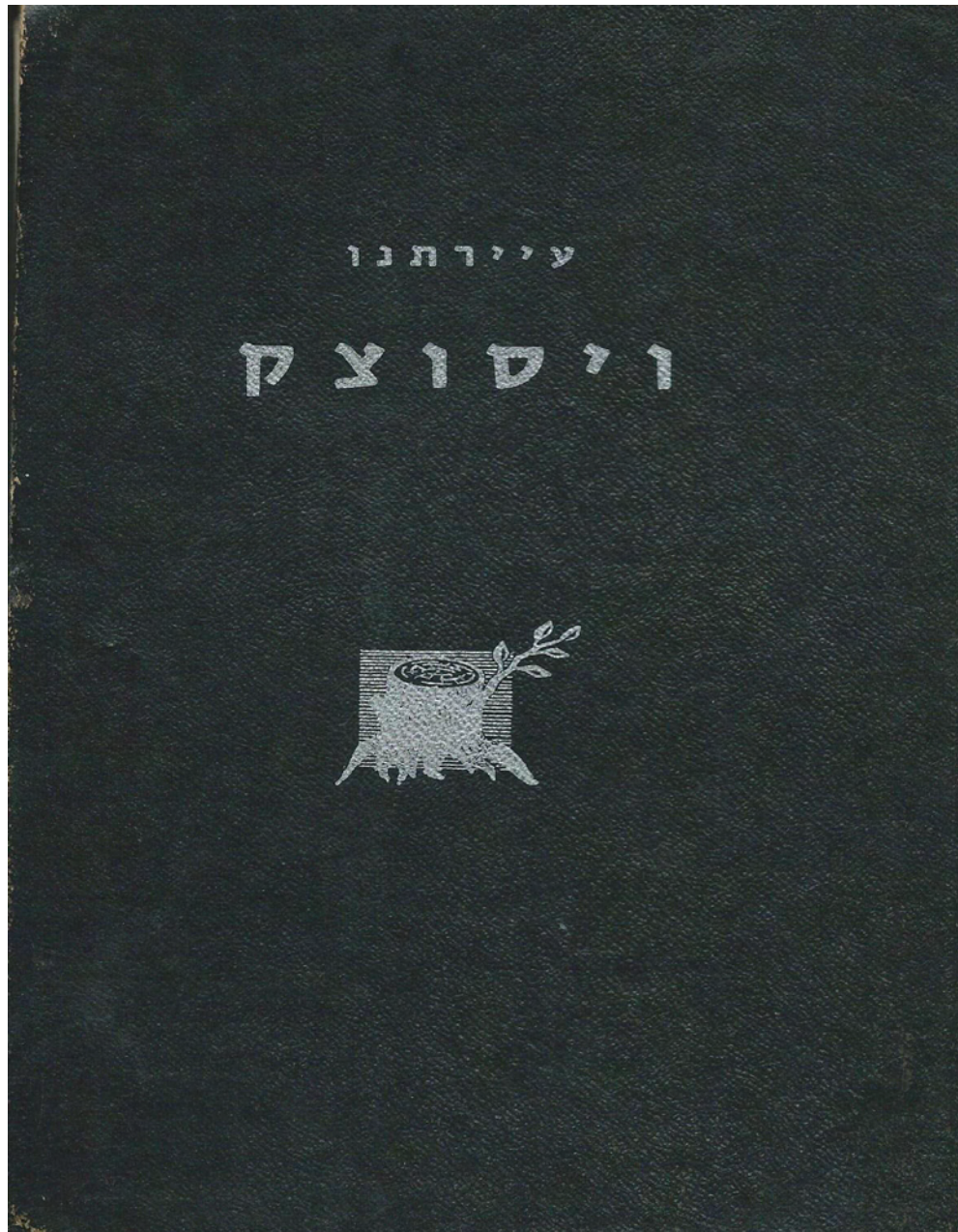


Our Shtetl

VYSOTSK memorial book



Translator's Foreword

Finding Vysotsk on the map

Vysotsk, with a population of just under 3,000, lies to the extreme north of the north-west Ukrainian province of Rivne. Dubrovytsya (pop. 9,600) is about 20 km to the south. A further 34 km to the south is Sarny (pop. 27,700), itself over 80 km north of the provincial capital of Rivne (pop. 247,700). Stolin (pop. 12,500) is about 25 km north of Vysotsk, separated nowadays by the Ukraine/Belarus border.

The Vysotsk that the authors of the Yizkor (memorial) book recalled was under Polish rule between the two world wars, part of the *kresy* (borderlands) subsequently incorporated into the Soviet Union. In those days, as the hand-drawn map of the Yizkor book shows, the bulk of Vysotsk's natural hinterland lay to the north, deep into what is now Belarus.

First visits to Vysotsk

Our first visit to Vysotsk, where my wife Sara's mother came from, was in 1993. We arrived unannounced, not knowing how the sudden presence of foreigners would be received. Villagers pointed us in the direction of the Jewish mass grave. On our return to the centre of Vysotsk we were greeted by the Head of the village, Grigory Yatsuta. He showed us the local history museum, then took us to meet Isaak Kaftan, the only Jewish person still living in the village.

A year later I paid another visit to Vysotsk, taking with me details of those who had been killed in 1942 (the list at the end of the Yizkor book transliterated into Ukrainian by Yad VaShem).

Subsequent visits to Vysotsk

Over a decade passed. On the next visit to Vysotsk Sara and I took with us our translation of Gitl Fialkov's astonishing personal account of survival (pages 154-180). Soon afterwards Gitl's story was translated into Ukrainian by teachers of English at the secondary school in neighbouring Dubrovytsya, and in 2009 this translation was included in the second edition of the book commemorating Vysotsk's millennium.

I also prepared a translation into Russian of the chapter-headings of the Yizkor book. Not surprisingly, more was requested. I therefore undertook to translate the complete book – though only too aware of the inadequacy of my Hebrew for such a task.

Translating the Yizkor book

As explained above, Sara and I started with Gitl Fialkov's account. Unlike the rest of the Yizkor book, which is in Hebrew, Gitl's account exists in two versions: her own, written in Yiddish, and her son's translation into Hebrew, which omits some significant material and adds or expands certain sections. What appears here is an amalgam of the two versions.

There is just one other Yiddish passage: a few stanzas from the Song of the Murdered Jewish People by Icchak Kacnelson (Itzhak Katzenelson). The rest of the book is in Hebrew. Needless to say, without Sara's help there are numerous passages I would not have made sense of on my own.

The Hebrew text contains many Polish, Russian and Yiddish words and expressions. The translation retains most of them, with explanatory footnotes where necessary.

Transliterating names of places and people

Nearly all of the names of villages and hamlets have been identified. Mostly they are left in the Yiddish form in conformity with the text, where necessary adding the modern Ukrainian, Polish or Byelorussian version in square brackets or as a footnote.

Family names presented a greater challenge. It is sometimes impossible to know how surnames of Hebrew origin should be transliterated, whereas with names of Germanic or Slavonic origin one can be more confident of a solution.

First names were problematic in a different way. Those of older people are transliterated in a traditional Yiddish form. Some of the younger people may or may not have altered the pronunciation of their names in anticipation of their new life in Eretz Israel. The names of those who settled in Israel generally appear in a standard Israeli form.

Inclusions and omissions

The complete text of the Yizkor book has been translated, except for the biographical details of those who settled in Israel and died before the book was published in 1963. Fifty years ago it was important to share these details with other former residents of Vysotsk, but by now nearly all of those listed as living in Israel have themselves passed away.

The photographs have been inserted in the text approximately in the same positions as in the original. Only one photograph has been omitted, partly because of the poor quality of the original and because it was in any case almost identical to the photograph on page 258.

I am grateful to members of my family for their help with the preparation of the photographs and the maps and in solving other technical problems.

Footnotes and glossary

The footnotes make no pretence to be anything other than basic. Many of them are repeated several times in order to avoid referring back to previous chapters. Needless to say, for those with a certain knowledge of Judaism or Zionism some of the footnotes will be redundant.

The glossary contains most of the Hebrew and Yiddish terms found in the text.

Looking forward

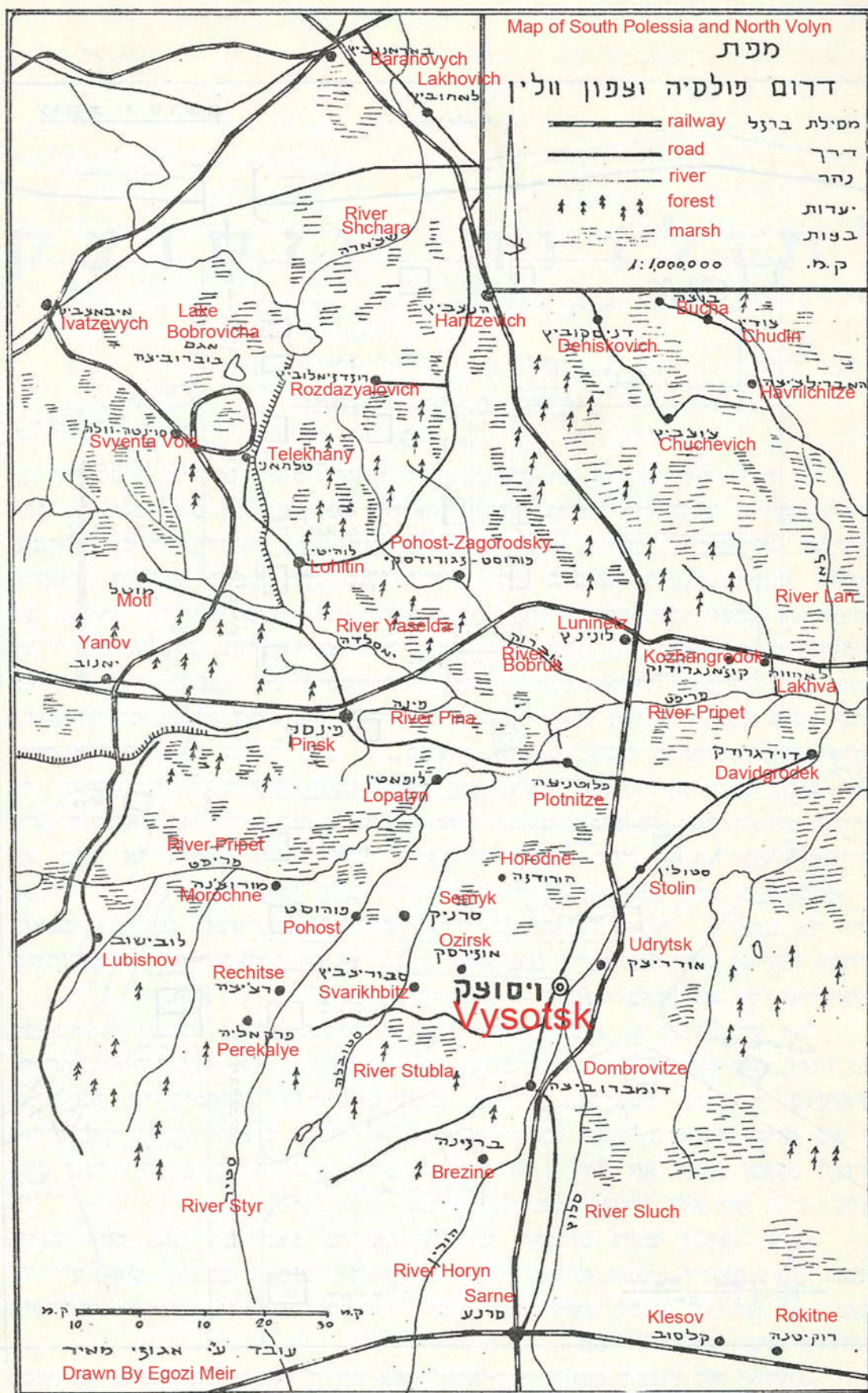
The primary aim of this translation is to make the history of the former Jewish community of Vysotsk accessible to the present-day inhabitants of the village. The hope therefore is that, little by little, sections of the Yizkor book will be translated into Ukrainian – as has already happened with Gitl Fialkov's story.

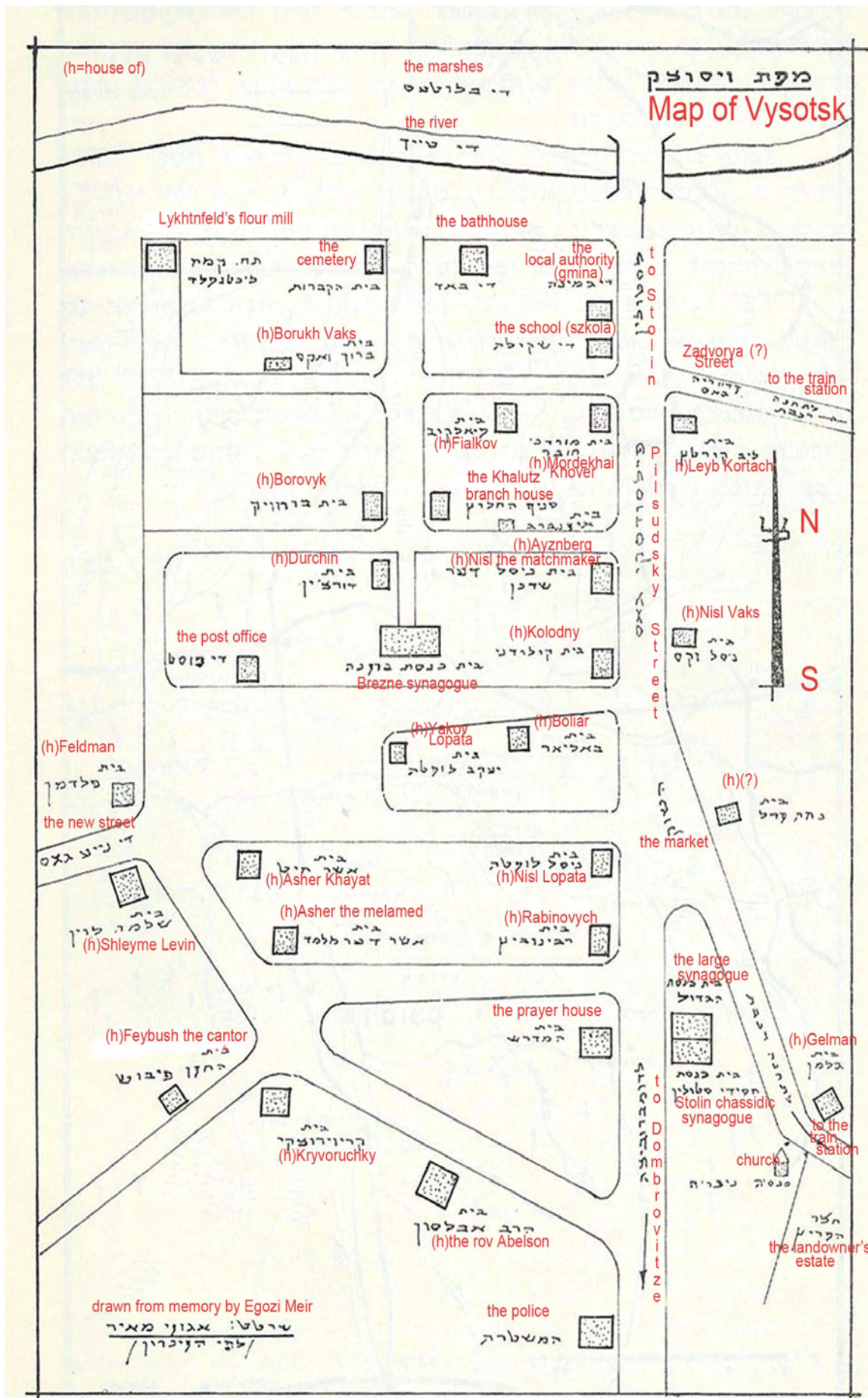
There is also much material in the book, whether descriptions of religious customs, rival political movements, the everyday life of the village or the detailed and vivid reminiscences of events in the war years, which could well be of interest and use to researchers in Ukraine, Poland and the English-speaking world.

Finally, there may be those with a personal connection with Vysotsk, unable to read the Yizkor book in the original, for whom this translation will bring to life an aspect of their family history.

Kevin Allen

Brighton UK, November 2014





Our shtetl, Vysotsk

Yizkor (memorial) book

Published by the Association of Former Residents of Vysotsk in 1963

Editor: Arie Fialkov

Editorial committee: Israel Gutman, Mordekhai Lopata, Rivka Nafkhan-Dan, Chaim Perlman, Zehava Shtoper-Zamir

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Preface

Though our hearts are full of yearning it is with great satisfaction that we present to the reader our book, a memorial book to our shtetl¹, Vysotsk.

Our shtetl was small and modest. This fact and all that goes with it – the small number of former residents of the shtetl living in Israel, their lack of skill in expressing themselves in writing, the financial constraints – all this determined the scope, form and appearance of the book.

The space in the book devoted to historical aspects is limited. We did not have sources or witnesses to assist us in drawing on events and stories from the distant past. We only came across a very small amount concerning the origins and history of the shtetl.

Despite that, there is relatively a good deal of material in the book on the life and struggle of the shtetl in recent times, during the first 40 years of the 20th century and up until the Holocaust; this was the most turbulent and crucial period in the life of our shtetl and in the life of the other shtetls of Volyn [Volhynia] and Polessia – those are the years during which the world order and society changed among the nations and among Jews. These years left their mark also on the lives of Jews of the shtetls of Volhynia and Polessia, among them our shtetl.

At the beginning of this period our shtetl witnessed the great migration to countries on the other side of the ocean; afterwards came the suffering and hardship of the First World War and the horror of pogroms and hunger after the war. It was at this time that we experienced the great awakening that followed the Balfour Declaration and the Russian revolution. The life of the young people was characterised by the tumult of those days; the overwhelming majority joined the Zionist and in particular the pioneer organisations (HeKhalutz² and the HeKhalutz HaTzair³) – for education purposes, training and emigration to Eretz Israel⁴. So during the course of the fifteen years from 1924 until 1939 about 160 young men and women from our shtetl (c. 20% of the Jewish residents of our shtetl) came to Israel. The great majority were members of HeKhalutz HaTzair and HeKhalutz and the pioneer training kibbutzim⁵.

It was a decisive period in the life of our shtetl and the impression of the period is stamped in the book in front of us. That is not to claim that we were able to incorporate everything. It is likely that certain chapters, events and deeds are not fully expressed here, either because there were no witnesses of the events or because of a lack of space in the book. At any rate the overwhelming majority of things that are written down we put together... they relate to this period, and for good reason.

The second period that is well represented in the book is the period of the Holocaust. The witnesses of this period are the last remnants remaining alive from the great slaughter. It seems to us that the words of the survivors that are in this book are not only a description of the horrors that took place within the borders of our shtetl, but also add valuable evidence to the literature of the destruction and the Holocaust in general.

Another section in the book is the part dedicated to the memory of the families and relatives who perished. In this section there are also interwoven words of memory and respect to people who in their lives and deeds contributed greatly to

¹ Yiddish: small town

² Pioneers

³ Young Pioneers

⁴ The Land of Israel, to which Zionists aspired to emigrate

⁵ collective training camps, forerunner of Israeli collective agricultural settlements

the character of the shtetl and its way of life. The scope of this section was determined by the writers themselves, that is to say by those who responded to our appeal and wrote about their families and relatives.

We note in appreciation and gratitude all those who contributed to the publication of the book: the many who contributed their money, all according to their ability, all of them former residents of Vysotsk; those who wrote and gave oral accounts of their experiences and their memories; those who supplied pictures and collections of material; those who were involved in the editing and preparation of the book and those who brought it to the publishers.

We shall not give thanks, we shall not hand out praise - we have done something that for us is a debt of honour to the memory of our family members and innocent, martyred relatives, an eternal memory for us and a witness to the truth for our children after us and to the generations to come. Let this book about our shtetl Vysotsk be an eternal tombstone to one of the remote shtetls in the diaspora, where we were born, where we were raised and grew up and whose memory has been branded in our hearts ever since we left and arrived in Eretz Israel, to work and to make a new life.

Concerning the History of Vysotsk

Vysotsk in changing times

It was right that we should open our book on our shtetl of Vysotsk with a historical survey about the shtetl, its past and origin; the beginnings of settlement there etc. For sure we do not imagine that our shtetl didn't have its own 'history'. It did, it certainly did. There are many signs to prove it: the old houses, tottering, about to fall, that remained in the shtetl, the old gravestones in the cemetery, the stories and tales told by old folk of the shtetl etc. From all of these we learn that our shtetl is old, with a 'history' of its own. But when we came to commit this 'history' to writing there wasn't a lot to hang on to. There wasn't enough material in our hands to form a complete 'picture'. The shtetl was pretty small, there were no well developed public institutions in it, no local newspaper of any sort appeared there, there were no writers or public figures, they didn't write about the shtetl in any newspapers and didn't tell about it in any 'memoirs'. It seems there wasn't even a community 'journal', the sort that was customary in various Jewish communities. Even when they said that one of the Jews of the shtetl had chronicled the events of the Jews of the shtetl, he didn't record much more than births and deaths. But this 'journal' was also lost with the destruction of the Jewish shtetl as a whole, and there is nobody left who could tell anything about it. This was a little Jewish shtetl which, like dozens and hundreds of other Jewish shtetls in Volyn and Polessia, lived its grey life. Of its joys and sorrows and of the various events no written record remained of any of these.

Nonetheless there is something there. The tiniest bit. We searched and researched and dug out here and there and from all of these something came together. Although we didn't really have time or means to do that much searching and scrabbling in old books, in encyclopaedias and in dictionaries etc, and however much we looked we doubted if we would find any more. We just found isolated lines, from which we learn that indeed the shtetl 'draws' its past from several centuries ago. Some of these records we include here.

In the book '1000 years of Pinsk', which appeared in Yiddish in America some years ago, there is a map of the region in the seventeenth century with Vysotsk marked in it, one of many such little towns. In an article about the history of Pinsk in the same book Vysotsk is mentioned as one of the small towns belonging to the district of Pinsk. This is what the article says: 'The growth of Pinsk in the sixteenth century came thanks to its geographical position. From a modest settlement in Brest province Pinsk grew, in a short period of time, to a metropolis with a wide influence, beyond the boundaries of Polessia. Pinsk's influence came from the fact that it established settlements (colonies) in Polessia which were bound to metropolitan Pinsk in the fields of law and taxation. In the year 1623, at the first sitting of the Lithuanian Council, at a time when Lithuania was divided into three districts, the following belonged to Pinsk district: Lakhovitz, Khomsk, Brahlin, Dombrovitz, **Vysotsk**, Turov, Niz. In fact Pinsk comprised more territory than the Council had determined...'

In a continuation of the article in the same book it tells of a rebellion of the 'colonies' in metropolitan Pinsk. This was in around 1764. The 'colonies' refused to pay taxes to Pinsk and Vysotsk was also among those rebelling...And in the same article, in a table showing the number of Jews in the region in the second half of the 18th century, Vysosk is mentioned as a settlement numbering 85 Jewish souls.

After Russian tsarist rule was established in the regions of Polessia and Volyn Vysotsk belonged, for administrative purposes, to Volyn and was part of the district of Rovno. With the establishment of Polish rule in the region (1920), Vysotsk was annexed to the district of Stolin in the *województwo*⁶ of Brest, a region of Polessia.

With the fall of Poland in the first days of the Second World War, when it was divided between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Vysotsk, together with the district as a whole, was annexed to the Soviet Union. A few days after the outbreak of the Russo-German war (June 1941) the Nazi German occupiers took over Vysotsk, as they did the region as a whole. They ruled it until they were expelled from it and from the region by the Red Army at the beginning of 1944. Since then Vysotsk, like the whole of Polessia, belongs to the Soviet Union, to the Republic of Byelorussia.

In our searches for sources regarding the history of the shtetl we found the article on Vysotsk in the Polish geographical dictionary that appeared in the year 1895, edited by Bruno Chalibowsky. In the article there is at last something more fundamental and comprehensive about the past and origin of Vysotsk and we publish this in our book.

Arie Fialkov

Afek

⁶ Polish: province

The shtetl in earlier times

Article according to the 'Geographical Dictionary of the Polish Kingdom and Other Slavonic Countries', Warsaw 1895

Vysotsk, which was known at a certain period by the name of Vyshogrod, is a little town on the river Horyn in Rovne⁷ province. Vysotsk is situated 17.5 *versts*⁸ from Dombrovitz⁹, 350 *versts* from Zhytomyr, 130 from Rovno and 3 from Vysotsk station on the Polessian railway line Vilne-Rovne¹⁰.

It has 217 houses, 1702 Orthodox inhabitants, 13 Catholics, nearly 100 Evangelicals¹¹ **apart from many Jews.**

The little town has its own Orthodox Church of the Assumption of the Most Holy Mother of God, which was built of wood on a walled foundation base and founded in the year 1877, also a school, a synagogue and administrative offices. There are five markets a year, mainly of agricultural equipment and produce.

The local authority area includes 16 rural hamlets in which there are 518 houses and 5,184 inhabitants. The total area amounts to 67,087 *desyatyns*¹².

On one side Vysotsk is washed by the waters of the river Horyn and its tributary Balamutky, on the other by the river Seret, creating as it were an island, linked to the land by bridges and dykes. On a high, man-made hill, stands the castle, and it is to this hill that the place owes its name.

The area to the left of the Horyn, where Vysotsk itself lies, is called by the name Zarzecze¹³, meaning 'beyond the river', whereas the territory of Polessia spreads out on the right-hand side of the Horyn. Occasional villages are scattered in the ancient forests of Polessia. The soil in this region is fertile; it consists of a mixture of clay and sand and it produces rye, wheat, millet, spelt, flax and potatoes.

Large deposits of iron ore are found in different spots. The forests here are intersected by rivulets and boggy swamps. Among the lowlands protrude some small hillocks called the 'Khylin hills'. The flora is rich and has its own special features. There are trees growing here which are not found in any other location: *Alnus Glutinosa* and *Quercus pedunculata* (oak).

Small pieces of amber are found in many places in the Horyn. In the distant past, when people were looking for a place for their settlements, they found it near the forest and within the forest itself. We know that Stanyslav Avgust was given a hammer and an awl made from stone, which were found in the fortress of Stolin when they were digging a well at a depth of close to 20 cubits.

Near the village of Rechitza¹⁴, which used to belong to the estate of Vysotsk, there are two large lakes linked by canals. At the bottom of these lakes you can come across wooden stakes, which seem to be remains of buildings in the lake. These have not yet been investigated by scientists. According to local legends, there existed a settlement here, 'Pochaiv'. Because of the sins and wickedness of the inhabitants this sank into the ground together with the church. An abyss opened up and was filled with water. Every year at Easter – so the locals say – there is the plaintive sound of bells rising from the depths of the lake.

⁷ now Rivne (Ukrainian), previously Rovno (Russian), Równo (Polish) as well as Rovne (Yiddish)

⁸ 1 verst = 3500 feet

⁹ now Dubrovysya

¹⁰ Vilnius-Rivne

¹¹ Lutherans

¹² 1 desyatin = 2.7 acres

¹³ now Zarichya

¹⁴ now Richytsya

In ancient times the banks of the Horyn were settled by Slavonic tribes, whereas the population of the village and the area around Vysotsk was mixed. The name of the village of Hranitz, near Dombrovitze, is evidence that it was the border between these two Slavonic tribes.

We know from history that already in the eleventh century the Varangian-Rus princes were beginning to carve themselves a path among local tribes by force. We find quotations to that effect dating from 1116. In Horodno (several miles from Vysotsk) the family of Vsevolodok Volodymyrovych, who reigned here from 1116 until 1182, sat on the throne.

The origins of Vysotsk itself are difficult to determine. Vysotsk's position as an island between the rivers, being protected and fortified by nature, attracted settlers.

Dombrovitze Russian princes ruled the area in the 12th and 13th centuries. Following the invasion by the Tatars the surrounding region was liberated and passed to the ownership of the throne. In the 15th century it was handed over to the Lithuanian princes Olgymuntovych-Olshansky. According to the chronicles, one of the owners was the father-in-law of Władysław Jagiełło.

Villagers in the area always had to struggle with the primeval forest. Vysotsk grew and became a significant settlement. Prince Yuri, helped by many Boyar knights, fought many battles with the Tatars in the surrounding region. While the prince was absent from home Tatars attacked the area and Dombrovitze. His wife, the princess, hid on the island. That's how she saved her life.

As early as the 17th century the whole area was under threat from the Tatars. In 1654 Tatars attacked hamlets in the area, robbed, pillaged, took people into captivity and sold them as slaves. In 1664 *hetman*¹⁵ Pavel Tetera Moshkovsky, who had married Helena, the daughter of Bogdan Khmelnytsky, bought the place and built a new castle on the foundations of the old one. But because of arguments about booty and money he was forced to flee from the Zaporozhsky Cossacks and he handed Vysotsk over to the Jesuit order in exchange for a yearly payment of 8,000 zlotys. Later he had second thoughts and sold the estate to a private owner. He died in Turkey, where he went in order to place himself and Ukraine under the protection of the sultan. After his death in 1742 the Jesuits regained ownership of the place, based on a verdict reached after legal battles between them, the buyer on one side and Tetera's heirs on the other side. These legal battles lasted for 70 years.

In 1773 the Jesuit order was liquidated by a papal bull issued by Pope Klement XIV. All the land that belonged to the order passed into state ownership and in 1775 the land was designated for educational purposes, administered by an education commission. In accordance with a decision of the *seym*¹⁶ the territory was leased to Wygonowsky¹⁷, and he in turn leased it to Mateusz Butrymowicz, famous for digging the canal linking the rivers Pripyat and Niman. To this day the canal is called Oginsky¹⁸.

There remains an inventory of the property that was transferred in 1774, following the abolition of the Jesuits, with a detailed description of the castle, the churches and also of the town itself, which was next door to the castle (as was customary). According to the inventory, in the town there were 83 houses, in which lived 83 owners, 134 sons and 4 relatives. There were 122 bulls and 42 horses. According to the inventory only 7 of the property owners were Jews. At the time of Lithuanian rule Vysotsk belonged to Lithuania as part of the Brest-Lithuanian province in the district of Pinsk.

¹⁵ the second highest military commander (after the king)

¹⁶ Polish parliament

¹⁷ chamberlain of the Brest-Lithuania province

¹⁸ Butrymowicz worked for Prince Oginsky

After the partition of Poland Vysotsk became part of Minsk province, and in 1805 it was united with Rovno district in Volyn province. Wygonowsky handed the area over to Borejko, who took part in Tadeusz Czacki's cultural project. He invited immigrants from Denmark¹⁹. They were Mennonites (an Anabaptist sect) and they founded a Danish colony called Sofiivka (it is now a German colony not far from Vysotsk), named after his daughter Sofia, who married Rulikowsky. Finally the territory was handed over to the Rulikowskys.

Local Jews are involved in trade, picking blackberries and cranberries and also the mushrooms which grow in great quantities in the forests. Every year they send several *baydaks*²⁰ full of this produce to Kiev and Odessa.

The villages which belong to Vysotsk are: Ozery, Udrytsk, Milyach, Zhaden, Yelno and Vilka Klusovska.

In the 'Jewish Encyclopaedia' [publ. in St Petersburg before the Revolution] appear the following two references:

- 1) Vysotsk – a small town in Rovno district, Volyn province. In 1847 the Jewish community in Vysotsk numbered 320 souls; in 1897 there were 912 inhabitants of whom 880 were Jews.
- 2) Vysotsk – during the time of Polish rule the small town was in the *voyevoda*²¹ of Brest (Lithuania), Pinsk district. Following the foundation of the Lithuanian council in 1623 the Jews of Vysotsk became part of the community in Pinsk. According to the census of 1766 there were at that time 85 Jews.

Vysotsk in 1901

From the Towns of the State

Vysotsk (Volyn district). The families of our community, the sons of Israel, number about two hundred and fifty. The majority are craftsmen who earn a living with difficulty. There are a few small shopkeepers and small traders, but their fate is no better than the first. The economic situation of our town is in general very bad; there are many who look for work but don't find any.

The moral situation of our community is much lower than the physical situation; it is a miracle that the charitable institutions that exist are still standing. There is the hospice which the venerable old rov did much to improve and adorn and put on strong foundations but now the hospice has deteriorated markedly, with zero funds for its economic needs, for the little money that is collected each week from the members is not enough for the many needs of expenditure. Accordingly they are up to their necks with spiralling debts. The former managers have washed their hands of it, and until others come to fill their place there is nowhere for the poor to rest other than in the prayer houses.

The sick fund society that existed for some years has also failed, collapsed and ceased its activities, as if it had never been.

In our town the lack of water is certainly felt, for the river that supplies the residents of our town with water is some distance away, and it is a common thing for the lack of water in the town to leave its inhabitants thirsty. It is about three moons since generous persons were moved to make good the lack of water by digging wells.

¹⁹ Holland, according to the original Polish version

²⁰ flat-bottomed boats

²¹ Russian: province

They had already begun their positive project and dug and found fresh water suitable for drinking and cooking when hard-hearted men in our community raised objections and disrupted the work, which was stopped in the middle. Meanwhile our town remained without water as before, and not only that but the well, which was not finished, became an obstacle in a public area. A 9 year-old boy has already fallen down the well but he was brought out while he still had life left in him.

We also feel the lack of a doctor. The doctor from the nearby town of Dombrovitz did indeed agree to visit our town twice a week for an agreed yearly salary, also there were other home-owners who undertook to pay the salary due to him, but when the time came to pay their dues, again there was embarrassment and confusion. So therefore our town will remain without a doctor.

Once again the wrath of the Lord poured forth on Breznitze, a neighbour of our town. On the 16th day of *Tammuz*²² at one o'clock in the morning fire broke out from one of the cowsheds and consumed eighty-six large and good houses. Also many shops. The condition of that town is very bad because that was the third fire in the last three years. And the inhabitants of the town were getting poorer even before the latest fire.

B. Abelson

taken from *HaTsifra*²³, no. 174



A house in Vysotsk (the home of the Gutman family)

²² June-July

²³ 'The Dawn', the first Hebrew-language journal in Poland. Founded in 1862, it ceased publication in 1927

The Shtetl in its Life and Work

Our shtetl

The shtetl of my birth, Vysotsk, was far from the railway station and as if cut off from the whole world. It was integrated into the expanse of meadows and rivers that quietly flow in summer. These rivers pass by the borders of the fields and pour out at the beginning of spring. This is the time when the rivers close in on the shtetl and cut it off from the outside. And in winter the rivers freeze.

I don't know anything about the beginnings of the shtetl, when it was founded, its history, its distant past. For me its history begins with my grandfather Moyshe of blessed memory. I heard about the Lopatyn family, which split into different branches, whose surnames differ because there were many brothers and they were destined for the danger of 'kidnappers'.

I remember a small, poor shtetl where there were no rich people. All of them were poor 'house-owners'. But the poor were not poor in the usual sense of the word. Wooden houses, straw roofs. A number of alleyways that were called streets, and one of the main streets was called the market (*der mark* [Yidd.]). Concentrated in this street were the tiny shops, from each of which hung a sign with the same meaning: *sklep mieszany* (a shop selling miscellaneous goods). A sort of *kolbo*²⁴ in miniature. There we did all our shopping, bought our groceries such as salt, groats, salt fish, a bottle of kerosene for the oil lamps (there was no electricity), material for clothes and so on.

Also prominent in the same street was 'the pump', a source of fresh water. Men, women and children thronged around it, waiting their turn to fill their buckets with water.

The shtetl was surrounded by streets belonging to the Goys²⁵. There were three streets, very long and straight, with little wooden houses, grey, without decoration.

Behind the houses huddled the farm buildings: stables and cowsheds, pig sties and haystacks. Whenever Jewish children ventured into the area they were very frightened of the dogs that were there.

The shtetl contained within itself the whole of life. The Jews earned a living from petty trade and crafts. The craftsmen were builders, tailors and cobblers. They would begin their work at sunrise and finish at sunset. And in the winter, when the days were short, they would continue to work by the light of oil lamps until late at night.

Craftsmen wandered among the nearby Goy villages in order to find sustenance. On Sunday they would put on their sack of tools and their talis²⁶ and tefilin²⁷ and walk to a village. On Friday they would return home for the Sabbath, when the meagre bundles of pay were handed over to their wives.

The majority of craftsmen had two trades: building, which they worked at during the summer months, and tailoring or shoemaking in the winter. The Jews were healthy and strong and extremely honest. They were imbued with the tradition of generations who had kept the commandments, the Sabbath and the religious festivals.

On the Sabbath songs and prayers rose up from their houses and from the three synagogues in the shtetl. They ate Sabbath and holiday meals, and on Sabbath

²⁴ 'everything in it' - a general store (the writer had a typical kibbutz store in mind)

²⁵ non-Jews

²⁶ prayer mantle

²⁷ small leather box containing hand-written passages from the Bible

afternoon the shtetl slumbered its slumber, the sleep of the Sabbath. Marriage ceremonies would always take place on Friday. They would then make the many Sabbath preparations early in order to join the chupa²⁸ ceremony. All the members of the shtetl would go to see the chupa, which was next to the big synagogue.

The newly married couple would be accompanied from the chupa by a large crowd, while the kleyzmorim²⁹ from Dombrovitze, Gabriel and his sons, played their sweet melodies.

And then there were the funeral ceremonies. Almost all the shtetl would take part in the burial.

Sabbaths were always full of joy and light when the rebbe³⁰ visited the shtetl. The rebbe from Stolin or from Pinsk was known as *der karliner*³¹. On the eve of Sabbath they crowded around the windows of the house where the rebbe was staying; a large crowd of all ages watched lively Chassidic dances and listened to their tunes and they all enjoyed them as one.

There were many long ordinary days in the shtetl, dreadful, boring days, days when it was as if nothing in the world was happening.

I knew the generation of young adults who, in their lives and activities, were the beginning of the revolution towards a new set of values. They were the ones who established a Hebrew school, a large Hebrew and Yiddish library and who shaped active public life.

They were already organised in Zionist or non-Zionist political organisations. They argued about Zionism, socialism, Bundism³² and communism. They worked for Keren Kayemet³³ and Keren HaYesod³⁴. And they were called by various names: Poalei-Tzion³⁵, Tzeirei Tzion³⁶, the HeKhalutz HaBoger³⁷.

Fresh winds blew into the shtetl, remote and frozen in its traditions, awakening the growing generation of the young. The Hebrew school and the Khalutz HaTzair³⁸ organisation were a source of nourishment for the revolution. There our eyes were opened to see and feel the reality in which we were living; there the strong desire to change the order of things was aroused.

There was aroused in us a hatred of idleness and of doing nothing, a hatred of exile. Implanted in us were feelings of national and human longing for freedom and open spaces. We began to speak Hebrew, we devoured the Hebrew literature that was building a new man. I had already read Jean Christof, the HaTkufa³⁹ books and so on in Vysotsk.

We learned that there was a big wide world and the ambition to study and the striving for knowledge matured within us. How we loved to study!

Some of us escaped and went to Vilne and Rovne, to study in the Hebrew gymnasia and Hebrew training colleges. Later we ran away, contrary to our parents'

²⁸ wedding canopy (pronounced khupa)

²⁹ Yiddish: musicians (singular: kleyzmer)

³⁰ dynastic Chassidic rabbi

³¹ from Karlin, a suburb of Pinsk

³² The Bund was the main non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement, founded in 1897 to represent Jews in Imperial Russia. It supported the 1917 February Revolution but opposed the October Revolution. It ceased its activities in the Soviet Union in 1921 but remained active in Poland (and the United States)

³³ Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlement

³⁴ United Jewish Appeal, founded in 1920, the main international fund-raising organisation

³⁵ Workers of Zion, an independent Zionist-socialist party, members of the right-wing section of which later played key roles in the new State of Israel

³⁶ Youth of Zion

³⁷ Adult Pioneers

³⁸ Young Pioneers

³⁹ 'The Era', Hebrew-language quarterly, founded in Moscow in 1918, moved to Warsaw in 1922

wishes, for training and afterwards to aliyah⁴⁰ and the realisation of our dreams in the Land...

The shtetl and our dear parents, also many of the young people, remained behind after we had gone. We began a new life in Israel, a life of construction and creation, while over them hovered and fell the terrible Shoah.

Zehava Shtoper-Zamir

Ramat HaKovesh

Jews of Vysotsk

There were many generations of Jews in Vysotsk. They had established their community according to the customs of their forefathers in the spirit of religion, imbued with the Chassidism⁴¹ of the older generation. Until the end of the previous century no progress was known in the shtetl, at a time when its neighbours, Dombrovitz on the one hand and Stolin on the other, were developing to a greater or lesser extent. Far from there being any rivalry in the shtetls in the economic or cultural field, its unique way of life remained the same even at the beginning of the present century; there was no new wind blowing there. There was no thought of any of life's luxuries because the majority of the Jews were very poor, getting by on no more than a crust of bread. Anyone who was conscious of this and was sad about it dreamed of getting out of the shtetl. Everything was geared to the grey everyday life and was filled with material cares.

Sometimes when there was an argument between Chassidim of Stolin and Chassidim of Brezne⁴² and they were confronted by a schism in the synagogue or when there was an argument about slaughter etc there came the intervention of the local rov, Yehuda Abelson of blessed memory, who was respected by all members of our faith and who knew how to solve matters. Through his influence the arguments were settled peacefully and with respect; the Jews of the shtetl were reconciled one with another in peace, in their homes, in their streets, in the synagogue and not least in the public baths.

Vysotsk was a typical Jewish shtetl, with its 127 buildings, homes of the Jews. According to the Russians' census of 1897, there were 800 Jews alongside 32 non-Jews. Even 25 years later the Jewish community, which numbered about 106 families, had not grown. But the number of non-Jews had increased considerably. It

⁴⁰ emigration to Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel)

⁴¹ founded by Rabbi Israel de Eliezer (1698-1760), known as Baal Shem Tov, Chassidism (chassid: righteous or pious) emphasises prayer and devotion, in contrast to the academic rabbinical orthodoxy prevalent in Lithuania

⁴² now Berezne, north-east of Rivne

was only in the last years of the Polish period that the Jewish community grew a little, even though the numbers leaving were quite significant.

In the 80s in the last century Reb Moyshe Rabinovych sat on the rabbinical seat. They called him Reb Mushke. He died 45 years ago, approximately, on the 10th day of Tevet [December]. He was a father devoted to the Jews of the shtetl, and even the Goys venerated him and would turn to him. He didn't leave a successor for his son, Reb Leybush, was the butcher in the shtetl and his son Mordekhai was merely a 'good Jew', who gave up everything and made do with very little. Reb Leybush the butcher was a progressive man for whom the limitations of Vysotsk were difficult so he wandered off to Berdichev. There he studied, researched and wrote a commentary on the Bible.

Shortly after the death of Reb Mushke of blessed memory the admor⁴³ of Stolin, the 'heir' Reb Isroel Perlov, invited Reb Yehuda Abelson, who was the rebbe⁴⁴ in Petrikov. Although he wasn't a zealous Chassid from the Stolin dynasty, he was sent to serve as the rov⁴⁵ in Vysotsk. Reb Yehuda was expert in the Torah⁴⁶, easy to deal with and quickly made friends with all the people in the shtetl. The common folk related to him and studied a passage from the Mishnah⁴⁷ with him between afternoon and evening prayers. On Sabbath afternoons they listened to him reciting the passage of the week. This was not customary in the old Chassidic camp, so at first they didn't join in his lessons or his sermons. One of Yehuda Abelson's four sons, Reb Yehoshua, who was wiped out with all of the Jews of Vysotsk in the last catastrophe, remained as successor to Yehuda Abelson.

Most of the people of the shtetl belonged to three clans:

1) the '*Yakov Leyblekh*' – owners of important houses, students of the Torah of long lineage who considered it a disgrace to marry tradesmen. They came from the rabbi 'Asher Yakov Leybs' (a Jew who was a great scholar of the Torah and law). In the absence of the rabbi they would turn to him regarding questions of meat and milk and so on. His grandson, the butcher Reb Chaim, was a man of honour and zealous in his religion.

2) the '*Nisalekh*' [Yidd.: 'little nuts'] – who were considered a family of second rank. The tradesmen were also part of them. They were called by the name of Reb 'Nisn Leahs', a Jew of high standing and good temperament, whose house was always open to anyone in need. Although the hostel, the only hotel in Vysotsk, was in his house, all the same he never demanded payment from a guest, but those who wanted to and were able to would pay. Most of the guests would leave without paying. Anybody who showed up or any parasite found with him a place of rest and food free of charge. In public affairs he also did not seek any reward. On all occasions he responded to his fellow man and acted well towards his Jewish brethren; he conducted himself in public matters warmly as a righteous man.

The family of *Nisalekh* were owners of houses and people of influence in all matters in the town and there were many interesting characters among them: Reb Nisl Meirs, a cobbler by trade, and his wife Feyge-Mirl. In his spirit and soul he was entirely just. A couple who didn't know the meaning of the word 'I'. They were always full of cares and burdened with work looking after and sorting out the affairs of the poor of the town and matters concerning the guests, the sick of the town and also those in need of help in the town. He was always running somewhere. Whenever they asked him: *Reb Nisn, vos loift ihr?* [Reb Nisn, why are you running?] the

⁴³ acronym for adoneinu (our Master) moreinu (our Teacher) verabeinu (our Rabbi)

⁴⁴ Dynastic Chassidic religious leader

⁴⁵ local Chassidic religious leader

⁴⁶ Five Books of Moses, Pentateuch

⁴⁷ written about 200 AD, this is the first written record of the 'oral law' which, according to tradition, God gave Moses on Mount Sinai but which was not incorporated in the Bible

answer would be: *es fehlt nit keyn tsores in shtetil* [There's never any lack of worries in the shtetl]; *Reb Nisn, vos makht ihr?* [Reb Nisn, how are you?]; *Shver tsu helfn di noitike* [Trying to help those in need]; *ober ihr aleyh vos makht?* [But how are you yourself?]; *adank dem reboyne-shel-oylem, mir fehlt gornisht* [Thanks to the Creator of the world, I don't lack anything]. Although he was very poor himself, he was one of those people who are satisfied with their lot. He would open the doors of the synagogue for 'those in need' at midnight. On Sabbath eve he would rouse the congregation of Israel two hours before sunset by sounding in the streets the traditional melodies: '*Isroel, am kadushim, shteyt oyf, shteyt oyf leavodas hobore* [Israel, holy people, rise to worship God], for that is what you were created for ...'

At the close of the Sabbath he always looked after arrangements for the *melave malka*⁴⁸ in the public house of study, singing songs superbly and with devotion. The third family – Reb Yitzhok Berchiks – was more extended. Almost all of its sons were craftsmen, particularly builders. Every summer, in some of the villages, there would be fires because the houses were of wood and straw. That is how they made most of their income. Early every Sunday they would go out into the villages, armed with *talis*⁴⁹ and tefilin⁵⁰ and tools. They would return home on the eve of Sabbath with produce from the village and also with some roubles in their pockets, the wages for their work. These simple and honest Jews made do with little, they read a lot of psalms and they spent the holy Sabbath not only in rest and prayer, but also in studying the Talmud⁵¹ and Torah⁵², in singing etc. There were among them a few who knew how to study the Midrash⁵³ and are worth remembering: Eliahu Moyshe, Reb Shleyme Yakov the glazier and the gravedigger and his son Moyshe, the rov Dovid Kaftan, Reb Aaron Yoynes and others like them.

I remember a mass meeting on the occasion of the Balfour Declaration⁵⁴ by the synagogue. There I made a speech in front of the crowd concerning the importance of the declaration. After the speech I was approached by Reb Aaron Yoynas the tailor. With tears in his eyes he asked me: 'Tell me Chaim, do you believe we shall really see Isroel with our own eyes?'

And how could I not recall Reb Avram Yitzhok Gedaliahs, the eminent scholar of the Torah and the doer of good deeds who went to David Horodok? Or Reb Asher Khayat who was at the head of everything to do with the public? He was the *adresn-shrayber*⁵⁵ who also wrote requests to institutions in Russian and Polish; the *proszenia*⁵⁶ to the *gmina*⁵⁷ and the head of the village were always done without payment. And many others like them, generations of honest folk, for whom respect is awakened by their memory.

And the last – Reb Feybush the blacksmith who never uttered an empty word and was honest and saintly in his conduct with God and man. The man was just, hovering always in higher thoughts. And when the days of Elul⁵⁸ arrived in the town it was felt that the terrible days, days of judgement, were approaching, and all private dealings were connected to the whole community. Then everybody felt in truth that the sons of Israel were responsible towards one another. In this spirit of tradition and

⁴⁸ 'Accompanying the Queen', the third and final meal of the Sabbath

⁴⁹ prayer mantle

⁵⁰ small leather box containing hand-written passages from the Bible

⁵¹ a collection of rabbinical discussions on the Bible, Jewish law, ethics etc

⁵² Five Books of Moses, Pentateuch

⁵³ commentaries on and interpretations of the Bible

⁵⁴ On 2 November 1917 the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, confirming that the British government favoured the 'establishment in Palestine of a national homeland for the Jewish people'.

⁵⁵ Yiddish: letter writer

⁵⁶ Polish: requests/applications

⁵⁷ Pol.: local authority

⁵⁸ the 12th month, August-September

religion, of fraternity and devotion, the young generation grew up, devoted with all its soul to the people of Israel and their destiny.

Then came the revolution of 1917 and with it changes in the patriarchal life of the Jews of Vysotsk. New spirits began to blow in the hearts of the young and a light was lit in the Hebrew school, which was established with difficulty and helped greatly in educating the children in the national spirit. The camp of youth, bearing ideals and ambitions, appeared on the stage of life in the shtetl. In particular Zionist



Stesya and son Chaim Ayznberg

activity developed in the shtetl during the time of Polish rule (1920-1939). The shtetl bloomed in all areas, even though the hand of the ruler pressed hard on the Jews. Many of the young people left for pioneer training, and it is no wonder that the little shtetl of Vysotsk provided over 150 pioneers.

Chaim Ayznberg of blessed memory

The First Days of Awakening

We were four friends, aged 14 to 16. The idea that culture and education are the basis of progress took hold of us. This idea was the basis of the proposal to establish a library in our shtetl. My friend, Zeydil Lopatyn, together with whom I studied for about eight years, agreed to my proposal. Zeydil, who had lost his father (killed by lightning), was small of stature, very clever and sympathetic, and he had the ability to help in bringing this mission to fruition. Dovid Shtoper, whose family were friends of our family, had a good and active nature. Yitzhok Yakhnyuk, an orphan, gifted from birth but lacking the means to develop his talent, had the motivation to make up for what he missed in lessons in the evenings and on Sabbaths. So he moved from group to group looking for companionship. In the end he had to study the trade of shoemaker. In his nature a talented boy, he was able to contribute a great deal to our cause.

First library

We four friends met and decided to send one of us to Dombrovitza⁵⁹ to meet Avram Binder, secretary of the Hebrew library in the town, and Avram Shvartz, secretary of the Bundist Jewish library⁶⁰. Since I was the lazybones of the group I was the one chosen to be 'the envoy' to Dombrovitza.

A couple of days later I returned from Dombrovitza. In my hands were 25 Hebrew books, among them the novel 'Love of Zion' by A. Mapu⁶¹. And books by Frishman⁶² and Lilienblum⁶³. From Shvartz I ordered 60 books which would be sent

⁵⁹ now Dubrovysya

⁶⁰ The Bund was the main non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement, founded in 1897 to represent Jews throughout Imperial Russia. It supported the 1917 February Revolution but opposed the October revolution. In 1921 it ceased activities in the Soviet Union but remained active in Poland (and the United States)

⁶¹ Avraham Mapu, who was born in Kovno (Kaunas) in 1808 and died in Königsberg (Kaliningrad) in 1867, wrote in Hebrew – his *Ahavat Tzion* (Love of Zion) is regarded as the first Hebrew novel

⁶² David Saulovich Frishman, born 1864 in Zgierz, a town just north of Łódź, died in Berlin in 1922

⁶³ Moshe Leyb Lilienblum (1843-1910) wrote in both Russian and Hebrew

from Vilne. These were books by Peretz⁶⁴, Mendele⁶⁵, Frug⁶⁶, Sholem-Aleikhem⁶⁷, Weissenberg⁶⁸ and so on.

I had to get hold of a sum of 25 roubles to cover the price of the books plus 20 roubles for binding. Each of us undertook to give the sum of three roubles and it was up to us to collect the balance of the sum from honorary membership contributions.

That is how we found our way to Chaim Ayznberg, the only son among sisters. He was accepted as an honorary member after he paid a rouble. The others were honorary members without voting rights: the chemist Berl Reznik, Yakov Fishman, Aaron and Yakov Olevsky, Itzik Lopata, and Itzik Rabinovych.

The balance of the sum we collected by means of lotteries. Thus after a month of work we obtained 85 books. But where were we to go from there? We needed to look for a room where it would be pleasant for boys and girls to come. To do the binding I found Nakhman Itzhok, the son of the second wife of Hillel. We found a room at Tzirl's place, the mother of Zeydil Lopatyn, despite the fact that her daughters and their husbands and children were living in the house.

None of Zeydil's family was opposed to this, and his mother was happy to see her son, who as a child had been a handful, doing constructive work. I felt uncomfortable, being the grandson of the rov and the son of Yakov Rabinovych, the devout Chassid⁶⁹. I was accused of introducing an abomination into the shtetl. This is what the Chassidim called these books.

This was the first library in the shtetl. We succeeded in establishing our library in spite of the conflicts with the old people. The first female readers were: Pesil Zakhries and Lea Eliezer Zakhries who belonged to the youth socialist circle. There were few teachers of Hebrew, but we did our best to read and understand by ourselves. More than once we were called to the rov of the shtetl Abelson, who rebuked us regarding the library, in spite of the fact that his son and my brother Yitzhok were regular readers of HaTsira⁷⁰ from Warsaw and HaZman⁷¹ from Vilne.

In March 1911 Yakov Fishman told me that he was bringing shkalim⁷² from Rovne and suggested that as a culture circle we should sell the shkalim for the next congress. We took the proposal to the committee to decide and it was accepted. It was a large amount of shkalim in relation to our shtetl, where Zionism had not yet taken root. Proud of our work in selling the shkalim, we began to work for the library energetically. The circle of readers and believers in Zionism began to grow. Twice a week we studied Hebrew with Dovid Leyb Paskhas, the son of the cobbler. We received new Zionist literature and letters from M. Usyshkin from Odessa. Chaim Ayznberg and Yakov Fishman gave us moral and social support. The meeting place at the friends of Zeydil Lopatyn was very pleasant and many visited. Both Avram Khizhy and Itzik Lopata joined us. Our circle grew, we received new books and that really gave the Chassidim something to talk about.

When I returned from Yekaterinoslav in May 1917 I was enthused by socialism and by the revolution of Kerensky and by the movement of awakening of the

⁶⁴ Yitzhok Leybush Peretz, born 1852 in Zamość, died in Warsaw in 1915. Regarded, with Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, as one of the three classical Yiddish writers

⁶⁵ Mendele Mokher Sforim (1835-1915), second most famous Yiddish writer after Sholem Aleikhem

⁶⁶ Shimon Frug (1860-1916), Yiddish writer

⁶⁷ *nom de plume* of Sholem Naumovich Rabinovych (1859-1916), the most famous Yiddish writer

⁶⁸ Isaak Meir Weissenberg (or Vaysenberg) (1881-1938), a leading Yiddish literary figure in Warsaw

⁶⁹ founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), known as Baal Shem Tov, Chassidism, which quickly attracted a huge following among the Jewish masses of the Ukraine, emphasised prayer and devotion, in contrast to the academic rabbinical orthodoxy prevalent in Lithuania

⁷⁰ 'The Dawn', the first Hebrew-language journal in Poland. Founded in 1862, it ceased publication in 1927

⁷¹ 'The Time', a daily Hebrew-language newspaper published in Vilna (Vilnius) from 1904 until 1915

⁷² certificates given in return for payment of annual dues to the World Zionist Organisation

workers. We were swept along by the great current; and so I came to Vysotsk a Zionist and 'half a Red'. And indeed I did not know in my soul the boundary between Zionism and socialism.

Zionist organisations

Avram Binder visited us in June 1917. We then founded the Zionist organisation in the shtetl. Lieb Zelmans Lopatyn was the chairman, I was the secretary, Batya Shmuels Shtoper the treasurer. Sara Lea Shar, Dovid Shtoper, Zeydil Lopatyn, Bril Ryzhy and Gitl Lykhtnfeld were members of the committee. We chose Yikhiel Borovyk as manager of the library, which was a part of the Zionist movement. We rented a two-room apartment and continued our work on the library with great energy.

As representatives of KKL⁷³ the following were chosen: Malka Ayznberg, Etil Vaks, Rivka Borovyk and Sonya Lopatyn. They distinguished themselves in their fundraising activity. Every Saturday evening we arranged meetings chaired by Leyb Lopatyn. Our arguments lasted 4 to 5 hours. As a result of the frictions and the differences of opinion between Sara and Lea Sher, the socialist comrades on the committee, the organisation broke up.

The organisation Tzeirei Tzion⁷⁴ was established, a branch of the popular fraction of the national Tzeirei Tzion. The majority of the members of the former Zionist Organisation came over to Tzeirei Tzion. Yeshayahu, Yosil Fibuz and Ternopolsky enriched our organisation on their return from Kiev. Ternopolsky, an active and energetic student, was elected as chairman of the branch. At the same time the general Zionist Organisation⁷⁵ continued to exist. Leybil Lopatyn and Dovid Shtoper were active in it. A general committee was set up and activity was begun on behalf of KKL and Keren Hayesod⁷⁶. Also Nisn Borovyk was elected on to the committee. But our work was interrupted several times by the pogroms in the vicinity and by changes of regime.

While we were up to our necks in our work in the library we were also hit by persecution and pogroms by *Petlyura* gangs⁷⁷. In particular our friend and comrade Ternopolsky suffered persecution. The rov from Vysotsk was called to the commandant who demanded that he hand Ternopolsky over within 24 hours. My mother, who hid him in the loft, was very afraid, and his friend Khayke Shtoper, who helped him in everything, called some friends to consult as to what to do to save him and us. The next day we sent an envoy to Brodetz, four km from Vysotsk, a place where the Red Army was encamped, to call for help. A fight broke out between four Red Army soldiers and their commander, who arrived in the shtetl, and two *Petlyura* guards, who were wounded. The following day the Red Army entered Vysotsk and Ternopolsky was nominated commander of the 21st brigade and sent to the front, where he was wounded. We never heard any more about him.

From the headquarters of Tzeirei Tzion Dr Peker and Malkhin visited our shtetl. Our activities turned to an additional field: the field of Hebrew education which was

⁷³ Keren Kayemet l'Israel, the Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlement

⁷⁴ Zionist Youth

⁷⁵ the umbrella organisation of the Zionist movement, founded in 1897 at the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland

⁷⁶ United Jewish Appeal, founded in 1920, the main international fund-raising organisation

⁷⁷ Symon Petlura (Petlyura), born in 1879, was a Ukrainian nationalist who became head of the government of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1919-1921). Jews held him responsible for the wave of pogroms. He was assassinated in Paris in 1926

expressed in the struggle against the cheyder⁷⁸ and in the establishing of the Hebrew Tarbut school⁷⁹. The first teachers in the school were: Shokhet, Kant and Geklman (her name now is Yaffa Anavi). Thanks to this school a young generation grew up and was educated, the majority of whom came to Israel to a life of labour and fulfilment.

The general Zionist committee was dissolved. The ways of the two parties, Tzeirei Tzion and Tzionim Klalliim⁸⁰ parted. A new young generation came, excited and active. And we, more mature, were at their disposal for advice and assistance. We continued our Zionist activities for KKL, selling shkalim⁸¹ and so on. We sold shkalim even to people who were far from the Zionist idea like Asher Lapinsky, the rov, Nisn Lopatyn and so on. In total we sold 200 shkalim. When, in Warsaw in May, I handed over the money to Yehoshua Khefetz, chairman of Tzeirei Tzion, his response was 'I am proud of you, Vysotskaim [people of Vysotsk]'.

And indeed the sons of Vysotsk have reason to be proud: many of them came to Israel and were among those who built and fulfilled the dream. Blessed are you, sons and daughters! May your hands be strengthened in the work of the people of the State of Israel!

Shlomo Rabinovych

London, August 1960



The Zionist Committee in Vysotsk, 1918
from right to left: Dovid Shtoper, Avram-Nisn Khizhy, Zeydl Lopata, Sara Lea Sher, the teacher Ternopolsky, Ben-Tzion Ryzhy, Gitl Lykhtnfeld, Leybl Lopata

⁷⁸ private school providing a traditional religion-based education

⁷⁹ Tarbut ('Culture'), was a network of Hebrew-language educational institutions founded in 1922

⁸⁰ General Zionists, centrists politically

⁸¹ certificates given in return for payment of annual dues to the World Zionist Organisation

During the Pogroms

It was on Yom Kippur⁸² at the end of the First World War. I was then a small child, I was sitting next to my father in the synagogue and because I was hungry my father of blessed memory sent me home to eat something. On the way I heard women shouting. Goys⁸³ had broken into some houses and pillaged everything that came to hand, especially food. I went back to the synagogue and told my father, but he didn't pay attention to it, for after all they were only the words of a small child.

Towards evening, during the prayer for the close of Sabbath loud voices and shouts were heard outside. Then two armed soldiers burst into the synagogue straight on to the bimah⁸⁴ – threatening that 'in five minutes not a soul will remain in the synagogue, and anybody defying the command will be killed on the spot!' Then there was a general riot and commotion. Fathers searched for their little children. Men's voices, women crying and soldiers' threats all mixed together in confusion. Everybody was very afraid. The lights were not turned off; dread reigned in the shtetl. In many houses the doors had been broken down. The food was pillaged and there wasn't anything to break the hunger after the fast. It was clear that a gang of those that were then roaming in the neighbourhood had burst into the shtetl. Later it was said that the rov remained alone in the synagogue in his corner to finish the prayer and only went back to his house at a late hour of the evening.

On the next day they were saying in the shtetl that in the shtetls of the vicinity there were pogroms against Jews and there were casualties. A great fear fell on the people of the shtetl in dread of what was to come.

Two days after Yom Kippur a strange Goy came into our house asking for bread and candles. He told us that in two days time a gang would come to the shtetl. This filled us with dread. It was well known that the sole aim of such a gang was - pogroms against Jews! It was said that in the nearby shtetl of Plotnitze forty Jews had been killed, most of the houses were destroyed and pillaged. We waited in dread for what was to come.

And indeed in the morning of the Sunday of Sukkot⁸⁵, a time when Jews of the shtetl are at prayer, there burst into the shtetl an armed member of the gang on horseback. Those who had been praying quickly left the synagogue, Jews hid in cowsheds, in roofs belonging to Goys, and some disguised themselves as Goys by putting on their clothes...

I remember how our family hid in the pile of straw in the loft of the cowshed and how my father sent me, a small child (as though I were not in danger), to reconnoitre what was happening outside... Things continued like this for two days; relative peace reigned over the shtetl. Only on the third day when they left two of the gang burst into the house of Reb Moyshe Ayznberg and killed him on the spot.

Dejection and grief reigned in the shtetl; the festival turned to mourning.

Dov Tkach

Haifa

⁸² Day of Atonement

⁸³ non-Jews

⁸⁴ reader's platform in a synagogue

⁸⁵ 7-day Feast of Tabernacles (between late September and late October), when some Jews eat (and sometimes sleep) in temporary structures partially open to the sky, recalling the 40 years in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt

Vysotsk, the Town of my Youth

(recollections)

First Acquaintance

I was six when I stayed in this town for the first time. Among my memories is a blurred picture of the figure of my grandfather Zalman of blessed memory standing next to the cart that took me to the railway station. The second time I stayed in the town was after the death of my grandfather. I was then eight or nine. When I got off the train I climbed up into the cart belonging to Akiva Leyb of blessed memory. This Akiva Leyb, serious and introvert, would take travellers from Udrytsk railway station to Vysotsk, a distance of about seven kilometres. A large wicker basket was tied inside the cart, in which people sat on a special seat while Akiva Leyb, humming in his soft, quiet voice, spurred his horse on.

It was at the end of summer and the family of Grandmother Lea of blessed memory were all busy gathering fruit from the orchard they rented from the local priest. The fruit would then be sold. So when I woke up on the first morning I was very surprised by the sight of large piles of beautiful apples and pears in every corner of the bedroom. And in the afternoon, when I visited the large orchard, we sat around a long table eating all the good things from the earth and the garden. Then the orchard guard, a young Christian, entertained us with all sorts of tricks, imitations of birds and animals and even the movement of a train.

In the main square of the shtetl I suddenly saw the life-size statue of the Russian tsar Nikolai, made of bronze and standing on a tall plinth (they smashed the statue after the revolution of 1917).

I was very impressed by the scene inside the large synagogue at Rosh Hashana⁸⁶. Two nice-looking youths sat opposite the steps of the Aron Hakodesh⁸⁷ on a bench they had brought from their home. Every now and then they ran up to open the Ark for the special prayers for which it was the custom to open the Ark. The impression this made on me was the reason why, ten years later and then throughout all the eleven years that I lived in Vysotsk, 'in the High Holidays' I always sat in the same place in the synagogue, opposite the steps of the Aron Hakodesh. I would open the Ark for special prayers and from there would peep from time to time to the right towards 'the cantor', Feybush of blessed memory. He was a man with a fine figure and a well-proportioned beard. In his pleasant, sweet-sounding voice he really came alive in the Karlin⁸⁸ melodies.

'Yudke' (Yehuda Shtoper) is standing in prayer to the right of Feybush. Due to the fact that he is hard of hearing Yudke stands right next to the cantor, and whenever Feybush the cantor brings a prayer to a close, with a shudder of joy and a trill of the voice, Yudke looks directly into his eyes, and his face lights up like that of an innocent child. And every so often, when the cantor comes to a passage in the prayer which the Karlin Chassidim used to sing, Yudke, obeying a secret sign, will immediately stand erect. Berl Zulir or Meir Katzman (may he live a long life) sings beautifully, to the rhythm of a marching song. And I look to my left and see the patriarchal and noble figure of Nisl Leas, whose place in the synagogue was on the bench beyond the banisters of the steps of the Aron Hakodesh. With his head covered in a prayer-shawl he is looking nearly all the time at the cantor, Reb Feybush. Next to him stands Reb Nakhman Perl (Nakhe), with his thick beard and serious demeanour.

⁸⁶ New Year

⁸⁷ Holy Ark (containing the Sefer (book of the) Torah)

⁸⁸ Karlin, a suburb of Pinsk, was the centre of an important northern branch of Chassidism

Behind my bench, on the bench next to the bimah⁸⁹, is Reb Ichie Berelikhes the priest, unassuming, modest and reverent, generating respect as he goes up into the priests' pulpit in the High Holidays and in the three festivals. I turn my gaze to the southern wall where Reb Isroel Nafkhan is sitting, a man of humility before the Lord and of exalted qualities. Next to him sit his sons Leybil and Gershele (where are you now, my dear ones?) and next to them, in a semi-circle, nice boys, including my best friends, are sitting on chairs brought from home. My father of blessed memory is sitting on the bench on the stage, for ownership of the seats in the large synagogue was passed down from father to son. My father had only recently arrived in the shtetl and his permanent place throughout the year was in the Karlin shtibl⁹⁰.

When I came for a third time to this shtetl on Lag Ba'Omer⁹¹ in the year 5682 (1922) I was 19, and the shtetl was then really waking up, with buds of liberation following the war. The Polish administration ruled its citizens with a light stick, and small trade was beginning to develop (throughout the whole history of this shtetl there had never been any wholesale trade). Several cloth merchants were beginning to go as far as the capital Warsaw for their supplies. And then an ironmonger's shop opened, which also sold building materials. After that another one opened. It was also the first time this had happened in the history of the shtetl. The situation of artisans at the time was satisfactory: carpenters, builders (of wooden walls). Among them were also some who took their tools with them to work in Christian villages.

Public Life

At that time our 'public life' was at its height: **'The First Generation'** of activists working in the field of national cultural activity in the spirit of the new times continued their activities with their heads held high. Zeydl Lopata of blessed memory was very prominent in this group. He was the life and soul of the group. Zeydl was gifted, with a talent for public speaking and for delivering lectures; he had energy and showed initiative in all aspects of public activity. Within the framework of Zionism and national revival he had a revolutionary view of the world.

We organised a Hebrew school, the first of its kind in this shtetl, which until then had only known the education provided by the cheyder⁹². A drama circle was also established, with the aim of performing, using local talent and sometimes bringing productions from outside. We undertook activities for Keren Kayemet⁹³ and Keren HaYesod⁹⁴, we founded the first Hebrew and Yiddish library in the shtetl and so on and so forth.

So the shtetl came to life not only thanks to the new, stable democratic form of government that followed the First World War but was also inspired by the national awakening that arose at that time among the Jewish masses in Poland and which symbolised a sharp turn in the renewal of public life, different in essence and form from the conservative public life of 'the older generation'.

After some years the group split up, each going their own way in life; some got married, others emigrated or made aliyah⁹⁵. We, the **'Second Generation'**, 'inherited' all the public activities carried out under the continuous leadership of Zeydl Lopata.

⁸⁹ reader's platform in a synagogue

⁹⁰ Yiddish: small prayer house

⁹¹ festival, 33 days after Passover

⁹² private school providing a traditional religion-based education

⁹³ Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlement

⁹⁴ United Israel Appeal, founded in 1920, the main international fund-raising organisation

⁹⁵ emigration to Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel)

For objective reasons the Hebrew school did not function for several years. We then founded the Tarbut Hebrew school, which was affiliated to the education network of the Tarbut centre in Warsaw⁹⁶. Only girls studied in the school because, in accordance with the instruction of the local rov, the parents refused to send their boys to the school. The school's struggle for survival was therefore hard and bitter. More than once at the end of the month there was no money to pay the teachers' salaries.

We organised balls, performances and all sorts of fund-raising activities in support of the Hebrew school. On winter evenings we (members of the school administration) went from door to door and came back with wood to light the heating stoves in the school. There were wearisome and protracted negotiations with the rov to allow **boys** to be educated in this school, but to no avail.

But what can be said today with certainty is that it was only because of the period of the Hebrew school, combined with the education given by HeKhalutz⁹⁷ and HeKhalutz HaTzair⁹⁸, plus the activities of the national funds, that we were fortunate enough to send from Vysotsk good human material, honest and humble, like their parents, loyal to the values of pioneering Zionism and devoted to its realisation in all corners of the Land, on the kibbutz, in the moshava⁹⁹ and even in the city. And if there is any solace to be had from the catastrophe that happened to us may this be a solace to each and every one of us.

The central popular cultural institution of the shtetl in 1922 was the library, founded by people of 'the first generation'. Twice a week books could be exchanged. Among the readers were young people of all ages and from all walks of life, male and female workers, including the woman who spent all day cleaning goose feathers, who came to bring some sweetness to her life with a classic novel in Yiddish: *der sheyner bokher*¹⁰⁰ and such like.

Public Library in Vysotsk, 1926

from right to left: Pinkhas Gelman, Pinkhas Bolyar, Itzhak Ryzhy, Israel Gutman, Gershon Kolodny, Reuven Khover and Moyshe Levin



For together with the new books that appeared the library also had all the sentimental novels of Shomer¹⁰¹ and such like, as well as novels by Avraham Mapu¹⁰² (Guilt of Samaria and Love of Zion) and Lilienblum¹⁰³ (Sin of Youth etc.). In addition the library had copies of 'The One who got lost in the Ways of Life' by Peretz Smolenskin¹⁰⁴ and 'Both Ends' by Reuven Asher Braudes¹⁰⁵ and so on and so forth.

It was the tradition to hold an annual general meeting concerning library matters. This is when we would elect a new management. All the progressive-

⁹⁶ 'Culture', a network of Hebrew-language educational institutes founded in 1922

⁹⁷ The Pioneer movement

⁹⁸ Young Pioneers

⁹⁹ settlement, originally agricultural

¹⁰⁰ 'The Handsome Lad'

¹⁰¹ Nokhem-Meir Sheynevisht (1846-1915)

¹⁰² Mapu, who was born in 1808 near Kovno (Kaunas) and died in 1867 in Königsberg (Kaliningrad), wrote in Hebrew – his *Ahavat Tzion* (Love of Zion) is regarded as the first Hebrew novel

¹⁰³ Moshe Leyb Lilienblum (1843-1910) wrote in both Russian and Hebrew

¹⁰⁴ Peretz Smolenskin (1842-1885), Russian Hebrew writer

¹⁰⁵ Hebrew writer, born 1851 in Vilnius, died 1902 in Vienna

minded people in the shtetl, of all ages and classes, would come to this meeting, because the library belonged to everybody. The meeting was preceded by elaborate preparations for the special festive occasion.

HeKhalutz

It was not many years before we also organised in our shtetl a branch of the HeKhalutz organisation, the members of which were ourselves, the people of the 'Second Generation'. This was also on the initiative of Zeydl Lopata who, by the way, participated in the drafting of our first letter to the headquarters of HeKhalutz in Warsaw, in which we reported the establishment of our organisation and so on. And I remember that festive moment at New Year in the year 5684 [1924] when the members came to the synagogue to tell me that we had received the first reply from the headquarters of HeKhalutz in Warsaw. We went at once next door into the house of our friend Beyla Bak to read the letter.



The Khalutz branch, 1924

from right to left, top row: Gershon Kolodny, Israel Gutman, Itka Nafkhan, Moyshe Levin, Rivka Petrukh, Yakov Kagan, Yehoshua Kryvoruchky, Motl Tzirkl, Kaftan, Aaron Sheynman, Shlomo Katz;
second row from top: Betzalel Lakhmanchuk, Pivovuz, Pessach Katz, Chava Geklman, Mordekhai Ayznberg, Chava Shnayder, Rivka Borovyk;
second row from bottom: Aaron Shtoper, Betzalel Tkach, Moyshe Ayzik Pivovuz, Etl Vaks, Mordekhai Lapinsky, Chaya Borovyk, Berl Ryzhy;
bottom row: Sonya Gelman, Mikhael Gelman, Zeydl Lopata, Yaffa Geklman, Ita Lopatyn, Bela Bek, Pinya Bolyar

How we trembled when we read the letter, since we saw in it a kind of message heralding the pioneering reality in the Land of Israel, in which from now on we were to immerse ourselves. Through this letter I began to develop expertise in the language of Hebrew correspondence. The opening words 'with reference to your letter' also became part of our letters. From then on, as the secretary of HeKhalutz, I began to love also the letters from the headquarters because of their fluent Hebrew style, just like the love I felt for the letters from Keren Kayemet, Keren HaYesod and the headquarters of Tarbut and so on.

And how busy we were when the first visitor visited us on behalf of the headquarters of HeKhalutz, for he was none other than Comrade Dubruml from Givat

Brenner. We saw him as an emissary from that 'planet' called 'Eretz Israel'. We were all eyes and ears, hanging on his words, eager to learn and ready for action. In the course of time we also received visits from Bandersky (Ben Dori), Batya Banderska of blessed memory, Berdichevsky and others.

Some of us also went off for training in kibbutzim¹⁰⁶, but the great majority remained in the branch and discharged their pioneering obligation by visiting, every evening, the HeKhalutz house (Aaron Borukh Nafkhan's house, which was also where the municipal library was, under our management) in order to read newspapers from the labour movement in Eretz Israel, especially Kuntres¹⁰⁷ as well as He'Atid¹⁰⁸, the newspaper of HeKhalutz, which came from Warsaw.

We remember the great day when we were invited to take part in a pioneers' meeting in kibbutz Klosova (quarry), where Berdichevsky and Banderska addressed us. I remember the arguments we had regarding the enormous problems that stood then at the centre of pioneer life, about the collective life taking shape in the labour movement in Eretz Israel and so on. The dances, and in particular the spontaneous dances in the intervals of the ceremony, songs from Eretz Israel, the visit during working hours quarrying stones, where we really came face to face with pioneering communal life – these all had a great influence.

A training kibbutz was also established in the Byala railway station, next to the river Horyn. This kibbutz depended on the work of a large sawmill (sawing wood into planks etc.). We would often go to visit it. (By the way, a little episode: the secretary of that kibbutz was not fluent in the Hebrew language, and one evening while we were sitting in our branch in Vysotsk a young Christian woman came in. In her hand was a letter from the above-mentioned training kibbutz in which the secretary asked us to translate protocols from Yiddish to Hebrew and to send it back via the Goya¹⁰⁹).

From time to time Zeydl Lopata would lecture us (in Yiddish) on the principles of pioneer Zionism. He was particularly fond of dwelling at great length on the student aliyah from Kharkov (*Kharkover studentn*), whom he would hold up as a symbol of self-sacrifice to the idea of building Eretz Israel.

It was not long before a branch of HeKhalutz HaTzair was organised by the younger generation. This was already '**the Third Generation**' of people in our shtetl devoted to the cause of national revival. The HeKhalutz HaTzair was propelled by an exemplary pioneering dynamic, contrary to the branch of HeKhalutz HaBoger¹¹⁰, whose members were already burdened with personal cares, at the core of which was how to escape from the four walls of Vysotsk and make aliyah to Eretz Israel quickly. HeKhalutz HaTzair was a home to constant fiery arguments and lively singing, and they danced with real devotion just like their parents, the Vysotsk Chassidim.

In the years 1924-5 the first olim¹¹¹ went from our shtetl. They were: Mordekhai Lopata, Sara Lopata, Khava the daughter of Reb Nisn Lopata, Etl Vaks, Mikhael Gelman, Yehoshua Kryvoruchky, Misha Likhtnfeld, Sheyndl Geklman, Rivka Petrukh and more. We accompanied the first olim to the railway station. There was no limit to the feeling of celebration and excitement. Our friend Mikhael Gelman of blessed memory made a strong impression on us as we accompanied him – one of the first olim – to the railway station. He rode on his fine horse next to the

¹⁰⁶ collectives preparing young people for aliyah (emigration to the Land of Israel) and communal life once there

¹⁰⁷ *Kuntres* (pamphlet) the weekly paper of *Ahdut HaAvoda* (Unity of Labour), was published between 1919 and 1929

¹⁰⁸ 'The Future', the newspaper of HeKhalutz, published in Warsaw

¹⁰⁹ non-Jewish woman

¹¹⁰ Adult Pioneers

¹¹¹ those making aliyah to Eretz Israel

wagon that carried those who were accompanying him. The crowd broke out in cheers of joy at the great event. And how profound was the silent grief when we received the news that our friend Mikhael Gelman had been killed in a road accident in Eretz Israel. I remember the grief of his mother and of the family, especially the deep sigh of his father Reb Itzhok Dovid who, following the tragic event, cried as he walked past the Ark in the large synagogue to pray Kol Nidrei¹¹² and ya'ale anakateynu¹¹³. Not long after that we were stunned again by the tragic death in Eretz Israel of our friend Chava Lopata of blessed memory. And again the profound, silent grief of the family.



On the occasion of Chava Lopata's aliyah to Eretz Israel
from right to left, top row: Chana Lopatyn, Leybl Lopata, Khanche Khayat, Feya Lykhtnfeld, Chava Lopata, Misha Lykhtenfeld, Basil Shtoper, Chaya Bigon, Roza Lykhtnfeld, Dovid Shtoper, Ita Lopata, Yakov Kagan, Israel Gutman;
middle row: Masha Lopatyn, Pesl Lopatyn, Nakhum Lopata, Nisn Borovyk, Ronya Ayznberg, Likhtnfeld, Mendl Lopata, Gershon Kolodny, Pinkhas Boliar;
bottom row: Nisn Shtoper, Chava Ayznberg, Etl Vaks, Rivka Borovyk, Zelig Khyzhy, Pesl (daughter of Zalman) Lopata, Dvora Lykhtnfeld, Rakhel Shtoper, Zeydl Lopata, Moyshe Levin

The National Funds

Among the other important elements that created the Land of Israel atmosphere in our shtetl were the national funds Keren Kayemet¹¹⁴ and Keren HaYesod¹¹⁵ - though Keren HaYesod was directed specifically to those of means, of whom there were very few in our shtetl. This fact restricted our fund-raising activities and limited the amounts we collected. In spite of that Keren Kayemet, as is well known, was the property of the many, of those in our shtetl who had hardly any money. Because of that this institution was popular among the residents of our shtetl. Although,

¹¹² prayer recited at the start of the Day of Atonement

¹¹³ 'Our groan shall rise...', from a piyut (liturgical poem) chanted on the eve of the Day of Atonement

¹¹⁴ Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901, in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlement

¹¹⁵ United Israel Appeal, founded in 1920, the main international fund-raising organisation

relatively speaking, the annual income was not great, KKL¹¹⁶ became an influential and educational factor in public life.

We made a point of following to the letter the guidance of all those returning from a visit to the headquarters of KKL in Warsaw. We never missed an occasion to collect money. On every holiday and national and family occasion (marriage, circumcision etc.) we would work for Keren Kayemet.

Particularly sacred for us was the regular act of emptying the boxes at the beginning of each month by going out in pairs to call on people in their homes. Throughout the whole of Polish Jewry there were few examples of such constancy in the field of KKL activity. I remember how one summer the shtetl was hit by a fierce storm that smashed the window-panes of most of the houses in the shtetl. There was a great deal of damage and people were very depressed, but the next morning, the 'beginning of the month', we went out in pairs, as usual, to empty the KKL boxes.

KKL activity in our shtetl was marked by a certain romanticism and was imbued with a strong national sentiment which could only be expressed through action of this sort, and we were therefore always very concerned about what we would leave behind for the dear residents of our shtetl.

How pleasant it was on the eve of New Year to bring the annual KKL calendar, with all the explanatory material it contained concerning Eretz Israel, in return for merely a symbolic contribution, or to bring fifteen types of fruit on Tu B'Shvat¹¹⁷. One year we even received from headquarters almonds from the Land. We had to pack the almonds the same evening in specially printed bags sent by headquarters - very festive indeed. (By the way, several days later dear Reb Hershl Makhles, in his own humorous way, joked about these same almonds, saying: 'You bring us some worm-eaten almonds for which we have to give you money?')

Once or twice a year representatives from the headquarters in Warsaw would come to visit us. Mostly they were emissaries from the Land who would appear in the synagogue between afternoon and evening prayers with a romantic speech regarding the duty to reclaim the land, build Eretz Israel etc.

The people in the synagogue would really lap it up. The Jews of Vysotsk were generally reverent and sound in their views, though it was not for this reason alone that there were almost no opponents of the Zionist idea – indeed many of them were supporters. The influence of the Zionist public was also particularly great. After appearing in the synagogue the emissary would generally visit the youth of all ages in HeKhalutz HaTzair, and a day like this was one big celebration for the adults and young people alike.

I remember the visit of Popovsky of blessed memory, who began his speech to the young people with these words, more or less: 'People of various nations are asked: What would you do to put out a fire in your country? And each of them would answer in his own way, but a son of the people of Israel needs to answer: **Each of us will throw a handful of earth** and this is how we will put out the fire.' The meaning of course was: reclaiming the land.

We - that is, all the members of the KKL committee - liked one of the visitors so much that we accompanied him, for a whole Sabbath, to nearby Dombrovitze. We were present there at all his speeches and at the mass reception. We returned home on Sunday full of impressions and moving experiences.

¹¹⁶ acronym for Keren Kayemet l'Israel, the full name of Keren Kayemet (see note 92)

¹¹⁷ the 15th day of the month of Shevat (January-February) when various (presumably dried) fruits and nuts were eaten



The KKL committee, 1933

From right to left, standing: Yoske Lopata, Tzipora Shuster, Arie Sheynman, Dovid Shtoper, Leybl Nafkhan, Gershon Nafkhan, Yakov Lopata, Reuven Khover, Gitl Lykhtnfeld, Zeydl Vinnik, Chana Lopata, Feygl Gutman; sitting: Sheyndl Khover, Mindl Kolodny, Gershon Kolodny, Israel Gutman, Rakhel Shtoper ..., Malka Bigon, Sheyndl Abelson

There was also a branch of ‘the Zionist Organisation’¹¹⁸ in our shtetl . This had already been organised by people of ‘the First Generation’. However this branch was more symbolic than real. For all that, in the large synagogue at Simkhat Torah ¹¹⁹ the tradition of a Zionist minyan¹²⁰ had been established whereby all the income from the sale of aliyot¹²¹, reciting ‘Unto thee it was shewed, that thou mightest know...’¹²² and other honours was handed over to the Keren Kayemet. It was through this that Zionist educational principles became so influential.

There was also a circle of Tzeirei Tzion, of which Zeydl Lopata was one of the organisers and which he headed. He would distribute *Bafrayung*¹²³ and all the other campaigning material among the Zionist and pioneering youth.

Apart from all those organisations there were no other public parties in the shtetl, apart from a small cell of a few people belonging to the Bund ¹²⁴, the youth group Kadima ¹²⁵, which later turned into HeKhalutz HaTzair, and in the course of time also a small cell of communists. To our regret the majority of the organisers of this were people who had left HeKhalutz.

There was also a ‘Committee for Orphans’ led by Asher Khayat, who was respected and loved by the common people and who was always diligent in maintaining a close and constant connection with the headquarters in Brisk ¹²⁶. They

¹¹⁸ the umbrella organisation of the Zionist movement, which later became the World Zionist organisation, was founded in 1897 at the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland

¹¹⁹ literally ‘Rejoicing in the Torah’, marking the completion of the annual cycle of Torah (Pentateuch) readings

¹²⁰ quorum of ten men necessary for reciting prayers in the synagogue

¹²¹ literally ‘ascents’, the honour of being called up to the bimah (reader’s platform) to chant a blessing before and after the cantor reads from the Torah

¹²² Deuteronomy chapter 4, verse 35

¹²³ Yiddish: *Bafrayung Arbetersztyme* (Liberation Workers’ Voice), official organ of the Polish branch of Poalei Tzion (Workers of Zion), a Zionist-socialist party

¹²⁴ Jewish socialist movement founded in 1897 to represent Jews throughout Imperial Russia. The Bund supported the 1917 February Revolution but opposed the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution. In 1921 it ceased to function in the Soviet Union but remained active in Poland (and the United States)

¹²⁵ ‘Forwards’, the provisional name of the local Zionist youth movement

¹²⁶ now Brest, Belarus (formerly Brest-Litovsk)

would frequently receive money and clothes for the orphans of Vysotsk, and some of the orphans were sent to study trade in special trade schools for orphans of Brisk and surroundings.

The Drama Club

A drama club for performances had already existed in the days of the 'First Generation'. The income from the performances was earmarked for support for the Tarbut school, Keren Kayemet and such like. Particularly memorable was the summer when Dina Veynblat came from the town of Sarny and stayed to direct us in rehearsals for performances. In her forceful style, full of a concentrated energy and blessed with a sophisticated artistic sensibility, she succeeded in instilling in the drama club a serious and purposeful approach. And the performances of plays like 'Song of Songs' and *Mirele-Efros*¹²⁷ and so on were very successful.

The efforts of Dina Veynblat brought relief from the greyness that marked the life of the shtetl at that time. Indeed when she left the shtetl her cart was accompanied by all her friends, men and women of the older generation who had formed a genuine friendship with her. They carried many garlands of flowers in their arms.

We also performed once in the neighbouring shtetl of Horodnya on a Saturday evening, after we had been there the whole Sabbath. By the way, I remember one curious thing: when we were selling tickets a lass came with two new vase pots in her hand (from the famous pottery of this shtetl), paying for tickets in kind instead of money.

Before there was a fire station in our shtetl we arranged performances in the Polish school building and after that in the hall of the fire station for which we were charged an excessive amount by the anti-semitic local administration. We would bring large kerosene lamps and benches on loan from the synagogues.

Religious Life

As has already been said, the Jews of the 'older generation' were God-fearing and devout but without making any special external show of devotion; none of them wore shtreymlekh¹²⁸, or long side-locks, apart from the rov¹²⁹. But most of them had long beards. They did not even wear special hats like the Jews of Galicia etc., apart from long kapotes¹³⁰, which the majority of them would wear on weekdays, and the black surdut¹³¹ on Sabbath and holidays. The great majority were followers of Stolin-Karlin rebbes¹³². A few were followers of the rebbe of Brezne¹³³.

There were three synagogues in the shtetl: the large synagogue that was intended for prayer only on Sabbaths and festivals and, inside the synagogue on both sides of the long corridor, two small synagogues or prayer houses (shtiblekh). On the right was the prayer house of the Karlin Chassidim whose rov was Reb Elimelekhke Karliner, and on the left was the prayer house of the Stolin Chassidim whose rov was

¹²⁷ published in 1898 and written by the prominent Ukrainian Yiddish playwright Yakob Gordin

¹²⁸ Yiddish: fur hats worn on the Sabbath

¹²⁹ Chassidic religious leader

¹³⁰ Yidd.: long coat worn by observant Jews

¹³¹ Polish: frock-coat

¹³² an important northern branch of Chassidism founded in Karlin, a suburb of Pinsk. Following persecution by the Vilne-based rabbinical authorities and the *misnagdim* (opponents of Chassidism) the 'court' moved to Stolin

¹³³ now Berezne, north-east of Rivne

Reb Moyshela Stoler. In the morning and evening they would always be praying there.

The large synagogue, built of wood in a special patriarchal architectural style, was very tall, in complete contrast to the small simple houses of the shtetl, the roofs of the majority of which were covered with straw. The Aron Hakodesh¹³⁴, adorned with artistic carvings, also stood high, with a splendid reading platform.

On the outside the walls of the synagogue had become black during the course of all the years but inside they were covered with oil-based green paint. Nobody could remember when they had been painted, just as nobody could remember or knew when this little ornamented 'temple' had been founded. There was a commonly believed legend that one of the Polish owners of the fort, a lover of the Jews, had built the synagogue at his own expense in the distant past.

Barely a marriage took place in the town without the ceremony taking place in the entrance to this synagogue. The most elaborate preparations took place at Rosh HaShana¹³⁵ and Yom Kippur¹³⁶, when all those praying in the two shtiblekh [small prayer-houses] down below and also most of those praying in 'the house of study' opposite would come and pray in the great hall of the large synagogue, where the beauty of holiness prevailed.

Also on the days when the admorim¹³⁷ visited the shtetl everyone would come to the large synagogue in their honour.

Later on, when the ancient wooden foundation became weak, Yakov Lopata volunteered to organise a special collection in order to replace the old wooden beams. They had indeed begun to remove the beams and started the renovation and were continuing in this work when in 1938 the building was burned in a fire. They suspected the local communists of starting the fire. 'The whole house of Israel, bewail the burning'¹³⁸ of this holy house for generations.

In the two synagogues and in the house of study 'the Sephardic version', the melody special to the Stolin Chassidim, prevailed. On the eve of Sabbath the synagogue hummed with the sound of those praying and the enthusiasm of those reciting *hodu*¹³⁹ 'Let the Redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy' and so on. After the noise silence prevailed in the prayer *patakh eliyahu*¹⁴⁰, the noise began again in *yedid nefesh*¹⁴¹ and in the happy tune *pittum haketoret*¹⁴². It started again in 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts'¹⁴³ and in the *ashrei*¹⁴⁴. There was a loud noise of voices in *raza de shabbat*¹⁴⁵ and indeed until the end of the evening prayer. In the morning Sabbath prayer the Psalm 107,2 excitement begins with 'Blessed be He, at whose word the world existed'¹⁴⁶, dies down with 'verses of praise'¹⁴⁷ and rises again with 'In the Sanctuary, O Lord, which thy

¹³⁴ Holy Ark

¹³⁵ New Year

¹³⁶ Day of Atonement

¹³⁷ acronym for adoneinu (our Master) moreinu (our Teacher) verabeinu (our Rabbi)

¹³⁸ Leviticus chapter 10, verse 6

¹³⁹ 'O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good' (Psalm 136,1)

¹⁴⁰ Elijah's Prayer Meditation, taken from the *tikunei zohar* (Rectifications of the Zohar (Splendour), the central book of the Kabbalah, esoteric interpretations of the Bible)

¹⁴¹ 'Beloved of the Soul', a poem by the kabbalist Rabbi Elazar Azkari (1533-1600)

¹⁴² 'Mixing the incense'

¹⁴³ Isaiah chapter 6, verse 3

¹⁴⁴ 'Blessed is he...' - verses from Psalms 84, 144, 115, 141 and all of 145

¹⁴⁵ 'The Secret of Sabbath', from the book of Zohar (see note 130)

¹⁴⁶ Sabbath morning prayer, from the Siddur (order of service)

¹⁴⁷ containing Psalms 100 and 145-150, various prayers followed by the Song at the Sea (Exodus 14/15)

hands have established¹⁴⁸ and with ‘The breath of life in every creature shall bless You, Lord our God¹⁴⁹, till the end of the prayer.

A noble and patriarchal melody prevailed among the Stolinim and the Karlinim in particular on the ‘High Holidays’, in the ‘Kingdoms, Memories and Shofars’¹⁵⁰. Many passages of prayer were accompanied by melodies, full of inspiration and rhythm.

The ‘third meal’ of Sabbath was arranged in the house of study with the participation of people from all the three synagogues. We, the ‘young scholars’, loved to be present for this third meal. A charm to the heart, in this meal were order, discipline and the reign of the spirit. Not a word of everyday conversation was heard apart from ‘hymns’.

Mostly Berl Zulir or Meir Katzman (may he have a long life) had the honour of singing *dror yikra*¹⁵¹ but the singing of *ya ekhsos*¹⁵² was the special responsibility of Feybush, who was famous in the community for his skill as a musician. When the excitement came with the refrain [*ya ekhsos*] he would stand up straight, dance and sit down again, and so on repeatedly. They would bring these melodies from the rebbe, learn them by heart for a certain time until they were ready to sing them in public.

The ‘house of study’ was also an ancient building. All the orthodox circles in the town would pray and study there without any regard for differences of Chassidic dynasty. But the melody of prayer (‘the version’) was purely Stolin-Karlin. However they would not object if anybody who happened to be passing in front of the Ark on a weekday sang in a difference melody, for the Jews of Vysotsk were peaceful people.

There was a tradition of study in the shtetl: on weekdays between afternoon and evening prayers the local rov read from *Eyn Yaakov*¹⁵³ and on the morning of Sabbath all the Psalms were recited in public. On Sabbath afternoons a page of Gemara¹⁵⁴ was studied, and the ritual slaughterer Chaim, the son of Hershl Makhles, led in reading sections of the Sayings of the Fathers.

‘Preachers’ from the outside would also appear in the house of study. They would ‘preach’ to the crowd in a special melody. Their themes would be religious law and legends, but mostly they preached about the ‘world to come’ and the behaviour of a man of Israel in this world. At the end of the ‘sermon’ they would place a ‘bowl’ by the entrance for contributions from the crowd for the ‘preacher’.

Usually this house of study served as a general meeting house for all the Jews of the shtetl. Of those who passed by in front of the Ark in this house of study the most frequent was Reb Itzhok Shabshi. He was also a melamed¹⁵⁵. By the way, among the melamdin who should be especially remembered in blessing is also the old melamed Reb Chaim Shlyapek of blessed memory, the brother of my grandmother Lea, the righteous of blessed memory.

The third synagogue in the shtetl was that of the Brezne Chassidim, whose rov at that time was Reb Itzikl. One of the old synagogue collectors was Reb Aaron Khaznchuk who was able to sing the melodies beautifully. With his singing he used to accompany every joyous family occasion involving members of his group - on the arrival of the rebbe and so on.

¹⁴⁸ Exodus chapter 15, verse 17

¹⁴⁹ Sabbath morning prayer, from the Siddur

¹⁵⁰ rams’ horns’

¹⁵¹ ‘Freedom shall be called’, the opening words of a poem by the 10th century Dunash ben Librat (or Labrat)

¹⁵² ‘God, I yearn’ - see later section on Karlin-Stolin Chassidism

¹⁵³ a book of tales and homilies from the *Talmud*, popular among the masses, collected by Rabbi Yakov ben Shlomo Ibn Khaviv, probably in the early 17th century

¹⁵⁴ part of the Talmud

¹⁵⁵ teacher (plural: melamdin)

In our day the rov of the shtetl was the old Gaon¹⁵⁶ Reb Yehuda Abelson, the righteous of blessed memory. He was an eminent scholar, an expert in the Torah and a rabbinical personality of great standing. His wife was also outstanding in her knowledge of the sources and in particular the Bible. After his son Reb Yehoshua fled from the Soviet town of Homel¹⁵⁷, where he had served as rov, and came to Vysotsk in 1923 Reb Yehuda transferred to nearby Plotnitze. His son Yehoshua served as rov in Vysotsk.

Like his father Reb Yehoshua also won the affection of the public. While he was still alive he achieved the 'coronation' of his first son Avram of blessed memory as a rov in the shtetl of Manyevich. Especially heart-rending was a eulogy that the rov Reb Yehoshua gave in Plotnitze on the death of his father, the Gaon, as was also the eulogy he gave on the death of his outstanding mother.

According to a report in Davar¹⁵⁸, at the time of the Shoah, Reb Yehoshua Abelson turned to the people of his community in the moment of death at the place of slaughter, in words of support: 'Hear oh Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord'¹⁵⁹ and delivered his soul to God, together with his family and the Jewish community of Vysotsk, may the Lord revenge their blood.

His son Reb Avram was also killed in the ghetto of Manyevich, murdered in the prime of his life. I remember the sermon he once gave at Passover as a young man when he came home from the yeshiva¹⁶⁰ this was a grand, epic performance of great pathos concerning the exodus of the people from the house of bondage and concerning the idea of freedom according to the sources, tradition, exegesis and legend.

Until the year 1923-4 there were two highly respected cantors in Vysotsk. They were Reb Isaskhar Trigon, who also had a cheyder in which he taught his pupils Talmud, Chumash¹⁶¹ with Rashi¹⁶², and Reb Yakir Shifman, may he live a long life. After the two of them moved elsewhere - Reb Isaskhar to Rokitne and Reb Yakir to nearby Dombrovitze - their posts were transferred, in accordance with a judgment of the rabbis' 'Torah-court' on the rights of holding a post etc., to Reb Chaim Sheynboym, son of Hershil Makhles, and Reb Yosef Berl, son-in-law of Reb Shleyyme Levin. Both of them, still relatively young, were outstanding in honesty and righteousness and in the carrying out of important functions in the shtetl.

Every Friday Reb Eliahu-Moyshe Borovyk would wearily drag his old legs from house to house throughout the shtetl to collect contributions of Sabbath loaves for those in need. Everywhere he went he would be greeted hospitably and with the respect due to him.

On Friday afternoons Reb Yudke Shtoper would visit the synagogue in order to arrange the candles and to place white cloths on the tables and change the cover of the Ark in honour of Sabbath. On his way to the synagogue for the second time for the start of the Sabbath, close to the time for lighting the Sabbath candles, he would tap on the windowpanes of every house in order to remind the housewife that the precise hour had come to light the candles, according to the luakh¹⁶³. He did this along the whole length of the street.

¹⁵⁶ 'genius', a title for a rabbi indicating great respect

¹⁵⁷ south-eastern Belarus

¹⁵⁸ daily newspaper of the labour movement in Eretz Israel

¹⁵⁹ Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4

¹⁶⁰ college for the study of the Torah and Talmud

¹⁶¹ Pentateuch

¹⁶² acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, who wrote famous commentaries on the Bible and Talmud

¹⁶³ calendar indicating the precise start and end of the Sabbath, week by week

The rebbitzin ¹⁶⁴ Miriam Abelson

The rov Reb Yehuda Abelson

For many years, until the end of his life, he was the collector for the Karlin shtibl (prayer house), and thanks to the great respect that people felt towards him and thanks to his honesty, integrity and humility they accepted his authority. As his house was a meeting place for his extended family and for his many friends of all ages he wasn't disturbed in the pattern of his daily life (also as a result of his being hard of hearing).

Every morning he would help his sons and his partners, Zeydl Lopata and the Khaver family, pack crates of fish in a mixture of ice in order to transport them to the capital Warsaw. This was their trade for many years. And after that public prayers, a meal and studying of the Midrash Rabbah ¹⁶⁵ in a loud voice – as this was his hobby – to study for about two hours every evening, before going up to his rest.



Velvl Gelman

Many days before the festival of Sukkot ¹⁶⁶, with great devotion and after consultation with the rov, he took a lot of care in choosing an elegant esrog ¹⁶⁷ and in decorating the kosher tabernacle in which he would indeed live throughout the festival, eating, drinking, sleeping and studying there.

Let us also remember Reb Shmuel Vinnik, who for many years was collector for the house of study and looked after it almost single-handedly, and Reb Nisl Meir's, who was among the most rare and dedicated beadles who did nothing in order to receive payment. Every Sabbath at dawn he would wake up the Jews of the shtetl 'for the work of the Creator', to chant psalms in the house of study. Once they were there he would single out how each of them earned their living for the week and

¹⁶⁴ wife of the rov

¹⁶⁵ collection of midrashim (exegeses and interpretations of the Bible)

¹⁶⁶ 7-day Feast of Tabernacles (between late September and late October), when some Jews eat (and sometimes sleep) in temporary structures partially open to the sky, recalling the 40 years in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt

¹⁶⁷ type of citrus fruit

this is how he would wake them up: 'Arise, such and such, son of such and such, prevail like a lion for the work of the Creator for that is what you must do'. And his voice echoed in the still of the night from one end of the shtetl to the other.

He would also make sure there were drinks and pastries for the various charity meals and he would literally cling to a group of Chassidic dancers.

Chava Lifshis, the wife of Reb Yoyne Borovyk, was the 'preacher' (Sagerin [Yiddish]) for the women of the synagogue and led the prayers on Sabbath and festivals and also in 'elegies' on Tisha Be'Av ¹⁶⁸. She would also look after and be in charge of the cooking for the admorim and their followers when they came to the shtetl, and she would also share among the women the leftovers which she managed to save from the hands of the Chassidim.

From 1924 onwards the admor ¹⁶⁹ from the town of Brezne, Reb Gedaliahu Toybman ('Reb Gedalche'), would also visit. He was invited by my father despite the fact that my father was a Karlin Chassid. My father had been on friendly terms with Reb Gedalche for over twenty years, from the time he visited Dolguslya in Russia and was received in great honour. And after the area was conquered by the Soviets the admor changed his visits to a different area and also came to our shtetl. He stayed with Reb Asher Khayat and his neighbour Zalman Lopata.

In these Sabbath meals the Chassidim from all circles in the town, including the rov, would sit around the long tables. Reb Feybush and Reb Aaron Khaznchuk would play their songs, and the admor would embark on 'chanting the Torah', and after the blessing of the food the whole group would go out into the street dancing with ecstasy and devotion until the admor, his eyelids lifted upwards, would also join in. In his appearance he would really enthrall all those who saw him.

The old cemetery was very ancient. Its gravestones were made of wood and the letters carved into them were almost indecipherable, apart from one marble headstone on the grave of my grandfather Reb Zalman son of Mordekhai, who passed away in the year 5669 (1909), according to what was carved on the gravestone that his son Yakov Lopata brought from Olevsk in Russia.

In about the year 1925 a new cemetery was consecrated at the end of 'the new road' of the Christians. The ceremony was carried out by the old rov Reb Yehuda Abelson, the righteous of blessed memory. In the circuits all the Jews of the shtetl from young and old took part, and at the end of the ceremony we were treated to drinking 'leChaim' ¹⁷⁰ in generous measure.

As it was then a period of argument between the two 'sides' concerning two places for slaughtering that had become vacant, people talked a lot about the 'division'. And some people wouldn't even stop arguing about it on this special occasion. Then Reb Asher Lapinsky got angry and shouted excitedly in a loud voice: 'What? Even here in this holy place, is this an eternal house for every living being?' He dragged those who were arguing to the dining table and drank leChaim with them, his eyes sparkling with holy joy coming from the heart.

Every spring the problem of leasing pasture-land, *zapolye* ¹⁷¹, came up again. This belonged to the local Christian community. The discussion would take place on the reader's platform of the 'house of study' between afternoon and evening prayers. Every cow owner would sign for his financial obligations towards the leaseholder and they would come to an agreement regarding the hiring of the Christian (shepherd) to look after all the herd.

The only municipal institution in the shtetl was the town council, *Urząd gminy Wysock* (in Polish), where the Jewish community was represented by two

¹⁶⁸ day of mourning marking the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people

¹⁶⁹ acronym for adoneynu (our Master) moreynu (our Teacher) verabeynu (our Rabbi)

¹⁷⁰ Cheers!

¹⁷¹ a local word, literally 'beyond the fields'

delegates. They were nearly always Aaron, son of Reb Yehuda Shtoper, and Asher Khayat. The other delegates and all the officials and workers were Christians. The town never enjoyed anything from this institution: not street lighting, not pavements, not road-building etc., apart from free education which was given in the Polish elementary school purely in the Polish language.

In the last years (around 1928) the Jews of the shtetl had to improve the appearance of the shtetl by whitewashing the houses, marking the **names of the roads and the numbers**, making wooden pavements etc. And indeed they built these pavements solely in order to discharge their obligation, constructing some of them from thick boards and some from light wooden boxes and the like. The result was that they were of pretty poor quality.

The Jews were just taxpayers. Although all the houses of the shtetl were built of wood and the majority were also covered with straw roofs there was no fire-fighting organisation or equipment in the early years, apart from a single horse-drawn pump and some demolition equipment. These were kept by Nisl Ranies (Reb Nisl, son of Reb Shleyne) and were under his supervision. They had been purchased at one time with money collected from the Jewish public. Things remained like this until in 1927-8 the town council (*gmina*), in cooperation with a mixed council of Jews and Goys, came to the rescue and erected a large shed in the centre of the shtetl for storage of fire-fighting equipment, an adequate quantity of which was purchased. They would also hire out the large hall in the shed for performances by our drama circle and for various artistic events - by the way, for a greatly exaggerated sum, a result of the anti-semitism that the authorities of the town were plagued with.

The 'Jewish Community'

In the year 1928, with the publication of the law ¹⁷² by the Polish parliament granting the status of 'Jewish Community' even to country towns, the tiny little town of Vysotsk, which also included the nearby shtetl of Horodnya, received, as if by a miracle, the status of community. Then the pre-election activity and the wrangling started between Zionists and orthodox. But elections did take place and a few delegates were elected, among them once again Aaron son of Yehuda Shtoper and Asher Khayat, who served as secretary, plus two delegates from Horodnya. However, under pressure from the town council (*gmina*), where there was a marked anti-semitic tendency, especially in those final years, the activity of the 'community' was restricted to the issuing of birth and death certificates and such like. It didn't do anything constructive of any significance. The 'community' made hardly any impression on the life of the Jews.

Medicine

In the distant past there had been a kind of 'doctor'. A clue to this was that Asher Khayat and Zalman Lopata purchased the house that they jointly occupied from the 'doctor'(der royfe). In our days there was no doctor in the shtetl apart from the felsher¹⁷³, a Russian university lecturer who knew something of medicine and who was invited to treat urgent cases of illness. In the case of a 'dangerous illness' the

¹⁷² The law of 1928 authorized the establishment of Jewish community councils in rural areas on a self-funding basis, responsible among other things for the registration of births, marriages, divorces and deaths.

¹⁷³ from Russian *feldsher*: medical assistant

family would bring the doctor from the nearby town of Dombrovitz for a single visit. While he was there other sick people in the town would also visit him.

In the year 1924 the chemist Mr Yakov Khomre and his family came to settle in the shtetl. He was the brother-in-law of the Jewish doctor Kupershteyn from Olevsk¹⁷⁴ which is in White Russia. He established a modern pharmacy in Vysotsk, and, on the initiative of the chemist Khomre, it wasn't long before a young doctor also came to Vysotsk. This was Dr Zlotnik who began to serve as the doctor of the shtetl.

Once Dr Zlotnik volunteered to give a series of lectures to the public, in particular to the young people, on the topic 'Culture and Civilisation'. He spoke in Polish, for the man only spoke Polish in spite of the fact that he was a committed Zionist. There were about thirty of us and we listened intently to the topic, as if hypnotised. He began his lectures from the earliest period of mankind, the generation of the Flood, the generation that set sail and so on and interwove into the lecture quotations in fluent Hebrew, like for example 'For we be brethren'¹⁷⁵...'. Amidst the constant provincial greyness of Vysotsk his lectures shone a special light for us. It wasn't long before Dr Zlotnik left the shtetl for he wasn't able to find his living there - although he was a bachelor.

A Way of Life

The appearance of the town was like the appearance of a very large village. Its houses were low, the majority covered with straw roofs. It was only because of the fires that broke out from time to time and consumed the old houses that new, larger and improved wooden houses were built in their place. From the main street, which was very wide, some alleyways branched out here and there. All this was a purely Jewish settlement. The Christian settlement was concentrated in the suburbs spread out in the four directions of the compass, from east to west and from north to south.

In the [Jewish] main street there were a few tiny shops: a grocery store, fabrics, building material, a bar etc. Trade was very sparse, except on Thursday when buying increased a little, with purchases at the grocery store for the requirements of the Sabbath. Throughout the day the movement of people was by and large barely noticeable because they were all busy working and looking after their own affairs. Towards evening a few people would appear in the square of the shtetl, some going to the synagogue and some of the young people going for a walk with their friends.

In the past there had been no post office in the shtetl. Postal items would be collected from the town's local authority office; anybody waiting for a letter would go there to enquire about the letter and collect it. At the beginning of the 20s a government 'postal agency' was established. In those days, with people from Vysotsk going to Eretz Israel, the majority of those thronging around the post office were families of olim¹⁷⁶ who came to collect letters from their relatives in Eretz Israel. There was a high level of expectation leading up to the moment when post could be collected. People would chat about Eretz Israel and tell each other about 'the situation' and about what was happening there etc.

At the beginning of the 20s there would burst forth in the evenings the playing of a fiddle and also records of cantorial singing, but only from the house of Meir Vinnik: 'Rahel weeping for her children'¹⁷⁷, 'And they shall rejoice in Your

¹⁷⁴ now in Ukraine

¹⁷⁵ Genesis chapter 13, verse 8

¹⁷⁶ emigrants to Eretz Israel

¹⁷⁷ Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 15

sovereignty¹⁷⁸ *Rachem na*¹⁷⁹ by Yossele Rosenblatt¹⁸⁰. Some years later there burst forth from the house of the chemist Yakov Khomre the sound of his wife Polya playing violin and piano. Later on Shleyne Shuster and Zeydl Vinnik, that lovely couple, played their violins. They would also give pleasure with their violins at the weddings of those without the means to hire the kleyzmorim¹⁸¹ from nearby Dombrovitza. These kleyzmorim were Gabriel and his sons. He played the clarinet and his sons the fiddles and drum.

On the eve of Sabbath they would bring the bride and groom, accompanied by almost all the people of the shtetl and by the kleyzmorim, along the whole of the main street as far as the entrance to the large synagogue, during which time the sounds of the playing and the drum resounded far and wide. After the rov, amidst a profound hush, had conducted the 'blessing' the wedding house regained its full dignity during the playing of the traditional melodies. Gabriel and his group would remain in the wedding house. With the passing of Sabbath the dances would begin and continue until the light of morning. Then, with their farewell melodies, they would accompany the best men to their homes, and Gabriel would leave for the prayer house to consecrate himself with his creator in a morning prayer. At the time when HeKhalutz was established Zeydl Lopata would organise a special dance for weddings, a pioneer dance, humming the words 'Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the Lord'¹⁸² until this dance became a traditional part of weddings.

When a boy was born the beadle would appear on the stage of the synagogue on Friday and after receiving the Sabbath would proclaim: 'Such and such, son of such and such 'requests' the 'world' (the congregation) to a boy'. After the eve of Sabbath meal, before the blessing of the food, people would go into the house where the boy had been born, sit around the table and be treated to peas or beans and compote, sing melodies, say the blessing of the food in public and return to their homes.



Pesya (the midwife), Volf Nafkhan and their grandson Itzhak Ryzhy

The next day, after reciting the Sabbath mussaf¹⁸³, the beadle would again proclaim: 'go in peace, it's a boy'! And again Jews would enter the birth room, bless

¹⁷⁸ prayer from the Mussaf service (an additional service on Sabbath and festivals commemorating the additional sacrifices offered in the Temple of Jerusalem – see Numbers 28-29)

¹⁷⁹ 'Have Mercy', the Third Grace following a meal

¹⁸⁰ a leading exponent of cantorial music (lived 1882-1933)

¹⁸¹ Yiddish: musicians (singular: kleyzmer)

¹⁸² Psalm number 4, verse 5

¹⁸³ an additional service, following the morning service, on Sabbath and festivals, commemorating the additional sacrifices offered in the Temple of Jerusalem

the mother and the newborn infant with a shabbes sholem and wish a speedy recovery.

Also on the evening before the day of the bris-mila ¹⁸⁴ they would visit the house where the boy had been born for vakh (watch), then study for about an hour and go home. The bris-mila would be carried out with great pomp and circumstance, and the honour [of holding the baby boy] was passed from the kvatter¹⁸⁵ to the sandak ¹⁸⁶, followed by drinks and pastries, traditional Chassidic songs etc.



from right to left, standing: Chaya Vaks, Reuven Kolkovsky, Breyndl Gottlieb, Eliahu Vaks, Malka Bigon, Reuven Khover, Sheynke Abelson, Pinkhas Gelman, Sheyndl Khover, Leybl Nafkhan, Mindl Kolodny;
sitting: Dov Bigon, a male visitor, a female visitor, Zeydl Vinnik

There was no birth clinic in Vysotsk, not even a qualified midwife, but they would invite the bobbe, the traditional midwife Pesya, the wife of Volf Nafkhan, and everything went smoothly.

Whenever one of the two water pumps in the shtetl, from which they brought water home in buckets, went wrong, one of the Jewish residents would go out to collect contributions from house to house in order to repair the pump. Once when I happened to be with Hershl Makhlas (Sheynbeyn) by the pump to which the two of us had come in order to draw water I was surprised by the reaction to my sholem [hello]. ‘That’s too quiet. Is it not written: “With joy shall ye draw water”¹⁸⁷? We must therefore be happy when we stand next to the water.’ On that occasion, breathing in the spring morning, I raised my voice in the song *kinderyorn* ¹⁸⁸. ‘At any rate something of my life (remains); my soul, is it not like scraps of linen?’ [presumably a quotation from a popular song]. For with all the dear intimacy of this shtetl and its special romanticism, the horizon was narrow and there was a yearning for a different life, more varied, that was out there, somewhere far away...

More than once while walking home late at night I met Berl Zulir while he was ‘on guard’. He would stroll along the ramshackle pavements and sing romantic songs to himself in his high voice. And years later, here in the Land [of Israel], when I

¹⁸⁴ circumcision

¹⁸⁵ the ‘godfather’ who carries the baby to the circumcision area

¹⁸⁶ the man who holds the baby during the *bris*

¹⁸⁷ Isaiah chapter 12, verse 3

¹⁸⁸ ‘Childhood years’ by Mordekhai Gebirtig (1877-1942), a famous writer of popular Yiddish songs who lived in Cracow

was in the cinema watching *Yankl der shmid*¹⁸⁹ as Yankl runs around at night from street to street, singing romantic songs in a voice that echoes far and wide, in his yearning for a life somewhere else, it all came back to me.

Like him, Reb Isroel Nafkhan (I was one of those who frequented his home), who would stand on Sabbath afternoons a good hour in front of the window panes with a book in his hands and only his lips moving, had similar feelings to Beberl's. So would Hershil Makhlas. Both of them became widowers at a young age. They did not re-marry, out of self-sacrifice for their children.

I loved rummaging through the pile of old copies of HaTsira¹⁹⁰ in Isroel Nafkhan's storage room. I also loved to read the sheets crowded with tiny lines belonging to Yakov-Shmuel Levin, dating from the time when he had once been in Odessa, in Tsarist Russia. These were kept in Reb Shleyne Levin's storage rooms. And so on and so forth...

When the young people went on walks it was mostly outside the town, 'over the bridges'. In the evenings we would sail in boats on the river, and on summer evenings you would hear the voices of pretty girls on the veranda of one of the houses singing in joy. But, as I've said, the horizon was very narrow, especially for the progressive generation; everyone would raise his eyes to the distance, to Eretz Israel. But there were also those who planned their life where they were or in the surrounding area.

However who could imagine such a tragic end? Alas, the Jews! Alas, righteous women! Good and loyal sons and daughters. Working for the Zionist ideal was the light of your life – even though you did not achieve it.

I loved you all, an eternal love, those I knew intimately and also those whom I loved only from afar. All of you were dear to me, old men and old women, young men and young women. And this is how I love you also, the remnants, here with us in the Land – our land. Everyone a kind of living memorial on the graves of those who were. For certain reasons it is difficult for me to name you, but you are all constantly in my mind's eye:

'Sky wrapped in greyish mist, in the air the smell of spring,
The dust of the roads dotted with light rain and you, strolling slowly -
Now I still keep and remember all that in my head turned silver,
Now also my heart will leave me suddenly and walk silently with you.

My heart walks silently in the row and does not grasp your death,
And does not know how and why your lives stopped suddenly.
I do not take in completely the idea that I shall never be able to see you again,
That all of you, the reality and essence of life, are but a shadow and a dream.

Sky wrapped in greyish mist, in the air the smell of spring,
And the dust of the roads dotted with tears and you, strolling slowly.'

(from *Or Zarua* [Shining Light], songs and ballads of Shimshon Meltzer [1909–2000])

¹⁸⁹ Yankl the Smith, based on the play by David Pinsky (1872–1959)

¹⁹⁰ 'The Dawn', the first Hebrew-language journal in Poland, was founded in 1862. It ceased publication in 1927.

And this is how the end came, together with the whole of the house of Israel in Europe. Our precious community of Vysotsk, where honest people, forever modest, lived and worked, among them parents, brothers, sisters, many family relatives and innocent babies, male and female comrades, and good friends, all wiped out on one day, the 27th of Elul 5702 – 9.9.1942 – by the Nazis and their Ukrainian emissaries, may they be cursed. Some of those who escaped and survived and reached Eretz Israel saw the mass grave beyond the town of Vysotsk, a grave on which there is not even any hope of prostrating ourselves.

About one hundred and fifty of the 'People of Vysotsk' are here in Israel. A large number of them come together every year for a memorial gathering and public Kadish ¹⁹¹. They appear like chicks abandoned by the mother hen, they assemble and come together as one. And so, every year on the anniversary of the slaughter, they gather, people of Vysotsk, to unite with the memory of their dear ones. And a memorial stone, paid for out of money collected from our friends, was erected in the 'Vysotsk Copse' in the KKL Forest of Martyrs in Eshtaol, which is on the road leading up to Jerusalem. On the 27th of Nisan (April) the children of Vysotsk come here to be with one another, to be together and commune with the dead. I gathered the strength to record their memory with these meagre lines...

Israel Gutman

Rehovot



Zionist activists in the shtetl, 1933

¹⁹¹ memorial prayer for the dead

A word about Chadorim and Melamdim

What we are talking about are the chadorim¹⁹² in our shtetl before a school was established by *Tarbut*¹⁹³ and before the establishment of a Talmud Torah¹⁹⁴. In those days all the children in our shtetl studied in chadorim with melamdim¹⁹⁵, all of whom were called rebbe by the pupils. And there were melamdim for all stages. There was an infants' melamed who only taught the beginners. He would teach his pupils, starting with the alphabet and going on to being able to read the Siddur¹⁹⁶. One such infants' teacher was Reb Itzhok Shabshi of blessed memory. In his house the children, of all abilities, sat on benches along a large table. They practised and repeated the alphabet. The 'rebbe' knew how to tell the difference between a child who knew his lesson and one who was simply shouting. He would approach the latter, caress him and explain to him what was written. They would study from seven in the morning until five in the afternoon. Even on winter nights, in the snow and the cold, the children would drag their legs to the cheyder and back. More than once the mothers would come to take their children home.

After a year's study in the cheyder they would move to a higher cheyder whose melamed was either Reb Yudl or Reb Shmuel. Here they already learned how to pray in a free manner and also studied a little Chumash¹⁹⁷. But discipline was stricter and the demands on the pupils greater. I remember the cheyder of Reb Yudl where I studied. At the side of his house, after any rain a puddle formed, and whenever the 'rebbe' dozed off at his table we would quietly creep outside and splash in the puddle. When the 'rebbe' woke up he would rush outside shouting at us to get back to the cheyder. When we got back inside the house we would hide in all sorts of places: under the table, under the bed, behind the cupboard and so on. Reb Yudl would take the long-handled dustpan from the kitchen and use it to drag each one of us from where we were hiding. Then his wife Hudl would hand him the strap with which he would beat us soundly until every child promised, tearfully, not to repeat the offence. But of course the next day the whole spectacle was repeated.

After a year's study in this cheyder we moved to the cheyder of Reb Asher Lapinsky. This name alone, Asher der Melamed, rained terror on the pupils. Discipline was extremely harsh, for Reb Asher was a very devout and God-fearing Jew who demanded from his pupils the same respect for both the lighter and the stricter commandments that he himself showed. We studied Chumash and Rashi¹⁹⁸ with him and also notation for reciting prayers.

He would pray in the evenings in the house of study. This is when the pupils would run home to bring paper lanterns with lighted candles in them to show them the way home at night when they came out of the cheyder. In the evening he would go over with us the passages of the Chumash we had learned during the day, with all of us reading out loud at the same time. But woe-betide anyone who spoke with his friend during the lesson or who didn't know how to answer the 'rebbe's' question concerning the lesson... And no wonder they would all avoid sitting near the 'rebbe'. On Sabbath we would study 'Chapters of the Fathers'. The whole week Reb Asher was hoarse from all his shouting and from getting angry with his pupils.

¹⁹² private schools providing a religion-based education (singular: cheyder)

¹⁹³ 'Culture', a network of Hebrew-language educational institutions founded in 1922

¹⁹⁴ a school providing a traditional religion-based education, free of charge for poorer pupils

¹⁹⁵ teachers (singular: melamed)

¹⁹⁶ prayerbook

¹⁹⁷ Pentateuch

¹⁹⁸ acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, who wrote the first comprehensive commentaries on the Bible and Talmud

From Reb Asher Lapinsky 's cheyder they would move to the more advanced melamdim who already taught Gemara ¹⁹⁹ with commentaries. Such a melamed was Reb Isaskhar the butcher. He was an intelligent man and a clever and brilliant scholar. Until this very day I remember his teaching.

And there was another melamed whose cheyder the children of the shtetl aspired to get into, though not all managed to do so. He was known locally as Reb Asher dem Megides [Reb Asher, the preacher's son]. As far as was possible his cheyder was modern, because in addition to Bible studies they also studied secular subjects with him (Hebrew, arithmetic, grammar and so on). And because his public responsibilities required him to visit government offices the pupils would 'have fun' in those idle hours. They played cards and so on.

The situation continued like this for years until a mixed Hebrew school for boys and girls was established in the shtetl by Tarbut. However, since some of the people in the shtetl were opposed to boys and girls learning together a Talmud Torah was opened for boys. Then some of the teachers mentioned above abandoned their private chadorim and served as melamdim in the Talmud Torah.

Dov Tkach

Education in Polish Volyn [Volhynia]

With the end of the First World War many of the teachers who came to Volyn had escaped from Bolshevik Russia because of the political pressure from the *Yevseksia*²⁰⁰. They brought with them some limited knowledge of the Hebrew and Yiddish schools that had sprung up in Ukraine and Russia for children of Jewish refugees and with this knowledge they built the foundations of the Hebrew school movement. In a short space of time Hebrew schools and kindergartens were established in many towns and shtetls and they began to attract Jewish children. The teacher training colleges in Kiev and Kharkov had an indirect influence on the coming together of the aims of education and their implementation. And then there were the experiments in publishing pedagogical journals in Kiev and Kharkov.

Although there was not yet at that time a direct link with Eretz Israel, all the teachers and founders of schools in Eretz Israel were certainly an inspiration. The curriculum of the Hebrew gymnasium in Jaffa was copied, improved and adapted to the schools in Volyn. The teachers who came brought with them teaching materials from the publishing house Omanut²⁰¹.

The study of Hebrew as the language of Jewish religious instruction had already become widespread via the 'reformed' chadorim²⁰². Now some of the teachers moved to the new schools, where they made attempts to adjust their teaching and to fulfil the ambitions that had filled their hearts since the days of Tsarist rule. These efforts were revealed fully in the years of German occupation, in particular following the Kerensky revolution.

With the establishment of the Hebrew secondary schools excellent teaching staff were recruited who had obtained their education in Western Europe (mostly in Austria). Their influence on the educational institutions in general was decisive, for

¹⁹⁹ section of the Talmud

²⁰⁰ an abbreviation of *Yevreyskaya Sektsia* (Russian), the Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party, which aimed to suppress Judaism and destroy independent Jewish parties, both Zionist and non-Zionist

²⁰¹ 'Art', based in Kiev

²⁰² private schools providing a religion-based education (singular: cheyder)

good as well as for ill. During the course of these years the ambitions and the methods of east and west were fused and the schools developed the form and character to which they had been aspiring. The activity of the headquarters of Tarbut in Warsaw, which was founded in 1922 at a conference of delegates from all the districts of Poland, was important during this process of fusion.

Worthy of particular note are the boldness and devotion shown by the Zionist activists in the towns and shtetls of Volyn, who had the courage to establish Tarbut schools and kindergartens despite the many difficulties placed in their way by the Polish authorities.

In 1920 the Tarbut Hebrew gymnasium was founded in Rovne²⁰³. It served as a centre for the entire cultural movement in Western Volyn and offered assistance and support to all the schools in the region, both those which had already been established and those that were established later.

The overwhelming majority of Yiddish schools in Volyn were liquidated. Many of the Tarbut schools did not receive governmental authorisation. Although on the face of it the educational legislation was as liberal as it could be, it was nonetheless difficult for the Jews to meet the demands, these being: a building conforming to the hygiene laws, teachers having general and pedagogic training and also Polish citizenship and political acceptability. The Polish government schools were established in the buildings remaining from the days of the Tsar. There were no other, more modern buildings with large rooms in the towns - and absolutely none in the shtetls. Even if a large building was found that conformed to the requirements of a school it took time before it received authorisation from the doctor and the government architect. The matter would pass from one office to another. Nevertheless by and large lessons were not cancelled, for the activists and teachers knew how to sort things out with the local police. During the course of these years many purpose-built Tarbut schools were established, with the help of the parents and with American support.

More difficult than the ruling concerning buildings was the issue of the political acceptability of the elementary school teachers' certificates. Most of the local teachers were registered in registration books in shtetls scattered throughout Russia. If a teacher was registered in one of the places outside Polish territory he would certainly not receive confirmation of political acceptability from the local authority. Many of the teachers in the elementary schools did not possess certificates recognised by the Polish education authorities. They had to receive their certification via an indirect route and be registered solely as teachers of religion, towards whom, for various reasons, the authorities were lenient.

The teachers' economic situation was depressed. Support from abroad had ceased. Salaries, although high and beyond the means of small trades people and artisans, did not cover all the teachers' needs. The headquarters of Tarbut tried to help in a pedagogic way through supervision and pedagogical journals, but its very existence was dependent on tolls levied on the schools. The government would not give any help to the schools. Even in the final years before the Second World War local authorities only gave very meagre support. The headquarters of Tarbut succeeded in those years in getting from the American committee certain sums for buildings, from which the schools in Volyn benefited.

Tarbut institutions formed in essence a Hebrew education network in Volyn. Most of the Jewish children living in the many settlements in the region received their education in these schools. The influence of these institutions on the Jewish population was great. Those who had initially been opposed to the new Hebrew education came to terms with it later; some of them even became supporters.

²⁰³ now Rivne, previously Rovno (Russian), Równo (Polish) and Rovne (Yiddish)

90% of the pupils in the elementary schools were of a low social status. Because of that, in many of the schools the children were fed with the help of the *T.O.Z.*²⁰⁴. The Tarbut headquarters also helped with the support provided by *T.O.Z.*. Then there was the teachers' institute which arranged summer camps for teachers and pupils in the Tatra and Beskid mountains. Many of the pupils of Tarbut schools in Volyn continued their path in the youth movement until it found its home in Eretz Israel.

Shmuel Rozenhek

from the book 'The Sarny Community'

The Tarbut school in the shtetl

This was in 1920, with the great Zionist awakening among the Jewish masses that followed the Balfour Declaration, the Russian Revolution and the anti-Jewish pogroms. Several comrades from Tzeirei Tzion²⁰⁵ got together, among them Zeydl Lopatyn, Yaffa Geklman, Yekhiel Borovyk, Volf Lykhtnfeld and Belka Ratner. We decided to establish a Hebrew school in the shtetl. We began by renting a room from Moyshe Shnayder, announced the registration of children in the Hebrew school and enrolled children of all ages. To begin with therefore there was one mixed class for all ages that served as a sort of preparatory stage for the next year. The next year there was already some kind of shape to our 'school'. We rented a house with a few rooms (from Benyamin Shnayder) and sorted the children into classes according to their age. The majority of the pupils were girls and there were only a few boys.

We looked for somebody to be the head of the school. We contacted the headquarters of Tarbut which was then in Rovne. We travelled to Rovne to see Rozenhek²⁰⁶, who was then the leading light at the headquarters of Tarbut, and asked him for a suitable person to be the head of our school.

The school developed. We gained the trust of the parents. We also attracted teachers like Rotman and Kadishevitz. There were four classes in the school and in them a hundred children - or, to be more precise, girls. On top of that we organised evening classes for young working people. As a result of that the struggle with the Bund²⁰⁷, who saw the working youth as their sphere of influence, intensified. The orthodox fought hard against the school and the evening classes because they saw the school as the source of all evil.

I remember one episode from those days. One evening some figures draped in white clothes appeared in the corridor of the school and below its windows. A rumour spread in the shtetl that corpses and devils were dancing in the school at night as a punishment to those who were studying the Torah without covering their heads. The children were really gripped with fear; for several days they would not come to school until things had calmed down. It transpired that the orthodox - possibly in league with the Bund - had enticed some children to wrap themselves in white clothes and frighten the other children in order to drive them away from the

²⁰⁴ acronym for *Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej* (Polish), Society for the Protection of Health of the Jewish Population

²⁰⁵ Zionist Youth

²⁰⁶ presumably Shmuel Rozenhek, author of the chapter 'Education in Polish Volyn'

²⁰⁷ the Bund was a non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement founded in 1897 to represent Jews throughout Imperial Russia. It supported the 1917 Revolution but opposed the October Revolution. In 1921 it ceased activities in the Soviet Union but remained active in Poland (and the United States)



A class of girls with the teacher Ternopolsky (in the middle), 1918

secular Hebrew school.

The school grew from year to year. Every year a class was added, until the Polish authorities, irritated and jealous, took action against it. They began to require from the teachers qualifications and government authorisation. The teachers at the school at the time were Kant for literature and Bible, Shokhet for mathematics and Yaffa Geklman taught the lower classes. At that time, under the auspices of Tarbut, evening university classes were organised in Warsaw for adults in order to obtain teaching certificates. Kant and I travelled to these classes and obtained teaching certificates. But the government wouldn't leave us alone. They looked for tricks and pretexts to bully us. They maintained that the flat was not suitable for its use etc. As we didn't have the funds for a better and more suitable flat the school was closed in 1924. They continued to teach in secret in private rooms comparable to a school, but in the course of time this was also stopped.

In 1927 the Tarbut school was re-established. I remember the teacher Feldman who, apart from his work in the school, was very active in the HeKhalutz HaTzair²⁰⁸ branch and in general among the young people of the shtetl, through the evening classes, lectures, literary debates and so on that he organised. But the re-established school was unable to find the strength to keep open for more than one year.

²⁰⁸ Young Pioneers



The Tarbut school, year one, 1924

from right to left, standing (top row): Malka Khaznchuk, Bella Lieberman, Rivka Sher, Roza Kryvoruchky, Mikhle Lieberman, Rut Vaks;
 second row from top: Pesil Lopatyn, Yakov Lopata, Trigon, Arie Kant, Roza Shokhat, the teacher Shokhat, Yaffa Geklman, Yakov Shmuel Levin;
 next row down: Gitl Lopata, Chana Feldman, Breyndl Kaftan, Sara Durchyn, Tama Shtoper, Feygl Geklman;
 second row from bottom: Dvora Borovyk, Esther Feldman, Freydl Sher, Lea Urman, Dvora Nafkhan, Sara Petrukh, Sh. Riva Borovyk, Pesl Shamash, Bonya Kikhl, Abrams Bar Ryzhy;
 bottom row: Zhana Khmara, Dvorale Borovyk

The teachers of the school were generous not only in their teaching. Their fingers were in every public activity in the shtetl. They organised and co-ordinated all the Zionist activities. They were the ones who organised and were active in the local library; they were the ones who collected contributions and were active on behalf of the KKL²⁰⁹; they were the ones who organised drama groups and presented plays; they were active in the youth movement and so on. I remember one particular evening event when there was an argument between the teachers and local KKL activists concerning the purpose for which money was being collected. The teachers maintained that the money should be devoted to the local library for acquisition of new books, whereas the KKL activists maintained that it should be given to Keren Kayemet. The two groups went away with the 'material' to collect money, having agreed that the group which returned first after selling the 'material' would be the one to get the money. It was the library group which came back first. The KKL activists were angry and were not willing to surrender their claim. Eventually a new agreement was reached to share the money equally between the two groups.

The beginnings of the Khalutz

The first branch of the Khalutz in the shtetl was organised as early as 1924 by virtue of the fact that at that time the only people who received emigration certificates were members of Khalutz and in particular those in training, preparing for communal life in Eretz Israel. In the shtetl there were then two Zionist organisations. One was

²⁰⁹ Keren Kayemet l'Israel, the Jewish National Fund

Tzeirei Tzion ²¹⁰ and the second 'General Zionists', but neither members of one nor of the other were able to emigrate to Eretz Israel. As has already been said, the only ones who could were members of HeKhalutz and those in training. We, who were members of Tzeirei Tzion, were particularly anxious to emigrate and decided therefore to organise the branch of Khalutz. We invited a 'visit' from the headquarters in Warsaw, and Khuma Khayut came. We called a general meeting of all the young people in the shtetl and afterwards a separate meeting of younger people. This is how the Khalutz and the Khalutz Tzair were organised.

In these meetings Khuma lectured about the tasks of the Khalutz, about Eretz Israel, about the worker in the Land and so on. She did not, as was usually the case with other lecturers, go overboard with words of praises but spoke simply - and there was a lot of magic in her words - about the tasks, about the difficulties, about the conquest of labour and settlement and so on. And in fact many flinched and did not join the Khalutz. But those who did join knew that they had to go into training, to begin work even before they travelled to Eretz Israel. Following her suggestion, we contacted the Khalutz headquarters in Warsaw and with its help organised a training group in the village of Byala, the first and a joint one for the whole region.

The drama group

Alongside the Tarbut school a drama group was founded that would prepare frequent performances in the shtetl.

In those years 1920 -24, as far as I recall, the following plays: *der yeshive bokher*²¹¹; *di shkhite*²¹²; *mirele efros*²¹³; 'the Song of Songs'; *got, mentsh un tayvl*²¹⁴, *fishke der krumer*²¹⁵, *tevye der milkhiker*²¹⁶ and others.

The plays were important not only in themselves as plays but in particular in preparation for reading them and in all the work that preceded the performance, the rehearsals, building the stage, décor etc. – all of this brought a spirit of life into the shtetl.

Yaffa Geklman-Anavi

Kiryat Chaim

²¹⁰ Zionist Youth

²¹¹ Yiddish: The Yeshiva Boy

²¹² Yidd: The Slaughter, by Yakov Gordin (1853-1909)

²¹³ Also by Gordin

²¹⁴ Yidd: God, Man and the Devil, by Gordin

²¹⁵ Yidd: Fishke the Lame, based on a story by Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1917)

²¹⁶ Yidd: Tevye the Dairyman, based on a story by Sholem Aleikhem (1859-1916) which later became famous as 'Fiddler on the Roof'

Karlin-Stolin Chassidism

The importance of the Karlin branch of Chassidism lies not so much in the extent of its influence, as in the case of the Chassidic movements that arose later in Poland and in Ukraine, but in the timing and the energy of its activities, not in stasis but in dynamism. It was one of the earliest branches of Chassidism.

In the early days of this movement, when ‘the great preacher’ Reb Dov founded his house of study in the shtetl of Mezrich in southern Volyn, his pupil, Reb Aaron the Great, founded a centre of Chassidism in the north, in Karlin, a suburb of the Lithuanian town of Pinsk²¹⁷ (in the year 1765 approximately).

The importance of this centre in the north, parallel to the centre in the south, was such that Chassidim²¹⁸ were called either Mezricher or Karliner. And so, in the earliest documents from the time of the campaign that was waged against Chassidism, we read: ‘Call the mourners now, at once, and mourn the Chassidim called Mezricher and Karliner [i.e. calling for their death]’.

The philosopher Shlomo Mimon, who lived during the early years of Chassidism, testifies in his autobiography that followers of the new cult that appeared at that time would pay visits to two towns, K (Karlin) and M. (Mezrich). And the French tourist Grégoire, who visited Poland at that time, writes that the members of the new cult – the Chassidim – were called by the name ‘Karliniim’, taken from the name of the place where it was founded.

Even in documents dating from a later period (1796-1801), which are to be found in the senate in Petersburg and which relate to the time when the Russian government intervened in the conflict between the Chassidim and the misnagdim (those who opposed Chassidism), they called the Chassidim simply by the name ‘Karliniim’, despite the fact that by that time Chassidism, with all its various branches and families of tzaddikim²¹⁹, had already spread to all corners of Poland and Russia.

In these same documents Reb Shneur Zalman²²⁰ of Lyadi²²¹, the founder of Chabad²²², was called by the name ‘head of the Karliniim’, i.e. leader of the Chassidim.

In Lithuania, the main centre of [Jewish] learning, the Karlin Chassidim were pioneers of the ideas of Chassidism. It was from Karlin, which had at one time been part of Lithuania, the main centre of opposition to Chassidism, that Reb Aaron the Great attempted to spread the teachings of Chassidism.

From among passages in the notebook of the town Nisvizh²²³ dating from the year 1769, which before the war was held in the ‘court’ in Stolin and which contain corrections and teachings of Reb Aaron the Great, we learn how considerable his influence had already become by that time in all of the surrounding area.

In spite of the persecution and the prohibitions that were visited on the principal communities in Lithuania, including the town of Pinsk, Reb Aaron still managed to light the fire of Chassidism there. ‘He delivered himself in selfless dedication for that’ was written on the tombstone of his grave, in accordance with his instructions.

This was the first rise in the movement. At the time of the first prohibition, which happened mainly in the year 1772 and which was also imposed in his town, Reb Aaron died in his home town. He was only 36 years old. ‘The fire of God that

²¹⁷ Pinsk is now in southern Belarus

²¹⁸ followers of Chassidism

²¹⁹ Hebrew: righteous ones

²²⁰ lived 1745-1812

²²¹ now in Vitebsk province, Belarus

²²² an acronym for Khokhma (Wisdom), Bina (Understanding) and Da’at (Knowledge)

²²³ Nesvizh, south-west of Minsk

blazed in his bosom consumed him'. Among his written teachings the Sabbath song *ya ekhsos noam shabat*²²⁴ is particularly worthy of note. Until today it is sung by Chassidim every Sabbath.

After his death his pupil and friend Reb Shleyme of Karlin indeed tried to preserve his heritage, but because of the persecution and the prohibitions he was forced (in the year 1784) to leave Karlin, the cradle of Chassidism, and request shelter in the town of Ludmir (Vladimir-Volynsky²²⁵). And when the righteous man vanished the glory of the movement in Karlin also vanished. Their prayer houses were forcibly closed and the Chassidim were subjected to ceaseless persecution.

This was the period of decline in the Karlin Chassidic movement. Reb Shleyme remained in Ludmir. In the year 1792 he was killed as a martyr by the Cossacks in their war against Poland. He became famous in Chassidic writing under the name 'Messiah, Son of Yosef', whose destiny it was to be killed by Armilos²²⁶ before the arrival of the Messiah, Son of David.

Ludmir Reb Shleyme took with him into exile Reb Asher the First, the son of Reb Aaron the Great. After Reb Shleyme's death Asher returned to the area where his father lived (about the year 1794) but still did not dare return to Karlin because of the persecution. He chose as his residence the shtetl of Stolin, near Pinsk. Since then the Karlin Chassidim have also been called by the name of Stolin.

It was at that time (1796-1801) that the Pinsk rabbi Rabbi Avigdor led the famous campaign against the 'Karliniim'. Rabbi Avigdor went up to the high senate in Petersburg and caused the imprisonment of the tzaddik²²⁷ Reb Shneur Zalman of Lyadi and also of Reb Asher of Stolin (the day he was freed was celebrated on the fifth candle of Hanukkah²²⁸).

It was after the victory of the Chassidim and after they had taken control of the community institutions in Pinsk that Reb Asher the First returned to the cradle of Karlin Chassidism (after the year 1810). Here he remained until his death (1826). So it was during his time that the start of the second rise in the Karlin movement took place, after the period of decline in the days of its rebbe Reb Shleyme. This rise reached its peak in the days of his son, Aaron the Second, who ruled almost 50 years until the year 1872. He had great power. He was responsible for fortifying the building which his grandfather and his father had built and he produced the book 'the House of Aharon', including the 'Karlin Torah'. It was during his lifetime that the majority of the famous Karlin-Stolin melodies were composed.



The rebbe Reb Moyshe Perlov from Stolin

The rebbe Reb Israel Perlov from Stolin

The rebbe Reb Elimelech Perlov from Karlin

²²⁴ God, I yearn for the delight of Sabbath

²²⁵ now Volodymyr Volynsky

²²⁶ Armilos is a wicked, cruel king of Jewish legend

²²⁷ 'Righteous one', a title given to somebody of exceptional spirituality

²²⁸ Festival of Lights (December)

Reb Asher the Second, the son of Reb Aaron, died a year after the death of his father and was succeeded by a small three-year-old child, Reb Isroel, who was crowned rebbe. He became known in literature by the name ‘Yenuka’²²⁹ king of Stolin’ and later excelled himself with his great energy. He would mix with the common folk and was also close to those far away for he understood their spirit. He also excelled in his musical talent; during Melave Malka²³⁰ he and his sons would play pieces by Bach and Beethoven.

After the death of Reb Isroel in 5682 [1922] the kingdom was divided, for he was survived by six sons. Apart from the one son who emigrated to America, the only one to remain alive was his youngest son, Reb Yokhanan, who came to Israel. News regarding the martyrs’ death suffered by Yokhanan’s other brothers reached us via the mouths of survivors.

Dr Ze'ev Rabinovych (according to the anthology *Or Zarua* [Shining Light])

²²⁹ infant

²³⁰ ‘Accompanying the queen’, the third and final Sabbath meal

Ya ekhsos (God, I yearn)

(Sabbath song by Rebbe Aaron the Great of Karlin)

God, I yearn for the delight of Sabbath, fitting and united with Thy virtue.
 Grant the delight of Thine awe to the people, those that desire Thy grace.
 Consecrate them in the holiness of Sabbath, joined in Thy Law.
 Open unto them the delight and desire to open the gates of Thy grace.

God, I yearn

Be Thou the Guard of those that guard and await Thy holy Sabbath.

As the hart panteth after the water brooks [Psalm 42, 1]

so their souls long for the delight of Sabbath,

joined in the name of Thy holiness.

Save them from turning away from the Sabbath

lest it be closed to them for six days.

May they receive the blessing of Thy holy Sabbath

and purify their hearts in truth and belief in Thy worship.

God, I yearn

And may Thy mercy be upon Thy holy people.

To those that thirst for Thy charity give drink from the river of Eden.

Crown Israel in splendour.

They glorify Thee in Thy holy Sabbath.

Throughout the six days bestow on them the inheritance of Jacob, Thy
 chosen one.

God, I yearn

Sabbath, the delight of souls and the seventh pleasure of the spirits,

and the joys of souls basking in Thy love and Thine awe,

Holy Sabbath, my soul is sick for Thy love,

Holy Sabbath, souls of Israel

will find shelter in the shade of Thy wings

and drink abundantly of the riches of Thy house.

God, I yearn.

The visit of the rebbe in the shtetl

I remember those 'High Holidays', when the rebbe from Stolin, the Admor²³¹ Isroelke, used to stay with us in the shtetl. It wasn't so easy to bring him to the shtetl because he was always busy with community business. Many came to ask his advice and waited with great anticipation for what he would say. His followers carried out his advice in pedantic detail. Every word that he uttered was considered holy in their eyes. They would ask him in particular about matters of commerce and matchmaking.

Whenever there was a promise that the rebbe was coming to stay in the shtetl there was great joy. They all whispered about it and proclaimed the good news to one another. There was a great deal of preparation; they would prepare long tables for the dozens of people who always accompanied the rebbe from the shtetls and the nearby villages. About two weeks before his arrival they were all busy preparing the meals, for in those days there were no bakeries, and every woman baked the bread herself in an oven lit by wood.

The rebbe would stay in our house. It was taken for granted that everything would be prepared there; they would slaughter a calf or a cow and would prepare various foods and fine wines, all in honour of the occasion. A number of highly thought of women would always come to help us prepare the meals. They would cook special foods for the rebbe.

The rebbe would come to the shtetl in his carriage, which had its permanent coachman who took him everywhere. There only had to be a rumour that the rebbe was on his way and his followers would come out with their carts and wagons to greet him. On both sides of the road men, women and children would wait for him. The carriage would be accompanied by singing and dancing of the Chassidim and there was great joy. My father of blessed memory Moyshe Ayznberg and my mother Stesya of blessed memory did their best to prepare sleeping places for the guests who were always received hospitably.

Many of the Chassidim would pay their greetings and ask the rebbe for advice. In those days making a living was hard, and ordinary folk had more than their fair share of worries. They would come to the rebbe and tell him their worries. The rebbe's followers believed implicitly in his words and in his promise that they would come to pass.

We had a large house with many large rooms which would be filled with men, women and children whenever the rebbe came to stay. After the meal the Chassidim would go into the street dancing, accompanied by their Chassidic melodies.

It is hard to describe the joy that surrounded all the Chassidim, the ecstasy that took them over when they danced. All the cares and worries about family and money were forgotten. And there were some among them who didn't even have enough bread in the house.

Chava Ayznberg

²³¹ acronym for adoneinu (our Master) moreinu (our Teacher) verabeinu (our Rabbi)

The Admor dynasty of Brezne

The name of Brezne²³² became known in the world and in particular in the Jewish towns and the shtetls of Volyn and Polessia because of the Chassidic dynasty that came to reside there at the beginning of the 19th century. The large estate owners who owned the lands of the Jewish shtetls were looking for ways to grow rich, and as Chassidism was in the ascendant and as the Jews were joining the Chassidic leaders



Rebbe Shmuel Pechnik from Brezne

with enthusiasm, the 'squires' came to pay homage at the courts of the rebbes. This is how the 'squire' of Brezne came to invite one of the Chassidic leaders, Rebbe Yikhiel Mikhl Pechnik, who was then living in Stolin – a shtetl in Polessia that had its own Chassidic dynasty – granting him an estate of land and helping him to build a house. Rebbe Yikhiel Mikhl and his family settled in Brezne. He was known as Reb Mikhle the Brezneite, and it was with him that the Brezne dynasty started.

Reb Yikhiel Mikhl was the son of Rebbe Dovid Halevi, the preacher from Stepan²³³ and a pupil of the Mezrich preacher, the grandson of Rebbe Dovid Halevi, who wrote 'golden columns', and the son-on-law of the Chassidic leader Reb Yikhiel Mikhl, the preacher from

Zlochev²³⁴. While he was still in Stolin Reb Mikhle of Brezne would sit, day and night, over the Torah and worship God in the local house of study, together with his only son Reb Yitzhok, the son-in-law of Reb Aaron of Chernobyl. His wife was a small shopkeeper and she provided the meals for her husband and son, who immersed themselves in worshipping God. It was indeed extraordinary that the Chernobyl dynasty, which had already achieved a reputation in all the Jewish world, got married to Rebbe Mikhle, although he was very poor and humble.

The son-in-law, Itzikl, the only son of Reb Mikhle, whose name went before him already as a Gaon²³⁵ and as a tzaddik, was later glorified greatly in Chernobyl.

The Brezne dynasty flourished and expanded, especially in the days of Reb Itzikl of Brezne, who drew crowds of followers because of his reputation as a holy man and miracle worker. Many Christians also came to him to ask for salvation and assistance. Brezne Chassidism was based on a heartfelt faith, simple and devout.



Many were the pupils and 'people of substance' who travelled to Brezne, though most of those who came were crowds of simple people who, in innocent belief and without reserve, clung lovingly to the rebbe, like children attached to a devoted mother. Tailors, cobblers, artisans and small retailers from Volyn, and even more from Polessia, trusted their hearts in him and placed the fate of their lives in his hands.

Rebbe Itzikl of Brezne would do many things in the various towns and shtetls, he would show the Jews the right path and teach them to put their trust in the Creator and bless his name. If anything happened to these Jews they ran at once to the rebbe to share with him the joy they

²³² now Berezne, north-east of Rivne

²³³ a village south-west of Sarny(c.50 km. south of Udrytsk, the nearest railway station to Vysotsk)

²³⁴ now Zolochiv, a village east of Lviv

²³⁵ 'genius', a title for a rabbi indicating great respect

felt, and if it were bad – that he would prevent it happening, God forbid... On the day that they met the rebbe, whether they travelled to him at the New Year or on another occasion, their whole heart rejoiced and woe and sorrow fled. The hour of the rising of the soul arrived for everyone.

Reb Itzikl of Brezne died in Brezne in the year 5626 [1865]. His son, Rebbe Yosle, who succeeded him on the throne, only 'reigned' for four years and departed this life in the year 5630 [1870]. Although only a rebbe for four years he left beautiful stories to posterity. He was 36 when he died, but despite his young age he was admired by his followers. Even the manner in which he died evoked wonder: Chassidim gathered together and came to him at New Year and on the Day of Atonement, but he held them back until after Simkhat-Torah²³⁶, saying to them all: 'You won't regret it, stay!' Towards evening on Simkhat-Torah he called his sons and told them how to conduct themselves. The whole evening he spent with the Chassidim, and towards morning he rushed to immerse himself in the ritual bathhouse, returned and breathed his last in his house of study.

After the death of Rebbe Yosle his eldest son was aged 18. Both his grandmother Perle and his great-grandfather, Rebbe Aaron of Chernobyl, who died in the year 5652[1892], were still alive. Rebbe Aaron had three sons, and he confirmed the eldest one, Rebbe Shmuel, as his successor on the throne. This Rebbe Shmuel was my father's father. He was the leader of Chassidism in Brezne for 49 years and passed away in the year 5678 (end of 1917) in Brezne. He was the father-in-law of the famous rebbe of Belz, Isaskhar-Dov Rokeakh of blessed memory.

With the departure of Reb Shmuelke his son Reb Itzikl sat on the throne in Brezne. His second son Reb Nakhumke, settled in Dombrovitze, the third, Reb Yosle, settled in Sarny.

From this dynasty yet another branch developed. This was from the rebbe Chaimke Toybman of Brezne, who was the son-in-law of Reb Itzikl. This planter also struck roots of sons and sons of sons who continued the chain of rebbes until the day of wrath that fate appointed there for all of them.

Reb Aaron Pechnik

(from 'A Volyn Anthology', a pamphlet published in 1946)

²³⁶ 'The joy of the Torah', celebrating the completion of the annual readings from the Bible

The rebbe from Brezne

When I was nine years old I began to study in Vysotsk. Our village, called Tuman, was three km from Vysotsk. In Vysotsk I stayed with relatives of ours. Returning home on a Friday was a special experience for me. On one occasion – it was on a Thursday because the teacher was ill – I decided to walk home. On the way I had to cross three bridges among avenues of trees and some woods. At home there was an especially joyous atmosphere. I was told that the rebbe was coming to visit us. This was the rebbe from Brezne by the name of Reb Itzikel, a tall man with the face of an angel and whose long white beard covered his face. Father, who was a strong supporter of his, received the rebbe in great splendour and honour. Sometimes the rebbe would rest at our place and sometimes he would come to visit just for a couple of hours. I could see from the preparations that this time he intended to stay and sleep the night. The evening meal turned into a kind of ‘feast fit for a king’ where the children sat in silence and listened. After the meal the rebbe gave each of us his blessing and we withdrew for the night’s sleep. In the morning Mother of blessed memory said that the rebbe was travelling to Vysotsk together with Father and the beadle. I joined them for the journey in our beautiful carriage. The journey passed quickly and without problem until we reached the bridges that cross the rivers at the entrance to the shtetl. We were surprised to see them floating in the water – the same bridges that I had crossed without hindrance the previous day. We went to the house of a peasant and asked him to get in touch with the Chassidim on the other side and tell them about the situation. The peasant, who received a gift of money from Father of blessed memory, went out in a fishing boat to the other side. After some time two large boats appeared, filled with Chassidim dancing joyfully. The joy intensified. Everyone was prepared for the arrival of the rebbe who, on his arrival in the shtetl, was going to stay in the house of Dovid Kaftan.

As has already been said, the rebbe was from the town of Brezne in Volyn and known as *der brezner rebbe* [the rebbe from Brezne]. They used to say about him that he wasn’t just a rebbe and a learned scholar but a real doctor. I remember how he cured my mother of blessed memory from a serious illness with a prescription that could only be found in the large town of Pinsk. I also recall a similar serious instance with my sister Heshke, who lived in Pinsk and who was ill with hiccoughs. Even the doctor could not cure her of this terrible illness of belching without stop and without being able to speak. Father of blessed memory told the rebbe all the details of the illness. After she received the medicine that the rebbe gave her Heshke was cured of the illness.

As a rebbe it was not appropriate for him to examine the patient; he simply listened to the details of the illness and, according to that, signed prescriptions for medicine that had proved effective.

The man with the white beard was like a saviour to his many followers. I always remember Father of blessed memory in the company of the quiet, good people of Vysotsk who were wiped out in the great Shoah. The heart will be bitter from so much sadness and woe...

For me those times were...

A shtetl just like all the other shtetls. A heap of wooden houses on a little hill. Short streets with long names. The official names are Polish, but in practice they are the same Russian names as in the past. But what do you need the street name for? Such and such son of such and such, such and such wife of such and such. There are no secrets - the man, his family, his job, his connections and his daily business. There's no need for a surname either; the nickname alone is sufficient. Even a baby in the cradle knows it: Moyshe *palubke* [covered wagon], Yankl *der hoz* [the hare], Ichie *der burak* [the beetroot] and so on. And if he doesn't have a nickname he will be called by the name of his occupation: Borukh *der kovel* [the blacksmith], Yosl *der sherer* [the barber]. Just a Jew, a simple Jew who makes do with what little he has.

Of course they make a living the same way as all the Jews: as shopkeepers, small traders, butchers and tradesmen. The common trades are: cobblers, tailors, carpenters and masons. There are many working in each of these trades. But there are some less common trades, including some single-handed ones: one barber, one tinsmith, one chemist, one hat maker, one bath attendant and, on another level - one rov. But let's not forget to mention the doctor and the photographer. A doctor for a certificate when you are ill and a photographer for state registration documents. However these two are from the 'Goys'. It's better for Jews if they don't need to go and see them. May God spare us from both of them.

Endless wide open spaces surround the little hill on which the shtetl stands. These open spaces are full of goodness: green fields, dense woods, fast-flowing rivers, quiet ponds and meadows in bloom. On summer Sabbaths young people flood here, in groups as well as in couples and by themselves. The rivers bustle with swimmers, orchards hum with those going out for a stroll, meadows whisper with dallying couples. The river in particular is always teeming with life. In winter groups skate on sledges or simply on blocks of ice. In spring groups sail in fishing boats along the broad stretch of water, which flows and spreads wide. In summer many go bathing and swimming in various styles.

Here, in the long summer Sabbaths in those spacious meadows, many a youthful dream is nurtured. Many a hidden spark of passion catches fire reading Bialik²³⁷'s poetry or Shimonovych's²³⁸ idylls or *Masada* by Lamdan²³⁹ or strolling happily along paths through the verdant fields. Many a spark is lit in their hearts at the sight of Goy farmers ploughing, sowing and harvesting.

In the same meadows children from the rov's school would light their bonfires in order to roast wild pears, fruit growing in the cemetery on the bank of the river. In later years the same children would build similar bonfires on lag ba'omer²⁴⁰ and on caf tamuz, singing and dancing round the fires and dreaming their dream of a return to Zion²⁴¹.

²³⁷ Chaim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934) the most famous Hebrew poet of the modern age

²³⁸ David Shimonovych or Shimoni (1891-1956), Hebrew poet, teacher and translator, born Bobruysk (now Belarus) 1891, emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1920

²³⁹ Itzhak Lamdan (1899-1954), Hebrew poet and translator, born in Ukraine, emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1920. *Masada*, published in 1927, strongly influenced young Zionists in Europe

²⁴⁰ festival, 33 days after Passover

²⁴¹ Theodor Binjamin Ze'ev Herzl died on *caf tamuz* (3rd July) 1904. Born in 1860, he was the first President of the Zionist Organisation and is regarded as the founder of Zionism. In his book *der Judenstaat* (the Jewish state) he demanded a 'legally guaranteed homeland' for the Jews in Palestine

World of the Fathers

A Jewish shtetl like all the other Jewish shtetls. Over the pious world of the older generation hover piety and respect for others. Chassidic sects, each with its own synagogue, its own rebbe and its own cantor. And there is no joy in the shtetl like the joy on the days when the rebbe comes to visit, especially on the Sabbath: many Chassidic visitors, communal meals, festive prayers, enthusiastic dances and charity banquets. Young boys and youths, in groups or by themselves, hang on to the corners of their fathers' clothes. With staring eyes they open their mouths, lift their legs and join the dance, stamp their feet, grab 'leftovers'²⁴² – and wonder...

Then there are the children from the rov's cheyder. Each cheyder and its own level of teaching. One for beginners, for Hebrew, a second for Chumash²⁴³ and Rashi²⁴⁴, a third for Gemara²⁴⁵. At times the chadorim are united to form a Talmud-Torah²⁴⁶, in which there is also a teacher for several general/elementary subjects – arithmetic, Hebrew, Polish, history and so on. A Tarbut²⁴⁷ school has also existed for some years, but it is specifically for girls. Each cheyder has its own way of teaching, passed down from previous generations. Taken together they represent all the types of education practised in the Jewish world in the preceding generations.

Over everything hovers the spirit of ancient Israel. Israel, the Land of Israel, the Torah and God the Holy One blessed be He are one. God is far away, above the seventh heaven. But he is there – love him, fear his countenance and keep his commandments²⁴⁸. The Torah itself is in the Ark of the Covenant – honour it and guard it. On Simkhat Torah²⁴⁹, if for a brief moment you have managed to hold the Torah in your arms how happy and fortunate you are! Israel, that means the Jews in this shtetl and in neighbouring shtetls. But the Land of Israel? What is it? Where is it and what is in it? It was near and far away at the same time.

Day by day and hour by hour you got to know it, read its name in prayers, in studies and in melodies. But at the same time it was also incomprehensible, strange, far off, concealed and mixed up with many obscure concepts, like the hills of darkness, *Sambation*²⁵⁰, the resurrection of the dead, the transmigration of souls, the Messiah and so on. You believed in all innocence that this Land of Israel was far away at the end of the spaces, beyond the seven seas, a desert ruled by the Dark Arab, and that there was no way out of it or into it. Only at the end of days the Messiah would bring us there with the blast of a trumpet and the sound of a ram's horn.

One's heart swelled and throbbed with tales from the Bible about Israel sitting securely on his land: 'Every man under his vine and under his fig tree'²⁵¹. One's heart wept and tears came into one's eyes hearing the rebbe tell the tales of the destruction on the eve of Tisha b'Av²⁵². And again one's heart rose with sounds of the vision of the last of the days: 'and the Lord's house...shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it'²⁵³.

²⁴² it was the custom for visiting Chassidic dignitaries to leave food for others to eat

²⁴³ Pentateuch

²⁴⁴ acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, who wrote the first commentaries on the Bible and Talmud

²⁴⁵ part of the Talmud

²⁴⁶ like a cheyder, providing a traditional religion-based education, free of charge for poorer pupils

²⁴⁷ 'Culture', a network of Hebrew-language educational institutions founded in 1922

²⁴⁸ cf Deuteronomy 5

²⁴⁹ 'Rejoicing in the Torah', a festival marking the completion of the annual cycle of Torah readings

²⁵⁰ a legendary river

²⁵¹ Micah chapter 4, verse 4

²⁵² the 9th day of the month of Av (late August), a day of mourning marking the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people

²⁵³ Isaiah chapter 2, verse 2

But between that distant past, whose beginning was happiness and peace and whose end was disaster, destruction and banishment, and the distant future of the end of days there was no bridge. The heart was torn between the past and the future and did not pause to think about the present. Something indistinct gnawed in the depths. There was something of an echo of that pain in 'These I remember: I remember and yearn for God when I see every city raised high and the City of God brought down to hell's abyss'²⁵⁴. A certain yearning grew in one's soul, with no solution.

And there came a new spirit...

Something happened in the world of the Jews: the Balfour Declaration²⁵⁵, confirmation of the [British] Mandate, realisation of '*Zionismus*'²⁵⁶. Things started to happen in the shtetl and in the Jewish world in general. Speeches, demonstrations, charity bowls in the synagogue, a library and so on. The shtetl was in ferment. The '*Zionisten*' were everywhere. The intellectuals became Zionists. Young working people and trade apprentices were Bundists²⁵⁷.

The struggle between the sides reached boiling point, as was the case throughout the Jewish world at that time. Some were for Eretz Israel while others were for Poland; some were with Herzl while others were with Medem²⁵⁸; some were for Hebrew while others were for Yiddish; some were for the *Haynt*²⁵⁹ while others were for the *Folkstsaytung*²⁶⁰. This is how it was along the whole of the frontline. The war of words raged in every street, at home and in the synagogue, as well as in the public baths.

The third side in this dispute, the 'older generation', fathers and mothers, Chassidic and pious, at first stood as if apart, continuing on their own path, but in the course of time even they were dragged into the dispute. A primary cause of that was money for aliyot²⁶¹ on festivals and for charity bowls in the synagogue. Some asked for donations on behalf of KKL²⁶², others asked for the needs of poor people and yet others asked for holy vessels.

And so it happened that on one occasion the Sefer Torah²⁶³ was brought into one of the synagogues. But the various camps were unable to reach a compromise. So each camp demonstrated separately the respect it felt towards the Sefer Torah. In a long procession they accompanied the Sefer Torah to its holy place. In this procession each camp came with its own banner and signs. The Zionists with theirs: the national flag with slogans in Hebrew and flaming blue and white torches. The Bundists with theirs: the red flag with slogans in Yiddish and flaming red torches. And the 'older generation', those closest to the occasion, with theirs: the Sefer Torah

²⁵⁴ a piyut (liturgical poem), part of the Ne'ila (closing section of the Day of Atonement service), written by Amittai ben Shefatiah who lived in southern Italy in the late 10th century

²⁵⁵ On 2 November 1917 British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, confirming that the British government favoured the 'establishment in Palestine of a national homeland for the Jewish people

²⁵⁶ presumably the German word is used to reflect the fact that Theodor Hertz wrote in German

²⁵⁷ the Bund was a non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement founded in 1897 to represent Jews throughout Imperial Russia

²⁵⁸ Vladimir Medem(1897-1923) a leader of the Bund

²⁵⁹ 'Today', a leading Yiddish paper in Warsaw (1908-1939)

²⁶⁰ Founded in 1921 as the organ of the Bund, the *Folkstsaytung* ('People's Paper') was renamed *Naye Folkstsaytung* ('New People's Paper') in 1926. It ceased publication in 1939

²⁶¹ literally 'ascents', the honour of being called up to the bimah (readers' platform) to chant a blessing before and after the cantor read from the Torah

²⁶² acronym for Keren Kayemet l'Israel, the Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlements

²⁶³ handwritten copy of the Torah only used during synagogue services and kept in the Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark)

itself beneath the holy canopy. But all of them, all of them dancing and prancing in a circle in honour of the Torah.

The following is a true story. On Simkhat Torah ²⁶⁴ the dispute came to a head in the synagogue, leading to fisticuffs in front of the Ark of the Covenant. In his wrath the rov cried out: 'Let me die with the Philistines'²⁶⁵, the Zionists sang 'The hands of our brethren shall be strengthened'²⁶⁶ and the children from the cheyder cheered and clapped their hands. Then one of the Zionists got on to the bimah and spoke openly about the *shtreymlekh*²⁶⁷ and the *frumme ketz*²⁶⁸ taking it upon themselves to rule the public. He said such a thing would no longer exist among Jews in the twentieth century. And thus the shtetl seethed with excitement.

But this was in the early days, in the first years after the Balfour Declaration. In later years the various camps apparently saw the error of their ways. Bit by bit, as the young people left the follies of youth behind, they became normal like everybody else. Young men and women, both good Zionists and convinced Bundists, became good 'little homeowners', each with his own business, with his talis ²⁶⁹ and tefilin ²⁷⁰, with his own rov and his own synagogue – just as in the old days.

The Fourth Aliyah ²⁷¹

The Fourth Aliyah burst forth. With it came a great change of values. The Jewish pioneer movement flourished. Something strange came to the shtetl, strange and wondrous. It had always been the case that a son of a tradesman would also become a tradesman and the son of a shopkeeper would become a shopkeeper. Both looked around for a bride with a dowry sufficient to enable them to open a shop. Although in most cases, even after they were married, they did not in fact manage to change much in the way their fathers had done things. But note, something new happened: landlords' sons suddenly changed and became workers.

The rumour spread that there was building work ('*oyfboy arbeyt*') in the Land. Who was suitable for building work if not masons, carpenters and plasterers? And so the pioneers became carpenters, masons and plasterers. Not only that but they also sometimes took on extra work within the shtetl, chopping wood and drawing water, to cover the specific expenses of their organisation. Then the first training groups were set up and flourished in the neighbouring villages. In the quarries and sawmills the young pioneers did all the hard work alongside the 'Goys'. Equality and cooperation among them all; the female comrade joined in and was equal with everyone. This became a topic of conversation on everybody's lips - and they were puzzled by it.

When a pioneer came to the shtetl they would point him out. So a branch was organised and divided into two: HeKhalutz HaBoger²⁷² and the HeKhalutz HaTzair ²⁷³. But they all sing and dance and make speeches and talk, arrange dances, organise plays, go out in groups for walks and travel in small bands to the nearby shtetls and towns as well as to conferences. There are visits from the headquarters

²⁶⁴ 'Rejoicing in the Torah', a festival marking the completion of the annual cycle of Torah readings

²⁶⁵ Judges chapter 16, verse 30

²⁶⁶ the first line of the poem 'Spirit of a Nation' written by Bialik in Odessa in 1894

²⁶⁷ Yiddish: fur hats worn on the Sabbath

²⁶⁸ Yidd: literally 'pious cats', presumably a nickname for religious zealots

²⁶⁹ prayer mantle

²⁷⁰ small leather box containing hand-written passages from the Bible

²⁷¹ Over the period of the Fourth Aliyah (1924-1929) 67,000 Jews arrived in Palestine, the majority from Poland

²⁷² Adult Pioneers

²⁷³ Young Pioneers

and from the regional council, reporting and speaking about Eretz Israel, about pioneer life and about the kibbutz.

And now the first olim²⁷⁴ emigrate to the Land. To begin with people talk about it in whispers: such and such, son of such and such has received 'permission' to make aliyah to the Land. No longer whispering, they say aloud: he is already preparing the paperwork. Then there is a farewell party: a feast and celebration, speeches, singing and dancing until the early hours of the morning. And in the morning the departure. The whole shtetl gathers by the house of the ole. Women crying, pioneers singing and children shouting for joy all mix together in the great wonderful bedlam of voices. Carts, cyclists and pedestrians hurry, running to accompany the ole to the nearby train station. At the train station the same picture repeats itself: crying and singing and speeches and shouts of joy mix in the hubbub. Then come the first letters from the first olim. Women standing on the thresholds of their homes, men in the synagogue and pioneers in their club all talk about and read the letters out loud. Enthusiasm for the Land continues to grow.

Every fine young man in the shtetl is a 'pioneer', without distinction of origin or who he knows or what his occupation is. The adults go by the name of Khalutz-HaBoger and the young ones by the name of Khalutz-HaTzair. But in the eyes of the shtetl there is no distinction between them; all are equal in its eyes.



The HeKhalutz HaTzair branch, 1925

from right to left standing [top row]: Simche, Eliahu Vaks, Malka Bigon, Sheynke Abelson, Reuven Kolkovsky, Sheyndl Khover, Itzhak Meir Vaks, Mindl Kolodny, Mordekhai Kolkovsky, Reuven Khover, Asher-Aaron Sher;

middle row: Rakhel Vinner, Brakha Kortach, Chana Lopatyn, Tama Borovyk, Pinkhas Gelman, Lea Kortach, Chaya Vaks, Eliahu Bolyar;

front row: Sara Miriam Katz, Golda Shtoper, Velfl Urman, Nishke Borovyk, Feygl Gutman, Pinkhas Ryzhy, Leybl Nafkhan

The pioneers' club becomes the centre of the shtetl and there is light and joy in it and singing and dancing every Sabbath eve and on holidays. Children and toddlers, pupils of the chadorim and Talmud Torah peep through the windows and the doors, imitate what the older ones are doing, make speeches, dance and even sing:

<i>bin ikh mir a kholetzl</i>	I am a little pioneer
<i>a kholetzl fun Poylin.</i>	a pioneer from Poland.
<i>gey ikh mir in shikhalakh,</i>	I go around in little shoes,
<i>shikhalakh ohn zoylin.</i>	little shoes without soles.

²⁷⁴ emigrants, those making aliyah (singular: ole)

And in the Hebrew version:

<i>Khalutz, Khalutz hineni,</i>	A pioneer, a pioneer am I,
<i>Khalutz ro'e ruakh.</i>	a pioneer 'vexer' of the spirit [cf. Eccles.6,9].
<i>bli begged uvli na'al</i>	Without clothes and without shoes
<i>uvli 'dag-maluakh'.</i>	and without 'dag-maluakh' ²⁷⁵

Yerida²⁷⁶

Thus it continued until the period of yerida began. It began in a soft hush. The letter from the Land would herald it. News concerning a letter from the Land was passed in whispers from one person to another. Then came a second letter which told about a lack of employment, a halt in construction work and so on. After that voices were raised saying there was a crisis in the Land. Haters of Zion, Bundists and devout Jews, raised their heads, the first saying the Zionist dream was false, a utopia, the others saying it was a punishment from God for forcing matters and that it was spelt out in a passage from the Bible: 'That the land spue not you out ... when ye defile it'²⁷⁷.

The pioneers tried to stand their ground. They maintained that it proved you couldn't build a country overnight and so on. But even among them there appeared a breach. First one, then a second, then a third turned and went wherever they could: the first to continue buying and selling in his father's home, the second simply into idleness, the third to communism. Then the first yordim²⁷⁸ themselves arrived. Out of their mouths came slander against the Land. These quiet, simple Jews, who had made aliyah to the Land for an adventure, returned disappointed. Their mouths were full of imprecations and curses about how the Land was devouring its inhabitants.

Communism blossomed and flourished among the people. Again the shtetl turned into a tangle of arguments. The yored, the communist and the devout Jew formed a united front, abusing, reviling and defaming the Zionists and in particular the pioneers. The HeKhalutz and HeKhalutz HaTzair branches could not take the strain and crumbled. Only a tiny number kept the faith. Even the training kibbutzim in the neighbourhood crumbled. The Hebrew school was demolished. Hebrew speech fell silent. The library ceased to order Hebrew books; instead it made a particular point of ordering Yiddish books. In addition to that there was also a new library founded by the communists, where of course everything was in Yiddish. The value of the Zionist funds went down. If a Zionist speaker were to appear in the shtetl and make a speech he would be interrupted rudely by a mass of voices and would have great difficulty finishing his speech, at times not being able to finish at all. Hatred of Zion was triumphant everywhere.

Only here and there some sparks carried on flickering, in the expectation of being set alight once again. These were remnants of the HeKhalutz and the HeKhalutz HaTzair who guarded the flame in secret so that it would not go out. In the twilight hour at the corner of a street or at the edge of the bench in the synagogue they would tell one another in whispers about the one remaining stone-cutting training kibbutz in Klusova, alive and well, working, singing and waiting for a sign.

And so two years of Zionist yerida in the shtetl passed by. Meanwhile the children had grown up and become youths. These pupils of the cheyder, who in their childhood had peeped into the pioneers' club through the cracks of the windows and beyond the locked door and had mimicked the actions of the adult pioneers, dancing

²⁷⁵ 'pickled fish', typical food of poor people

²⁷⁶ literally 'coming down', return from Eretz Israel

²⁷⁷ Leviticus chapter 28, verse 28

²⁷⁸ returnees from Eretz Israel (singular: yored)

and singing *bin ikh mir a kholetzl* [I am a little pioneer] – these children, having grown up, now stood facing their destiny, the destiny of their people and the destiny of mankind as a whole. Their bewilderment was interwoven with another bewilderment, the eternal destiny of youth, the bewilderment connected with adulthood and the awakening of sexual attraction. This double and triple bewilderment was the meeting together of adolescent girls and boys, getting to know and understand mankind and man, questions of building the Land and the renewal of a nation. And thus, through various recurrences, arose the revival, the new pioneer organisation of the young people of the shtetl, with its name, the dear, familiar name: HeKhalutz HaTzair.

Boys and girls

Boys and girls in the shtetl were two separated worlds. Each world circles in its own orbit. Boys learn in the chadorim and the Talmud Torah, and girls in the school. Boys cause havoc in the shtetl: make 'wars' with Gentiles, steal fruit from the orchards, catch fish in the river, sail in boats. Girls sing on balconies, play quiet games and read books. Boys have fun swimming in the waves of the deep river. Girls, far off, paddle in its shallow waters. The boys, as soon as they grew up a bit, bought a football and on Sabbath afternoons went out to the meadows beyond the shtetl and played enthusiastically until they were exhausted. And the girls at the same time - who knows what the girls do at the same time?

The two worlds were circling in their orbits when suddenly they saw each other and here they were coming towards one another. Soon their glances meet and they are struck. Girls, out for their walks, approach as if incidentally to see the group of boys playing football. The boys' hearts are throbbing and the games become more intense. When, as if by chance, the boys approach the group of girls singing on a balcony the singing intensifies and becomes louder. When groups of boys and girls meet on the pavement the encounter will not pass quietly: snowballs are thrown, water from a nearby puddle is splashed, words are exchanged, there are mutual compliments and insults. If one of the boys happens to snatch a serious conversation with one of the girls then the matter becomes an event. His friends will be told in secret about the manner and content of the conversation and about what was discussed. She will do the same among her friends. And so meeting follows meeting and conversation follows conversation until they reach the stage of twilight walks. The young people's hearts were beating and they were drawn to one another. They didn't know why their hearts were beating or what they were drawn towards. Unclear longings were awakened for something wondrous, far and near at the same time.

Trumpeldor ²⁷⁹

A report concerning the event in Tel Hai and the death of Trumpeldor and his comrades was circulating for three or four years before it also reached the pupils of the rov in the shtetl. Before they knew who he was and what it was all about they had heard his name and they had seen his picture. In the corridor of the synagogue adult pioneers would take illustrated newspapers out of their pockets and would point him out with their finger: there he is! One of few against many strong ones. Young people and children would push forward secretly, pressing themselves in among the

²⁷⁹ Yosef Trumpeldor (born 1880 in Pyatigorsk, Russia), together with seven other 'Guards', died in 1920 in a fight defending Tel Hai, a farming village in the north of the Upper Galilee valley

circle of adults. Standing on tiptoe they stared inquisitively at the picture and the famous words underneath: 'It is good to die for our country' ²⁸⁰. In the boys' eyes he was a miracle, everything was strangely comprehensible and incomprehensible at the same time. Their hearts beat and continued to beat for something for which there was no explanation.

And thus yearnings intertwined with yearnings, becoming one. The quivering of the soul on hearing about Tel Hai and Trumpeldor and the yearning for a communal life joined together. The Tel Hai idea and Trumpeldor became the centre of inspiration for the young people. The name, containing hidden within it the embodiment of the inspiration for the idea and the attraction of an independent communal life, was on everyone's lips. In short, an 'organisation', that is to say the organisation of young people.

Joy entered the camp of teenage boys and girls. In the nearby shtetl there was a 'Trumpeldor', that is to say a youth organisation with that name, where boys and girls talked, went for walks, danced and had fun together. So that was the answer! We needed 'to make a Trumpeldor'. And so one of the 'Trumpeldorim' ²⁸¹ was invited and came from the nearby shtetl to organise us.

That Sabbath in the month of Elul ²⁸² was very festive. Boys in the synagogue and girls on the balconies whispered with enthusiasm and urgency, talking and telling one another about the organisation and about the visiting organiser. The 'comrade' visitor would stroll with boys and girls (the only one at that time who went for walks in the middle of the day in public with the girls in the shtetl) praising the organisation in our shtetl. The faces of the boys and girls were ablaze with enthusiasm. Soon they would also have a 'Trumpeldor' organisation. There was no end to the joy and the preparation. The place and the hour were set. The boys arrived early, coming from one end of the street. And the girls came a little later from the other end. The boys stood crammed together in the corners of the house, and the girls sat comfortably around the table. The opening, speeches, a committee and the organisation was established. We dispersed, each gender going its own separate way.

What had happened became known in the shtetl. It reached the ears of the rov (he was the rov/melamed of the boys in Gemara ²⁸³). During the lesson the next day the rov's voice trembled: 'Woe to you, you rascals! What is it with you and this epicurean Trump (he meant Trumpeldor)? It is the month of Elul and you should be singing the Psalms and showing reverence' and so on and so forth. The boys lowered their eyes, tried to defend themselves, but to no avail. The voice of the rov shook and rose to a terrifying volume. The shtetl heard about the matter. Fathers and mothers joined in the battle. The boys and girls did not have sufficient strength and were defeated.

The Little Library

The Trumpeldor business fell silent. But young hearts do not know silence. The spring, blocked in one place, gushes out of another. There is a library in the shtetl known as 'the large library' with books in both Hebrew and Yiddish. It had always been in the hands of the Zionists and passed 'from generation to generation' until it came into the hands of the pioneers.

²⁸⁰ cf. *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (Horace Odes, iii,2,13) – 'To die for the fatherland is a sweet and becoming thing'

²⁸¹ members of the Trumpeldor organisation

²⁸² August/September

²⁸³ part of the Talmud

Following the disappointment of the Fourth Aliyah and the return of emigrants to the shtetl the communists grew stronger. The quarrel broke out also in connection with the library. There were those who said the library was Zionist and belonged to Tarbut²⁸⁴, and there were others who said no, because it was a general library and belonged to the whole shtetl. There were meetings, arguments and votes. In the end the Zionists gained the upper hand; they defeated the communists, and the library continued as a Tarbut library.

Young men and women followed this argument, and an idea occurred to them. Until now they had only read short books. They had also already acquired a taste for edifying literature: 'Love of Zion'²⁸⁵, 'Guilt of Samaria'²⁸⁶, and 'A Donkey's Burial'²⁸⁷ and others of a similar nature.

But there were so few of such books in the library, and they longed to read more. Each book was devoured immediately. A second was requested, but there wasn't one. So the call went out: come let us also establish our own library. There was a joint meeting of the young men and women, fees were levied on everybody, a committee was chosen and money was collected. After a short time the first books arrived, all in Hebrew. It was called 'the little library'. A monthly reading fee was imposed. Reading in any other library was forbidden. When there weren't enough books for all the member-readers they decided to read a book in groups. First of all five at a time and after that in fours, threes and twos.

But they weren't satisfied with the monthly fees of the readers and looked for additional sources of income. In the winter they would chop trees in the homeowners' yards and draw water for the tanneries. The income was dedicated to the library. A most important source was the purimshpil²⁸⁸. It was a tradition from former times to go and visit Jewish homes in the shtetl with a 'purim play'. This tradition was adopted by the young people for their own purposes, for the sake of the library if not for ourselves. It wasn't sufficient just doing the local rounds within the shtetl; groups of actors would go into neighbouring villages. During the two days of purim they would wander from village to village along roads impassable during spring, through melting snow and on the surface of rivers packed with ice and present 'David and Goliath' or 'David and Saul' – all for the sake of the library.

Kadima²⁸⁹

To begin with the name of the new youth organisation was Kadima, that is to say a Zionist Hebrew youth organisation for independent development and social renewal. It was given this name by its organiser, a teacher in the neighbouring shtetl. From the start the educational and cultural activity was imbued with a pioneering content. The leaders – to be more precise, the female leaders – , comrades from what remained of the former HeKhalutz HaTzair, saw in the new organisation a kind of direct continuation of HeKhalutz HaTzair. It was they who gave it its pioneering character. The content of conversations, reading material, the form of the organisation – everything was stamped with this mark.

²⁸⁴ 'Culture', a network of Hebrew-language educational institutions founded in 1922

²⁸⁵ regarded as the first Hebrew novel (published in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1853), written in 1867 by Avraham Mapu (born in Kovno (Kaunas) in 1808 and died in Königsberg (Kaliningrad)

²⁸⁶ also by Mapu

²⁸⁷ published in 1873, by Peretz Smolenskin (1842-1885), a Russian Jewish socialist novelist

²⁸⁸ Yiddish folk theatre dating back at least to the 17th century which parodies the main characters in the story of Purim, a festival that takes place on the 14th or 15th day of Adar (usually late March), marking the victory of the Jews over their Persian oppressors, as told in the Book of Esther

²⁸⁹ 'Forwards', the provisional name of the local Zionist youth movement

But when on one occasion the organisation was confronted with the question of clarifying its position regarding affiliation to a national organisation an argument ensued: HeKhalutz HaTzair or HaShomer HaTzair ²⁹⁰?

It was a group of boys and girls from HaShomer HaTzair in the nearby shtetl who unwittingly started this argument. This group had come to the shtetl on a walk dressed in uniform. Decorated with various marks of office, armed with banners and sticks and bugles, they walked in formation, greeting us in a loud voice. It was this group that attracted some of our people.

In connection with that the argument broke out regarding 'externality' and 'internality'. Some said all this was 'externality', which marked out the HaShomer HaTzair. We did not share this, for the spirit of HeKhalutz HaTzair was one of 'internality', self-development, renewal, studying, reading and so on. For that reason we were in favour of HeKhalutz HaTzair. Others said it was precisely because of this that our heart was with HaShomer HaTzair where everything was beautiful, there was discipline and order. In short, 'externality' was precisely what our souls craved.

And there were conversations, inquiries and arguments. One of the Klusova kibbutz people came, also two from the training kibbutz Grukhev, to explain and talk about what united and what divided these two organisations, about form and content, about internality and externality, about pioneering and 'guardism'. The issue was decided: the Khalutzim²⁹¹ defeated the Shomrim²⁹² and the result was announced at a joyful celebratory party – HeKhalutz HaTzair.

HeKhalutz HaTzair

The HeKhalutz HaTzair was the only youth organisation that this shtetl had ever known. All the young people in the shtetl belonged to the HeKhalutz HaTzair. To start with the branch consisted of just one age group, 16-17. But as time went on other age groups also joined, and the branch embraced all the age groups, from the age of 9-10 to 18-19, representing the movement as a whole. Each year was an age group, forming a broad educational unit. There was no further division into groups. Nor could there be, both because the number of those belonging to an age group was not too large (20-25) and also because all the young people in an age group were from the same background in respect not only of age but also their educational and cultural level. So much so that any division into groups would have been regarded as artificial, creating a division among friends.

The branch was founded precisely at the time when there was a slump in pioneering and Zionist activity, at the time of the crisis between the Fourth Aliyah and the Fifth Aliyah. Fathers and mothers became angry, even Zionists had doubts. At this time of crisis in the Land what was the point of pioneering? Had these boys and girls gone mad? But together with the anger and the bewilderment there was something akin to forbearance. 'After all they're only children – let them play a little. Eretz Israel? Training? When they've matured a bit they'll sober up.' But these 'children' treated the matter very seriously. They worked on literature and pioneering journalism, argued vigorously with parents and opponents and listened intently to anything coming from the Eretz Israel.

²⁹⁰ Young Guard

²⁹¹ Pioneers

²⁹² 'Guardists', members of HaShomer HaTzair

Klosova²⁹³ was several dozen kilometres away. It was often the case that somebody from the shtetl would go there, either for work and trade or with the express intent of seeing the ‘miracle’. They would talk to groups of boys and girls of the HeKhalutz HaTzair about this miracle, unique of its type. 80-100 young men and women from all corners of Poland living together, with ‘gumboots’ on their feet, working in the quarry and in the sawmill together with the ‘Goys’. In spite of the unfamiliar surroundings and the lack of any hope of making aliyah in the near future this kibbutz was buzzing with life, with meetings, singing and dancing.



The HeKhalutz HaTzair branch, 1929

The boys and girls would listen, wonder and dream. They even began to speak openly about the matter to their parents and other Jews simply in order to force them to pay attention, for the issue was also of relevance to them. But the latter became angry and asked furiously what these urchins were getting themselves involved in. This Klosova business was complete madness. What was this longing and what was the ‘joy’ in it? Then there came an ‘envoy’ in order to recruit additional members for Klosova. The envoy spoke about Klosova, about life there, about its activities and about its hopes. Two young men, from the remnants of the former branch of HeKhalutz HaTzair, stood up and went off to Klosova. They and Klosova became the central force of attraction for the young people in HeKhalutz HaTzair and a stumbling block for the parents and the shtetl as a whole.

Many varied questions occupied the branch. The members heard and also read about topical matters and concepts and questions, the meanings of which they did not know. The questions kept coming, urgent and flustered, crowding in on one another. There was not enough time in the hours devoted to ‘cultural activity’ to solve them. They heard that there were political parties and trends in the wider world and among Jews and in Zionism (these also existed in miniature in the shtetl) and that each party had its own purpose and its own programme. And there were arguments and rivalries between parties.

Even within Zionism itself there were several parties, and six or seven lists appeared at a Zionist Congress. Moreover even in the shtetl there were proponents

²⁹³ From 1924 until 1937 Klosova, a granite quarry dating from Tsarist times near the village of Klosow (now Klesiv), c.25 km. east of Sarny (itself c.50 km. south of Udrytsk, the nearest railway station to Vysotsk), was the foremost training kibbutz in eastern Poland

and supporters of each list. There was great bewilderment and with it the desire to know what kind of trends they were and what their doctrine was. They also heard – this too was talked about in the shtetl – that there were social classes among the nations and that the workers' movement had its own doctrine with its different interpretations: socialism and communism and anarchism. And within these sub-doctrines there were such things as democracy and dictatorship, reform and revolution, trade unions and cooperation and so and so forth. Again bewilderment and its fruit, a thirst for knowledge.

They heard that among the Zionist trends there was a labour trend. HeKhalutz and HeKhalutz HaTzair were part of that trend. But this trend is also not that simple. Within it there were Poalei Tzion²⁹⁴, PZ Right and PZ Left, Hitakhdut²⁹⁵ and HaShomer HaTzair. What were they all and what were the differences?

Many of us were still attached to religious customs and tradition. When they heard that there was a religious stream in Zionism this stirred in them vague feelings for a non-secular Eretz Israel. On the other hand some people were also sometimes bewitched by the bragging of the Revisionists²⁹⁶ in the newspapers: 'In blood and fire Judea fell'²⁹⁷.

Certainly they had all read Bar Kokhba²⁹⁸, Nir David²⁹⁹ David Elrai³⁰⁰ and Bironika³⁰¹. Perhaps we shall conquer the Land by the sword as it fell...

So there were many questions concerning 'the differences'. What was the difference between PZ right and PZ left? What was the difference between Al HaMishmar³⁰² and Et livnot³⁰³? What was the difference between socialism and communism? What was the difference between reformist socialism and revolutionary socialism? And more and more.

Such questions would flow, especially in the 'free conversation', in the 'box-party' and at the time of a 'visit'. 'Free conversation' was a conversation consisting of questions and answers, free and open. One person would ask a question and anybody was free to answer, and so a conversation developed. A 'box-party' meant an evening of questions in a non-open form. Many threw their questions into a box, they then opened the box, decoded the questions followed by the answers, i.e. the conversation.

But our favourite was the evening of a 'visit'. The visitor, who might be from the 'headquarters' or from the regional council in the nearby kibbutz or even an 'envoy' from Eretz Israel, was among friends, as if one of them. But all eyes and all attention were directed towards him, as towards someone of eminence. Many sorts of questions were asked. He, the visitor, was the 'final arbiter'.

His words were devoured, his looks absorbed. For a long time the young audience would remember the grace of his visit. His expressions would be repeated, they would come back to what he had said, they would imitate the way he had

²⁹⁴ 'Workers of Zion', an independent Zionist-socialist party

²⁹⁵ 'Union', a Zionist Labour party founded in 1920, merging HaPoel HaTzair (Young Worker) and Tzeirei Tzion (Young Zionists)

²⁹⁶ right-wing nationalist Zionists

²⁹⁷ the slogan continues: 'in blood and fire Judea will rise'

²⁹⁸ Shimon bar Kokhba, the last king of Israel, led a revolt against the Romans in CE/AD 132. The independent Jewish state of Israel was defeated three years later, with huge losses on both sides. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries numerous novels, plays and even operas were written on the subject

²⁹⁹ 'The Field of David' by Shalom haKohen (1771-1845)

³⁰⁰ almost certainly a translation into Hebrew of Alroy by Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881, British author and, later, Conservative Prime Minister)

³⁰¹ probably a translation of the section of Flavius Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews telling the story of Bernice, daughter of King Herod Agrippa the First and sister of Herod Agrippa the Second (allegedly also his mistress)

³⁰² 'On guard', a pre-war radical Zionist group in Poland (with no connection to the subsequent Israeli left-wing newspaper of the same name)

³⁰³ 'A Time to build' (Ecclesiastes 3,3), a relatively conservative, middle-class stream of Zionism

behaved, they would discuss his visit and would see in his whole demeanour an example and symbol. And when sometimes an argument arose later regarding one of the questions one of those present would remind the others of one of the things the visitor had said on the subject and all arguments would fall silent.

Young people at work

What do boys and girls in the shtetl do? The answer is they enter the same trades as their parents. There is a rule in the shtetl dating back generations: the sons are engaged in the same work as their fathers. And their fathers are engaged in the same work as Jews in general in the shtetls in exile: shopkeepers, traders, carpenters, tailors, shoemakers or simply artisans. In recent years a certain change has also been felt: there are more carpenters and fewer tailors, while shoemakers have almost disappeared from among the young men of the shtetl. And all of this – for what? The young people have their own answers.

Each trade in the shtetl has a purpose of its own. The young people of the shtetl felt a particular attachment to the trade of carpentry. These young men, in whom the spirit of the time and the fragrance of Eretz Israel inspired a yearning for something new and different, saw for some reason in the trade of carpentry something of greater scope, of greater physical strength, something more ‘Goy’. Not only that, but this trade was associated with the building of houses and with construction in Eretz Israel. In the circumstances of the shtetl no trade was closer to ‘building the Land’ than carpentry.

Their attitude to the trade of shoemaking was precisely the opposite of this. There were many adult Jewish cobblers in the shtetl, but young cobblers were few and far between; not a single one of the young branch members worked in this trade. There was something of an attitude of rejection towards it. They would see in it the trade most typical of the Jewish exile, from which anybody seriously seeking something new and different would recoil. The ‘Goys’ sensed it and began to learn this trade, and the wheel turned full circle; shoemaking, the most ‘Jewish’ trade, began to pass into the hands of the Goys.

There were few tailors and blacksmiths among the young men, but on the other hand many of the young women were seamstresses. This trade was the only one available to them in the shtetl – that is if one leaves out of account housework, which every young Jewish woman did in any case. A young woman growing up in the shtetl had many needs, and since her poverty-stricken parents were unable to satisfy her needs she looked for a way of satisfying them herself. There was no other way apart from sewing. There was plenty of sewing work. As is well known, Jewish girls, although poor and although living in a god-forsaken shtetl, need many dresses, of all sorts and in all styles. Not only that. There are many Goys in the shtetl and in surrounding villages. They too, the shiktzes³⁰⁴, also learned how to adorn themselves and make themselves pretty, by retaining something of the traditional Byelorussian costume and to some extent by imitating the young Jewish women. And so the work for Jewish seamstresses grew and grew. The number of seamstresses in the shtetl increased at the same time. Therefore when a Jewish daughter in the shtetl finished her obligatory studies in the Polish school in the majority of cases she turned to sewing.

The conditions of work and the hours of work are as with the young men: many hours, no wage in the first year and after that extremely low pay. A woman’s wage is lower than a man’s out there in the big wide world, not to mention among

³⁰⁴ Yiddish: Gentile girls

Jews in the little shtetl. The conditions of work were hard and inhuman for the young men and young women alike. They would work, as the saying goes, 'from darkness to darkness', from sunrise until sunset and then generally even longer. On winter evenings, by the light of a paraffin lamp, the employer and his apprentice would also work together for 14-15 hours a day. After all the employer was only the home-owner, himself a poor man living on small means. It is no surprise that there was no sign of a trade union, of workers' organisations or any kind of social institution in the town.

On one occasion the young workers, of all ages and from the various organisations and parties, rebelled against the employers. Pioneers, Bundists and communists joined forces to fight together for fair working conditions. They called a strike with minimal demands: shortening the hours of work, minimum wage and so on, but to no avail. The employers stood firm, not recognising any organisation and not accepting any demand. All of this whilst remaining on the most friendly of terms with the strikers. They simply maintained the one thing: they could not afford to meet the demands. The strike continued for many days and ended without anything. The strikers gave in and everything returned to how it had been previously: a meagre wage, long hours of work and every man, apprentice and employer looking after himself.



HeKhalutz HaTzair, the young age group, 1932

from right to left, top row: ..., Itzhok Gutman, Rakhel Khaznchuk, Gitl Tkach, Malka Lopata, Freydl Furman, Asna-Golda Katz, Khana-Mirl Reykhman, Itzl Lopata;
 second row from top: ..., Shoshana Gelman, Eliezer Lopata, Pesl Shnayder, Feygl Mayzl, Chava Nafkhan, Lea Lopatyn, Gitl Sheynman, Dvora Borovyk, Yakov Vinnik;
 middle row: Breyndl Lopata, Esther Furman, Rivka Fialkov, Breyndl Lapinsky, Berl...;
 second row from bottom: Teybl Fialkov, Lifshe Borovyk, Dvusya Shtoper, Nishke Lopata, Brakha Feldman, Esther Shuster, Sara Khaznchuk;
 bottom row: ... Bolyar, Gitl ..., Esther Gelman, Feygl Berman

Although these boys and girls were constant in their work and in their professions this did not prevent them from also doing their own 'pioneer' work, as they called it. They did this work together, as was customary with pioneers, for the benefit of everyone in the branch. Chopping wood for other Jews. This famous 'Goy' work was something young men of the branch pounced on; renting a room for the branch club as it didn't have one; fund-raising activity undertaken by the movement; urgent help for a member making aliyah to the Land; money for participation in summer camps and courses if there were insufficient funds and so on. They

announced a special joint day of work, the proceeds from which were devoted to the above-mentioned causes. Then they gathered axes and saws and, like the shkotzim [Gentiles], went into the yards to chop wood. The shtetl heard about it. These new woodcutters knew their job very well so people would gladly offer them work. At the end of the day they would come direct from work to the branch club, with axes in their belts and saws over their shoulders. There was great joy, and the exalted dances and the singing spread throughout the shtetl.

An area of pasture-land for cows covering several tens of *desyatins*³⁰⁵ was allocated to the Jews near the shtetl, between the spacious pasture-land belonging to the Goys. The plot of land was purchased with the aim of freeing themselves once and for all from the pressure of the Goys regarding pasture-land for cows belonging to the Jews. The sale process continued for about ten years. With all the means available to them, by force, via informers and through legal demands, the Goys undermined the process in order to avoid the final handover of the area to the Jews. With every legal process that ended in favour of the Jews the Goys would appeal and bring the matter to a higher court of justice.

Meanwhile funds were extorted, legal processes prepared, more and more journeys undertaken, documents written - and the area itself continued to shrink. There was uproar in the shtetl regarding the matter: general meetings, committee meetings, discussions and elections, fund-raising, visits and internal division. In the end the bulk of the land was handed over to the Jews. As a result of this there was more work, harvesting and hay-making work that their fathers and their fathers' fathers had not known. In fact this was also later handed over to the Goys. But Jews also sometimes tried their strength in this work, and the first to do this were young members of the branch.

On one hot summer's day a group of young men from HeKhalutz HaTzair went out to do hay-making. This work was particularly attractive because it was Goy work - and pioneering work in the Land. They worked energetically, sweating, as they should. At the end of the day they marched back, rakes and pitchforks on their backs, singing cheerfully, celebrating the conquest of a new branch of labour and their victory over themselves. And so to the branch club for an energetic hora³⁰⁶.

Going away for training

What happened when young men and women went away for training? In the movement in Poland it was customary for young people up until the age of 18 to be members of HeKhalutz HaTzair and from then onwards to be members of HeKhalutz. Questions of training and decisions regarding who was to be sent for training were in the hands of HeKhalutz. At that time the branch did not recognise this standard separation. All of the 15-16 year olds were officially HeKhalutz HaTzair, but in reality everything concerning the Khalutz was also discussed here as a matter of course. Between the HeKhalutz and HeKhalutz HaTzair no separation was recognised or noticed. As far as they themselves were concerned and as far as the shtetl was concerned the general and one and only name for the young people of the branch was HeKhalutz. That was it.

In fact in everything relating to pioneers, whatever the matter was, the HeKhalutz HaTzair branch was involved: it sent members away for training, helped members make aliyah, stamped, distributed and read newspapers and pioneer literature, took part in HeKhalutz fund-raising and all other pioneering activities. It

³⁰⁵ Russian: 1 desyatin = 2.7 acres

³⁰⁶ Jewish/Israeli round dance originally from the Balkans

had links with both of the 'headquarters' [HeKhalutz and HeKhalutz HaTzair] and as far as it was able to it carried out the instructions of both of them equally. Envoys from both 'headquarters' and from Eretz Israel would visit the branch. In their meetings with members of the branch even these envoys would 'forget' whether they had come to HeKhalutz or HeKhalutz HaTzair. What was the difference? For surely it was one and the same idea? Why and for what purpose was there a division?

As has been said, the kibbutzim in the area exercised a special influence in the shtetl and in the branch. First and foremost there were the two large kibbutzim, Klosova³⁰⁷ and Dombrovitza. Members of the branch, by themselves or in groups, would often visit the kibbutzim, on various occasions or for some special reason. On one Friday it so happened that a group of young people from the branch went from their homes on foot to the training kibbutz in nearby Dombrovitza. They spent the whole Sabbath there as 'pioneers' in every aspect of kibbutz life. On their return on foot to the shtetl they were full of enthusiasm. They sang and danced their hearts out all the way to the branch club, carrying on until they were exhausted. The visit was a source of experiences, memories, impressions and influence for years to come.

Visitors would also come to the branch from the kibbutzim, to give lectures, to recruit people for the kibbutz and to collect money for training and for aliyah. Whenever there was a meeting of branches it would take place in kibbutz Dombrovitza. Whenever a branch outing was arranged on holidays the destination was the nearby kibbutz. And the other way round: whenever the kibbutz was in need of people and 'headquarters' was not in a position to supply them envoys from the kibbutz would go to the nearby shtetls to 'snatch' those willing to be 'snatched' from the branches. Whenever it was necessary to increase the number of members going to the Land and finances of the 'joint funds' were insufficient envoys from the kibbutz would appear again in the shtetl asking for help. Meanwhile conversations, question and answer sessions and lectures would take place in the branch. Relationships took shape, reciprocal friendships were formed.

That is how the renewed exodus for training began on the eve of the Fifth Aliyah. These were difficult days for the training kibbutzim. This was evident particularly in the lack of aliyah. An envoy came to the branch from Klosova asking for members to join the kibbutz in order to fill the places of those leaving and of the few making aliyah. It was that extremely harsh winter of 1928-29. Cold, frost and heavy snows carried on throughout the winter. How, in this of all winters, would young men and women go away for quarrying and sawmill work in Klosova?

The feelings of confusion grew in the branch. Two of the older ones stood up. Together with the envoy they left their homes for Klosova that very day. As if that were not enough, several weeks later a second envoy came to 'snatch' for a second time. Again the feelings of confusion in the branch intensified. By this stage those left were only 15- and 16-year-olds. Who at that age can find the strength, in such a winter and in those conditions, for the labour and hard life of Klosova and not end in failure, thereby bringing disgrace on the branch as a whole? Feelings ran high and there were many arguments. These claimed this and those claimed that. The envoy tried to encourage, to enthuse, to convince. It seemed he was right, but boys and girls, in their instinctive fear and in their mumbled and naïve words, were also right.

What was the solution? One of the youngest stood up and announced that he would volunteer. There was relief in the room and admiration for the young volunteer. But for all that doubt and fear gnawed. It was forbidden to let anyone in the shtetl, apart from members of the branch, know about his preparations for departure. In particular it was forbidden to say a word to his parents, for they would

³⁰⁷ From 1924 until 1937 Klosova, a granite quarry dating from Tsarist times near the village of Klosov (now Klesiv), c.25 km. east of Sarny (itself c.50 km. south of Udrytsk, the nearest railway station to Vysotsk), was the foremost training kibbutz in eastern Poland

for certain keep him locked in and cause trouble for the branch. The matter was kept entirely secret. On the same night in which his departure was to take place a kind of secret rejoicing reigned in the branch club. They danced and sang as if on a normal evening, but at the same time in the corners of the room they whispered to each other while they helped with the preparation for the departure. It was a clear cold night. With their departure from the club the celebratory tension increased. Columns of people passed by in the darkness of the night after the boy had left on foot to the train station. The tension increased with his departure.

His older brother, who at the last moment had been informed about the departure of his young brother, caught up with him on the way in order to take his leave of him. The moment of parting between the two brothers was moving and painful. The older brother handed the younger a pair of tefilin³⁰⁸. This, in his words, was a sign and token of remembrance of his father and mother's house, to which he would never return. The hearts of the young people throbbed and trembled as if the young man were going to the other side of the world. Hands were clasped tight and lips whispered a blessing and prayer, lest he return [to the shtetl], lest he abandon [the training kibbutz]... After two weeks he returned. He could not find the strength to carry on.

But the seed sown in those days was not sown in vain. With the end of the winter many made a move. It was the business of the branch to look after anybody going off for training, to answer his questions in discussions and meetings, to give authorisation [to leave], to undertake supporting activity, to organise his departure etc. Beyond the walls of the branch it was forbidden to reveal anything, especially not to the parents who fought fiercely and with all means available to them to prevent the departure of their sons and daughters for training. There were many difficult discussions with the parents. They would hide clothes, lock money away from their children and even go so far as to inform the police.

There was the case of one who had been preparing to leave for a long time, he brought his clothes over in secret to his friend's house in order to keep them hidden until the day of departure. He left the shtetl on his way to the train station in secret. One after another the members of the branch followed him, moving inconspicuously, accompanying him and carrying his personal belongings. With every rustle of footsteps and rattle of carts on the path all of them would hide in ditches by the sides of the roads lest passers-by catch sight of them in the darkness of the night. But despite everything the facts became known to the parents an hour after their son had left their house. The father quickly chased after his son but was not able to stop him. Then he took his suitcase and personal belongings from him, but to no avail. The son arrived in Klosova without anything; his clothes and personal belongings returned with his father to his home in the shtetl. In the case of a second young man, his parents caught up with him in the kibbutz with the intention of bringing him home but they did not succeed. There was a third who only managed to escape from his home on the pretext of going to look for work in the nearby town. And so with a fourth and a fifth and so on.

Fathers and mothers became angry, exploding in rage. They cursed their children, the branch, the movement and Eretz Israel as a whole. Parents insulted and abused the name of the branch, and there were those who would spit when passing the branch club, as if they were passing a 'house of abomination'. The fight between fathers and sons was hard and bitter, but not for too long, for the fathers realised they could not change the mind of their stubborn sons. They came round and accepted the situation. Sons and daughters came back from training and were received warmly by their parents. They were also helped as far as was possible in their aliyah to the Land.

³⁰⁸ small leather box containing hand-written passages from the Bible

Interest grew with the first ones making aliyah to the Land and with the arrival of the first letters. Every envoy from Eretz Israel was invited to the parental home. They eagerly devoured what was said about Eretz Israel, the kibbutz and so on. Members of the branch were among those who visited the homes of parents whose children were in Eretz Israel or on training. They were received extremely warmly. Fathers and mothers would accompany the olim and, trembling with emotion, would send their blessings [to their children in Eretz Israel]. Behind the windows and doors they sometimes listened to what the envoy or visitor said inside the branch club about the situation in the Land.



On the occasion of the visit of Tzipora Lukov to the branch

Top row: Leybl Vaks, Tzipora Lukov, Rivka Fialkov, Yehoshua Lopatyn;
bottom row: Eliahu Goldberg, Barukh Vinnik, Gershon Goldberg, Shalom Vinnik

As time passed fear increased greatly regarding what was happening in the Land. As early as the events of 1929 they would be worried and pray for peace in the Land. Then there was a rumour that many were making aliyah to the Land to help the defenders. They were simple Jews prepared to join in. Greater still was the fear over the events of 1936. Every black frame in the newspaper was like a knife in the living flesh of the Jews of the shtetl. Every piece of news about a new settlement was received with great joy.

KKL³⁰⁹ collection boxes, which in previous years had been boycotted by many of the families, were now brought into all of the homes.

With the rise of aliyah all opposition to departure for training ended. There was almost no home in the shtetl which did not have a son or daughter in the Land or in the training kibbutz. And so, thanks to the children, the shtetl became entirely Zionist-pioneering. At the time of the elections to the congress³¹⁰ the shtetl would deliver, relatively to its size, a large number of shkalim³¹¹, and nearly all the votes in the elections were given to the Working Eretz Israel list.

The shtetl in the years before the war

New houses and wide streets. The fires that would afflict the shtetl almost every summer had almost completely destroyed all the old wooden houses with their straw roofs. In their place arose houses of larger dimension, which with their many large windows and glass doors looked with pride on to the street which was in the process of being renewed. The streets became broader and even had pavements at their sides.

Although the appearance of these new houses gave grounds for thinking that hardship had lessened and poverty decreased, that was not the case at all. Hardship

³⁰⁹ Keren Kayemet l'Israel, the Jewish National Fund

³¹⁰ Jewish Congress

³¹¹ certificates given in return for payment of annual dues to the World Zionist Organisation

and poverty grew and flourished, as if in parallel with the new houses. In the shtetl the shops grew in number, yet their turnover went down. Tradesmen were busy in their trades, yet wages dropped markedly. Many kinds of taxes added to the impoverishment of the small traders and the poor artisans. Teachers and Polish officials lived as tenants in the large new houses, while the 'landlords' would live in one or two of the rooms of the house.

A statue of Pilsudsky (he was the 'national hero' and prime minister of Poland at that time) was displayed in the market square as a symbol and sign of the source of these changes. A substantial decorated house stood proudly at the entrance to the shtetl. This was the state Polish school which had branches in houses all over the shtetl. At that time all the Jewish children studied in this school together with the Goy children. It was above all in this area, the area of education, that the 'revolution' in the shtetl was particularly noticeable.

8-10 years previously you had no doubts about Jewish education. The immovable corner stone, chadorim and Talmud Torah, had been established for boys and an elementary Tarbut school, attended mostly by girls. Parents would give their soul to provide their children with a Jewish education. Although the Tarbut school had closed because of poverty, private Hebrew lessons, where boys and girls studied Hebrew, did not stop. But at the present time an end has been put to almost all of that. If still some private lessons took place this was certainly only for an hour a day after the lessons in the Polish school.

Nowadays boys and girls of all ages study in the Polish school. In place of the Hebrew language, the sound of which in former years you could frequently hear ringing from the mouths of boys and girls in the streets of the shtetl, now sometimes the Polish language is heard. In addition to that, children are not allowed to visit the branch club.

The Polish school stamps its heavy heel on its pupils. Using all means and all kinds of pretexts the pupils are not allowed to visit the club. Thus the majority of the youth of the shtetl have been uprooted from the branch; there remained only the older age group. In fact boys and girls did not always obey the school's instructions and would often gather in secret for conversation and communal singing in a private house, in a side alley or in the open field far from the shtetl or beneath the shade of trees.



A group of HeKhalutz members, 1936

from right to left, standing: Mindl Sheynbeyn, Tzipora Shuster, Yoske Vinnik, Nekhama Gottlieb;
front row: Dovid Shtoper, Aaron Shabshi, Esther Goldshteyn, Leybl Vaks, Dina Borovyk, Yehoshua Lopatyn



HeKhalutz HaTzair, the graduate age group, 1936

first row, from right to left, standing: Shmuel Kaftan, female visitor Feygl Mayzl, Gitl Sheynman, a male visitor, Esther Furman, Dvusya Shtoper, Itzhok Gutman, Rakhel Khaznchuk, Yehoshua Gottlieb,..., Sholem Vinnik,... Esther Gelman, Breyndl Lapinsky, Dina Berman;

middle row: ..., Malka Lopata, Sara Khaznchuk, Brakha Feldman, Pesl Shnayder, Teybl Fialkov, Nishke Lopata, Rivka Fialkov, Breyndl Lopata, Lifshe Boroviyk; front row: Leybl Vaks, Khana-Pesl Lieberman, Yehudl Furman, Eliezer Lopata

But the long arm of the school reached them even in these places. Teachers and officials and policemen and Goy pupils constantly followed the movements and actions of the Jewish pupils after the lessons. Woe-betide boys and girls if they were caught in their mischief. Bad marks, fines and even house arrest were all used as a means of punishing pupils and those teachers who disobeyed orders. Yet in spite of everything they would continue to get together, in greater secrecy and with greater caution. These conversations and this activity of the branch were for them almost certainly the only source of any form of Jewish Hebrew education. Even cautious parents did not object to it.

The Polish school on the one hand, the lack of Hebrew education on the other hand and the influence of the surroundings in general all had their effect, even on the more mature youth. The previous generation were all in the Land or in the training kibbutzim. In contrast to its predecessor, for this new generation the branch, its business, its activities, its club were not the centre of their attention.

At the present time the boys and girls are occupied first and foremost with all sorts of other matters. On Sabbaths they crowd together on the balconies of houses, chatting aimlessly. In the evenings, in particular on Sabbaths and Sundays, some of them spend time in joint dances with Goy boys and girls.

The authorities have built a large hall in the centre of the shtetl, home to the firemen and their equipment. By the way, it is used as a hall for dances and parties and plays of all sorts organised by the Goys and in particular by the local Polish officials and teachers, of whom there are already quite a few in the shtetl. Although at these parties there has been no lack of anti-Semitic incidents and attacks on Jews, young Jewish men and women have not stayed away from them.

Only occasionally did separate, independent Jewish parties take place. Various things prevented that: lack of money, lack of a licence, lack of a hall etc. But what are young men and women supposed to do on beautiful summer evenings and during the long winter nights? What indeed? What are you, members of HeKhalutz HaTzair, doing at those parties? No answer was forthcoming.

In the final months before the war there was a noticeable stirring among the young people of the branch. Aliyah to the Land increased, the period of training was

shortened, the central activities of the movement improved: more visits, more seminars, more summer camps and study weeks, more links and more direct educational training. All these activities had their effect in the shtetl and in the branch. A steady exodus to training kibbutzim began. Letters from the kibbutzim from people in training aroused enthusiasm and attracted others. It seemed the wheel had begun to turn again and began to swing vigorously. More and more went away for training, classes and groups went away occasionally, particularly to far-off kibbutzim. As a result of this the branch was spurred into greater activity and into reawakened vigour. It seemed it would take just a little longer and the former days would return. And then the war broke out...

The bitter end

With the Soviet occupation news arrived. There was renewed life in the shtetl. Electricity was introduced; outside in the streets there was lighting, as there was inside the homes. An additional new school was built, and Jewish children and Goys study there together in peace. One person was made commissar, another was made head of the police and somebody else was appointed as a teacher in the school. Former policemen and officials were dismissed and sent away. New ones came in their place, locals, both Jewish and non-Jewish, good and polite and so on.

But look, a miracle! A group of young men and women from the branch came forward, from those who had attended the training kibbutzim in the area now under German occupation and from those who had not yet been in training at all, young and innocent people, who had uprooted themselves and moved to Vilna, the centre for the few survivors of the movement. Their voices still reached us from Vilna. They told us about the training and about the movement and its activities and in particular about the hope and the yearning for the Land. Suddenly, with the outbreak of the German-Russian war, these voices fell silent. No voice and no echo, either from the shtetl or from the fragments of its dispersed people.

Tiny Jewish shtetl, how were you destroyed³¹²? And your Jews, were they banished 'in an unknown direction' and did they meet their death there? Or perhaps they were killed there and then, in that very market square, the place of tribulation from the time of Petlyura³¹³ and Belkhovitz? Perhaps they were hurled alive into the terrible burial pits by the muzzles of guns and machine guns? Perhaps they were chased to the River Horyn and drowned in its deep waters? Did any of your young people succeed in escaping and joining the Red Army? Or perhaps no survivors remain? And your houses, the new and the old, synagogues and schools, did they turn into the dwelling place of criminals and the cruel enemy? Or perhaps they all went up in the flames of the greatest and most terrible of all the fires you have ever known? Tiny shtetl, where are you, where are you?

With the liberation of these districts by the Red Army the blackout was lifted. In the few letters that arrived a few lines cry for the bitter and hurried end of the shtetl, along with the whole of the House of Israel in Poland. The axe came down on it too. There survived only a few scattered and shattered remnants in the wide spaces of Russia and in the Red Army, in the forests round about and in the partisan detachments. Most of those few who returned came to the final shore, to Eretz Israel.

I. Fialkov

(Mishmar HaYam 1945) Afek

³¹² cf. Lamentations chapter 1, verse 1

³¹³ Symon Petlura (Petlyura), born 1879, a Ukrainian nationalist who became head of the government of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1919-1921).



a discussion at a HeKhalutz HaTzair summer camp near Vysotsk ³¹⁴

³¹⁴ At the German colony of Sofiivka (see The shtetl in earlier times, page 8)

My shtetl

Here it is, a shtetl so tiny that it doesn't even exist on the map. Even if we discover that it lies somewhere close to the border of Polessia and Volyn and even if we pinpoint the spot where it is situated, next to the river Horyn, it will be difficult to locate its precise position. Yet it is etched in the hearts of those who were born and lived there.

In this shtetl there seethed a vibrant Jewish life. Every aspect of the Jewish people and every current in Jewish thought was reflected and represented in it. The majority of its Jewish inhabitants were Chassidim, but there were also a few misnagdim³¹⁵, and there were Zionists and non-Zionists. HeKhalutz and HeKhalutz HaTzair brought together the majority of the young people in the shtetl, but there were also some who leaned towards other political movements and other philosophies: communists, Bund³¹⁶, General Zionists, Revisionists and so on. There were no assimilated Jews in the shtetl.

In all of them there beat a warm Jewish heart, prepared at any time to come to the aid of other members of their community. This readiness to help was revealed especially in times of trouble. Whenever a fire broke out in the shtetl Jewish assistance would be shown towards those who had been burned out of their home. When, on a snowy winter's day, the water was frozen in the well, all the neighbours would rush to help with the hard labour of drawing the water. When somebody was sick they would look after the welfare of his family. And when families were without food it was a matter of course for help to be forthcoming. There was no municipal authority or government to support the needy, only the spontaneous response of the Jewish heart. That is what sustained all of them.

The little shtetl sent many pioneers to Eretz Israel. They are now scattered throughout the Land. Most of them were in training before they made aliyah to the Land, and even those who did not manage to make aliyah were deeply attached to the idea of rebirth and redemption in the Land. The heart grieves and weeps for all those Jews, children and teenagers, men and women, young and old, whom the enemy hurled into the grave.

May their memory be blessed and may their name endure for ever.

Lea'ke Lopatyn-Cohen

Kiryat Motzkin

³¹⁵ Yiddish: orthodox 'opponents' of Chassidism

³¹⁶ a non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement

On the Banks of the Horyn

On the banks of the Horyn lies the shtetl. Steppes and dark forests, above whose horizon there rises a wild splendour and grace. 150 Jewish families live there. Each family has a house of its own, a low wooden house, a small patch of land, a vegetable garden and even a milk cow in the cowshed. They earn their bread by the sweat of their face³¹⁷. They are reared in poverty.

Sometimes a fire breaks out in the shtetl or a disaster happens. When that happens one family stands shoulder to shoulder with its neighbour. The shtetl has not known the bright lights of the city, but neither does it know isolation between one person and another. Life flows slowly here, a life gray and peaceful.

And children grew up in the shtetl, full of innocence and faith. But once they became aware of what was happening beyond the borders of the shtetl the soul was stirred and the imagination captured from afar by the story of the construction of the homeland. The shtetl was narrow, suffocating. They rebelled against their parents.

A rush began to HeKhalutz and Klosova³¹⁸, then aliyah to the homeland. For years the shtetl has linked its destiny to the Land. The best of its children are there. Vysotsk is proud of its pioneer past, to which it remains loyal. It is proud of its children who took part in the fight to defend the Land. The young generation is brought up in their light.

I came here at the end of summer, having had enough disappointments and enough wandering from place to place. I saw large, strong [pioneer] branches reduced to their current shameful condition. On the way here how apprehensive my heart was lest ... lest Vysotsk should also disappoint. I found it sound, loyal, a corner of light in the darkness.

When I arrived in the shtetl I was immediately surrounded by a swarm of children, examining the 'strange aunt'. They surrounded me in pioneering naiveté: she's 'ours'! Their faces blushed slightly, but as soon as they saw my friendly face they plucked up courage. The ice broke and their lips spoke: Please tell us, let us have a conversation!

We went into the club. A spacious room, tastefully decorated. The group of children sat around me, singing. They love the quiet songs that express themselves slowly and that tell of human feelings. These little ones know how to listen to a song. Suddenly there is a request: 'Sing us a new song'. I consented. From the very first moment a bond of love was formed between us. It is really so good being with them.

I began *bay mayn fenster in dem gorten*³¹⁹. They listened intently. They knew the melody, but the story interests them. The story is of the good boy whose flowers, that he had tended and nurtured with a great deal of love, were picked by some naughty children. 'Is it right to pick beautiful flowers which want to live?'

³¹⁷ cf. Genesis chapter 3, verse 9

³¹⁸ a training kibbutz – see pp. 92-95

³¹⁹ Yiddish: By my window in the garden



from right to left, top row: Vinner, Mina Zolyar, Rushke Goldberg;
 second row from top: Tzirl Goldberg, Mirl Gottlieb, A. Shnayder, Sara Nafkhan, Sara Durchyn, Risya Shnayder, Kaviar
 third row down: Feygl Berman, Malka Sher, Brakha Feldman;
 fourth row down: Ronya Shlyapak, Gitl Furman, Chana Vaks, Tzipora Shuster, Rivka Fialkov, Mindl Sheynman, Elka Shnayder, Chaya Zolyar, Furman;
 fifth row down: Esther Shlyapek, Sara Lieberman, Kaviar, Mindl Sheynbeyn, Khasya Borovyk, Feygl Rykhotsky,...Lakhmanchuk;
 bottom row: ..., Rabin, ..., Brakha Vinnik, Asher Aaron Sheynbeyn, Aharon-Shmuel and Feygl Fialkov,...Kortach

A conversation develops. They remember trees chopped down in the Land, find what is in common between the flower yearning for the sun, thirsting for dew, and the Jewish pioneer asking for a rooted life, the life of nature. We turn to tragic events in the Land, and sorrow hovers over their faces. They are sad, very sad.

I read them the story 'The tree that was chopped down'. Hearing about the tender oak, uprooted and tossed on to the ground, their eyes are filled with tears. It is hard to see them in their distress.

In my heart I pondered. How terrible it was that wicked deeds deprive even our little children of their innocence and the joy of life. I tried to console them. I went on to tell them that the pioneer in the Land will not despair of building afresh, will plant and sow until hatred between man and man will cease.

The young ones decided to call their group by the name 'The Planters'. How I loved them when I saw their sadness and their enthusiasm. I firmly believed that they would indeed be young planters in the homeland.

Chava Shpigl

1937



from right to left, top row (standing): Chava Nafkhan, Eliahu Goldberg, Tzipora Shuster, Yedudl Furman, Mina Zolyar, Sara Durchyn, Shlomo Furman;
 second row from top: Gitl Sheynman, Esther Furman, Itzhok Shnayder, Chaim Sher, Brakha Feldman, Dvusya Shtoper, Rivka Fialkov, Freydl Furman, Lifshe Borovyk, Breyndl Lopata, Nishke Lopata;
 second row from bottom: Pesl Shnayder, Itzhok Lopata, Rakhel Khaznchuk, Feygl Mayzl, Sara Khaznchuk, Malka Lopata, Teybl Fialkov;
 bottom row: Yaakov Vinnik, Dina Berman, Kh. Pesl Lieberman, Esther Shuster

On the occasion of my aliyah

Sometimes I wonder: can it really be true that no Jewish community exists in Vysotsk? That community which I knew in its joys and sorrows, where private joy was a joy shared by everyone and where they all felt the pain of an individual sorrow, that community where devotion and love reigned and where manual labour was how the majority of the inhabitants of the shtetl earned their living.

I have beautiful memories of the shtetl where I was born and grew up. I stayed there until the age of 17, when I made aliyah to Eretz Israel. It was towards this aim that my most beautiful dreams had already been embroidered in the Tarbut school, where we were taught by our teacher Yaffa Geklman. During lessons on the *Torah* and at every other opportunity she would talk to us about Eretz Israel. In summer when we went for walks outside the town which we organised on behalf of the school she would read from newspapers from the Land. We would sit on the grass and listen to her, quivering with excitement, and dream of the Land.

We grew up with the love of parents and family. We also knew how to respect our parents and other adults and to love the People of Israel. I remember, while I was still at school, our class organised a scout group. Our motto was 'A healthy soul in a healthy body'. Our leader was Itzhak Ryzhy of blessed memory.

After that, from the scout group, we organised ourselves into a Kadima³²⁰ group. we were then also joined by the young men who taught privately and in the Talmud Torah. We were a group of young men and women, and our aim was to make ourselves ready for life in Eretz Israel.

From Kadima we moved to HeKhalutz HaTzair. In HeKhalutz HaTzair there was a life seething with excitement. It grew and grew. The parents were against their children visiting the branch because they knew that this would lead to aliyah to the Land, something that at that time they were against. But slowly, over time, they began to get used to the situation and occasionally, without our knowledge, they would creep up in secret to see what was going on in the branch. I remember once when we came out of the branch clubhouse at a fairly late hour I saw my mother and Chava Vaks strolling past the club. I ask: 'Mother, what's the matter?' 'Nothing', she answers, 'we came to see what you get up to in the branch'.

Our mothers knew how to find joy in another person's joy. Any letter that was received from the Land would pass through almost the entire shtetl. I remember when my sister Rivke got married and wrote that she was living in Nes-Tziyona and the wedding was at Etil Vaks's place in Rehovot the women began to ask about the distance between the two settlements. Mother answered them 'It's like from Vysotsk to Brodetz'. So she told me laughing. When I came to the Land and would walk on foot from Nes-Tziyona to Rehovot I thought to myself what a splendid sense of direction my mother had had!

In 1932 I made aliyah to the Land. On the night before my travel many of my girl friends came to bid farewell. There, among the preparations, I see Mother sitting with tears in her eyes: 'Mother, what's the matter?' She answers: 'Sarali, you are only 17 and I haven't had enough time to look at you'... And she burst out crying. I kissed her and calmed her down: 'Mother, you will all come to the Land and you will still be able to see me for many years.' To that Mother answered: 'Were it not for that hope I would not let you travel'.

The next day the whole shtetl came to accompany me to the train. I took my leave of all of them. Father stood aside. I went up to him and said to him: 'Father, we have to say goodbye!' He burst into tears. This was the first time I had seen my father cry. Through his tears he says to me: 'Sarali my daughter, will I manage to see you again? I am unable to give you anything other than my blessings which will accompany you always. Always endeavour to do what is good and honest and remember that you have left us here. Write at least one letter every week'.

Yes, Father, I sent letters every week. I always hoped to see you again, the shtetl and its people that I loved so much, but I was not able to. The end came down on the community of Vysotsk, and from it only a few survived.

Our heart grieves for those who were destroyed by the hand of the murderer. The heart is bitter with pain.

Sara Petrukh-Moravnyk

Netanya

³²⁰ 'Forwards', the provisional name of the local Zionist youth organisation



The HeKhalutz branch in 1933

This is how they were

The little shtetl of Vysotsk, which had the appearance of a village, rests on a hillock near the border between the provinces of Volyn and Pinsk, between the shtetls Dombrovitz and Stolin. It is about 8 kilometres from the shtetl to the nearest railway station, Udrytsk. Nearby runs the river Horyn, the waters of which pour out over its banks in the months of spring. With the thawing of the snows the water covers wide areas of low land, creating swamps around the shtetl. At this time the shtetl would remain cut off from all other human settlement; there was no way out and no way in.

Vysotsk is considered to be an ancient shtetl. According to the stories of the old people it dates back several hundred years; indeed some ancient gravestones remaining in its cemetery from hundreds of years back are evidence of that. There is no community journal here and there probably never has been. Vysotsk was influenced by Volhynian Dombrovitz on the one hand and by Chassidic Stolin on the other hand (the latter is regarded as belonging to White Russia). For generations, until the Polish occupation in the year 1920, its links were with these shtetls.

No important events took place in it. The life of the thousand Jews in it was quiet and peaceful. There were hardly any troublemakers, there was hardly any strife in the shtetl. Everyone was busy with his work and sat in his shop, taking care of the livelihood of his house. This was not easy and was only achieved with much scrimping and scraping. They did not aspire to great things and did not acquire wealth. Peaceful relations prevailed among the Jews themselves and between them and the non-Jews in the village and those in the neighbourhood.

The Jews of Vysotsk were pious. Everyday life continued throughout the course of the week, but when the Sabbath approached the shtetl took on a different form. Every Jew went to the public baths, removing everything relating to everyday life. The shops closed on time, and through the windows of every house Sabbath candles in polished candlesticks shone in a shining bright light. The children ran around in their Sabbath clothes. Young and old rushed to the synagogue to welcome the Sabbath, Queen of the Heavens. In the synagogue they prayed with Chassidic enthusiasm, and there was a special festive feeling throughout the whole of this Jewish shtetl.

While they were still very young the children started to study in the cheyder. The cheyder was of the type usual in the Jewish shtetls. In a small narrow room in the melamed's³²¹ house they sat around a tightly packed table, listening to the teaching and studying alef beys³²² and Hebrew with the teacher. Every Thursday a kind of examination took place. In such conditions great scholars could not be expected from the cheyder; education remained at a low level.

During the First World War (in the year 1915) the local activist Chaim Ayznberg was stirred into action and began to concern himself with the education of the young generation in the shtetl. He collected a number of children without education whose parents were unable to pay fees to the melamdim, rented a house and founded a school for them. Bila Ratner and Lykhtnfeld joined Ayznberg as teachers. The lessons – Hebrew and general subjects – began in the school. There were those in the shtetl who were dissatisfied with the method of education and with the school in general. This was only natural. But Ayznberg did not back down and continued with his important project. After the Balfour Declaration³²³ was published and the winds of freedom were blowing in Russia activists were found who helped Ayznberg put the school on a sure foundation and attract children and parents and win over public opinion. From it there emerged a national generation on whose lips the Hebrew language was alive. From their ranks came those who were subsequently educated in training kibbutzim and made aliyah to the Land.

Among teachers at the school we have to mention Kant, Shokhet and Ternopolsky and among the activists Zeydil Lopatyn. All of these, with Chaim Ayznberg at the head, formed a mass Zionist movement in the school. Zeydil Lopatyn, a former pupil of the cheyder who came from a family of fishermen in the shtetl, was one of the first to devote himself to the Zionist movement with all his energy. He loved the theatre with all his heart and organised an amateur group in the shtetl which excelled in its performances. They would dedicate all the income to the cause of Keren Kayemet le'Israel³²⁴ or similar institutions. He had excellent speaking ability. He would stand in front of a large public without flinching, and his words stirred the public to Zionist activity. For many years he worked loyally until he moved to Luninets. When he was there he also did not sit idly, continuing the Zionist activity for which he was renowned in all the surrounding area.

And we should remember Moyshe Levin, grandson of the rebbe Moshke of blessed memory and son of Leybush the butcher. He had also studied in the cheyder. When he reached the age of 11 he was sent by his father to the yeshiva³²⁵ in Zhytomir, where his older brothers had already studied. He studied there until the

³²¹ teacher's

³²² Yiddish: alphabet

³²³ on 2 November 1917 British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, confirming that the British government favoured the 'establishment in Palestine of a national homeland for the Jewish people'

³²⁴ Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlement

³²⁵ college for religious studies

war broke out in 1914. While still in the yeshiva he began to disapprove of the differences between social classes. He was a boy of 16 when he ceased his studies and became interested in the revolutionary movement.

Towards the end of the First World War Moyshe returned to Vysotsk. Gangs and various groups with weapons in their hands would pounce on wayfarers and on settlements and small shtetls. A self-defence group was organised then in Vysotsk, and Moyshe Levin took an active part defending the shtetl. During the period of Polish rule Levin began to be active in the pioneer movement. He went to a training kibbutz, but not much time elapsed before he left the Zionist movement and turned to communism. Despite his alienation from religion people in the shtetl loved him for his honesty and sincerity. More than once the local roiv invited him for a conversation. Moyshe suffered more than a little hardship; he was persecuted and captured and sat in prison. When in the last war the Red Army entered Vysotsk he was appointed governor of the region. According to all accounts he also escaped the Nazis, surviving in Vysotsk. In the end he and his wife went to Russia.³²⁶

Sons of Vysotsk knew how to give the Goys a beating when necessary. So, for instance, at the time of the revolution, when the army was celebrating the victory of the revolution, the priest with people of his retinue, carrying torches and icons, came to the shtetl in a procession. The Jews joined them with the Sefer Torah³²⁷. Together they danced and celebrated the liberation which wasn't 'theirs' [i.e. neither the priest's nor the Jews']. The self-defence group that existed in the shtetl and its *general shtab*³²⁸ were based in the town prayer house. They were of benefit to the residents on more than one occasion. All the instructions came from the synagogue, and when there was a pogrom they knew how to beat off an attack. The main commander of the self-defence was Shymon from Bila, a village near Vysotsk, a boy of brave heart, armed from top to toe. He would be the first to appear in all the dangerous places. His deputies, Lykhtnfeld and Sheynman, were also courageous. Mobile guards were nominated from among the members of the self-defence. They inspected all the strategic points.

An event occurred affecting the rich Lykhtnfeld family. Petlyura's³²⁹ people entered and stole all their possessions. The self-defence galloped to the scene, captured the head of the gang, brought him to the government house and removed his weapon from him. Meanwhile Lykhtnfeld's father arrived. In front of everyone he slapped his son's face and sent the commander of the gang back in the wagon in style.

Women of Vysotsk also knew how to stand their ground. Dvoyre Itzik's was known to be a smart woman. She smashed the head of one ruffian with a block of wood when he attacked her. In the early days of Polish rule the young men went off to the field to look after the cows. A group of ruffians led by Bolek Belkovych came up to them. All the young people of the shtetl ran away and hid, but some were caught and took blows (including me). Later, when I returned to the shtetl, I averted my eyes from the sight of the pogrom inflicted by the ruffians. It was only with difficulty that I managed to find the majority of the residents of the shtetl who were hiding in the cemetery.

³²⁶ A later chapter makes clear that he in fact returned to Vysotsk after the war

³²⁷ handwritten copy of the Torah used during synagogue services and kept in the Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark)

³²⁸ from German *Generalstab*: headquarters

³²⁹ followers of Symon Petlura (Petlyura), born in 1879, a Ukrainian nationalist who became head of the government of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1919-1921). Jews held him responsible for the wave of pogroms. He was assassinated in Paris in 1926.

I remember the incident that happened at that time in one of the houses where they were sitting shiva³³⁰ for the deceased and had come to pray in a minyan³³¹. In rushed the robbers, taking all the men – 18 in all – and placing them in the middle of the market place in order to shoot them. After prolonged negotiations the people were ransomed in hard cash, paid in full, in accordance with the robbers' demands. Moyshe Ayznberg was murdered while he was standing in morning prayer, the talis and tefilin on his head. The ruffians demanded money from his family and received what they asked for. When Ayznberg tried to escape through the window they killed him on the spot. At that time the Poles were in the process of taking control. Their administration established peace in the neighbourhood.

There were no proper organisations offering help and assistance in our shtetl, but human feeling and mutual understanding between one person and another were alive and well. I remember how Henya Sheyndles would go out into the town on Fridays and eve of holidays whatever the weather, in rain and snow, to collect from anyone who would give food and money for the poor of the shtetl. After her death her place was taken by Minke, whose heart beat with the desire to help people in need.

This was not the only sort of help available in Vysotsk. There was also help in other areas. In the case of illness, when Kopchik or Kalinsky gave instructions to take the sick person to Rovno or Warsaw for treatment, help would always be organised. Khava Lifshes and Feyge-Mirl would go out into the streets to collect money to cover the cost of transporting the sick person. If the money collected was insufficient they would come to Lekhia-Etil (my mother) and obtain an extra contribution from her, and the sick person would be taken in time for the remainder of the treatment. And if a poor visitor or an itinerant preacher came Nisl Meirs would already be on duty, making sure there was somewhere to sleep, that there was a warm meal and also food for the onward journey.

Nisl Meirs also had other responsibilities. Every Sabbath in the early hours he would wander from street to street to remind the public to go to the synagogue to 'chant Psalms'. He had a special song. This is how it went: 'People of Israel, get up and worship God, for this is why you were created'. Nakhum the beadle would already be making sure the prayer house was heated in time. They would gather for prayer and also for a bit of 'politics'. There were no newspapers or radio in the shtetl. Yet despite that the news flowed. Also on weekdays, between mincha³³² and maariv³³³, news from the world and from the shtetl would flow - also facts and opinions and commentary embellished by a good Jewish imagination.

There was no lack of public work in the shtetl even if it was not organised. Everybody would have a special area of responsibility. For instance it was Nisl Borukh's job, whenever Jews were killed by bandits on the roads or in nearby villages, to go out himself, accompanied by a 'Goy' wagon, to where the killing had taken place in order to bring the victim back for a Jewish burial - despite the danger involved in the matter. Borukh Shleymes would not at the time think twice about the distance from his home, nor about whose property had been burned (whether Jewish or 'Goy'); he would immediately grab a bucket and run to where the fire was, to put it out, to save, to help...

This is what the Jews of our shtetl were like...

Ze'ev Urman

Givataim

³³⁰ seven days of mourning

³³¹ quorum of ten men necessary for reciting prayers in the synagogue

³³² afternoon prayers

³³³ evening prayers

People in the shtetl

I am going to tell you about some of the people in the shtetl that I remember. The first of them, Chaim the melamed, was an infant teacher. I remember him when he was already old but still had small children. He was very very poor and a pious person.

The local rov, Yehuda Abelson, a distinguished scholar of the Torah and pious, made his living by selling yeast and Sabbath candles. The shopkeepers of the shtetl were expressly forbidden from selling these products so as to enable the rov to make a living. I also remember that during the first war there was a shortage of bread. They would pass by every eve of Sabbath to collect a little flour for him to bake bread for himself, like all the Jews in the shtetl.

As has already been said, this rov was a distinguished scholar of the Torah and pious, strict by nature. All the Jews of the shtetl were very wary of his wrath. He was also a judge who passed judgment in cases of conflicts between one person and another.

He had three sons. The eldest was called Bonim, an educated man in the end of the nineteenth century meaning of the word. The second, Yehoshua, served as a rov. He was the last rov in the shtetl, taking the place of his father who in his old age moved to the neighbouring shtetl of Plotnitze³³⁴. The third son, Khezkil, always stayed close to his father's table, sitting over the Torah in the prayer house. I remember I lived near the house of the rov. Whenever the rov's wife travelled away from home I would spend the night in the rov's house, in accordance with his request. I was very attached to the rov, whom I greatly respected.

I remember the bitter and fateful day on which the Petlyura people murdered one of the elders of the shtetl, Reb Moyshe Ayznberg. On that day people of the shtetl escaped from their homes and hid in all sorts of secret places. Then I met the rov in the old cemetery where he was crying like a child. I rushed to see what the situation in the town was like and if it was possible for people to return to their homes. In the evening we all gathered. We brought the rov to spend the night in our house. He sat with us the whole night in the dark until morning light.

Reb Feybush the blacksmith would work all day, sometimes remaining until midnight in the smithy that was in the street of the Goys. After work he would come home. Before he managed to finish his meal he would already be sitting and reading aloud from one of the sacred books or rehearsing and memorising one of the Chassidic tunes in order to come prepared and practised, ready for the meal *Melave Malka*³³⁵. This was celebrated in the synagogue at the end of the Sabbath.

Then there was Yoyne the shoemaker, a strict and pious Jew, and Reb Nisn son of Reb Mordekhai, who for some reason was called by my mother's name Bath-sheva. A pious Jew, he would spend the summer producing large sliced cheese called *shvaytzer kez*³³⁶. In winter he would trade in anything that came to hand from his work with Goys. It was with great difficulty that he supported his family. Despite that he had his sons - myself, my brother Itzhok and my brother Mendl - educated by the best melamdin in the shtetl. He would save on food in order to pay tuition fees on time.

Then there were Shevakh Katz, very poor, quiet and devout, and Shleyme Levin and his son-in-law Leybush, the ritual slaughterer from a rabbinical family. His father, Moshke 'der rov', and his brothers, one of whom was Mordekhai, would sit days and nights over the Torah worshipping God, during which time his wife, and

³³⁴ north of Vysotsk, now in Belarus

³³⁵ 'Accompanying the Queen' (i.e. Sabbath), the third and final meal of the Sabbath

³³⁶ Yiddish: Swiss cheese

after that his son, worked in the shop. The same Shleyne Levin had a sort of oil 'factory'. This was a kind of wheel harnessed to horses. During the oil extraction process the seeds crystallized into a sort of solid block which served as food for the cattle. The seeds would belong to the owner of the 'factory' as payment for the extraction of the oil, while the oil itself remained with the farmer. This work continued for two months in the winter. The family made its living from this throughout the year in addition to milk from the cow that they kept in the house and from potatoes that they grew in the garden at the side of the house and from potatoes that they received from the 'Goy' in exchange for dung from the cow.

Yenkl Feldman *der bukhlicher*³³⁷ came from the village and continued to draw his livelihood from it even when he was in the shtetl.

Then there was the yard of Zalman Velfils Kagan with the three families living in it. There is no way of knowing how they made a living. Despite that sons grew up and were educated in the Torah and to do good deeds.

It is obvious that it is impossible to describe every Jew of the shtetl, but in general it is possible to say that in essence, in terms of how they earned their living and their way of life, all the Jews of the shtetl were one family divided into two Chassidic schools: Chassidim of Stolin and Chassidim of Brezne. All lived roughly the same difficult crushing life. They made do with little, were content with their lot and raised boys and girls in the right path. A large number of them made aliyah to the Land and were among its builders...

Mordekhai Lopata

Eyn Vered



³³⁷ from the village of Bukhlychi, now just over the border in Belarus, the first station north from Udrytsk, the nearest railway station to Vysotsk

A few memories

The Jewish homes and shops were in the centre of the shtetl, and in the middle of the long street was a well from which water was drawn by a hand pump. Sometimes I would go with two pails to bring water especially for important guests, because this water was better than the water in the well in our yard.

Whenever the rebbe from Stolin came to Vysotsk there was great joy. They would dance, sing and get up early to visit him and seek his advice and ask mercy for good marriages, birth of children and so on. From the adjacent room I would listen to the women crying.

My brother Chaim, although he wasn't religious, would receive the rebbe hospitably and was pleased when he came. They met as friends for a conversation.

After my father was killed by the Petlyura people we - five daughters - were in deep despair. But Mother, in her faith, gave us encouragement, demanding more work and more 'energy' in order to survive. On the day of my father's death many Jews were rounded up by the Petlyura people in the centre of the shtetl near the pump with the intention of killing them. They were only saved by a miracle.

I remember a large fire in the shtetl. Many houses were burned and many families remained without a roof over their heads. That night one woman was seized with labour pains. As there was at that time no doctor in the town they looked for my mother to help the woman in labour. On such occasions Mother would become a doctor, and everything would turn out well. She would help willingly and generously.

My brother Chaim Ayznberg also loved to help his fellow man. I remember him in the days of the Russian revolution. He would make a speech in the synagogue and in the street about equality of rights for all human beings, about brotherhood and justice etc. Then Zlata, our neighbour, came out and called to us 'Then why doesn't he marry my daughter Yente?'

I remember more. The boys learned in the chadorim and the girls wandered about without lessons. Rakhel Kryvoruchky and I gathered them in Ryzhy's house and taught them Hebrew.

Our neighbour in the street was Hershil *der shnayder*³³⁸. He had two daughters, Chaya Reyzl and Khasil. This was a very clever family. The post office was also next to us for a time. Large horses with bells around their necks would bring the letters. On both sides of our house lived shoemakers. One of them, Pesakh *der shuster*³³⁹, had a daughter Lea who would shout at me for picking up the wild pears from their tree that fell on our land.

Meeting anybody from abroad was very interesting. Fanya Rabinovych would come once a year to visit her sick mother or her brother Avram. She was beautiful. We listened to her stories with great enthusiasm. Mother's friends were Nekhama Shtoper, Lea Zalmans and Lea *di fakterin*³⁴⁰. This was a foursome of beautiful, healthy and clever women. Always happy and joking and jesting.

Chava Ayznberg

Holon

³³⁸ Yiddish: the tailor

³³⁹ Yiddish: the cobbler

³⁴⁰ Yidd.: the agent

³⁴¹ born 1886 near Minsk, died 1944 in Auschwitz

How? ³⁴²

Land of Polessia, landscape of my childhood, how have you been bereaved?
How did such a terrible thing happen? How will you rest on the open spaces of your ponds and meadows, and my people are no longer, no longer among you? Through tears the heart sees your grief-stricken paths and your abandoned dwelling-places and it scans the horizon for a soul from Israel. The heart knocks on the houses of your shtetls, but there is no sound and no answer. Only the wind answers it from afar, the wind that says Kaddish³⁴³ in the willows by the stream in the land of my childhood.

Polessia, desolate region, you raised generations of Jews for the Torah and for toil. In your low-lying villages the blacksmiths, sons of Jacob, struck with their heavy hammers and shod horses. Good, patient craftsmen laboured in your tiny shtetls. In their sorrow they elevated your poor land and illuminated your open spaces with their longing for the Saviour.

Polessia, where my people lived a wretched life, where they knew poverty and solitude and the Goy's hatred. But in their soul shone an eternal light. And this light of their soul cast light on the darkness of your dense forests, and the trunk of my tree was carried, yearning, day and night on rafts along your calm rivers. Then Polessia, in your paths sons and daughters of Israel will arise and follow the dream, to toil in a far-off land. From the fires at sunset in your meadows they draw longing for that which is far away and beautiful. In your fields they listen to the voice of Zion in the song of the rye and the spelt. And as they stand on your borders to part from you for ever they took with them the fruitful sorrow resting in your ample bosom and kissed the dear childhood that remained sealed on the banks of your lakes.

How have you been bereaved of my people? How? How did you not conceal them all in secret places in your forests? How did you stand by passively and not open up the broad swamps to swallow all the murderers? How is it that you did not protect your Jews, who always perfumed your air with the fragrance of Sabbath, who warmed your autumn with the eternal hymns of the soul?

How? How? How, land of my childhood, will you speak to me from afar?

Y. Rabinov³⁴⁴

³⁴² cf. Lamentations of Jeremiah

³⁴³ prayer for the dead

³⁴⁴ born 1904 in Pinsk, emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1925, became a member of kibbutz Gevat (Central Israel) and died in 2000

Destruction of Vysotsk

During the period of Soviet rule

The shtetl, our shtetl of Vysotsk, lying as it does off the beaten track, far from the railway and main roads, barely felt the early days of the German-Polish war. Life continued on its usual course. But when, in accordance with the Soviet-German pact, the region passed without much ado over to Soviet rule the situation in the shtetl changed fundamentally. The language of instruction in the state school immediately changed to Russian, and after a short time the old teachers were also changed in favour of new teachers loyal to the new regime.

The situation of the Jews in the shtetl did not deteriorate; on the contrary, the blatant anti-semitism that had grown stronger in the preceding years disappeared completely. Petty trade, even though officially stopped, continued to take place, although it was hard to obtain certain goods.

Many refugees arrived from the regions occupied by the Germans. The Soviet authorities in the shtetl welcomed them and treated them well. However after a little while they were sent away from the shtetl into Russia. Bit by bit life settled down. It seemed it was also going to be possible to live with the new Soviet regime.

My father who, during the period of Polish rule, had worked hard as a builder moving from village to village in the surrounding area, was made responsible by the new regime for the only café in the shtetl. He was very successful in his new role. My brother Feybl and my sister Eydl worked, earning good wages. My younger brother and I continued to study, but only in the state school, because in the meantime the chadorim, that had provided a Jewish education, had folded.



Itzhok Yakhnyuk (1918)

Our situation was therefore not bad.

It remained like this until 22 July 1941, the day on which the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany broke out.

Not many days had passed from the outbreak of the Soviet-German war before the Russians began to leave the shtetl. I felt there was a great misfortune hovering over our heads. The Russians did in fact ask us to join them when they retreated into Russia. Although the roads were already impassable and difficult it was still possible to get out and reach Russia. But only a few did this. The majority of the inhabitants of the shtetl remained where they were, whether because of the fear of being refugees or whether because they were used to routine and did not show sufficient courage to venture beyond the life they were used to.

It seemed that life would continue somehow or other. People looked at each other and learned from each other. In particular they drew lessons from the refugees who had come to the shtetl from the regions occupied by the Germans in the first days of the war – and didn't run away. They came to the conclusion that if these people, who knew the Germans, were not running away why should they? Moreover, these refugees would receive reassuring letters, letters expressing hope and certainty, from relatives who had been in the area under German rule since 1939.

Of course it became clear later that these letters had been written under pressure from the Germans, with the prime purpose of influencing the Jews to stay

put. Apart from that, nobody dreamed of the threatening horrors and slaughter. We certainly feared punishment because of collaboration with the Soviets. But mass slaughter of Jews, such as that which came and raged over us, how could the human imagination foresee this?

As a consequence the Jews did not run away when the Russians left. My brother Feybl, who was then 20, did in fact go with the Russians but several days later came back to the shtetl and his parents' home.

During the Nazi occupation

The arrival of the Germans was felt immediately by the Jewish population of the shtetl. The 'Goys', residents of the shtetl - even those who were confirmed communists - immediately changed their spots, provoking and attacking their Jewish neighbours. Indeed, as has been said, with the shtetl being far from the main roads, the combatant armies did not cross its path, and therefore the shtetl did not experience - especially in the first days of the war - the killings, pogroms and plunder experienced by the other shtetls near the front line. In addition to that, many refugees from shtetls in the surrounding area were concentrated in the shtetl. They had found sanctuary and refuge there from the persecution and the pressures in their home towns and villages. In these circumstances the Jews of the shtetl foolishly thought that what had happened in the other shtetls of the region 'won't happen to us, the 'Goys' here are better. Here there's no cause for violence or acts of hatred. Here it will be different.'

When German rule was established in the shtetl representatives of the Jews were summoned to the authorities. In the absence of an official representative Asher Khayat went to them. Via him the first decrees were brought to the Jews: a poll tax - a large sum, around 50-60,000 roubles. This had to be handed over to the German authorities within a few days. Asher Khayat tried to plead for more time to find the money, thereby making the punishment more severe: the money was to be handed over to the authorities within three days, otherwise twenty prominent Jews of the shtetl would be killed. They were gripped by panic, but the amount was collected and handed over to the German authorities at the appointed time.

Day after day new decrees poured down on the heads of the Jews of the shtetl. Every day there were fresh misfortunes. All the Jews, starting from the age of twelve, were obliged to wear identification marks on their clothes. First of all it was a white band with the word *Jude* and after that two yellow patches, one in front on the chest and the other behind in the middle of the back, so they could identify the Jew from afar and from every side and direction.

Attacks on Jews passing innocently along the road and burglary of Jewish homes became regular events, so much so that one did not pay any attention to them. The schools were closed to Jewish children. Trade ceased almost completely. Basic provisions were impossible to get. When you managed to get hold of something it was certainly only by means of simple barter - one item for another. Some things were scarce, in particular paraffin for lighting and salt for cooking.

In general Jews were forbidden to go out of the shtetl. They could only go out of the shtetl with a special permit which was difficult to obtain. Every Jew from the age of twelve was obliged to do public work for a number of days in the month. The work consisted of digging trenches outside the shtetl, repairing roads etc.

I looked older than my age and would go off for work instead of my mother or sister of blessed memory. With the inspector, who came from the local 'Goys' and who loved a tipple, we found roads that needed work done on them. In exchange for some drinks that we used to bring him he would turn a blind eye to our work.

We went off for work in a group, in columns, with spades on our shoulders for digging. We were forced to sing, in Russian, the song beginning with these words: 'Who is the war because of? The war is because of the Jews!' The Germans constantly rubbed our noses in the fact that the war had broken out 'because of the Jews'. One day the Jews were ordered to nominate representatives to represent them on a permanent basis in their dealings with the authorities. This is how Itzhok Goldberg was chosen as head of the Jewish community in the shtetl. Linked to him were officials and Jewish policemen who made sure orders from the authorities were carried out precisely and in detail.

The policemen would go around with clubs keeping order. Sometimes it even happened that a Jewish policeman hit his brother for refusing to carry out an order and so on. It has to be admitted that there were many who jumped at the role of policing because they were free to go in and out of the shtetl without a permit. They would also receive larger rations of food.

Occasionally, on all sorts of pretexts, the Germans would impose fines on the Jews and, using various ways and means, would also extort objects of value like silver, fur coats etc. On one occasion an order was issued to hand over to the Germans all the silver objects belonging to the Jews. So all the silver objects, like candlesticks, cups and such like that were in the Jewish homes and that had been handed down from generation to generation were handed over to the Germans in one go.

The winter of 1942 was extremely harsh. The Germans, who were also suffering many losses on the Russian front because of the extreme cold, decreed that the Jews should hand over to them all the fur coats in their possession. The order was carried out with the help of the Jewish policemen.

The situation became more and more harsh until it was unbearable. We hoped for change, for help, but did not know where it would come from. The Russians were far away. 'The second front' was not even on the horizon. Then eyes turned towards heaven... Only God would have mercy. Belief in God above gathered strength, and the people were more strict in observing the commandments, they visited the synagogue more often and prayers multiplied to God in heaven above that he would help them get through the difficult days somehow or other.

Foodstuff became more and more scarce. The stock of food that had been collected in every Jewish home became smaller until it disappeared. They would eat the meagre rations they received from the authorities. It seems to me that was 200 grams of bread per day per person.

The Ghetto

The boundary of the ghetto, for all the Jews, covered around half of the Jewish houses. Into it were packed all the Jews of the shtetl, including the refugees from outside who had gathered in the shtetl. Each liquidation of a ghetto in the surrounding area would bring new refugees to the shtetl, fleeing the slaughter in their shtetls and going anywhere where 'peace' still reigned. And so they also came to our shtetl. As a consequence the conditions in the ghetto and in every single house were extremely cramped. The ghetto was closed in by a high fence and hemmed in by barbed wire, with two gates, at the entrance and at the exit.

Inside the ghetto the situation deteriorated from day to day. Food rations became smaller, the congestion was dreadful. Infectious diseases like typhus etc. broke out, and it was a real miracle the people didn't die. Sick people went around like shadows. It seemed they were all waiting to die together. Going out of the ghetto with a permit became ever more difficult; only with the help of a bribe to the

guards on the gates was it possible sometimes to sneak out. Inside the fence the guards were Jews and outside the fence they were 'Goys'.

During the whole period of the ghetto there were in all five or six Germans in the shtetl. They were in charge of the authority in the shtetl. Under their command was a police force of 100 to 150 Ukrainians and White Russians, residents of the shtetl and the surrounding area. I remember that I did indeed hear the Jews whispering secretly and preparing for an uprising. They even began to collect weapons in secret, but for some reason it did not reach open confrontation with the authorities.

One after another rumours spread concerning slaughter of Jews being carried out by the Germans. In August 1942 rumours reached us about the killing of Jews in many nearby towns and shtetls. There was a widespread rumour that Hitler had ordered the liquidation of the Jews in the whole of Ukraine and White Russia by September 1942, and rumours in fact reached us concerning the slaughter of Jews in the surrounding areas. We heard about the liquidation of the Jews of Rovne, Sarny, Dombrovitze, Rokitne and other shtetls. They were therefore getting near us.

We guessed that following the murder of Jews in Dombrovitze it would be our turn, but for some reason we comforted ourselves that misfortune would leap over us. The Germans themselves reassured us, saying that the liquidation order applied only to the Jews of Ukraine and that because we were residents of White Russia no harm would befall us.

Two weeks had in fact passed since the liquidation of the Jews of Dombrovitze, and still we were alive... This meant – so we in the shtetl began to believe – that everything would pass by peacefully.

The Slaughter

In the middle of the month of Elul ³⁴⁵ in the year 5702 [1942], two weeks before the slaughter, a rumour spread in the shtetl that they were digging large pits outside the shtetl at the end of the Podvysoche road. We saw before us the Shoah approaching. These pits were for us. There was panic in the shtetl. The head of the community was sent to the authorities to clarify what it meant. In their diabolical deceitfulness they knew how to confuse and calm our turbulent hearts. 'The pits', they said, 'are being dug for military purposes...' Our spirits calmed down a little. People wanted to believe that that was indeed the case, but in our heart of hearts we knew the bitter end was approaching.

In our houses a small bundle was prepared for everyone. In it were food and clothes, necessities for the journey in case we managed to escape. Two days before the slaughter, with the constant rumours concerning the approaching slaughter, our family slept one night outside the ghetto at the house of a 'Goy' we knew. The next morning we returned home. We all felt that the end was nigh. Despite that we hoped that a miracle would happen... Many people handed over the valuables they had at home to 'Goy' acquaintances for safe keeping in order that they would return them when the time came. The New Year festival approached but we did not feel its approach. The days were awful³⁴⁶ enough without that.

And in fact two days before New Year, Wednesday, the 27th day of Elul 5702 [9 September 1942], came the fateful day. That night, on the Wednesday morning, we were woken up by the sound of unusual shots. Fear and panic gripped us. At the break of dawn we saw the unthinkable: the whole ghetto was surrounded by armed

³⁴⁵ here: late August

³⁴⁶ A reference to Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe), the period between the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement

policemen standing at a distance of about twenty metres from one another, making sure nobody sneaked off through the barbed wire fence.

The order was given for us all to assemble in the centre of the ghetto. The policemen carrying out the work were mostly from outside the shtetl. They burst into people's homes shooting to kill, killing men and young people in particular.

Our family, which had always been very careful not to be split up, found ourselves separated in the chaos. We lost sight of my father and my brother Feybl. It seems they were killed inside the ghetto by shots from the Ukrainian policemen. My mother, my sister, my younger brother and I linked arms and walked together to the square, the centre of the ghetto, where everybody was assembled on the order of the policemen. This was opposite the post office in the house of Dovid Shtoper.

It is impossible to describe the confusion among those gathered in this place. Wailing, women crying and shouting, children and old people joining in the terrible wailing. I sensed what was going to happen soon, but my heart turned to stone and I did not shed a tear. My mother cried and wailed terribly, like all the mothers who were terrified and crying.

The Germans passed through the crowd. Anyone who did not obey their order was killed on the spot. On their orders those who had been rounded up had to kneel in row after row. They were also forced to empty their pockets, take off their outer garments and pray to the Almighty. From there they separated the people into groups. Each group, accompanied by armed policemen, following the route of the previous one, in the direction of the Podvysoche road.

About half an hour passed since the first group left. Then the order was given to the second group to move. My family, myself among them, was in this group. There were several hundred people. The majority were old people, women and children; there were not many young men in the group. When we left the ghetto and came to the 'Goy' road I saw a spectacle that I shall never forget: anticipating our exit from the ghetto, the 'Goys' were standing in the doorways of their houses with sacks in their hands, ready to loot.

We walked in rows, carts travelling in front of us. It seemed this was in order to collect our clothes and any objects we had with us. As I found out later, those who were to die had to remove their clothes before going into the pits. In front of us, at the head of the column, went three armed Germans, and behind us came the Ukrainian policemen, armed with rifles. In all, those accompanying and supervising the death column amounted to about twenty to thirty people.

And so we wound our way along the Podvysoche road until suddenly confusion spread among the column. Shouts of 'Hurrah' were heard. Many people began running in all directions. I was among them. After some minutes of confusion and flight I found myself lying on the ground by the cowshed in a farmer's yard. I knew I must not linger. I got up and ran towards the river Horyn, a few hundred metres away from the yard where I had been lying. As I was fleeing I encountered several other Jews running in the same direction, with the policemen running after us and shooting at us.

We reached the river. I was very frightened because I was not a strong swimmer, and the river at the spot we had reached was deep, with turbulent whirlpools. But there was no time for doubts or thoughts, for the bullets from those pursuing us were whistling over our heads. I jumped into the river and began to swim.

Around me swirled panic and dread. All those who succeeded in their attempt to reach the banks of the river alive jumped in. Those who did not know how to swim also jumped in and drowned in the water, screaming and wailing. The policemen continued shooting into the river at those swimming. Many were hit and

drowned. Luck smiled on me and I swam across the river to the other side. I continued running towards the nearby forest, the policemen's bullets whistling over my head.

The policemen crossed the river in boats and continued shooting as they pursued us. We were a group of about twenty to twenty-five people, men, women and children. (By the way, apart from myself not one of them was from Vysotsk itself) We got further away, going deeper into the forest, heading for the villages in the vicinity, although without any knowledge of where or for what, except that we were hungry, barefoot, without clothes and wet and naturally looking for shelter.

On the way we split up into two groups, each going in a different direction: one in the direction of Stolin and the second, of which I was a part, in the direction of the village of Zhidin³⁴⁷. We walked all that day and night, hungry and suffering from the cold. The next day we sat down in the afternoon to rest round a bonfire which we lit in order to roast potatoes we had found in fields on the way and to dry our wet clothes.

We were sitting, tired and aching bitterly, when suddenly shouts of 'Stand up!' split the air. To our astonishment we were surrounded by policemen. I took to my heels and fled. A policeman from the gang pursued me shouting 'Stop!' and firing at me. I ran as long as I had the strength until I sensed that the policeman had stopped pursuing me, although he continued to shoot constantly until the shots could no longer be heard. I found myself alone in the middle of the forest, barefoot and without upper clothes. To this day it is not clear to me how the policemen discovered us in the depths of the forest. Probably one of the 'Goys' caught sight of us wandering in the forest and informed the police about us.

After the war I found out that from the whole of that group, amounting to about twelve people, only three children remained alive. Like me, they had managed to slink off and run away from the policemen.

Vysotsk in ruins

At the beginning of 1944 Vysotsk was occupied by the Soviet army. One Friday some months later we arrived there in a cart. It was a strange feeling coming into the shtetl. I was confronted with visions of terror and horror. I felt I would not be able to live there.

We came into the shtetl via the Podvysoche road. It was on this road that we established ourselves in a room we rented from a farmer we knew. The next day we went to visit the shtetl. We were appalled when we came into the Jewish streets. There was ruin and destruction everywhere. The houses were ruined and only skeletons of walls stood out here and there. Fragments of pages from prayer books, Chumashim³⁴⁸ and so on were still drifting about in dust and ashes.

The only street that had survived was the main street, running from the church to the bridges, which used to be known as the 'the market'. Most of the houses in this street were intact but missing doors and windows. That meant the houses were deserted; nobody was living in them. In contrast, the 'Goy' streets remained intact. The houses and sheds stood where they had always been, in one piece and renovated, with the same tenants as before.

My parents' home was intact. I went inside it and found a 'Goy' family there. I introduced myself as the son of the rightful owners of the house. I was received hospitably, although, it seemed to me, only for the sake of appearances.

³⁴⁷ Zhaden', a few km. east of Vysotsk

³⁴⁸ volumes of Chumash: first five books of Moses or Pentateuch

It was clear to me that I could not stay in the shtetl for very long. Every house, every wall, every object inspired terror in me. All the horror of the killing confronted me. I couldn't bear it. I had to leave and looked for a way of doing this, an aim, a purpose...

All my requests to enter Russia were met with outright rejection on the part of the Russian authorities.

The shtetl of Vysotsk, being so close to the front, was bombed and shelled constantly. It seemed that it was going to be necessary to evacuate it. In fact the Russians began to move the inhabitants out of the shtetl. I had no wish to join the group of evacuees and looked for a way of getting away by myself. I remembered that my parents had at one time handed over objects of value to a Goy family living near Vysotsk for safe keeping. I went to the family, but they didn't want to have anything to do with me.

It was my good fortune that the staff of a battalion operating in the neighbourhood was billeted in this house. The commander, a Jew from Moscow, looked after me. Following his advice, I joined the battalion as an apprentice. This is how I enlisted officially in the Soviet army as an apprentice soldier. The commander protected me and looked after me, making sure that I came to no harm. I went with the battalion wherever it went. I was not given any particular functions apart from frequent guard duties. We were a long way from the front that had been close to Vysotsk - about 8-9 km away. In the months of May and June 1944 the front suddenly moved forward. We came to the neighbourhood of Pinsk where I was bedridden with typhus and taken to a hospital near Plotnitze. After that I was struck down with a fever.

Vysotsk in 1946

I came to Vysotsk again. This was the third time after the Shoah. It was in March 1946. The reason for my return to Vysotsk this time was to sell my parents' house in order to provide myself with a little money for my onward journey. After a good deal of time dealing with the matter in various official institutions and law courts the house was handed over to me. I immediately sold it to the 'Goy' living in it.

At that time the shtetl was neglected and desolate. Of course there were few Jews there, but they were also intending to leave. At the time those present in the shtetl were: Moyshe Levin³⁴⁹, Itzhak Kaftan³⁵⁰, Brokhe Kortach, who happened to be visiting her husband (the officer billeted in the shtetl), Nisan Borovyk and in addition some other Jews who were not former residents of Vysotsk.

As I have said, the Jewish streets were in ruins. There were only remnants of houses protruding like memorial stones from among the ruins of dust and ashes as a reminder of what had been and was no more. Whereas the Goy streets remained intact; in their houses and sheds life continued as if nothing had happened.

I did not have the heart to go and visit my brothers at the end of the Podvysoche road [the mass grave]. To this day I regret that and it pains me. It was also a mortal danger then for Jews to return to Vysotsk- even though it was in Soviet

³⁴⁹ In *Висоцьк – із глибини віків до сьогодні* (Vysotsk - out of the depths of the centuries until today), published in 2005 to mark 1000 years since the founding of the village (the revised edition, published in 2009, includes Gitl Fialkov's account), Moyshe Levin (1905-1978), who had been secretary of the Jewish section of the pre-war underground Communist Party (and, before that, an active Zionist), appears as Movsha Shlemovych Levin. Following active service from 1941 to 1945 he returned to Vysotsk, becoming head of the social security department of Vysotsk region.

³⁵⁰ Isaak Senderovych Kaftan, as his name appears in the 2009 edition of the Vysotsk commemorative book, married a local girl*, remaining in Vysotsk until his death in 1996 (*Nisan Borovyk refers to this towards the end of the next chapter).

control. Gangs of ‘*Banderovtzy*’³⁵¹, who were carrying out operations against Soviet rule, were roaming in the neighbourhood. Sometimes they attacked people working for the Soviet authorities, killing Jews in particular. The ground was burning under their feet.

I waited desperately for the possibility to leave - for the longed-for shore, Eretz Israel.

Ze’ev Yoniel (Yakhnyuk)

Kiryat Shalom

³⁵¹ followers of Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)

In the Shoah and the struggle for life

The shtetl under Soviet rule

With the arrival of the Soviets in the shtetl at the end of 1939 private shops and businesses were abolished. Everything passed into the hands of the government. The shop-owners remained at their places of work as officials and workers employed by the authorities. New enterprises were also established. Among these was a sausage factory of which I was the manager. I had to prepare a written report about the situation and the management of the factory. This report was passed to some central economic office. In my capacity as manager of this enterprise a lot of meat for sausage production was under my control and under my inspection. I was able to make sure there was kosher meat for the Jewish population in the shtetl and this is what I did.

The school of course also passed into the hands of the new authorities. The previous teachers were removed and new teachers were appointed, male and female, of the sort that the new authorities had faith in from the point of view of their class origins, previous activities etc. So Khaykil Sheynman's daughter became a teacher, while Lipshe, my brother Yakhiel's daughter, was declared unfit for teaching because of her 'bourgeois' origin.

For us Jews the synagogue served as the sole public meeting place, not only for prayers but also for public activities and simply for conversation. The large synagogue had burned down some years earlier, and the synagogue of the Brezne Chassidim was the most popular meeting place for the Jews of the shtetl. There they would sort out business affecting the public, set up meetings concerning local matters and also simply argue - about the regime, about life, about everything, as usual.

Among Jews of the shtetl there were some, especially among the tradesmen, who supported and liked the new regime, while there were others who opposed it. The arguments in the synagogue became fiery. Khaykil Sheynman, one of the supporters of the new regime, became disappointed by it over time, because his hope for an improvement in his situation and for aliyah did not materialise.

And so life flowed slowly by until the war between the Soviets and the Germans broke out. When the mass retreat by the Soviets took place at the beginning of the war the shtetl was also abandoned. Many of the Jews, in particular those who had collaborated with the Soviets, joined the Soviets in their retreat from the shtetl and went with them wherever they went, in an eastward direction, inside Russia. So the two brothers, Dovid and Pessach Katz, went with them. Dovid returned from the journey and fell in the war. Avraml Berman, Yakov Kagan, Moyshl Levin and Nishke Borovyk and many others went. The women remained in the shtetl.

Among those who went with the Soviets were some who fell in the war and by the wayside. Others, after years of wandering and great suffering, arrived in the Land. This is how Pessach Katz, Avram Berman, Aaron Shabshi and Shmuel Borovyk arrived in the Land.

Under the yoke of Nazi oppression

After the Soviets had retreated the shtetl remained without anybody in charge. The whole area was already in the hands of the Germans. Stolin continued to be the centre of the province, where the provincial authority had already been established by the Germans. There were grounds for the assumption that was circulating that the

commander of the province was about to come to the shtetl in order to sort out matters on behalf of the authorities.

The priest Trozhevsky³⁵², a Ukrainian nationalist priest who had been banished to another region by the Poles because of his hostility to them and who now, with the arrival of the Germans, returned to the shtetl, the same priest, an anti-semitic and fanatical Ukrainian nationalist, became head of the local council (the *gmina*) under the protection of the Germans. From now on this priest became the head and most important person in the shtetl. The Jews also turned to him in all public matters affecting the Jewish community.

His first order affecting the Jews was the formation of a *Judenrat*³⁵³ to manage the affairs of the Jews and to represent them in their dealings with the authorities. We gathered in the study house for a meeting in order to choose the *Judenrat*. Ten to twelve people were proposed: Asher Khayat, Nakhman Perl, Gershon Nafkhan, Aaron Lakhmanchuk, Nakhman Vasserman, Yitzhok Goldberg, Nisan Borovyk, Yakov Raykhman, Hershl Rabin, Yakhiel Borovyk. My wife, Basil Shtoper, was not happy about my joining the *Judenrat*. She saw in it a tragedy, but there was no choice. I accepted the judgement of the public.

The first meeting of the *Judenrat* with the German provincial commander in the shtetl was in the *gmina* building. He spoke to us about the war and how the Jews were responsible for it breaking out etc. At the end of the meeting he ordered the Jews to hand over 100,000 roubles to the authorities (the Russian rouble was a currency that still circulated in the area).

For the Jews of Vysotsk this was too large a sum to collect. Through the efforts of the priest Trozhevsky the sum was reduced to 50,000 roubles.

We gathered in Asher Khayat's house to decide the amount of money each Jew was to contribute to this aim. It was very difficult to collect the sum. Jews contributed gold, and the priest gave them roubles in exchange.

The synagogues were closed. Jews were forbidden to meet together. The community council of the *Judenrat* moved to the house of Itzhok Goldberg.

A local Ukrainian police force was created, in charge of which was a German commissar who came from outside, together with some German policemen.

Even after the sum of money had been handed over to the authorities we were not left in peace. New decrees came, one after another. All the Jews were required to work, digging trenches etc. A special committee of the *Judenrat* dealt with that.

The cows belonging to the Jews were confiscated and handed over to the German officials and people working for the authority. Again the Jews were required to hand over some of their possessions, this time clothing - thirty suits. People on the committee like me were the first to hand over their clothes. After the clothes we had to hand over boots. Those who didn't have any had to give money or cereals instead. These were sent to Stolin, in exchange for which we received skins to make boots.

Any dispute anybody had with the authorities was used as a pretext for new decrees against the Jews. When a Ukrainian nationalist teacher, a hater and persecutor of Jews, who organised Ukrainian gangs against the Germans and who had been captured and imprisoned by the Germans, escaped from where he was held the Jews were held responsible for his escape and were required to bring him back within 24 hours, otherwise they could expect a lot of trouble. The Jews, having no choice, began their search for him in the surrounding area. They carried out a thorough search, reporting to the authorities what they had found out. He was captured and sent to Stolin.

³⁵² Veroslav Tkhorzhevsky

³⁵³ Council of Jews

On the eve of Pessach 1942 another decree came out requiring us to hand over to the authorities a large sum of money as well as grain. Itzhok Rykhotzky, the stove-builder, ran away from his work. All the Jews of the shtetl were accused and ordered to bring him back, or else they would be punished with the full force of German law. *Judenrat* members went away from the meeting anxious to look for him in the shtetl and in the surrounding area. When they failed to find him there was a danger that as a result all the Jews would be expelled from the shtetl. There was panic and alarm in the shtetl. Jews looked for secret hiding places for themselves and their possessions.

Nakhman Perl went away into the forest, to his 'Goy' friend. His young son, Itzko, who wanted to go with him, was caught by the police as he was wandering in a secret place, looking for money which had been hidden in case it was needed to buy food. As they continued their search the Ukrainian police found hidden treasure and money. Using threats the police demanded from the Jews that Nakhman Perl should appear before them. Dovid Shtoper (the younger son of Shleyme Yoshkes) went to the forest and found Nakhman Perl. Somehow or other he saved himself from a serious brawl with the Ukrainian police and met his punishment in prison. Through the efforts of the *Judenrat* Nakhman Perl was released from jail. Five suits were handed over in exchange.

The cows belonging to the Jews were confiscated for the officials and the German authorities. The cows were rounded up into one herd and put out to pasture in the meadows beyond the shtetl. Jews who had become herdsmen were responsible for looking after the cows and taking them out to pasture. A group of Jews, among them Velfil Vaks, Dovid Durchin, Feybl Gelman myself and others, became herdsmen for the Jews' cows that had been confiscated by the Germans. These cows provided milk and meat for the German people working for the authorities in the shtetl. We were happy when, after the main milking, we managed to squeeze a little milk from the udders of the cows to keep ourselves and our children alive, some of whom, particularly the older ones, were with us in the meadows.

Within the confines of the ghetto

The order to establish the Jewish ghetto came on the 20th July 1942. All the Jews were mobilized for the work of building the fence of the ghetto. The ghetto surrounded the inner Jewish streets. Barbed wire fences were erected along the whole of the market, one side of which, facing the Jewish streets, was included in the ghetto and the second side of which, facing the 'Goy' streets, was outside it. The ghetto continued as far as the house of the rov Abelson, from there turned right through the narrow mud alley (where Vinnik, Pinkhas and Isroel Shtoper lived) to Pilsudsky Street (the street where Reb Ichie Shabshi and Sender Kaftan lived) and from there as far as the house of the Khover family.

All the Jews of the shtetl were concentrated in the ghetto, plus Jews from villages in the surrounding area. Jews from neighbouring shtetls like Stolin and Horodok, where the situation was even more difficult than in Vysotsk, also congregated in our shtetl. The conditions in the shtetl and in every house within it were extremely cramped. Going in and out of the ghetto was strictly forbidden, except for those with special permits for work in the service of the Germans (taking the cows to pasture, digging ditches etc).

Rumours of horrors began to reach us from the nearby shtetls. They told about killings and mass slaughter etc. We could not believe it. A week before the mass slaughter in Vysotsk a refugee arrived, a young man from Sarny. He told us about the slaughter there. We could not believe it. Another Jew, a refugee, who

happened to be in the ghetto, told us that he had passed through towns and shtetls and had not met any Jews. There was fear and great consternation.

We sent a Goy on a reconnaissance mission to Rovne to find out about the Jews there and in the surrounding areas. He returned with terrible news: the Jews of Rovne had been slaughtered. We didn't believe it. How could such a thing be, we said to ourselves and to our neighbours. More refugees were absorbed into the shtetl. They also told us about the killings in the towns and in the shtetls. And we did not believe them. We could not and did not want to believe them.

The German authorities began to collect ornaments and jewellery from the Jews. Decree after decree rained down. To begin with they demanded candlesticks, samovars, forks, spoons. After that silver and gold objects. Two days before the slaughter they walked into the Jewish homes and demanded silver, gold, fur coats etc. They themselves would search and rifle through. If they didn't find anything they threatened people with death. The *Judenrat* itself was forced, by means of intimidation and punishments, to take part in these searches, coaxing the Jews to give them everything they had.

The last order from the Germans was to hand in a sum of gold. The heads of the community got together in the house of Asher Khayat for a consultation as to how to collect the gold. Present at this meeting were: Asher Khayat, the rov Abelson, Sander Kaftan, Aaron Khaznchuk and others. At this meeting a 'ban' was imposed on any Jew in the shtetl who did not hand over his possessions in accordance with the Germans' order. The trouble was there were Jews who, even if they had wanted to, were unable to hand over their possessions because they were hidden in places it was impossible to get to under current conditions. There were possessions hidden in the field, under trees outside the shtetl etc. For example my silver and gold vessels were hidden in the tannery building belonging to the Bigon family, in a covered hole on top of which stood barrels from the tannery which was by then under Germans ownership. There was no way I could get there.

Living under the threat of a 'ban' was oppressive. They blew the shofars³⁵⁴, lit candles and ordered all the Jews under oath to hand over all their possessions. Those who were present wept bitterly. After that they collected about one kilogram of gold which was handed over to the Germans.

The last day

On the last day before the slaughter I was with the cows in the pasture-land beyond the shtetl, as was my wont. With me was my son, Natanel, aged fifteen. In the morning when he got up my son expressed the wish to visit our home in the shtetl. He was missing his mother and his sisters. I could not stop him, and he went. After a little while I followed him. Aaron Sheynman, who was with us in the pasture-land, was left to guard the cows. On the way I already heard that Gitl Lykhtnfeld had been killed during the night. She had gone out of the ghetto during the night and had hidden with a 'Goy' neighbour. This was reported to the German authorities, and she was immediately shot.



Natnael Borovyk and Asher Sheynbeyn

I came to the shtetl and I knew immediately that the 'slaughterers' had in fact already arrived in the shtetl. From Yosl Shlyapek, the only barber in the shtetl, who

³⁵⁴ Shofar: ram's horn

used to shave and cut the hair of the Germans and thus overheard their conversations, I already knew that pits had been prepared in Podvysoche. In order to calm him down the Germans told him that the pits had been dug for military purposes. Also from 'Goy' neighbours it became known that these were in fact the pits - two large pits, each one measuring fifty metres in length.

I sensed what was coming. My six-year-old daughter was playing at the back of the house, singing and shouting. I stood at the side and cried. I touched her and embraced her, and she also started to cry. I went inside my house, not saying what I had heard on the way. My son was not at home at the time. Obeying the instruction of the

community (the *Judenrat*), he had gone out to do some work demanded by the Germans. I sensed what type of 'work' that meant. I almost fainted. After nearly an hour my son returned. He had slunk off from his work and come home. We ate some of the soup that my wife Basil had prepared for us and got ready to go back to my work in the pasture-land. I begged my son to accompany me, I implored him, but he said immediately that he wanted to stay another night with his mother and his sisters. I was forced to return to my work.

I returned to the pasture-land, to the cows. When evening came I lay down to sleep. My friend Aaron Sheynman also dozed. His wife and his son had also refused to join him, remaining in the ghetto in the shtetl. I woke up to the sound of the noise and rattle of motors. My heart foresaw evil. I saw and heard the motors as they drove near to the bridges over the rivers at the entrance to the shtetl. The lights were turned off. The motors approached. One of them was advancing into the shtetl.

We ran to the rivers near the shtetl. Dead silence reigned. We did not hear a voice from the shtetl. This was at ten o'clock in the evening. We met Vove Shtoper, Dovid Durchin and Feybil Gelman's son. I also expected to meet my son, but he wasn't there. They said there was fear and dread in the shtetl. Yosl Shlyapek, who was used to coming and going among the Germans, had been shot and killed.

The one motor that had arrived in the shtetl reached the post office, (opposite Asher Khayat's house). One of the 'Goys' who came out of it calmed them down, saying nothing would happen. Dovid Shtoper (Shleyme's son), who sensed the danger, forced a breach in the barbed wire fence. That night fifty people managed to get out of the ghetto through the breach.

There passed a night of dread. When it was morning we heard the sounds of shots from the shtetl. We felt the most terrible fear. We were shocked and dejected. We knew that now our turn had come. We left the cows and turned to go to the forest on the way to the village of Rechitze.

The Slaughter

After some time we met Beril Bigon, who had been in the shtetl on the day of the slaughter and was among those taken to slaughter. He told us that first of all they ordered the Jews to bring their money and their gold. Those who still owned anything brought what they had. In accordance with the order the Jews gathered in one place. They were arranged in rows and separated into three groups, 500 people in each group, 1500 people in all.

In the first row were Yakhriel Borovyk with his three daughters and Leyb Durchin. A few armed Germans, about 10 in number, marched at the sides of the column. The rest of those accompanying them were 'Goys', Ukrainian policemen.

While this dejected procession was moving along the Podvysoche road a roaring sound was heard coming from the column of those going to their death: hurrah, hurrah. The shout went through the whole column. A mass flight began.

The policemen accompanying them took fright and scattered into the yards of the houses at the side of the street. Some of the Jews in the column continued running away towards the Horyn and then jumped into the river. Some remained where they were. The policemen regrouped and got the chaos under control. Beril Bigon was among those who took flight and jumped into the water, into the Horyn. The murderers chased those who were running away, shooting at them as they swam in the river. Many drowned, few were saved.

One of the 'Goys' present at the time of the slaughter at the side of the pits told us that when the column arrived near the pits they were all ordered to strip naked. Their entreaties, supplications and weeping were of no avail. Everyone, men and women, stripped naked and were pushed into the pits, row after row. Each row was made to kneel inside the pits, along the whole of its length. And so they shot them facing the side of the pit. After them a second row, the same terrible spectacle was repeated, until they were all gathered in the pit, killed and slaughtered, one on top of another in crowded rows. Of those saved from drowning in the river 'Goy' witnesses have told how:

a father and his little son managed to swim across the river. On the other side a bullet hit the father, killing him. His little son remained lying beside him crying, begging his father to give him something to eat. The Germans heard him crying and killed him on the spot;

a little girl was wandering in bushes on the other side of the river. The Germans discovered her and killed her;

Leybush Lieberman's daughter was saved, hiding in the village of Ozery. She wandered around in the village. As nobody came to her rescue she went back to the shtetl, where the Germans killed her;

Leybush's son, Hershil Lieberman, together with other Jews, hid on the other side of the bridge. With nowhere to escape they went back to the shtetl and were killed;

other Jews, who did not obey the order to go out and hid in their houses, were killed in their homes by the enemies;

Nisn, son of Borukh Vaks, who openly refused to leave his home, was shot dead on the spot;

Yoyne Borovyk, my father, came out of his place of hiding some days after the slaughter, to gather some shoots in the yard to make a fire. He was captured and shot on the spot;

Feybl Gelman's son hid in the attic of the priest, his neighbour. Kopchik the doctor, son-in-law of the priest, discovered him and handed him over to the murderers who killed him on the spot.

Who can count and describe the various strange ways the murderers chose to put the Jews to death?

Without shelter

We gathered in the forest of Khochyn. We were a group of 14-15 Jews. Among us were Dovid Beygl, Bertzio Lykhtnfeld, Aaron Sheynman, Dovid Shtoper, Dovid Durchin and others. A 'Goy', a communist, bumped into us on our way. He joined our group and helped us. We handed him some of our money, in exchange for which he provided us with food, particularly bread and potatoes. We all lived as a collective and were very prudent.

Winter came and with it the cold and the frost. The group began to break up. Each one went his own way, looking for shelter and refuge. I was ill, I turned to Prasadovke [Prasodivka] to a 'Goy' of my acquaintance. He would not take me in. I

turned to another acquaintance who was not at home. His wife greeted me warmly, but in fear. She hid me in the attic until her husband came. The 'Goy' was indeed pleased that I had come but after some days he began to be afraid of revenge by the Germans who had issued an edict, warning that anyone found harbouring a Jew would be killed and his possessions confiscated. So I was ordered to go away at once.

I was all alone, sad and hungry. I found mushrooms which I ate. After a short time I felt my strength wasting away. I lay down under a tree waiting for death to take me and save me. 'Goy' shepherds found me. They recognised me and gave me a piece of bread to revive me. I could not lift my arm to put the bread in my mouth. They put it into my coat pockets. I was thirsty, I wanted a drop of water, but there wasn't any. I lay helplessly, waiting for death to come.

While I was lying there I heard from afar a voice calling 'Nisu, Nisu' (Nisn, Nisn). It was the same 'Goy' who had sent me away from his house in fear of revenge and now he was bringing me a little soup in a small pot and a piece of bread. While he was doing this he told me that Dovid Shtoper, his wife and son were wandering in the forest looking for me. We were happy to meet. Dovid, his wife and their children spent the night at 'Goys', wandering around in the forest during the day.

I continued to go around in circles, wandering in the forest from place to place until a certain 'Goy', an acquaintance from Prasadovke, heard about me. He brought me food and afterwards also took me into his home. I was dirty and covered with scabs. He fed and watered me. I had a bath and learned that partisans would stay in his house, which was by the side of the road. Germans also frequented his house.

It was dangerous to stay at his place, but not having any choice I stayed with him for some weeks. At night I would rest on the stove and during the day I would hide in the attic. One night the 'Goy's' little son woke me in a fearful whisper: 'Nisn, get up and run away, otherwise you will be caught and die.'

I heard people making a lot of noise. These partisans were *Bulbovtzy*³⁵⁵ who had been fighting both the Germans and the Soviets. I got up and sneaked away from the house towards the forest. Dovid Shtoper, his family and their relatives had built themselves a sort of fortified cave in the forest. When I escaped from the *Bulbovtzy* I came to this bunker. After some time I moved in order to live alone in a bunker I had dug nearby. Dovid Shtoper knew that other 'Goys' were plotting to kill him so he and his family left for another forest where communist partisans were active.

A daughter was born in one of the bunkers. I decided to go to Vysotsk to obtain nappies and clothes for the new-born baby. I came to Podvysoche, to Goys whom I knew. When they saw me they were pleased and frightened at the same time. I asked them for clothes for the baby and collected a full sack of clothes and food. I took them to the bunker, and there was great joy.

The spring of 1943 came, the snow melted. We endeavoured to move to other forests, where larger forces of partisans were operating. When the snow thawed the bunkers filled up with water. We worked hard to remove the water from the holes. As quickly as we took water out of the holes more appeared. I was ill from cold, hunger and excessive physical effort.

I decided to leave the bunker and go to a 'Goy' I knew nearby, to rest and recover a little. I came to the house of a 'Goy' called Kiril, whose son was close to the communist partisans but who was also on friendly terms with the *Bulbovtzy*. One night, as was my custom, I was lying down on top of the stove when suddenly I woke up to the sound of loud knocking. My host calmed me down saying 'Don't be afraid, these are our partisans, the communists'. But something told me that these were different. They were in fact *Bulbovtzy*. Before the light was turned on I slipped off the stove and hid behind a chest of clothes. They had come in to look for communists

³⁵⁵ Ukrainian People's Revolutionary Army followers of Taras Bulba-Borovetz (1908-1981)

and Germans. I knew that if they caught me they would kill me on the spot. I heard them place a machine gun by the door, at the same time imposing a curfew on the village. They then began their search.

Straw was brought into the house. The *Bulbovtzy* spread themselves out to sleep. In my heart I was fainting with fear of the approaching bitter end. My 'Goy' host and his boy were running around like madmen, looking for a way to save me. Suddenly Mishke, my host's son, turns to the armed *Bulbovtzy* guard and says to him: 'You must want to sleep. Give me the gun and I'll keep guard for you and wake you up in due course.' The guard agreed to the request and lay down to sleep. Mishke came up to me, silently urging me to get up and escape. I got up, stepping carefully among the sleeping *Bulbovtzy*, and sneaked out.

Under the protection of partisans

I went in the direction of the villages and forests where Soviet partisans held sway. This is how I got to Khochyn and Zhidin. In Khochyn I met Chaim Khaznchuk (the son of Aaron Yoynes). Chaim was making clothes for the 'Goys'. I joined him for work and company. He would cut, and I learned to sew. We made clothes for the partisans. In exchange we received food – bread and meat. Except that the partisans would come and go, and the villages were also sometimes surrounded by Germans.

Once while we were sitting and working a 'Goy' burst in in panic, shouting 'Germans are in the village!' I picked up my few chattels and ran away into the forest. I forgot my little Siddur³⁵⁶. In the forest I come to a battle raging between the partisans and the Germans. The village of Khochyn had been set alight by the Germans. I lay in the forest under a tree, bewailing the bitterness of my fate.

The next morning, once the fighting had abated, I returned to the village to look for my Siddur. And indeed while I was wandering about I found it lying on a side path, in its cover. It seemed that one of the bandits had taken it with him. When he realised it was of no importance to him he threw it aside on to the path.

I lived and worked together with Chaim Khaznchuk. In exchange for making clothes we received food. Once we did work for a 'Goy' in exchange for which we received bread, milk and honey. But Chaim was a sick man. His legs were swollen and wounded. On our way back from working at the 'Goy's' place heavy rain was falling. We trod in rain and mud. Chaim's condition got worse and worse. When we reached the place in the forest where we lived his legs had swollen so much that he could not walk any further. I got hold of some ointment, handmade by the Goys, with which I rubbed his legs. The result was that all the skin fell off his legs.

Among the partisans there was a famous Jewish doctor, Dr Erlykh. His conclusion was that if conditions had been suitable he would have had to amputate his legs in order to save him. Otherwise he would not survive more than 24 hours. And in fact after a few hours he breathed his last breath and died. During the whole of the night prior to his death he talked about his father. His final words were: 'Nisn, I bless you, stay alive and tell them about me ...' He called 'Mother' and died.

We got hold of talises³⁵⁷, of which the 'Goys' had quite a few, having stolen them from the Jews. We wrapped the dead man in them and loaded him on to a cart that we got hold of from a Goy, burying him in the forest some way from our bunker.

Without Chaim I remained without a source of food. I wandered from place to place, skeletal, exhausted and hungry. Once I went into the house of a 'Goy' near the village of Udrytsk. In response to my request his sons said they did not have anything to give me apart from some potatoes in their skins which they had prepared

³⁵⁶ prayer book

³⁵⁷ prayer mantles

for the pigs. On the eve of Pessach we got hold of a little spelt flour which, with water added, we used to bake a kind of matzot³⁵⁸. This served as our Pessach food.

Once, it was the beginning of 1944, I entreated a 'Goy' to accompany me to Vysotsk. I wanted to find something as a reminder of my children. He agreed. We came to the shtetl. The church stood untouched. The majority of the houses along the long market were in ruins. My house still stood, undamaged. Likewise the house of Hershl Makhls. Isroel Nakhman's house was only partly destroyed. The houses of Nisn Vaks and Yehuda Shtoper were intact. The Germans were no longer in the *shtetl*, and the Red Army already held sway in the vicinity.

Liberated Vysotsk

When Vysotsk was liberated by the Red Army we, a group of Jews, returned to the shtetl. I lived alone in a house in Podvysoche street. I became a tinsmith. From pieces of tin I made all kinds of vessels, in exchange for which I received food to keep myself alive: bread, potatoes, butter etc. A bakery was established in the shtetl by the Soviets. This is where we got our bread. When Itzl Kaftan arrived in the shtetl I joined him in tailoring work. We kept body and soul alive from the wages we received from the 'Goys'.

The shtetl was devoid of Jews. The majority of the Jewish homes were in ruins. The houses which had not been damaged had been improved and repaired and turned into offices of the Soviet authority which had been re-established in the shtetl.

I began to receive a great many letters from Vysotsk people scattered in the surrounding area and in Russia. In all of the letters I was asked to reply to them with news regarding relatives and acquaintances in the shtetl. I replied to all of them based on what I knew and on the information I gathered from the 'Goys'.

I walked in the ruined streets and collected fragments of books, parchments, little personal keepsakes etc. Once I met a shiktze³⁵⁹ wearing a blouse made from the material of talises. I became angry, tore the blouse off her and took it. She apologised, saying she had received the material from a partisan.

In the shtetl I heard from 'Goys' about the bitter end of the Jews who had escaped the slaughter. The Khover family and Dovid Shtoper (son of Yehuda Shtoper) had hidden throughout the winter in the German colony near the shtetl. They were exposed by 'shkotzim'³⁶⁰ and reported to the German murderers. They were captured and dragged to the shtetl along the route to the cemetery. Going past their house Motl Khover refused to go any further. He was shot and killed on the spot. They captured Velfl Vaks in the forest and dragged him to the shtetl together with gypsies. There they pushed him into the pit together with the gypsies and shot them.

The Soviets began to bring order back to the shtetl. They established offices for the authority etc. On one occasion I was called to the commandant of the shtetl. When I went to him and he discovered that I was the only Jewish son of the shtetl who had come back he asked me to cooperate with them in order to exact revenge on the Germans. I replied that I wanted to go to my sister in Eretz Israel. In the end I acceded to his request and gathered information for him about the killers and those who had collaborated with the Germans. I identified many shkotzim who, according to my information, had killed Jews. They were killed by the Soviets on the basis of my evidence. Once I was called to give evidence in front of a special committee that was collecting evidence and material about the killing etc. I was told that on the

³⁵⁸ unleavened bread

³⁵⁹ Gentile woman

³⁶⁰ Gentiles

initiative of this committee they were opening the burial pits, taking photographs and filming etc. I was called to come to the open graves, but they did not let me come near the place without a special permit. But the same sentry who would not let me approach by the usual route advised me how, despite that, I could get to the pits via a side road.

I arrived there. A terrible spectacle was revealed in front of me: the pits were open and 'Goys' were dragging out body after body. Seven bodies were already out. Dressed in their clothes, these were the bodies of those who had been thrown into the pits after the main slaughter. I saw a woman covering her face in her hands, I saw a baby. There was a terrible stench. I was shocked and in turmoil. My knees gave way and I fainted. Russian nurses helped me. With an aching heart I shouted: 'Why did you open the graves?'

I had a meeting with people from the committee and protested to them about the desecration of the graves. My protest was in fact effective, and the action was stopped. After that I heard that the local priest had arranged a burial service by the side of the open pits. Again I protested to the authorities. The priest calmed me down, saying that it was only done for the sake of filming. These pits were unfenced. In response to my appeal the area of the slaughter was fenced. But later on the fences were destroyed, and the graves again remained unprotected.

I saw that there was nothing for me to do and I began to think about getting out. Several Jews had gathered including Nishke Borovyk and Moyshe Levin. The husband of Brokhe Kortach arrived. Nishke knew him. Brokhe's husband had been appointed by the army to clear up the areas that had been mined. I met him and we became friends. We spoke about Brokhe who had written to me from Leningrad, asking about her relatives and about her shtetl and about the address of her sister in Ramat HaKovesh. He began to ask me questions about his wife and about her connections with Eretz Israel etc. Once he told me that Brokhe was on the point of coming to him in the shtetl. And she did in fact come. We met with her in Podvysoche, in a house full of Soviet officers. She fell on our necks, weeping bitterly. For hours we sat talking and crying. She told us that it was thanks to her mother-in-law, who kept her and looked after her throughout the whole of the siege of Leningrad, that she had remained alive. The child, their child, had died.

Brokhe travelled to Rovne, accompanied by two soldiers, and brought back food for us. She visited the side of the burial pits. In her parents' house she searched for something to remember them by but didn't find anything. The little Siddur in my possession was from her father, the last thing remaining from her destroyed home.

Brokhe returned to Leningrad. Her husband, as an officer, moved his office to Dombrovitz. He would often visit me. We talked a lot about Judaism, Zionism, Eretz Israel etc. Finally he admitted to me that he was a Jew and came from a noble family. His father had fallen into bad ways, drinking himself to death. He himself had studied in a military school. When he graduated from the school the war broke out.

He had met Brokhe in a little shtetl near Vilne. She was working there as a teacher when the Russo-German war broke out. They got married. When the Soviets retreated she went to Leningrad, the city of his birth.

Itzl Kaftan and I remained the only Jews in the shtetl. We worked and hired ourselves out for our upkeep. When the rumour reached us that there was permission to leave for Poland Itzl went off to Rovne in order to register exit permits for the two of us. We began to collect money and get ready to leave. Meanwhile Itzl had met a shiktze. He became attached to her and didn't want to leave her. All my pleas and appeals to him to take her with him when he left came to nothing³⁶¹.

³⁶¹ See note 350 on p. 98

After Passover 1946 I left Vysotsk via Sarny. On the way I met other Jews. We continued our journey to Poland together. We got there in May 1946.

From Poland my 'escape' route took me via camps with masses of Jews emigrating to the Land. I arrived in Czechoslovakia. And from Czechoslovakia to Austria and from Austria to Germany, where I stayed for two years and four months.

In December 1948 I arrived in the Land.

Nisan Borovyk

Haifa

History of the Vysotsk Ghetto

Dedicated to my children Ronit and Gil, may their candle shine
and in memory of my parents Aaron and Gitl
and my brother Yehuda of blessed memory

In spite of my profound distress and emotional strain I regard it as a duty to myself to record in writing the history of the Vysotsk ghetto. Few of us survived. As one of the few who did survive I have a duty to do this in memory of all the victims of our shtetl, in memory of my friends who were killed and in memory of my parents, to whom I also owe an additional debt for the care they took to bring me up in a Jewish–Zionist path, even though my education in a Hebrew school was only possible for them through great financial sacrifice. I have to do this also for my children, so that they should know and remember what the new Amalek³⁶² did.

The Vysotsk Ghetto and its liquidation

Vysotsk, the little shtetl where I was born, lived its own ‘usual’ life within the barbed wire fence of the ghetto. The complacency of the Jews of the shtetl was such that all the rumours that spread regarding the liquidation of the Jews in the towns and shtetls, far away and nearby, were met with deaf ears and disbelief. Even the streams of refugees from the surrounding area, and in particular from David-Horodok, did not undermine this complacency. The residents of the shtetl explained away any news regarding pogroms against Jews and liquidation of shtetls and whole towns with a thousand different excuses. The blame was placed in particular on the local ‘Goys’ of each town and shtetl. The ‘Goys’ of Vysotsk were ‘good Goys’ in the eyes of the people of our shtetl. People had confidence in them, certain that they would not allow such a thing in our shtetl. It is true they put up with great suffering, indeed imprisonment within the ghetto, life deprived of everything, the oppressive work, the constant ‘contributions’ in money and the equivalent of money. They did indeed suffer a great deal from all these, but with all that there was great hope, a hope bound in the certainty that despite everything they would remain alive. We should remember that the rumours concerning mass murder of all the Jews had not reached our shtetl at all. This innocent community, like other communities in Poland, was misled by false promises and lies.

I was a young lad in the best years of my life. In spite of the poor knowledge of the electricity trade I possessed at the time I worked as an electrician in the shtetl. In this capacity I had the right to go out freely from the ghetto. I came into close contact both with the ‘Goys’ and with the Germans, in whose apartments I did repairs, or repaired the electrical installations. One day as I was walking along the streets of the shtetl, carrying on my shoulders a special contraption to climb electrical poles, a young ‘Sheygetz’³⁶³ came up to me and began chatting with me. During the conversation he became very interested as to whether there was a battery charger in the power station and whether in principle I would agree to charge batteries for him in exchange for the appropriate payment. He introduced himself as a resident of the village of Khochyn, which was near Vysotsk, saying that he needed the batteries to operate a radio set. I agreed to his proposal and began to charge batteries for him. In exchange for this I received food and even monetary payment from him. It seemed this ‘Sheygetz’ liked me and he explained to me who he was. He was one of the residents of the farm (‘khutor’) near the village of Khochyn, serving as a go-between

³⁶² the giant Amalek was an enemy of the Hebrews (Gen. 36, 12-16)

³⁶³ Gentile man

between the Russian partisans in the surrounding area and the Soviet army soldiers roaming in the forests who, through his efforts, were brought to the partisans. He needed the batteries to operate the station for transmission and reception. So fate brought me into contact with the man who saved twelve of us.

One day this 'sheygets' came to me, very agitated and nervous, and informed me in prosaic simplicity that the day after tomorrow they would 'liquidate' the Vysotsk ghetto, following the ghettos in the other towns and shtetls which had already been liquidated. He did not in fact stun me very much with this piece of news since in my heart I felt the bitter end coming, but the very words 'the day after tomorrow' had their effect. The essence of the proposal he made me was simple: to gather young healthy men, escape from the ghetto and come to him, and he would bring us into contact with the partisans who were in need of young people.

I was in great turmoil. This proposal meant saving my own life and that of some of my friends. Could I accept this offer? I was disturbed by many considerations. In the end responsibility towards the community in general prevailed over private considerations; apprehension for the community and for my family was stronger than the temptation to secure my own life, because if I were to go missing the community first and foremost my whole family would pay for it with their possessions or their lives. The situation was critical. I did not reveal the matter to anyone except my parents, even though I warned my close family about the approaching disaster.

We made plans, did various things, prepared identities with Christian names. But none of this saved us from the bitter fate. In our family it was decided that in the evening my mother and my younger brother would go out of the ghetto and hide with a 'Goy' friend for the night, while we, the men – Father and I – would go out in the evening to the Jewish herdsman, who were looking after the German herds of cattle near the shtetl. If nothing happened in the morning all of us would return to the ghetto the next day. But if in fact it did happen I would ensure Mother and my brother were brought there with the help of the young sheygetz from Khochyn.

My uncle Bertzio did the same thing. His wife and his children were sent out of the ghetto to the mechanic who worked in his flour mill. He himself came to the meadows where the cows were pasturing.

We found ourselves about two kilometres from the shtetl and were able to get a good view of the bridges that stood at the entrance road to the shtetl. No special movement could be seen. Some of us dozed off while the others stood guard. It was a peaceful and normal evening. Towards midnight we heard a single shot. We stood on the alert in tense anticipation, but in the absence of any further shots we imagined this was only a random shot of no significance. As became clear later, the shot was aimed at my mother, killing her on the spot.

This is what happened: the daughter of our 'Goy' friend, with whom my mother had hidden, brought a Ukrainian policeman to the place where the Jewess was hiding. The policeman took my mother, my brother and my mother's cousin, who was accompanying them, and brought them to the door of the German commander of the ghetto to receive instructions. The commander became angry, shouted and ordered the policeman in German to put her in a cell. But the policeman didn't understand German, aimed the rifle at my mother and killed her on the spot. This was the single shot. Whereupon the German commander exploded, shrieking at the policeman for what he had done, because this was likely to reveal their satanic plots for the next day. Our relative and my little brother were locked up in a cell. This event was the cause of the liquidation of the Vysotsk ghetto being delayed by an additional day.

The dawn was bright. Those of us in the pasture-land knew nothing of what had happened. When it was morning my father and my uncle Bertzio were called. They did not reveal to me what had happened. At noon I also knew about my mother having been murdered. I decided to make use of my acquaintance with the Germans in order to obtain my mother's body and bring her back for a Jewish burial. The Nazi commander's answer to my request was a decisive rejection. He said that his grandfather had been killed in the war and he didn't know where he was buried. An order was given to release my brother and our relative from the cell. We learned details from them about what had happened. So my mother was not brought back for a Jewish burial. What we knew was that she was buried somewhere by the bank of the river Horyn near the bathing beach.

Grief-stricken, exhausted, broken and crushed by the day's events we gathered in our house for Mincha³⁶⁴ and to say Kaddish³⁶⁵, as had been the custom in our community since time immemorial. My brother, who had been released from the cell, came home ill with dysentery and with a temperature. We had to call out a doctor to help him. Saying Kaddish for my mother and calling a doctor for my brother did not happen, for exactly at that moment horrors began to rain down non-stop on that serene Jewish community.

From the direction of the bridges motor vehicles with Germans began arriving in the shtetl, and at dusk the ghetto was surrounded by Ukrainian and German policemen. There was no possibility of escaping from it.

I clearly remember one young Jewish woman shouting: 'The Germans are coming!' This was right in the middle of the Mincha prayer. I remember how in an instant the house emptied of the people who had been praying in it. Only my father, my sick brother and I remained. I was dressed in the same clothes I had been wearing when I fled the previous day. This was the first time in my life that I wore high boots. I tried to persuade my father to escape, but his spirit was so broken and the disaster had so stunned him that on no account would he budge from the house. He committed his fate with that of the whole community.

I shall never forget the scene when my father came into the kitchen, took out from a drawer a long kitchen knife, stuck it into my right boot and said to me: 'Escape and avenge'. This scene stunned me completely. Every minute was crucial. Before I had decided on my next move my father grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, opened the door and pushed me out: 'Escape, look after yourself.'

I was thrown into the deserted ghetto street, in which only a few figures were to be seen slipping away in the dark, which had already settled. I then came to the decision to escape to the area of pasture-land where we had been yesterday. Sentries stood around the barbed wire fence of the ghetto, but I had nothing to lose. I came to the yard of my grandmother's house, within the grounds of which the fence of the ghetto passed. The mill and the large house were outside the bounds of the ghetto whilst the small cottage, where my grandmother and my uncle Bertzio lived, was close to the cemetery fence and within the ghetto. I was so confused by the turmoil and the fear into which I had been thrown that I did not even go into my grandmother and uncle's house.

I came to the fence, wanting to cross over to the other side. A Ukrainian sentry who recognised me stood erect in front of me. He called 'Run! Escape! Tell Bertzio he should escape too!' These were the words of a guard, a servant of the Germans, in whom there remained a human soul. My feelings were confused. I handed myself over into the palm of destiny. 'Thank you! Thank you!' I mumbled to the guard. 'Bertzio isn't at home any longer.' In that I was indeed correct: Bertzio

³⁶⁴ afternoon prayer

³⁶⁵ prayer for the dead

was not at home, but his wife and children, seeing that nothing had happened that day, had gone home towards the evening. Neither I nor Bertzio knew that and were sure they had stayed in their place of hiding.

So I slipped away through the barbed wire fence, going in the direction of the mill and from there downwards beyond the stream, which I crossed without taking my boots off. It was only after some time, when it was of course already too late, that my natural senses returned to me and I could think with composure about where I would go and what I would do.

I came to the pasture where I met a number of Jews, some of whom were working with the cows and some of whom had come there in order to escape. We stayed there until after midnight. There was even an argument as to whether we should abandon the cows and run away or whether, if nothing happened, the community was likely to suffer if the herdsmen had abandoned the cows. Towards morning a number of other people arrived and told us about what had been happening. Then it was decided to run away from there, come what may.

We moved to the nearest forest via the houses and the fields on the other side of the river. It was the Rechitza forest. We were there when dawn broke. We decided to remain there for the day, without knowing what we would do from then on. There were twelve of us: Nisan Borovyk, Feybl Pivovuz, Bertzio Lykhtnfeld, Dovid Beygl, Ze'ev (Veve) Shtoper, Natanel (Saniu) Lopata son of Meir the carpenter, Sender Gelman son of Feybl, Shleyne (Syuma) Goldshteyn son of Yenkl, Aaron Sheynman, Chaim Khaznchuk, Dovid Durshteyn (the name of the twelfth I have forgotten).

Silence reigned until the early afternoon hours. We were even hoping we could go back. Towards midday we heard the first shots of a machine gun. This was the sign. Each person's silent look at his neighbour expressed more than would have been possible to express in words. Each of us knew what was happening at that moment to our children, to our families and to all our loved ones. People did not cry. At that moment it seemed they felt what I was feeling.

And I, what was I feeling? I had no feelings, I did not cry and did not say anything. My heart turned to stone. In my soul the fire of revenge burned without ceasing. Then I reached the decision: only by joining the partisans would I be able to get revenge. Shots followed shots. Individual shots were also heard among the sounds of the machine gun.

As we found out later, these were the shots that rained down on the group making the noise, dispersing and running away across the river Horyn. After so many years it is difficult to describe what was happening within each one of us in those fateful moments. A kind of frozen apathy took hold of us, a petrifying of the senses.

Towards evening we decided to run away, but where to? There were no specific ideas. The only thing that was clear to all of us was that we had to get as far away as possible from the shtetl, in case there were searches in the forest looking for Jews who had escaped. I put forward the proposal that the 'sheygetz' from Khochyn had made, without taking any responsibility upon myself. I was hoping that he would at least succeed in linking the younger ones to some brigade of partisans. The proposal was accepted, and we went on a long circuitous route in order to get to the ferry over the Horyn, of which my father had formerly held the lease.

The journey lasted two nights. At midnight, on the eve of New Year 5703 [1943], we came near to the ferry. On the other side of the river we were a little safer because that was where a chain of continuous forests began, running hundreds of kilometres. We arrived at the outskirts of Khochyn. I and one other approached the house of the 'sheygetz' from Khochyn, whose name was Aleksey.

We had not expected such a welcome at all. He led us to a thick grove surrounded by swamps, informed us about the surrounding area, helped us build temporary shelters from shoots and branches and, most important of all, brought us food. We came to an agreement with him that until he managed to bring us to the partisans he would provide us with food in exchange for ready cash and gold, which some of us possessed. He carried out his work in real mortal danger. In fact he was the person who taught us and instilled in us the belief that there was a possibility of being saved and remaining alive. But during this time problems were growing. The money had run out, winter was approaching and there was a need to look for some sort of accommodation.

Each one of us began to make his own plans. The group began to break up. The first to leave the group was Gelman who went back to Vysotsk, where he hoped to find shelter with their neighbour, Kopchik the doctor and brother-in-law of the priest. He did in fact get there. They sheltered him in the attic of the barn. Later they informed policemen who took him to the cemetery and killed him. When we heard this a great mourning fell upon us.

My uncle's son, my neighbour and my closest friend, Syuma Goldshteyn, decided, contrary to our pleas, that the farmers who had been his father's tenants in the khutor³⁶⁶ of Libonitzk would surely give him shelter and look after him. What happened to him we do not know exactly. The only thing that is clear is that on the way there he bumped into a policeman. He began to run away, whereupon the policeman shot him.

The third who tried his luck was Natanel (Sanyu) Lopata. He also met his death on the way. This was the end of three of my friends, with whom I had spent the bulk of my life. We were friends, we were neighbours and finally also brothers in suffering and sorrow.

Perhaps I have my two uncles, Bertzio Lykhtnfeld and Uncle Beygl, to thank for the fact that I remained alive. I learned in their company and from their experience of life.

Aaron Sheynman also left us. We did not see him again. The same happened with Dovid Durtsheyn.

If my memory does not fail me, our number shrank by half. In the winter we moved to a pine forest, dug a trench in the ground, covered it with earth and with branches, camouflaging the surrounding area. This is how we lived.

With the Partisans

I do not remember exactly how we got hold of our food. Chaim Khaznchuk and Nisan Borovyk, who made their living sewing for farmers of the neighbourhood, supplied us with a large part of our sustenance. Partly we got food by sending one of us to farmers in the surrounding area. Once, in the winter, we even went to Vysotsk along the frozen river.

Our main aim was to join the partisans, about whom we had heard from farmers in the surrounding area. Here it is worth noting that the area in which we found ourselves supported the partisans and was hostile to the Germans. It remained therefore a partisan enclave, in which the Germans did not set foot. This enclave continued for thousands of kilometres, through forests and villages, roads and bridges to the north, south and east. The various partisan brigades formed a link between themselves along these roads, coordinating their operations and the places where they camped.

³⁶⁶ Russian: hamlet

The Germans took action against this area by bombing the villages from the air and burning them. They also surrounded villages in order to find those whom they denounced as partisans. The simple farmers of the area had many stories to tell concerning the partisans and their activities. The farmers themselves suffered twice: on one side from the Germans, who regarded them as partisans or collaborators with partisans, and on the other side from the partisans who forced them to share their food with them etc. These farmers also wished for salvation and redemption.

This is how, in the spring of 1943, I arrived in the village of Ozery with a partisan unit. I adapted to the conditions of the place, and after a number of days we left the forest and roamed eastward, towards Ukraine. I was the only Jew in the unit but did not feel any discrimination towards myself; I was one among equals in all respects. Perhaps one can put that down to the fact that I was the only Jew. The general rule of not accepting Jews remained in force. We bumped into Jews hiding in the forest who wanted to join, but they were met with an outright refusal.

After some time we found out that we were approaching the partisans' airfield where aeroplanes dropped weapons. Sometimes aeroplanes also landed there to unload freight. After two weeks we were equipped with the best of modern weapons: new automatic sub-machine guns with magazines of 71 bullets, heavy and light machine guns, light mortars and above all stocks of ammunition and explosives. From then onwards the emphasis was placed on the use of explosives and on sabotage in the rear of the enemy.

I passed a crash course in sabotage and was appointed assistant to the saboteur. The main aspect of our missions was to sabotage railway lines and trains, but we did not spare the roads or other German vehicles. The area where we were operating had become a hell for the enemy. Not a day passed without heavy damage.

After the chief saboteur was blown up in a work accident, together with railway lines which he had mined, I was given the role of saboteur. My first mission was to mine a road along which German commanders, accompanied by a heavy guard, were to pass the next day in slow-moving armoured vehicles. The whole company entered an ambush. They fired shots at those who had survived the explosions. Not a single man from the enemy forces came out alive following this action. After that setting mines under the railway line became my daily routine, and almost every week I mined two or three places. This is how we moved from place to place. We destroyed, blew up, burned, killed, plundered and robbed. Our operations and the operations of our comrades, the other partisans, brought real benefits. The enemy was cut off from the rear, the supplies ceased to arrive on time. The Red Army looted their installations. The famous counter-attack in Stalingrad began and the retreat of the Germans from Russia.

My uncles, Bertzio Lykhtnfeld and Dovid Beygl, joined other partisan detachments. We were therefore separated from each other. Their situation was similar to mine in almost every respect. Dovid Durchin also joined the partisans but was killed in action. Aaron Sheynman heard that Dovid Shtoper (Yoshkes) was on the other side of Vysotsk with a group of people and that their situation was better, so he moved there. In the end he was killed. Chaim Khaznchuk died in the forest following an illness that attacked him. Together with Nisan Borovyk we brought him for a Jewish burial, in accordance with religion and custom, under a high tree on a hillock in the area of Khochyn. Nisan Borovyk remained in the area of Ozery and joined the Jews of Ozery and others who had been hiding in the area for some time. Also Feybl Pivovuz remained in the same area. And so we were separated from one other. Each went his own way.

Following Liberation

The times were changing. The Germans were on the retreat from Russia. The front line came near where we were operating. Our sabotage actions increased. We moved ahead of the retreating Germans, at the same time constantly carrying out sabotage in their rear. It was my fate to take part in the liberation of Vysotsk, although there was no battle there. The Germans had left the place immediately on our approach. In general they withdrew in one go from all areas of Ukraine and White Russia. They entrenched themselves in Brest Litovsk and Kovel, drawing a line of defence along the River Bug.

I remember something else - how surprised the mechanic in my uncle's flour mill was when I went to see him in Vysotsk. I did not remain in Vysotsk for long. I went to the fraternal^[mass]grave . In the shtetl I heard that my Uncle Beygl and other members of the family from the village of Ozery were living there.

A new danger began to lurk, threatening the lives of Jews in the areas surrounding Vysotsk and in the whole of Ukraine. There appeared gangs of Ukrainian nationalists under the command of Bandera (who were called '*Banderovtzy*'). They demanded the establishment of an independent Ukraine on a nationalist-fascist basis. Luckily for us the Russian authority stamped on them hard, but at the grass roots they had the upper hand. Their actions in the regions where the partisans had formerly held sway found an echo and support among the residents who had suffered a great deal at the hands of the partisans. Playing on the sentiment of hatred of Jews, on which they had raised their flag, the *Banderovtzy* found a fertile soil. So, following liberation, after sufferings and much hardship, my uncle Dovid Beygl was killed near Ozery by the *Banderovtzy*. Following liberation the partisans had appointed him representative of the civil authority in the region. Relatives of our family from the village of Ozery were killed together with him.

I knew that there was no place for me in Vysotsk until the establishment of a firm civil authority. I therefore escaped to join the partisan brigades of the Red Army that began to come and strengthen their position in preparation for an attack on the line fortified by the Germans along the Bug. I was therefore enlisted into the Red Army and placed in the first front 'as a partisan who did much for the homeland'. We remained there for a number of months. Following a period of great anticipation the attack commenced. The enemy was pursued relentlessly and retreated in a hurry over the River Visl³⁶⁷. My luck ran out. In the battle for the little town of Chełm ³⁶⁸ a bullet hit me in my shoulder and I was taken away from the front.

I came back to Vysotsk on roads which were not really roads. A civilian authority had already been established. In Vysotsk I found my relative Manya Lykhtnfeld from Ozery. With her was the family of another Jewish doctor. They had been with Bertzio and the partisans. Bertzio was then at the front in East Prussia. After a short stay in Vysotsk, and in view of the danger from the *Banderovtzy*, whose operations against the authorities were growing, we decided to move to a larger Jewish centre. We therefore left for Rovne where we decided to wait for Bertzio in order to make aliyah to the Land. On May 1st 1946 we left Rovne on our way to the Land.

Ze'ev Shapir (Veve Shtoper) New Year's Eve 5723 (1962), 20th anniversary of the catastrophe

³⁶⁷ Vistula

³⁶⁸ east of Lublin, Poland



The house of the Nisn Lopatyn family

In Destruction and Anguish

[**Gitl Fialkov** (born Vysotsk December 1889, died kibbutz Na'an December 1981) wrote her account in Yiddish. This was translated into Hebrew by her son, Arie Fialkov. Both the Yiddish original and the Hebrew translation were included in the Vysotsk Yizkor memorial book. The following is an amalgamation of the Yiddish and Hebrew versions, each of which includes a significant amount of material not found in the other version. Text in *italics* is found only in the Hebrew version, whilst text in **bold** is found only in the Yiddish version.]

A few days after the outbreak of war between Soviet Russia and Germany all the people working for the authority – officials, teachers, policemen – packed their things and left. Several Jews, mainly young ones and communists, went with them. The Jews of the shtetl were bewildered and asked the Russians in alarm: 'Who are you abandoning us to?' The Russians reassured them and answered: 'Don't worry, we shall come back to you soon.'

The shtetl stayed without anyone in charge. The Russians had withdrawn from the shtetl and Germans had not yet appeared. Alarm gripped the Jews, who were afraid of the Goys, but the representatives of the Goys reassured them. In fact nothing bad happened to the Jews at the time. The shtetl was waiting for the arrival of the Germans.

Germans in the shtetl

One Sabbath the news spread that they were coming. The Jews cleared out every suspicious item, they burned Russian and Hebrew books, they erased any sign of their contact with the Russians. A Jewish German-speaking woman was found who dared to go out to greet the Germans with bread and salt. But they did not come on that Sabbath. It was some days before a small group of Germans came. The Goys went to the outskirts of the shtetl to greet them with bread and salt, in accordance with tradition. The Jews did not dare to meet them. They stayed in their homes, their hearts beating in fear. Through the gaps in the shutters they saw a well-known hooligan, an attendant in the wash-house, accompanying them [the Germans] and making friends with them. We knew that he was seeking their company through hatred of and incitement against the Jews.

Not many days passed before the Germans established the local authority. They relied mainly on the local Goys. The Germans did not themselves bother us over much, but their Goy employees began to bully us. Every day new decrees, one after the other. A head count was conducted of all Jews in the town. All their possessions were registered meticulously. The Jews were forbidden to move freely from one place to another, just as they were forbidden to buy and sell freely. The eating of meat was forbidden. All food items were handed over to the authority and the Jews got what they could in secret. The synagogues and prayer houses were confiscated and converted into grain warehouses for the local authority. Any public gathering was forbidden. The minyan³⁶⁹ gathered in secret, underground. The Jews were forbidden to walk on the pavement. But so far not that much importance was paid to the decrees. One day a decree was issued requiring a white and blue ribbon to be worn on the arm. Also all Jewish houses were to be marked by a Star of David. Several months later, on the eve of Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement] at the beginning of 5702 [September 1941] the Star of David was cancelled and each Jew was obliged to wear a yellow patch on the chest and on the back.

³⁶⁹ the quorum of ten men required for reciting prayers in the synagogue

The Goys exploited the new situation and began plundering. At first they would come into the Jewish houses carefully, later they became bolder and went about their business freely, rummaging in the cupboards and in the chests, grabbed whatever took their fancy and disappeared with the warning not to tell a thing to the German authority. The Jews complied, not saying anything out of fear of revenge by the Goys. The main task of the local police, which was recruited immediately from among the local White Russians, was to make the Jews' life a misery. They would pester us on various pretexts in order to extort money and goods. They would force their way into a Jewish home on the pretext of looking for refugees etc., demand ransom and the Jews, having no choice, would hand over the money and keep quiet. From time to time the Jews would collect sums of money or valuables and give them to the *Goy* police, without the knowledge of the Germans, in order to keep them quiet. But the bribe lost its effect after only a few days. I remember one night there was a knock on the door, my husband opened the door and a local Goy, who had recently come up in the world, came in, with him ten militiamen with guns in their hands. In the house were concealed refugees from Horodok³⁷⁰. The Goy shouted at us and warned: 'They've come from Horodok, but soon the devil will take you all.' The next morning, when the community heard about it, the Goy was given a beautiful cupboard, and that is how he was kept quiet for a few days.

After a few days the Jews in the shtetl were drafted for public work. Every Jew was required to give up half of his time to work for the authority. In a family with two workers one worked full-time on government work and the other was 'free' to work for his family or his home.

The work consisted of carrying stones from one place to another, leveling out heaps of sand beyond the town, breaking ice on the rivers. The craftsmen worked in the workshops given over to military purposes: building, carpentry, blacksmith work etc. In addition to the regular work groups of Jews were frequently required for one-off jobs. Every evening the community made a list of those going to work. Early every morning the workers gathered at the community house, were registered and taken away to work.

According to the order from the authority, the Jews were organised in a community. At the head of the community stood a community council, which mediated between the authority and the Jews. Through it the authority's orders and instructions were carried out.

At the disposal of the community council was a group of young Jews who served as a kind of Jewish militia and carried out all the orders of the authority relating to the Jews. They too wore a ribbon on their arm. The Jewish police caused us no end of trouble. The Jews continued to get food through trade and their working contacts with Goys and amongst themselves. Craftsmen continued to go to nearby villages and do their work there: carpentry, building, shoemaking etc. In exchange they received food. Anyone going out of the shtetl needed a double permit: from the community council and from the local authority. The Goys who provided employment obtained such a permit quite easily for the Jewish craftsmen.

Despite all the hardships the situation of the Jews in the shtetl was a little 'better' than the situation of the Jews in the surrounding towns and villages. Incidents of murder, death by starvation and arrests rarely occurred in the shtetl. No wonder the shtetl quickly filled up with Jewish refugees. 170 of them, women and children from Horodok, found shelter with us. Their husbands, the heads of the families, were taken away by the Germans, not knowing where they were going. There were also 150 Jewish inhabitants of neighbouring Goy villages who sought refuge with us. The community billeted them on the Jewish families; in every house

³⁷⁰ David-Horodok, Belarus

there were several refugees and sometimes whole families. Many of them got food from their hosts free of charge. Men and women endeavoured to collect food for those who were accommodated separately. After a while a kind of soup-kitchen was set up for them so they wouldn't die of starvation.

One day it was decreed that all the Jews had to leave the shtetl and move to Stolin. This is how the story goes: the authority discovered that a young Jewish man, a communist, was hiding in the shtetl. They demanded to know where he was but nobody handed him in. They threatened the shtetl with killing but still the man was not found. All the people were ordered to leave. One Jew (one of the wealthy ones) went to his loft to get some provisions for the way. That is how the man in hiding was found and the decree was cancelled.

A year later, from the surrounding towns and villages, there came terrible news of murders, starvation, torture, arrests and of new ghettos being established. In the shtetl it hadn't been that bad so far. The Jews were becoming very worried about their fate. So as not to provoke the authority people obeyed and carried out orders promptly. The Jewish militia was on guard, making sure that nobody – God forbid! – offered any resistance to the authority. So the truth is the militia became an accomplice in every act of degradation and torture.

In the month of Av in the year 5702 [July/August 1942] the ghetto was established in our shtetl. Several side streets were surrounded by a barbed wire fence and the Jews were forbidden to go out of the ghetto. From the ghetto there was an exit to the river that lies beyond the town. Every departure from the ghetto for work or food required a permit.

The ghetto remained for six weeks before it was liquidated, together with its inhabitants... Living conditions in our ghetto were more comfortable than in other ghettos. They were not too strict with us and we used to go through the wire even without a permit, moving around freely outside the ghetto. For the time being there was still food. There was not yet any murder or torture of our Jews. The situation gave Jews the hope that they would somehow get through the bad days and survive, to be redeemed... But from every corner one heard about ghettos being liquidated, of many Jews being murdered. The Jews heard it, they trembled and yet they deluded themselves that it would not happen to them. The Goys, acquaintances and friends, offered them reassurance... The fear was really deep, but so was the hope that would very soon prove to be a false illusion.

The Slaughter

Two weeks before the massacre in Vysotsk the Jewish ghetto in the neighbouring town of Dombrovitz was liquidated in a mass-murder. We knew about it, and the fear grew that the day of our slaughter was approaching. An order came that all Jews should remain in the shtetl. If no-one dared to go out nothing bad would happen to anyone. But if any Jews were to disappear all the remaining Jews of the shtetl would be punished. The community council believed and led others to believe that it was so and that everyone must obey the order and not go out of the shtetl. Jews who were working in the villages, hearing about the mass-murder in Dombrovitz, remained where they were and did not even return on Sabbath as usual, fearing destruction. **On Friday night** the militia visited all suspect Jewish houses, and where someone was missing they gave a strict order to bring back the missing person. That Sabbath my husband didn't come home either. Hearing about this the militia knocked on the door late at night, but I didn't open it. They threatened to break the door, but I didn't answer. However my tenant opened it. They came, searched the beds and, not finding my husband, forced me to go to the village and bring him back. I didn't have

any choice, got up early on the Sabbath morning and went off to the village, ten kilometres from the shtetl, and returned together with my husband. He thought that we, the whole family, would come to him in the village and thus be saved. And several others thought the same. But the militia forced them to come back into the town. After about ten days the calamity happened, and the slaughter of the Jews was carried out in our shtetl too.

Two days before the slaughter we, two families, packed some of our things and planned to go out into one of the villages. We went out into the yard, ready to go on our way. At this moment a Jewish refugee from Warsaw, who was living with us and did photographic work for the authority, tried to prevail upon us to stay, because a friendly Goy had assured him that he would always let him know in advance of any danger, and if there really was a danger he would himself leave with us. And so we went back into the house.

The next morning the refugee was told by an acquaintance of his, a Polish woman, that they were already digging pits for the Jews beyond the shtetl and that our destruction was approaching. The Warsaw refugee went away and told the Jewish council everything. The council tried to find out if it was true. The Goys, wanting to mislead them, said that they were only war trenches and nothing more. This was Tuesday, one day before the general slaughter in the shtetl. That day German vehicles with artillery of all sorts came into the shtetl. In charge were just six Germans. All the rest were Goys from the surrounding area... From the sound of the vehicles we understood that 'something' would happen in the coming days.



Anshel Fialkov

On the evening before the day of the slaughter, on the 27th day of Elul in the year 5702 [9th Sept 1942] the community did not receive any work assignments.

A great fear reigned in the ghetto. We lay down to sleep and our hearts were beating in fear. At night our tenant, the photographer, went out to find out what the situation was and brought bad 'news'. We got dressed and sat, gripped with fear. He went out again and calmed us down: 'The street is quiet'. We went back to bed with our clothes on.

The tenant was on guard. From time to time he went out. Finally he came back, passing on to us the news given him by his Polish acquaintance that the slaughter was being prepared for the next day. When he was reproached for not having told him earlier, as he had promised, the Pole replied that he himself did not know about it until then. But later it emerged that the Pole did indeed know earlier but he betrayed everyone.

We began to pack our things in order to run away, but it was already too late. Anyone who tried to go out of the ghetto that night was shot on the spot. That's how six Jews were shot, trying to run away. At dawn Jews tried to break out of the ghetto, but it was surrounded on all sides by local armed police who lay in wait for any Jew trying to escape. That is how, early that morning, Hannaj Lopata was murdered, in front of her two little daughters, on the doorstep of her house, as she was trying to get out. That is how, soon afterwards, a young man was murdered. Through the window I saw men and women with small children in their arms, as well as teenage boys and girls, trying to break through the wire. When the Goy policemen turned their guns on them they all went back into their houses.

Suddenly, in great panic, people pushed their way into our house. The room was full of people, old and young. From the outside policemen stuck their guns in the windows. A great wailing and lament broke out. One woman cried out: 'Jews!'

Nothing will help us, we must go to the slaughter! Some of those assembled, including me and my family, went out through the lower door into the yard. (*It was an enclosed yard at the back of the house*) I said to my 18-year old son at once: 'Stay there in that corner, perhaps you'll be able to escape.' To begin with he was stubborn, not wanting to leave us, but after pleading with him for a long time he went out, but soon came back, saying that at a particular place, close to Sender Kaftan's house, you could bribe the militia and get out of the ghetto. I gave him what I had on me and he went out. A few minutes later he returned saying there was no choice, he would go to the market place where all Jews were going. Perhaps there he would be able to get away. He took a long knife, filled his pockets with food and was gone...

I haven't seen him since then... I was told later that he was among those who fled the slaughter, jumped into the river and were shot by those pursuing them.

The panic on the street increased. Terrified, people ran, pushing their way into the houses. Our house, in the centre of the street, was overcrowded with people. I and my 16-year old daughter went down into the cellar and with us were many of those who had gathered in our house. Soon the cellar was also completely full. My daughter and I stayed there in a fenced-off corner used for storing potatoes. One mother, a refugee from Warsaw, stuck her two children in our corner, among the potatoes. Meanwhile the police came into the cellar, apparently after they drove the Jews out of the house, and ordered people to leave the cellar and if not they threatened to shoot. Everyone left the cellar and we were the only ones to remain in a hidden corner. Also with us were the two children. Their mother told the police that there was nobody left in the cellar and she had got out with everybody else. A few minutes later the police returned, stood at the entrance to the cellar and ordered us to get out, threatening to shoot. We didn't answer them. They left, went into the house, up into the loft, where they searched in all corners and hiding-places (we heard all this while we were in the cellar) and then they went away. About an hour later the police appeared again at the entrance to the cellar. They wanted to put the light on but they didn't have any matches. They threatened to blow up the cellar with a mine. We lay there quietly without uttering a sound. They went away again and again they came and this time, after more threats, they fired shots into the cellar, but they missed. And we remained still, holding our breath and trembling in fear. That day groups of police and soldiers, Germans too, were constantly coming into our house and searching in every nook and cranny. From our hiding-place we heard them climb into the loft, look in the oven and underneath the oven. When it became quiet outside my daughter went into the house, packed all the family things that were particularly precious to her: pictures, addresses, mementos, and returned to the cellar.

When it was dark the two children decided to get out of the cellar and go to a Polish woman that they knew, certain that she would take them into her house. After all she was their best friend and all their belongings were hidden in her house. I tried to prevent them from going, but they wouldn't heed my advice. Because they looked like Poles they believed that nothing bad would happen to them. The eight-year old girl really did look like a Goy. They didn't know Yiddish, whereas they spoke Polish well. I fed them and they went on their way. After a short while the little brother came back, shocked and in tears. In answer to my question 'Where is your sister Lyusa?' he told me that they had run into a policeman who ordered them to stop and that he, the boy, ran off to the Polish woman. His sister stayed still, hoping to persuade them that she was Polish. But they murdered her on the spot. He came running to the Polish woman, but she didn't want to take him into her house and he therefore went back into the cellar.

At night the hours crept past. What was going to happen? Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow they would discover our hiding-place and murder us, but going outside was filled with mortal danger. So what should we do? And so, sitting in the cellar, confused and desperate, we decided in the end to go out, despite everything that might happen. We went out in the knowledge that we were going to a certain death. Out of doubt and fear, when we went out we didn't dare to take the boy with us. He in the meantime had fallen into a deep sleep.



Teybl, Aaron-Shmuel and Feygl Fialkov

We got out of the cellar, went quietly through one yard, then into another yard, and as we were about to go across a lane between the yards we heard a command in Ukrainian: 'Stop!' We froze. An armed Ukrainian policeman came up to us. He immediately ordered my daughter to take off her coat and choose between two deaths: standing, with her face to the wall and her hands up, or lying down, with her face turned to the ground. I began begging him to have mercy on my daughter. I wanted to hand over to him what I had, valuables and money. But he hardened his stance and ordered me to put down everything I had, took my daughter and me, one hand on either side, in order to take us - so he said - to the Germans. He took a few steps then stopped. Again I begged him to let us get out of the ghetto, he raised his gun and hit me with it. I called to my daughter: 'Let's try to run away', and I was already beginning to run. But seeing that my daughter wasn't moving from the spot I turned to her and, not knowing what I was doing, I began shouting for help... Hearing my cry, armed policemen gathered, and there we were surrounded already by not one Goy, but many Goys. We gave up immediately. All around us bloodthirsty policemen and us, two Jewish women in the middle... My daughter said to them: 'Come to our house where lots of clothes are hidden, and other valuables. We'll give you everything, just let us get out of here.' They agreed. We all went back to our yard. While we were negotiating regarding the hidden things, suddenly my husband appeared, I had no idea from where. It turned out that in the turmoil of that morning my husband hid in the corner of the cowshed and lay there the whole time and, now that he heard our cries, he came out of his hiding-place. So now all three of us were together. We dug in the earth until our things were discovered. Meanwhile the local policemen went away and only the first policeman remained, waiting for his loot... He was pressing my husband to work faster, threatening to dig a grave just for him... A chest of clothes was pulled out and the Goy chose what he liked and carried

as much as he could on his shoulders, ordering us to walk in front of him and he would lead us out of the ghetto. We didn't trust him and begged him to set us free. But he didn't agree and we had to go in his company. All three of us marched in front of him and he, with his gun raised, behind us. While we were walking he shot but missed. I didn't know if he did it on purpose or not. After a few minutes we stopped again, and again I begged him for mercy, to let us go free. But he ran up to me angrily and hit me with the gun. From the force of the blow I fell to the ground and remained lying there, powerless. My husband and daughter continued walking with the policeman, who pressed them to go faster. After a few minutes I heard two shots pierce the air. In my bitter heart I realised that my two dear ones were no longer living.

Wandering from place to place

I lay on the ground for a long time with terrible anguish in my heart and didn't know what I should do. For a while I thought of getting up, going up to the murderers, letting myself be murdered and putting an end to my troubles... I dragged myself to a nearby cowshed and remained lying in a pile of hay. After a short while I stood up and proceeded to go in an opposite direction, precisely the direction that leads from the ghetto to the open street. In the darkness of the night I detected human bodies scattered around. I touched them. They were dead bodies. I passed a small pile of fresh earth and next to it people's clothes. I realised that this was where the people who had been shot first were buried.

I reached the barbed wire that closed off the ghetto, tried to get through and couldn't. I tried to crawl underneath, got injured and again failed. Finally I managed to crawl through. Now I was outside the ghetto in the open street, where not long ago Jews used to live. I trudged my way in the darkness as far as a neighbourhood at the far end of the shtetl. I knocked on the door of a Goy I knew. But when he saw me he was scared, too frightened to let me into the house, because anyone who hid Jews risked punishment by death. He advised me to go to the neighbouring village. In my torment and confusion I didn't know where my feet were taking me. After a short while it became clear to me, to my astonishment, that I had turned back into our shtetl. I didn't see anyone on the way and nobody saw me. I turned round and walked towards the village. After an hour of walking around at night I reached the river. I knew that the river was shallow and one could cross it on foot.



Arie Fialkov on his visit to the shtetl as an emissary from the Land, with his sister Feygl and his brother Aaron-Shmuel, by the bridge, winter 1939

I went into the river in my shoes and clothes, certain that I would be able to cross it easily, but how astounded I was when the water reached my neck. I tried to go back, but the current dragged me forwards. I swam across the river. Then I realised that I was lost. I swam back across the river. Wet, exhausted and crushed, I dropped under a pile of hay and lay there till dawn. At dawn I went on my way again and reached the village of Prasaduvke. I knocked at the door of a Goy I knew. He didn't want to let me in the house. I went off to another Goy who immediately took me in, gave me other clothes till mine dried out. He gave me food and drink and led me up to the loft. I stayed there for two whole days, then his wife came to me, bringing me my dry clothes and asked me to go. She was afraid. I went off to look for shelter in another village, Rudnya, eight kilometres from our shtetl. I knew many Goys in the neighbourhood and where they lived. A Goy I knew led me to a wood nearby and there I met my sister's daughter. The two of us stayed in the wood for two days. But we were too exposed to passers-by, and the owner of the wood was scared of leaving us there for longer and ordered us to move. We left the wood and went our separate ways.

My sister's daughter trudged from one Goy to another and no-one took her in until she met a Goy she knew who tricked her and handed her over to the Nazis, and in the shtetl from where she had escaped she met her death.

I hid in the loft of a cowshed belonging to a Goy. After about four days his wife came to me and asked me to go away because she was afraid. I wasn't able to argue with her but I asked to see her husband before I went away. That Goy, Yakob, a good and merciful one, who knew my husband well, knowing that if I went out of my hiding-place I would certainly be murdered, advised me to move to the other end of the loft, hide there in the hay, and he wouldn't say anything to his family. For four weeks on end I lay there, and none of the many people in the house knew about it (*except for the head of the family himself*). He alone took care of me, brought me a piece of dry bread once a day – and sometimes also a little water. He wasn't able to bring more out of the house, or else it would be discovered.

Early one morning, after four weeks of lying in the loft, the Goy came to me in alarm and ordered me to leave his place because the Germans were conducting a search nearby and it would be bad for everybody if they were to find me there. At that time the Germans were searching for food supplies and also cattle. I climbed down from the loft and hid in the garden among high beanstalks. When it became dark I left my hiding-place and hid with another Goy I knew (*also one of our acquaintances, who had promised me that if I had to leave my first hiding-place he would take me in*). After a few days he led me away to his brother-in-law who lived alone four kilometres away from the village. On the way he had second thoughts and advised me to go by myself to his brother-in-law and hide in a barn. That's what I did. In the morning the Goy came across me in his barn. He was very angry and ordered me to clear off at once. But his wife begged him to let me stay there till the evening. In the evening, having no other option, I went away to the first Goy where I stayed for four whole weeks. I climbed up to the loft by myself. In the morning the Goy ran into me and simply said that his old father, who was sleeping downstairs in the cowshed, must not find out about me. He continued to feed me with dry bread and water. That was my only food during the months I was in hiding.

And again after several weeks my saviour turned to me and asked/ordered me to leave his house. I asked for a few kilos of salt for the road. At that time salt was a precious commodity *and only rich Goys were able to get it. This peasant was rich and had plenty of salt*. I hoped to find shelter in exchange for the salt. He brought me a small sack of salt and in the night I went away to the Goy I was with before. In exchange for the salt he hid me for two days and once more ordered me to leave. I

went back to my good Goy. He was one of those who were unable to forsake their fellow human beings. He advised me to go up to the loft of his uncle's cowshed and he, my saviour, would continue to feed me as before.

I went into his uncle's cowshed and lay down in a pile of hay. After about an hour the farmer came to feed his cows but he didn't notice me. After he went out I hurried and climbed up to the loft, and 'my' Goy continued to feed me with bread and water. He would come in the evening, climb up the ladder near the roof, knock quietly, and I would stretch out my hand through the hole that I made in the thatched roof, take the dry bread from his hand and water too, but not often. Occasionally he would bring the bottle of milk that his wife gave him when he went to work in the field and he himself would make do with bread. Through a small, unnoticed hole in the thatched roof I would see him when he passed through the yard and sometimes I would rustle in the thatch of the roof if I wanted something, and then he would come to see me.

Workmen were threshing the peasant's cereals. When they finished they brought all the hay to the loft where I was lying. They pushed and pressed the hay in, not knowing that anyone was there. Afterwards they climbed to the top and trod back and forth on the hay. I only just managed to release myself from the hay that was piling on top of me to the point of suffocation...

I lived like that in the loft for three weeks, and nobody, apart from my good Goy, knew about it. One day he came to me and announced sadly that he was finally forced to refuse me help, he could not look after me any longer.

I got up very early and got down from the loft. When the owner came to feed his cows and suddenly caught sight of me he was trembling in joy and fear at the same time. He asked me if I was alone or if there was anyone else from my family with me. When he heard that I was the only one left he burst into sobbing and tore out the hair on his head in sorrow. He immediately brought me food but at the same time announced that I must leave his house in the evening because he was afraid. He sent his daughter-in-law to me, whom I knew well. She was very glad to see me and did not let her father-in-law send me away. At the same time she warned me not to let the old woman, her mother-in-law, catch sight of me. *In this house at that time lived the old parents-in-law and she, the daughter-in-law. Her husband was serving in the army.*

I returned to my hiding-place in the loft and stayed there for three whole months. One day the old man, the owner, ordered me to leave, or else he would be forced to hand me over to the village administration. I told him he could do with me as he liked because I was sick of life and suffering and it was better for me to die... When the daughter-in-law learned of this she came up to me in the loft and swore that she would not let her father-in-law hand me over. She continued to feed me, and the Goy who helped me in the past brought me bread.

One day the old man climbed up and said: 'Well, it is safe for you to go out now, the Germans have gone away and there are no longer any police in Vysotsk.' Hearing this announcement, my head began to spin and I fainted. The first terrible thought was: 'I'M THE ONLY ONE LEFT'. And the thought tormented me ceaselessly, and - why just me? I opened my eyes and saw my good Goys standing there, trying to cheer me up. I was about to get up and go home to my house... But they stopped me: 'Wait a bit, we'll find out if it's true...' It turned out that it was still too soon.

And it happened that suddenly my support was cut from under me. The Germans took away the old peasant and his horses as well as the young man. When the old man returned the wailing grew. They were sure that the young man and horses would not come back. One day he came back, followed by German soldiers.

They began rifling about, searching the house. They took for themselves any valuables they liked the look of. They searched the loft, the cellar, the cupboards and in the cowshed under the spot I was hiding in. From where I was I could see them well. They were three tall Germans. Armed, wearing sheepskin and helmets. One of them was about to go up to the loft. But the others objected. They ate and drank greedily and when they were about to leave the young man and his wife begged them to release him and take the owner of the horses in his place, as he was their owner and knew best how to deal with them... After some discussion the Germans gave into their plea, the old man left with them and the young one, who stayed at home, remembered me and brought me my portion of bread THAT VERY SAME EVENING. The disappearance of the old man and the horses made life more difficult for the young wife and also aggravated her attitude towards me. She began to show impatience as far as keeping me was concerned. One night I left the loft and went to the Goy who had previously given me shelter for two days. He himself was not in, his wife meanwhile hid me in a bale of hay in the yard until her husband got back. I got into the bale and stayed there all night. Early in the morning she took me into her tiny, poor home and kept me in the corridor under a large box. When her husband came she begged him not to drive me away. In gratitude I gave them several of my clothes and also promised to give them my winter coat when summer came. They were very poor peasants and needed my present very much.

A hiding-place was fixed for me between the large box and the wall. Twice a day I was given baked potatoes. Bread was not to be found at their house. At that time the German retreat was beginning in this area. The militiamen, sensing the weakness of the Germans, left and joined the partisans. The peasant said repeatedly that he was keeping me only because the Germans were no longer in the area but if they returned he would be forced to send me away.

After two weeks in this house had passed I went off to a peasant who still owed my husband money for a carpentry job. This was two kilometres away. Through the window I noticed strangers in the house so I didn't go in. The Goy, sensing there was a stranger outside, took an axe and a piece of iron and came out, thinking there were robbers. I went up to him and made myself known to him. *The minute he saw me, he threw down his weapons*, greeted me heartily and burst into tears. I couldn't control myself either and I too sobbed loudly. And so the two of us stood in the dark night, crying. He let me into the house and gave me as much rye as I could carry. He strongly urged me to stay the night at his house, but I didn't want to because his house was right by the side of the road. I loaded the sack of rye on my shoulder and went on my way. When we parted he said to me that if ever I needed anything else I should come to them and they would give me whatever they could.

One dark night in the month of Adar in the year 5703 [Feb/March 1943], the period of melting snows, I had to go back and cross, on foot, a partly frozen river, with water flowing on top of the ice. I got lost. My shoes filled with water. My feet kept slipping on the wet ice. My sack kept dropping and got wet, and with every attempt to lift it up I kept slipping and falling. I kept walking, dragging the sack behind me, getting up and falling, getting up and falling all night. I changed my clothes, climbed up on to the oven and returned once more to my shelter behind the large box in the hallway.

One evening the Goy returned from the village with news: the Germans were back. He ordered me to leave his house at once. I asked him: 'Well where shall I go?' 'Anywhere you wish' was his reply, 'but you must get away from here.'

Where to?

Where to? – I went outside. It was dark, late at night. Near the house lived a Goy whose mother I used to know. I entered the yard quietly and went up to the cowshed loft. Early in the morning when the peasant came in to feed his cows he saw me and demanded that I leave his house at once. It was rumoured that a search for partisans was going to take place there today. I got up to go. The peasant's wife took pity on me: 'Where will you go now, in daylight? They will find you, lead you into the shtetl and murder you there.' When I answered that that was precisely what I wanted the Goy said: 'No, if you've stayed alive this long it's a shame for you to be murdered now. There, in the nearby forest there are Jews. They are living in shacks. They move from one place to another, running away from the enemy... You must go to the Jews in the forest.' But how was I to reach them now, in broad daylight? The Goy brought his sleigh into the barn. I lay down in it and the Goy placed a load of hay over me and drove me away on the road from the village of Puznya. By the side of the forest he took me out, led me into a copse beyond the village and told me to wait there until it got dark. Then I should go into the village, and the Goys who traded with the partisans would lead me to the Jews in the forest. I stayed in the copse the whole of that day. In the evening I went into a cowshed belonging to a Goy I knew in the village. The Goy, when he saw me in the cowshed, was very grieved over the death of my husband and my children, whom he knew well, but he didn't want to give me protection or shelter. *He took me to a neighbour's yard, advised me to stay there and said he would be back in the morning to guide me to the Jews in the forest. In the morning he didn't keep his word.* I dragged myself from one Goy to another, to no avail. As I was going around the village a woman, a Goy, called to me from one of the houses, inviting me to come to her place. Despite my fear that perhaps Germans were there and that she would betray me - as happened with many other Jews - I did go to her, thinking that sometimes one should stop worrying, *and if my suspicions were right that would be no bad thing. After all, one needed to be rid of this wretched life and have done with it once and for all!*

Going into the house I was astonished to see in front of me a young man from my shtetl. He was the one who had noticed me earlier through the window and asked the woman to call me in. There are no words to describe what came over both of us in this encounter. I had been wandering alone among Goys and hadn't seen a Jewish face until now. Crying, we told each other everything that had happened to us. He, the young man, had already been in the forest with a group of Jews, he had left them and come to hide here. I asked him to take me to these Jews. For some reason he didn't want to. (When I came to the forest afterwards I was told that his protectors, the Goys, handed him over to the famous Ukrainian hooligans, the Bulbovtzy (named after Taras Bulba³⁷¹) who bound him and tortured him – indescribable tortures. They tore off pieces of his living flesh, tore out his tongue, chopped his nose off and finally cut off his head and hanged his body in the middle of the village).

In the meantime the peasant came in and ordered me to leave immediately. So I walked around aimlessly. *I met another peasant whom I did not recognise, but he recognised me and invited me to come to his house for a few days. But only in the evening would he come and take me.* On my way I came across a deserted house without windows and without a roof and I went into it. Immediately afterwards two dogs and a young Goy burst in. He knew me and let me stay there till morning. I stayed in the deserted house, trembling with cold and damp and looked through the window at the dark night. Suddenly, not knowing from whom and how, blows fell

³⁷¹ in fact Ukrainian People's Revolutionary Army followers of Taras Bulba-Borovetz (1908-1981)

on my head, one after another. I felt blood running from my head and face on to my clothes and hands... In shock I called out in the darkness: 'Why are you hitting me?' Then they stopped hitting me and went away.

Injured, tearful and weak, I came out of the house and dragged myself to the village in the dark. Suddenly there appeared in front of me a Goy, a stick in one hand and a coat in the other. He at once ordered me: 'Throw off your coat, such are the times we live in.' I said to him: 'Why did you stop at smashing my head? Why didn't you murder me?' 'No,' he said, 'I'm not going to murder you but give me the coat now.' I took off my coat and threw it to him, together with some other small things that were in the pockets. (It was the same Goy who hit me *in the dark and took off his coat to avoid being recognised*).

I went into a peasant's house to wash my head and face, but the blood kept flowing and the peasant was hurrying me to get out. I went into a second peasant's house, the peasant's children began to cry and make a fuss, frightened by the look of my injuries and the blood... The peasant let me into somebody else's barn, shut the gate and went away. Tired and exhausted I lay in the hay and the blood kept streaming. I took out of my pocket little pieces of soft bread, tried to stop the hole in my head but this didn't help. The blood kept streaming through the bread. I struggled for two days with the weeping wounds until at last the blood stopped flowing. *My hair, the bread and the congealed blood stuck together and blocked the holes in my head. But this was not the end of it. With every crumb of bread that came off, yellow puss and blood burst out.* It took half a year before the wounds healed.

Morning came. The peasant came into the yard and I heard him say to his friend: 'It seems someone was here during the night.' He began searching the yard, in the hay and in every corner. He came to the spot where I was hiding but didn't notice me. I stayed there until midday. Then the other peasant, the one who had brought me here, was supposed to come and take me to the Jews in the forest. This is what he had promised me but he didn't come. I went out of the yard in broad daylight, walked into the village and asked people to take me to the forest. None of them obliged. I sat on the side of the street without energy or sense of direction.

So for a whole week I continued to move from one barn to another. Nobody wanted to take me in, for fear of the Bulbovtsy who were going round the villages, and any Jew who fell into their hands was tortured and murdered. One woman, a Goy, who couldn't bear to see my troubles, got up, dressed me up in her own clothes, put some bread in my pockets and asked her daughter, together with a friend, to lead me to the Jews in the forest. *She told us that the Jews were on the move all day long in the depths of the forest and that they only returned to their shack at night. I should go to their shack and wait until they returned in the evening.*

In the Forest

The three of us, the two Ukrainian girls and myself, set off in the direction of the Jews in the forest, a five-kilometre walk from the village. *It was a thick forest, the ground was covered with deep snow and outside winter cold and frost prevailed. Not a living soul anywhere, no signs, and we were walking through deep snow among the tangle of the frozen trees.* We came to the shack. The girls left me there and I went into the shack where I had a shock: a dark, black, empty and deserted shack. Next to the walls some straw was strewn about, apparently as bedding. In the middle were scattered remains of burning logs. The opening was blocked with a sack of straw. The trees were rustling, snow, cold, emptiness and fear.

I sat all day waiting for evening to come. Night came. The night hours passed by and nobody came. Sleep did not come. In the early hours I heard voices of people approaching. I thought they were the Jews of the shack coming 'home'. They were indeed Jews but from another shack, from a nearby forest, escaping from a Bulbovttsy attack on their shack. Many of them had been murdered, many had fallen along the way and these, the survivors, tired, injured and exhausted, came here – a 24-kilometre walk – as fast as they could, looking for shelter. I handed them my bread and potatoes and that helped them recover. **Among those who had run to the shack was a woman who, during the attack, lost her husband and her 19-year old daughter and she and her 15-year old and 8-year old daughters escaped alive. When they ran away the youngest daughter got lost and the mother thought that she was already murdered, but after three days the daughter was found by Jews and they brought her to the shack to her mother. For three days the little girl was lost in the forest without food or drink until the Jews, searching for the dead in order to bury them, found her. From talking to the Jews it was clear to me that the previous inhabitants of the shack would not be coming back because the existence of the shack had been revealed and it was too well known to the local Goys and the gangs of murderers. They made a new shack in another place in the forest. I attached myself to the group and lived with them in their shack.**

One day we went out to the nearby village. It was known that a group of partisans was in the village. As we got near the village a peasant bumped into us. With a whistle in his mouth he alerted his comrades. We were soon surrounded by a large band of armed robbers who ordered us to stop. The majority of us managed to escape and just I and three Jews were stopped by them. They ordered us to drop our bags and began questioning us: 'Where are you from? Where are you going to?' As they were talking they pointed their guns at us, about to shoot. I went up to one of them and asked him: 'Tell me, where are you from?' He answered: 'From Kharkov'. I asked the second one and he replied that he was from the village of Zamrotsyenyia. I asked him if he knew someone called Anshel (my husband). 'Yes,' he said, 'I knew him well. He used to work in our village as a carpenter.' When I heard he knew my husband I said to him: 'I am his wife,' and I begged him to let us live. They searched our packs, took the boots off my companion, took our best clothes off us and let us go free. This was a gang of Bulbovttsy.

We got back to the rest of our group and together walked to our destination. We were certain that the Bulbovttsy would come after us and murder us. We got to the village quite early and bumped into guards. We didn't know if they were partisans or murderous Bulbovttsy. They led us into some barracks where many armed peasants were sitting. We sat, prisoners, until their commander came and set us free.

For three weeks we were in the forest. There we met a woman from Dombrovitz with her son. They were unkempt and emaciated, lost in the forest. Her whole family – her husband, she and their seven children, of whom the youngest was 11 years old – were out in the forest. On the way peasants had robbed and beaten them and they escaped naked and bereft of everything. In their night-time wanderings a daughter got lost. Her husband and two daughters were captured. The woman remained with her four children: two sons and two daughters. They set up a shack in the forest. They were joined by a Jew they didn't know, and at night they would go into familiar villages to look for food. One night after walking for four hours, as they were returning to the forest after searching for food in the village, they noticed a huge light in the forest and as they approached it their eyes grew dark: their shack was burning and the remains of their three children, together with the remains of the other Jew, were scattered around in the fire. They had been murdered and on

top of them the shack had been set on fire. The mother and her son gathered individual limbs from the bodies of their dear martyred ones, concealed them in a side-channel, covered them with leaves and departed from the place of grief to look for other Jews, and that is how they met us. The end of the family is that the one remaining son was mobilised into the Soviet military, there something happened to him and he was arrested. The mother, after much wandering, stayed by herself in the shtetl of Rafalovka (Volyn).

One day we heard a lot of noise coming from the direction of the village. It turned out the Germans had come into the village and, following a battle with the partisans, were in control of the village. We withdrew to another village, Svarichevich [Svaritsevichi]. From a distance we could see the village burning and the villagers running in panic into the forest. We wandered into the forest, not knowing where to camp. A friendly peasant advised us to go deeper into the forest because gangs of Bulbovtsy were roaming around in the vicinity. Only a few days ago they had murdered forty Jews in the vicinity, among them a woman from our shtetl. He promised us he would come back and let us know by whistling when the danger receded and the Bulbovtsy had left. We followed his advice and went deeper into the forest and stayed there for five days until the potatoes were finished. The Jew from our company, Asher Bitchik from Puznya, with his son and another person, Kopl from Dombrovitz, went out and got near the track that runs through the forest in order to find a shepherd and ask him what was happening. It was their misfortune to meet a band of Bulbovtsy who captured them, harnessed them in front of their carts and drove them like horses... That is how, in celebration, they brought them into the village. There they were bound with ropes and thrown into a stable. The three men struggled with the ropes, tore them off and escaped. But they were captured again by a Bulbovtsy guard and murdered after prolonged suffering and torture of various sorts. Limbs were cut off one by one. That's what the Bulbovtsy did with their Jewish victims.

Reb Asher Bitchik from Puznya was a dear Jew. I remember how one day after Passover, on a beautiful summer-like spring day, as we were walking along the side of the forest with the green fields in the distance, he said: 'Dear God! The world is a world, the trees are blooming, the fields are green, but we...' and he burst out into uncontrollable weeping. He was very devoted to three orphans, his sister's children. When he divided the small portion of potatoes he would give himself less than he gave the youngest, the nine-year old. The day before his death I washed his upper shirt for him. I boiled water in a small hole, threw the shirt in it and poured the water over the shirt on top of a hot stone so that it would be washed well from the dirt... He shaved, put on the clean shirt and went out ... to his death.

The third one to be murdered with him was Kopl from Dombrovitz, a shokhat³⁷², who would pray with great devotion every day beneath a tree. He also had holy books which we found in the homes of Goys. From time to time he would go to his father's grave there in the forest. He celebrated the eve of Seder of 5703 (April 1943) together with us in the forest, under the open sky. Reb Asher collected some ground bark from a farmyard, baked over a fire a kind of dough as a reminder of matza³⁷³ and he, Kopl, read to us the whole of the Haggadah³⁷⁴. During the whole of that hour a soft snow was falling and we sat with our feet wrapped up in rags and our eyes were full of tears over the story of the Exodus from Egypt...

The friendly Goy kept his word; after two days we heard his whistle and the barking of his dogs. We told him about the end of the three Jews from our company.

³⁷² ritual slaughterer

³⁷³ unleavened bread

³⁷⁴ story of the Passover

The peasant burst out sobbing and tore hair from his head, so great was his grief. He had come especially to warn us to save ourselves but we didn't hear him. There were only six of us remaining, without a single adult male: three orphans, the woman with her young daughter and myself. Those who had been murdered had up until then been our protectors and guides through the depths of the forest. Now what would happen to us? We wandered in the forest until we came to the village of Zolotye, six kilometres from the forest. We heard that in the village there were partisans under the leadership of Misyura. This was a partisan unit under the leadership of a young peasant-partisan who was famous for fighting the Germans and for defending Jews. He was a simple peasant from Ozersk, I knew him and had once been in his house. Many Jews were in his unit. When they heard about the death of the three Jews they sent people to look for the remaining Jews in the forest, and that's how we met them and went with them to their village.

There, in Ozersk, I also met Dovid Shtoper (Shleyme's son) from Vysotsk. During the days of the Nazi occupation he served in the Jewish militia. A proud Jew, he managed to escape with his family into the forests. From time to time he dared to come into the shtetl, dig in the yards of Jewish homes and take out various things and trade them in for food with the Goys. The Goys said to each other that the shack in the forest was full of goodies and they plotted to rob it. One night they approached the shack and shot at it from a distance in order that the people inside would run away... Everyone did indeed run away, they came with a cart, loaded everything up and left. Dovid Shtoper could not rest. He wanted to know which of the Goys had done it. He went up to them quietly. A young boy followed him. Suddenly the boy saw Shtoper surrounded by Goys, searching him. It seems that that is how Shtoper met his death. His wife was saved and she too, after a long time of wandering, arrived in Italy and from there to Eretz Israel.

And again regarding The Slaughter

In the partisan unit I met someone from Dombrovitz who had been in Vysotsk at the time of the slaughter and who had managed to escape from the death pits. He told me all the details of the slaughter.

Early on the morning of the slaughter all Jews were ordered to appear at the market place. The Jews sensed the danger and did not rush to fulfil the order. The Goy policemen began to drive the Jews from the streets and from the houses. With rifles in their hands they went from house to house and drove the Jews to the spot that had been decided on. (That is when our house was filled with those escaping the murder chase.) At the market place outside the ghetto the Jews were arranged in long rows. At the sides of the street machine guns and cannons were placed in readiness... The first to be taken were 100 Jews from the first row, on the pretext that they were being taken to work. Around an hour later another 300 Jews were invited and they too were accompanied by armed policemen. Nearing the place of death they understood at last what was awaiting them: death by shooting, straight into the pits that had been dug. The local rof began to recite the confession and after him the local doctor. Immediately there arose a great cry of lament and resistance and many began to run away. The rifles and machine guns all around began to work. The cries got even louder. The Jews who were waiting in fear at the market place, hearing the cries and the violence, also began to run. There was a great deal of noise and cries and a stampede in the direction of the nearby river. A mass of policemen and armed Goys went after those who were running away, shooting at them with their rifles. The Jews who had escaped jumped straight into the river to swim across it. But the Goys fired after those in the river. It was a horrible picture, impossible to

describe. In terror Jews jumped into the river, and met their death swimming, some on the surface of the water, some under the water and some of them at the side of the river. The water in the river was really red from the blood of the Jews who were shot. Even those who reached the other side of the river were hit by the fatal bullets. Anyone hiding among the trees on the other side of the river was murdered later when they went on the search for food. 23 Jewish girls who managed to swim to the other side of the river roamed among the trees for three whole days and not having any protection or aim they returned to the shtetl, hungry and exhausted, and there they met their death.

The remaining Jews, who didn't manage to escape to the river, were led to the pits beyond the shtetl and there they were shot.

With the Partisans

The partisan unit wandered in the forests. They would stop at one place for a few days and then move on. While on the move they would carry out various acts of sabotage and attack. We were not accepted into the camp, where there were only armed fighters. We used to follow the unit wherever they went. We would rest some distance away so as not to be noticed. Jews from the unit would come to us to let us know on the quiet when the unit needed to go on its way. We would get up and follow them from a distance. Mostly they would move at night. Every night they covered 20-25 kilometres, through forests, rivers and ditches in the cold, wet weather of the end of winter. With them they dragged a whole transport of calves and cattle. All this moving about exhausted us to the point of death.

One night we came into the village of Vichivka. The unit went into the village and we, 200 Jews, stayed outside the village, hidden in ditches and among trees. The partisans got drunk and sank into a deep sleep. That's when the Bulbovtsy attacked them. *First they cut the telephone lines to prevent them from getting help.* That night many of the partisans were murdered and wounded, as were some of those who stayed outside the village. The bullets flew over our heads like rain. We scattered in all directions. I and four other Jews ran for three whole days. Hearing that the Bulbovtsy had pulled out we went back into the village, and there we were told that the Bulbovtsy had taken over the village, taken many of the partisans prisoners and confiscated their weapons, food and their cattle.

A mother, who also had with her two daughters and three grandchildren, as she was running away from the attack she fell on to the ground and sensed that she was lying on top of a human body but she didn't know that she was lying on the dead body of her daughter who was torn to shreds by bullets from a repeat-action weapon. A grandchild was also murdered in the attack.

The partisans quickly recovered from their defeat. Soviet aeroplanes supplied them with guns, and with that they re-organised and renewed their actions. Again on the move, they undertook acts of sabotage and we, the Jews, continued to follow them, protected by them.

One day, in the village of Lusetska [Lasitsk], the Jewish doctor Erlykh came to us (before becoming a wartime doctor he was an optician in Dombrovitz) from the partisans and announced to us that our unit was now setting out on a longer action lasting ten days and that we, the Jews, should wait here for their return. Many weeks passed and they didn't come. Meanwhile news reached us regarding gangs of Bulbovtsy and also German soldiers on the rampage in the vicinity. We left the village. On the way we met a caravan of Poles with their womenfolk and children. Behind them were Gypsies. The Poles were also running away from the Bulbovtsy.

(The Germans didn't do them any harm) So we followed the Poles and rested near them in the forest.

Days and months passed by. Rumours told of victories and the approach of the Soviet army. The Germans were retreating. **The whole area was in a state of lawlessness.** In the deserted forests and villages battles raged between the partisans and the Bulbovtsey. On the whole the partisans were gaining the upper hand. Villages passed from one side to the other. Other villages were burning. We found ourselves in the line of the moving front. So it went on until at last the whole area was liberated and the front moved further away. That was in the autumn of 1943.

The Poles came out of the forests and drove away. Jews **also** began to appear in the villages, alone and in groups. Others also settled there. The terrible period of the forests, which for us lasted for 8 months from March till November 1943, came to an end. For many months we didn't wash and didn't change our clothes. Only occasionally, at night sitting around the fire, did we take off our clothes to dry them. Only the youths, who went into a village to look for food, would return with a shirt or a pair of trousers which they had taken from a farmyard.

With Liberation

The forest period was over but we couldn't rest yet. I and several other Jews came into the village of Nimovitch. We entered one of the houses together. A typhus epidemic was raging in the area, and I too lay ill for three weeks on a hard bench, without any kind of medical aid and only a pile of straw for my head. No food touched my mouth, only water. When I got up from my sickbed, weak and exhausted, a peasant woman came to me and suggested I should knit gloves and socks for the partisans and earn my keep that way. I agreed and for my work I received food and lodging.

The front was not far from the village. Six kilometres away was the river Styr. On the other side were the Germans and on this side the partisans and the Soviet army. From time to time the German troops broke through the front and crossed the river. The Red Army troops drove them back. One Friday there was a commotion in the village: 'RUN AWAY!' The Germans had come across the river and were getting close. I wasn't yet strong enough after my illness. It was bad, wet weather following the end of the snow. All the Jews of the village gathered and went away to the shtetl of Rafalovka – 120 kilometres away.

With us there, in the village of Nimovitch, were also the three orphans who had been orphaned yet again following the murder of their uncle Reb Asher Bitchik from Puznya. Theirs was a bitter fate; after the months in the forest they were covered in sores and boils. The youngest of them, Aarele, nine-years old, embarrassed by his sores, lay a whole day, sad, covered in rags. I heated up some water and, very carefully, washed round the sores on his hands. There was no soap to be had. One day I went with his thirteen-year old sister and twelve-year old brother to beg for food nearby. A Goy took pity on the little boy and suggested that he should stay with him in his home, tend his cattle and he would care for him and give him food and clothes. The little boy agreed, as did his sister. The boy would get up early in the morning at 3 o'clock, go out and tend the cattle until 9 o'clock, he would eat and sleep a little and again go out to tend the cattle until it got dark. In cold days he would go out in the morning until it was dark, but even then it wasn't easy for him because the local boys made life very difficult for him.

I would go together with his sister to visit him. He would throw himself at us with hugs and kisses. The boy was very lonely among the Goys. He begged us to bring his younger brother to him because he was missing him. Once we brought

him, and when the two little brothers saw each other in the distance they ran and threw themselves at each other and kissed and hugged until it was hard to separate them.

When we left the forests we took the boy and came with him to Nimovitch. None of the peasants were willing to take the boys into their homes because of their running sores. We brought them into a barn, where they lay separately. Barefoot and naked in those cold days. The girl would come to us to sleep and then she would return to the barn to her little brothers. That was the fate of the orphans. Heaven and earth should cry and lament their fate.

In Nimovitch we sheltered together at the home of a widow whose husband had been murdered in the fighting. She wasn't able to manage her household. She took us in, and in return we worked in the yard and in the home. Day after day and night after night soldiers, then partisans, would come in and out. We fed her four children, looked after the cowshed, chopped wood and cleaned the house, which had been neglected. In that house Hannah Feldman from Linka gave birth on a bench over a bit of straw. Together we walked the long road to Rafalovka, the newly born baby swaddled and bound to its mother's bosom. The mother held on to me on one side and on to her husband on the other side. That's how we marched. The baby would cry loudly and our companions, angry with the parents, demanded that they leave the baby behind. When we got to Rafalovka the baby had hardly a drop of life left in it, not wanting to eat or drink. After about two months it recovered. After about eleven months, when we got to Pinsk, the baby was circumcised.

We walked non-stop for seven days and nights so as to get farther away from the Germans who were getting nearer. Half way there we were walking on the ice of a river which was beginning to melt. Our feet would step into water and this is how, cold and having passed through many dangers, we came to Rafalovka. On the way were scattered dead bodies of Germans, and also limbs mixed with pieces of aeroplanes, victims of the Soviet bombs.

In Rafalovka we returned to a civilised life for the first time. We looked like wild beasts or cavemen, wrapped in rags. *We stared in wonder at trains which we had not seen for years.* Here there were trains and buses going regularly between the towns. There we saw thousands of soldiers marching back and forth. In sealed carriages Ukrainian Bulbovtsy, who hadn't wanted to serve in the Red Army, and deserters from the front were being transported. German prisoners looked out of the carriages, tired and dejected. In the station some of those who were departing picked crumbs of bread off the ground. We felt no pity for them. We said: 'If they fall into our hands we'll tear the living flesh off them, in revenge for everything that they have done to us.'

The shtetl was partly destroyed. It had suffered from frequent air battles and bombardment. *Every so often there were dog-fights in the air, bombs fell, making a terrible noise,* houses were on fire, people, torn into pieces, crushed and killed. *We had no confidence in the morrow.* We, a group of twelve Jews, fixed a ruined house and lived in it. The Soviet authority allowed us to take as many as we wanted of the potatoes left in holes in the ground by the Germans. It was very hard work taking the potatoes out of the hard frozen ground, not having anything to dig with. Suddenly a bomb fell close to our flat. People were killed, houses destroyed, windows and doors were blown out of our flat and the ovens were smashed. A brick fell on my head. *Only by a miracle did I survive.* We went out into the street ... devastation, impossible to describe. Houses collapsing, *pieces of wood and bricks flying about,* the air thick with dust and so dark you couldn't see each other.

I stayed in Rafalovka for six months. During the day in the shtetl and at night in the nearby forest. The German aeroplanes bombed a lot at night; some of the

inhabitants of the shtetl also went in the forest, in order not to be in the shtetl at night.

With the liberation of Pinsk by the Soviet army I made my way there. Jews from the surrounding area stayed there together. **Of the Pinsk Jews themselves there were only 18 who came at that time.** After liberation no Jew was safe in the shtetls. That's why they tended to concentrate in the larger towns.

Young people found work in the town or got jobs with the authority. Those Jews arriving from elsewhere had to rely on trade, which the NKVD³⁷⁵ strictly forbade. Jews would ask: 'How are we supposed to live?' The NKVD turned a blind eye. I began to work in order to earn my keep and also in order to forget my misfortunes. I baked rolls and sold them in the market.

Jews were afraid of returning to the shtetls. The Bulbovtsy were still on the rampage on the roads and in the forests. Jews were being murdered as they travelled to their shtetls. I myself didn't visit our shtetl. I was the only one left, my loved ones all gone. Who would I go to, and what for? What would I do with my house? I knew that only one Jew went back to our shtetl. One thought brought him there: to avenge our blood that had been spilled. He wrote to me that I should not go back to the shtetl: 'It pains the eyes to see it'. He wrote to me about my deserted house, without windows, without doors and its ovens smashed. The Goys were repairing it, he didn't know for whom.

On the Way to Eretz Israel

The repatriation of Polish citizens began. I registered as a Polish citizen in order to be able to get out. Two large convoys of Polish citizens left on their way and I missed them. My turn came with the third convoy, the departure of which was postponed several times. Rumours were doing the rounds among the Jews that it was possible to get to Eretz Israel direct from Poland without any trouble. From Łódź one would travel to Romania, and anyone who had 50 roubles in gold could travel from there to the Eretz Israel. I worked hard and saved 50 roubles in gold so that I too could get to the Eretz Israel, *to my sons*.

The people who were travelling in convoys were allowed to carry as many belongings as they had. The government paid for the journey. There were Poles who came back with plenty of goods, weighing a few tons. There were some who took horses and cows with them on the wagons. When they registered me they asked how much weight I was taking with me. I replied: 'I don't have anything.' They wrote down one hundred kilos just the same.

As the third convoy was not leaving I looked for other ways to get to Poland. I made my way to Kovel on all sorts of roads, and from there to Łódź with a group of 25 Jews. That was in the month of Tammuz in the year 5705 (June/July 1945).

Abandoned and alone I didn't know where to turn. When I told some Jews I had children on a kibbutz in Eretz Israel they advised me to turn to a kibbutz in the city. *So one day I went to the kibbutz. There were young people there who greeted me warmly. One of the managers of the kibbutz told me he knew my sons in Israel. He asked me to come again the next day because 'someone' from Warsaw was coming and he wanted to ask his advice as to what should be done with me. When I came the next day I noticed a tall man with a moustache, who was surrounded by the other kibbutz people. When he saw me he came over to me, shook my hand and asked how I was doing. This was Antek³⁷⁶.* He listened to me attentively, encouraged me

³⁷⁵ *Narodny Kommissariat Vnutryennikh Dyel* (Russian), Soviet State Security

³⁷⁶ Antek was the *nom de guerre* of Icchak Cukierman (1915-1981), a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the main link between the *Z.O.B.*, the Jewish Fighting Organisation in the ghetto, and the Polish Home Army. After the war he emigrated to Israel where he co-founded kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot

and promised that they would look after me. I would go to the kibbutz frequently. It was pleasant sitting there among the young people. *They asked me to eat but I didn't want to. I was worried in case the food wasn't kosher.*

After about two weeks *Itzhak Ts* [Ichhak Cukierman] returned from Warsaw. They called me over to the kibbutz. *In those days I had a parcel stolen from me and I was afraid to go, leaving my belongings without anyone watching it. A man from the kibbutz came and asked me to go. He would look after my things. I came to the kibbutz and they began to take care of all my concerns.* After a few days I left on my journey, with the aim of reaching Italy. Hannah G., a girl from the Khalutz³⁷⁷, was allotted the task of taking care of me on the way.

A long, wearisome journey began, through countries and across frontiers, by train and by car and on foot. We were on the move for four months, *stopped at refugee camps and continued travelling.* In the large towns there was always someone to look after us. I can no longer remember the names of all the stations and places we passed through. *At one border crossing we were turned back. Many tried to cross a second time. They were turned back. Again they tried. We too tried to cross the border over high and steep mountains but we didn't make it. We were taken back in wagons, like prisoners. But in Keppenberg we bumped into Greek Goys who were returning from work camps in Germany. Their aim was to go to Italy first, in order to travel from there to Greece, their homeland. They were, it seemed to me, the only ones among the Goys we came across who met us with joy and friendship – 'Jews! Jews!' They used to quarrel amongst themselves but they treated us well. They asked us to sing Jewish songs. They asked us to let them accompany them as Greek Jews. They also did their best with the British. They knew we wanted to get to the Land. Indeed it was with them that we reached Bari, in Italy.*

In Italy we stayed in the UNRA³⁷⁸ camp and there they looked after us. The whole way I was together with girls from the Khalutz. Not wanting to part from them I went with them to the training kibbutz in Maria di Leuca. I knew that Jewish soldiers from the Jewish Brigade were also taking care of my immigration to Eretz Israel. One Sabbath a soldier came to the kibbutz, *with a pack on his back. He entered the dining room and asked for Hannah G., the one with whom I had travelled all the way from Łódź. After a short conversation it became clear that it was me he wanted.* He brought me a letter from my children in Eretz Israel. *When he said goodbye to us I wanted him to take letters back for me. He told me: 'You will be there before me.'* Indeed, after a few days my travel to Eretz Israel was confirmed, together with the large convoy of children.

When I came to Bari to make my arrangements I met the Greeks, who hadn't sailed yet. They cheered us in fraternal joy. They knew that the people who returned from small towns were due for immigration. One Thursday, November 9th 1945, my wanderings were over. Our ship, an English military one, arrived that day to the shore of Eretz Israel. I came down to the shore and my eyes were looking for my children, who had remained there and were waiting for my arrival.

Gitl Fialkov

(Ghetto Fighters)

³⁷⁷ Pioneers

³⁷⁸ United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

In memory of our Families

Twenty years have passed since the Shoah. I shall try to put down on paper what is engraved in my heart and in my memory concerning my home in Vysotsk, the shtetl of my birth, and in doing this erect a memorial to my dear ones, my family, victims of the Shoah, buried in a large mass grave somewhere outside the shtetl, a grave abandoned, overgrown with thorns and thistles, perhaps ploughed and sown, the fruits of which are enjoyed by enemies of the Jews.

For more than twenty years I lived within the confines of the shtetl, rolled about in its dirt, had fun running around in its puddles, trampling in its marshes, enjoying it in its full glory when it was covered in its white coat. Snowballs provided me with my first target practice. It was here that my character was formed, the character of a daughter born of a vibrant Jewish shtetl.

Vysotsk was one of the small shtetls scattered throughout the length and breadth of Poland where Jewish life with a traditional culture flourished, where there was also a young generation of pioneering Zionists, a Tarbut ³⁷⁹ school, synagogues and public prayers during the holidays and throughout the whole year. A shtetl – in fact it's doubtful if it can be described as a shtetl or just a large village – a shtetl bordered by the banks of the Horyn on the eastern side and on the west by four rivers and the bridges above them. When the snow thawed, the water rose and the floods came the shtetl seemed like an island in an expanse of water.

The railway station was seven kilometres away from the shtetl. On the way there and back we had to cross the Horyn on a raft. In order to cross the river the people were always reliant on the goodwill of the Goy 'raftsman' who was sunk in a deep slumber for most of the time. It was not easy to rouse him from his sleep. The main contact with the nearby shtetls – Dombrovitz and Stolin – was by horse and cart in summer and by horse-drawn sledge in winter. The whole shtetl was surrounded by 'Goy' villages, Jew-haters. Much of the time these villages were used as nests by all sorts of gangs.

As a result of changes of regime our shtetl was also affected by political and economic changes. But despite everything Jews of Vysotsk put down roots in the place and found their livelihood in petty trade and craft – tailors, cobblers, carpenters and so on.

The family

Our extended family lived in the community of Vysotsk. Grandfather Asher son of Reb Gershon Nafkhan ('Asher-Gershns') and Grandmother Tsipora had four girls and two boys. One of them was my father, Isroel, whose wife was Rakhel, daughter of Rebbe Eliezer Fikman from Dombrovitz. My two brothers were Leybele and Gershele (the name of the elder brother was Yosef Leyb and the name of the younger brother Gershon). Then there were my younger sister Sara Minke and myself. My uncle Chaim Aaron Nafkhan and his wife Blume emigrated to America with their sons Leybush and Dovid and the girls Rivke and Miriam. Aunt Pesya, her husband



Minka and Gershon Nafkhan

³⁷⁹ 'Culture', a network of Hebrew-language educational institutions founded in 1922

Shleyme Kolodny and her seven daughters and only son Gershon lived in their house in the same street opposite us. My other aunt, Malka, and her husband, Nakhman Perl, who had six sons and one daughter, Rivele, also lived in the same street, three doors away from us. My aunt Mindl bless her soul (whom I did not know), her husband, Hershil Sheynboym, their son Chaim and their daughter Rivtse, both married with children, lived in the house next door to us. My aunt Miriam, the youngest of my grandmother's daughters, her husband, Meir Katzman, and their three children lived with us. They are now in Israel. All of them made their living through trade; one had a clothes shop and another a grocery shop. My grandfather had a sister in the shtetl, Dvoyre, and her husband, Yeshiyahu Feldlayt, and their children. Then there were also Grandmother's cousins. All in all an extended family with its joys and sorrows, home visits, gossip and also family arguments, as is normal.

The glory of the family was the 'young guard', the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren. Active and full of energy, strict in their observance of every detail of tradition. They were delighted to go out and collect Hannukah³⁸⁰ donations, counting the petty change and accumulating money. Who was there to equal them? They would exchange Purim³⁸¹ gifts reverently, earnestly collect Pessach nuts and enthusiastically philosophise over the 'stealing' (finding) of the unleavened bread



Chaya Fikman-Nafkhan and Minka

(*Afikumin*) on the eve of Seder³⁸². They were ready for everything. They certainly did not pass by the opportunity to eat the sweetmeats, Hannukah pancakes with masses of goose fat, *oznei haman*³⁸³ and all the other spices, stuffed pastries (*kreplakh*) belonging to festival days etc.

On the night a festival was celebrated, whether the Yamim Noraim³⁸⁴, Rosh HaShana³⁸⁵ and Yom Kippur³⁸⁶, Sukkot³⁸⁷, Simkhat Torah³⁸⁸ or Pessach, I loved to see everybody polished and spruced up, wearing new festive clothes, as they walked to the synagogue proudly, side by side with their fathers, with a feeling of security, not once teasing the girls who were not allowed to take part in the procession.

When my father of blessed memory took my two brothers with him he would kiss me and my sister. He would greet us with a joyful blessing for the New Year and a Happy Holiday before leaving us on his way to the synagogue. We would stand in reverence by the entrance to the house. Our eyes would follow them all the way, envying our brothers who were going to the synagogue with Father. It was our lucky day when, on the holiday of Simkhat Torah, girls were also allowed into the synagogue.

³⁸⁰ the 8-day Festival of Lights starting on the 25th day of Kislev (December) to mark the re-dedication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem following the successful uprising of the Maccabees

³⁸¹ a festival that takes place on either the 14th or 15th day of the month of Adar (usually late March), marking the victory of the Jews over their Persian oppressors (see Book of Esther)

³⁸² Hebrew: 'order' or 'arrangement', a ritual feast marking the start of Passover

³⁸³ 'Haman's ears', triangular biscuits filled with poppy seeds (or alternatives) traditionally eaten at Purim (see Book of Esther)

³⁸⁴ 'Days of Awe', the period between the New Year and the Day of Atonement

³⁸⁵ New Year

³⁸⁶ Day of Atonement

³⁸⁷ The 7-day Feast of Tabernacles (between late September and late October) when Jews eat (and sometimes sleep) in temporary structures partially open to the sky, recalling the forty years in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt

³⁸⁸ 'Rejoicing in the Torah', a festival marking the completion of the annual cycle of Torah readings

The House

Our house was large, built of wood. Two ante-rooms were used as shops. In one was a grocery shop under the name of my father Isroel Nafkhan. In the other was a clothes shop run by my uncle Katzman. Later on, when my uncle bought his own flat, this house was rented by Yekhiel Borovyk and family, and in place of the sign of a clothes shop there appeared the sign *sklip zhelizny* (iron shop)³⁸⁹. Later, with the death of my father of blessed memory, part of the house was inherited by my older brother Leybele. He made it his family home and established a clothes shop. Again there was a new sign: *sklip manifakturny*³⁹⁰. My brother Gershele inherited the second half of the house together with the grocery shop.

The main thing that characterised the house was the roof, a tin roof, almost the only one in the whole shtetl. All the other roofs were covered with wooden shingles (*shindlakh* [Yidd.]) and a large number of the roofs were covered with straw. Our beautifully painted roof gave a special hue to the street with its grey background of wooden and straw roofs. From time to time the colour of the paint was changed. One time it was green, then it was red. At least every few years it was necessary to repair the roof because the rust constantly ate away at it. Despite that it showed its strength, particularly on those nights when flames would consume the Jewish homes (mostly malicious acts) and a fire – the nightmare of all residents of the shtetl – would break out. Then our roof would whisper to us: ‘Those sparks will not consume me, they will not catch hold of me!’

Around the house there was a large vegetable garden, arranged in rows, mainly sown with potatoes and few cucumbers, large and small radishes and sweet-corn. There was even a row of tobacco plants. With the arrival of tomatoes in our shtetl there also came publicity regarding the important vitamins tomatoes contain.



Malka and Nakhman Perl

Tomatoes were also grown in our garden. A row of potatoes adorned with stalks of corn was set aside for every daughter (that is to say my father's sisters), as there was no ground for a garden next to their houses. And so the whole family was able to enjoy the benefits of the garden. Our cowshed was situated some tens of metres away from the house. In it was our cow, a special specimen that we bred ourselves. Her colour was a light red with a white patch in the shape of a heart on her forehead. Her offspring were all similar to her. We also reared domestic chickens and fattened up geese. These supplied us with goose fat throughout the year. It goes without saying that there was no shortage of milk and meat in the house. We made butter, cream, soft and hard cheese ourselves by hand. Everything was produced in the most primitive fashion without any mechanization. In those days the cellar served as the ‘fridge’. This is where milk products were preserved in the summer and also potatoes in the winter.

³⁸⁹ standard Polish: *sklep żelazny*

³⁹⁰ standard Polish: *sklep manufakturny*: textiles shop

Inside, in one half of the house there were two bedrooms and a large dining room. In the second half there were two large rooms and a kitchen shared by the two households. The furniture – wooden beds, polished in a clear brown colour, a table and chairs in the bedroom, a large table, a sofa, a bench and chairs and a bookcase in the dining room. In the bookcase were all the tractates, prayer books, Torah³⁹¹ and prophets, volumes of the Mishnah³⁹² and the Zohar³⁹³ etc. Our two chests of clothes (*'kufertim'* [Yidd: kufert]), polished in the same colour as the beds, as an alternative to the clothes chest, stood on wheels and were easily moveable, thus enabling changes to be made in the bedroom.

There were no pictures in our house because 'Thou shalt not make any likeness...' ³⁹⁴ The special objects that adorned the dining room were the large flowerpots: houseplants, cactuses and so on. The floor was made of wood. The colours merged beautifully against the background of the clear greenish paint, the green flowerpots, the brown colour of the furniture, the white tablecloth spread on the table and, on Sabbath eve, our silver candlesticks and Grandmother's copper candlesticks. Everything gleaming bright. How pleasing it all was to the eye.



Itzhok Petrukh, his brothers Meir, Avigdor and Sander Perl

Grandfather and Grandmother

Grandfather Asher, son of Reb Gershon, spent a lot of time studying the Torah and praying. He was a strict Jew. The grandchildren shied away from approaching him out of fear and reverence towards him. For many years he suffered from a wound in his leg that did not heal for the rest of his life. Treatment at that time was primitive, without x-ray or any electrical means or antibiotics. He suffered great pain, enduring his sufferings in silence ('I shall be tormented by pain in this world, then straight to the Garden of Eden in the world to come'). Grandmother, Tzipora, tiny, who ruled the nest, was full of energy and common sense, helped in the shop, convincing her women customers. The grandchildren clung to her and she gave us sweets. She was like a second mother to us.

Orphanhood, war, thunder (as told by Father)

The year 5674 [1914]. On the 27th day of Tammuz [July] my mother of blessed memory died in the vacation town of Otwock, near Warsaw³⁹⁵, hundreds of kilometres away from us. This was the year when the First World War broke out. A state of emergency, chaos, impassable roads. My father has difficulty getting there and doesn't arrive in time for the funeral. He returns home and clings to his young children. My sister Sara Minke is only six months old and I am close to four. My brother Gershele is seven and my brother Leybele is ten. My father doesn't abandon

³⁹¹ Five books of Moses, Pentateuch

³⁹² the 'oral law' handed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and not included in the Bible

³⁹³ Hebrew: 'Splendour', written in Aramaic, it is the basic work of Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah

³⁹⁴ Exodus chapter 20, verse 4

³⁹⁵ 24 km south-east of Warsaw

us. Together with Grandmother he takes on the burden of bringing up his children; day and night he looks after us. There is no describing in words his love for Mother. He always told us about her, describing her as very beautiful (no pictures remained of her), noble, kind-hearted and sensitive. With all his heart and in the purity of his love he instilled in us her noble image, her concern for us and her love for us. When he became a widower Father was still young, a man of thirty. But he did not marry a second time. 'I could not find a replacement for her and I did not want a stepmother bringing you up' he once told us. He lived in solitude for the last 22 years of his life, giving everything to us, his children.

In 1918-19 came the end of the war and there was hunger at home. Rumours of pogroms and a change of regime. Refugees are hiding in our shtetl. We receive hostile visits by gangs, sometimes by Petlyura's³⁹⁶ people and sometimes Belkhovtzy. Terror and fear dominate everything. One doesn't know what the day will bring. My aunt's daughters, certainly other young women in the shtetl, disguise themselves as 'Goys' and hide with 'Goys'. We, the children, dread what is to come. It is rumoured that the Poles are supposed to come; indeed one night they appear in our house. My grandfather, who knew Polish, goes out to them. They ask for food and something for the horses. They collected what there was to collect and went on their way. After some days a group of Belkhovtzy suddenly appear. Everyone is trembling with fear because for some time news of their atrocities and of their dirty tricks had been spreading in the shtetl. A delegation goes out to meet them. They order such and such amount of money, food and fodder for the horses, going from house to house to collect what there was to be collected. There is no haggling with them. The main thing is to see the back of them. At dawn that morning my father also went out to take the cow to pasture. In the Goy street which he passed he met one of the Belkhovtzy soldiers on his horse. He calls Father, ordering him to run in front of the horse. He gallops after him (and we at home are pleased that at last Father has gone out of the house). Suddenly we see Father running through the vegetable garden, very pale and out of breath. We call out to him to return quickly and hide with the 'Goys'. Father tells us everything that had happened to him, how he was saved by a miracle, when the Belkhovtzy soldier was stopped suddenly by one of the Polish girls who was looking out of the window. Father continued running and disappeared from the Belkhovtzy's sight. Of course on that Sabbath there was a 'thanksgiving' blessing. 1920-30. The regime becomes more stable. Our shtetl is in the hands of the Poles. Food, including hot meals, is distributed to children and adults on behalf of the Joint³⁹⁷. Help starts to arrive from America from my uncle Chaim Aaron and his family. Life begins to return to normal. Father begins again in commerce, opening a grocery store. My two brothers also come to help him. In our free hours and after studies both my sister and I take on the burden of cooking and housework. Grandfather and Grandmother are also with us. The rays of the sun break through in the skies of our shtetl and in our family circle. Three of my aunt Pesya's daughters get married. Grandfather and Grandmother have great-grandsons and great-granddaughters. Also more grandchildren are born. New branches of the extended family grow.

³⁹⁶ Symon Petlura (Petlyura), born in 1879, a Ukrainian nationalist who became head of the government of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1919-1921). Jews held him responsible for the wave of pogroms in 1919. He was assassinated in Paris in 1926.

³⁹⁷ American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, founded in 1914 to assist desperate Jewish communities in Palestine, the JDC was the main source of external funding for Jews in eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, between the wars. During the Second World War the JDC saved many thousands of Jews and assisted displaced Jews following the war.

I remember once at Shavuot³⁹⁸ (I think it was in 1930) the whole family, approximately fifty people, came in to eat strudels and *puterkukhin*³⁹⁹. How the old people's faces glow then, both of them in old age (nearly 90), especially Grandmother ('A joy to be a mother of sons'), the noise, the singing, the clinking of glasses with the blessing of Lechaim ['Cheers'] and the old couple in the centre. How beautiful a picture it was to behold, the mountains of food. Will I be able to immortalise it with these words?

We also knew years of sorrow. Within a year the family grieved the death of my aunt Miriam, the youngest of Grandmother's daughters. After that Grandmother died. At the end of that year Grandfather passed away, as did Ravtsia, the daughter of my uncle Hershl Sheynboym. Again orphanhood surrounds our family, a heavy blow for all of us. More than one person linked it with an 'evil eye' that was sent into the house during the family gathering at Shavuot.

My brother goes off to study

Gershele went to a yeshiva⁴⁰⁰ in Luninets⁴⁰¹ and Leybele went to a Talmud Torah⁴⁰² in Stolin⁴⁰³. Those not paying school fees had to stay with distant relatives, '*Essen-teg*'⁴⁰⁴, that is to say every day they would go to eat with a different family, about seven families would support the *yeshiva-bokher*⁴⁰⁵. Of course every day such food was necessarily dependent on the housewife, on whether or not she was mean or did things properly and was clean. And so on. For Gershele at any rate it was very painful to speak about those times, but when he did he gave vivid descriptions of the housewives with whom he came into contact and on whose generosity he depended. Sometimes he would talk about it in a cheerful manner, making us all laugh. But apart from the inner humiliation caused by this way of life they also knew days of real hunger. Homesickness was very strong. Leybele couldn't take it at all and came home after a month. Gershele, it seems to me, continued for half a year, perhaps to the end of the year.

Our house - open to all

A fresh wind was blowing in our shtetl: national awakening, Zionism. In the light of events in Tel Chai⁴⁰⁶ a branch of HeKhalutz is organised. My brothers are enrolled as members of the general Zionist organisation, but Leybele the *soltys*⁴⁰⁷ is responsible for registering the HeKhalutz. They talk about aliyah and going off for training. There are even some who carry out the command. My father belongs to the Karlin Chassidim sect. I make my first steps in the HeKhalutz HaTzair movement. For all of them our house was open. More than once it would happen, particularly in the winter evenings, that a number of Chassidim, friends of Father or simply neighbours,

³⁹⁸ a holiday on the 6th day of the month of Sivan (May/June) commemorating the day God gave the Torah to Moses

³⁹⁹ Yiddish: butter cakes

⁴⁰⁰ religious studies college

⁴⁰¹ now the administrative centre of the Luninets district of Brest province in southern Belarus, Luninets was under Polish rule from 1540 until 1793 and again from 1920 until 1939

⁴⁰² school providing a traditional religion-based education, free of charge for poorer pupils

⁴⁰³ nearest small town, nowadays just north of the Ukraine-Belarus border

⁴⁰⁴ Yiddish: 'eating days', the arrangement by which a yeshiva student would eat with a different family each day

⁴⁰⁵ student in religious seminary

⁴⁰⁶ refers to the death in 1920 of Yosef Trumpeldor and seven other 'guards', defending Tel Hai, a farming village in the north of the Upper Galilee valley

⁴⁰⁷ Polish: *soltys*, village administrator

would gather for a cup of hot tea. The samovar is on the table, and the conversation revolves around the miracles and wonders that the rebbe has performed. This was precisely at the time when, at the court of the rebbe of Stolin, a deep division opened up as to who would inherit the rabbinical throne on the death of the esteemed rebbe, the *gaon*⁴⁰⁸ Reb Israelke Perlov of blessed memory. They spoke tearfully of the irreplaceable loss. As is well known, a major dispute flared up among Stolin Chassidim which ended in the schism between the followers of rebbe Moyshele and the followers of rebbe Melekhke. This schism did not bypass our shtetl. As a result it was divided into two in a bitter civil war, with each sect having its own butcher and kosher inspector and imposing a complete ban on the other sect's butcher.

The rov of the shtetl was the rov Abelson. He was loyal to both sides. My father belonged to the Karlin Chassidim. I remember with what devotion they would talk about and interpret the will that Reb Israelke of blessed memory had left. They knew all its paragraphs by heart, and any hint in the will was passed from one to another, such as 'The king shall rule'⁴⁰⁹. From that they drew an explicit hint that his son rebbe Melekhke should inherit the rabbinical throne.

I also remember a story concerning the greatness of the vision of Rebbe Israelke of blessed memory. This was still in the days of Tsar Nicholas. A certain Jew, who was in great danger, appeared in court on a charge with which he had been smeared. The danger of death or life imprisonment awaited him. Of course they would go to the rebbe in prayers and entreaties. He was supposed to help them. On one occasion when the rebbe was standing, listening to the court proceedings, he turned to the window and wrote on the windowpane which was covered with warm condensation : *Sud bezposredstvu*⁴¹⁰ (that is to say, a verdict without consequences). But indeed who could see into the future, if not the rebbe? We, the children and also members of the HeKhalutz HaTzair, listen more than once to these stories, intoxicated by devotion and a strong belief in the omnipotence of the man.

When the rebbes visited the shtetl the young people would join as loyal participants in the ecstatic dancing of the Chassidim. With the same enthusiasm and devotion we, the young ones, continued to 'raise the spirit', dancing the Horah⁴¹¹ in the clubhouse of the HeKhalutz HaTzair every single evening. Every Sabbath morning, when my father and brothers were in the synagogue, my girl friends, from my class, would come to drink a cup of *tzikoria*⁴¹² and taste yeast cakes, after which we would also steal into the synagogue to hear in turn the eighteen benedictions of the Amidah⁴¹³. Of course no Sabbath passed without a guest dining at our table ; a public emissary passing through our shtetl or somebody collecting alms would always find a place to sleep in our house. And when the first representatives from the HeKhalutz HaTzair centre arrived they also would dine and sleep in our house. My dear father knew how to open his heart to all our wishes. He always liked to have visitors and always made sure to bring a 'guest for Sabbath'.

By the way, I remember a prank my friends played on Grandfather while he was still alive. It was already getting dark outside. They lit a torch, placed it on the kitchen floor, covered it with sawdust and shouted to Grandfather: 'There's a fire in the kitchen!' My grandfather rushed into the kitchen and at once threw water on the spot. The children burst out laughing. Grandfather's wrath was difficult to assuage.

⁴⁰⁸ 'Genius', a title for a rabbi indicating great respect

⁴⁰⁹ This refers to the name Melekhke, 'little king'

⁴¹⁰ from Russian *без посредствий*

⁴¹¹ Jewish/Israeli round dance originally from the Balkans

⁴¹² Polish: chicory

⁴¹³ 'Standing prayer', originally consisting of 18 blessings, is the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, recited every day at each of the prayer services

My two brothers

Both of them were handsome. Leybele was active as the *soltys*⁴¹⁴, representing the concerns of the shtetl to the authorities, always busy with the affairs of the community, alert to all sorts of questions, discussing and arguing. But he read little and did not go deeply into things, not passing the annual examinations in written studies of Gemara⁴¹⁵. In contrast to him Gershele does not neglect the tractates and reads non-religious texts in secret. He was greatly influenced by 'A Wanderer on the Path of Life' by Smolenskin⁴¹⁶ and 'Concerning Paths' by Ahad HaAm⁴¹⁷. He was a thinker, struggling hard, looking for a solution. He was innocence and purity itself, with blue eyes and curly fair hair, a pleasant lad, devoted, responsible and caring towards us all. He was harnessed to the yoke of earning a living, helping Father in the shop a lot. Although I was three years younger than him, a special friendship formed between us. He would exchange opinions with me on all sorts of subjects and problems. He also understood my mood. At that time I was all enthused by the pioneering idea and on the threshold of departure for training. Against Father's 'No' he was on my side. For some reason my sister was not attracted to the affairs of the movement and turned into a real housewife.

The newspapers that came to our house were: the *Haynt*⁴¹⁸ and all the pamphlets of the HeKhalutz⁴¹⁹ – the *HaAtid*⁴²⁰ and so on. During mealtimes conversations and arguments continue concerning the pioneer movement. My father joins in everything. He tries to understand us. His spiritual world is not only the world of the Gemara, the Mishnah and the prayers. In his boyhood he read *HaTsifra*⁴²¹. By the way, copies of *HaTsifra* were still kept in the loft, arranged according to the date of issue. Father was affected in his younger days by the atmosphere of the movement of national renewal. It seems to me that he turned to Chassidism after the disaster of the death of my mother, his beloved. And so he would guide and lead us, instilling in us confidence in the direction of life we chose. He hoped and believed we would not shame him in whatever we turned to.

The day of my aliyah occurred on 9 of Av [July] 5694 (1934). I part from those dear to my heart. Who could tell that I would not see them again? My dear father returns from his morning prayer pale and agitated. Saying farewell is very difficult for him. Perhaps the malignant illness is already taking hold of his body? The letters I have kept are all full of a fierce longing for me. 'If only I could see you one more time it would make it easier for me', he wrote to me once. The condition of his health was deteriorating completely, but he only hinted at it. He was anxious not to make me sad. He notes the devotion and care they are giving him. In particular he was worried about my sister Minkele who was caring for him day and night. On the 7th day of Adar 5696 [February 1936] he passed away. He was only 52.

Life makes new demands. People recover from the catastrophe. Each of the children builds himself a family nest. Leybele and his wife Freydl had a daughter whose name was Tirtzele. Gershele marries Chaya Fikman, the daughter of our uncle from Sarny. Minkele married Avroml Goltzman from Stolin. To all of them sons are

⁴¹⁴ Polish: *soltys*, village administrator

⁴¹⁵ section of the Talmud

⁴¹⁶ Peretz Smolenskin, a Russian Jewish Hebrew writer, born 1842 in Mogilev, died 1885 in Odessa

⁴¹⁷ 'One of the People', pseudonym of Asher Tzvi Hirsh Ginsberg (1856-1927), a Hebrew essayist and proponent of cultural Zionism (as opposed to political Zionism)

⁴¹⁸ 'Today', a leading Yiddish-language paper published in Warsaw from 1908 until 1939

⁴¹⁹ 'The Pioneer' movement, divided into HeKhalutz HaBoger (the Adult Pioneer) and HeKhalutz HaTzair (the Young Pioneer)

⁴²⁰ 'The Future', the newspaper of HeKhalutz, published in Warsaw

⁴²¹ 'The Dawn', the first Hebrew-language journal in Poland, founded in 1862

born bearing the name of my father of blessed memory. I also have a daughter and her name is Israela. All of us keep alive the name of our dear father. It seemed as though our family had found some repose and a little of that longed-for happiness. But then the war breaks out.

The date of the last letter that I received was 1941, under Soviet rule. A few words saying all of them are in good health and an announcement from Gershele that they had lost their son of seven months. Later a card to say that a daughter had been born with the name of my mother Rakhel. From then on -complete silence.

Up till now the civilised world has not been shocked by the evil they did to you. But the sole survivor of our family bears witness to the memory of our dear ones. In my imagination I see you in days of joy, in days of sorrow, sadness and fear under the rule of the Russian saviours, when you were on a list of wealthy people, your wealth a source of blackmail and threats. I shall forever see you imprisoned in a ghetto under the rule of the murderous Nazi regime – marching in a group to an open mass grave, with your babes in arms. I see your contorted faces and I hear your cries. Or perhaps you went towards death in a quiet prayer of Kiddush HaShem⁴²²?

My saints! How shall I raise the elegy and who will hear it? From afar my tears saturate the abandoned grave.

May your souls be gathered in eternal life.

Rivka Nafkhan-Dan

Eynat

⁴²² 'Sanctification of the Name', an act that brings honour and respect to God (cf. Leviticus 22.23)

My father's house

How difficult it is to record memories of a home that no longer exists, of an extended family that remained faithful to tradition and brought up its children in the deep-rooted values of Judaism.

At the head of the family was my clever and sharp-witted grandfather. Who did not come to him for advice in various difficult situations? He would always be ready with advice for those who needed it, with a pertinent and clever aphorism, and the person seeking advice went away encouraged. He always demanded action, in particular from young people with regard to earning a living for their families, so that they could give their children a proper education.

He was extremely realistic and practical, endeavouring to give his son a peaceful home background in order that he would be 'a wise student' and devote himself to the study of the Torah. He was proud of the fact that his son was expert in the Torah and the Talmud and full of the wisdom of Israel. In the long winter evenings he would enthral us for many hours with the legends and splendid stories about god-fearing men, their lives and deeds.

I remember the Sabbath and festival days. The house would be ready for the arrival of the festival, cleaned, with the dishes appropriate for Sabbath banquets, accompanied by songs. All these left deep impressions in the hearts of those taking part. There was great beauty in this joint family life, full of tradition, rich in content and with deep spiritual values.

Our house experienced bereavement and orphanhood. My mother had an extremely fine and sensitive soul. Under the strain of everyday life, which was cruel to her, she broke down in her suffering. She was so young. She would worry about her little children and feared for their fate. Then her heart prophesied to her that her end was nigh and that it would come before she had brought us to a safe shore. Her sick heart could not take the hardships and worries of life and she departed at the age of 34.



Hershl Sheynbeyn

My father was a typical educated Jewish type, detached from the realities of everyday affairs and of earning a living, but he embraced the modern world. This was a time of turbulence and revolution in Russia, a time of hope for the coming of a new world.

He was a loyal Zionist, forever hoping to join his children in the Land and live there. He was among the committed followers of Zionism, although in those days there were few people in the shtetl of his age who publicly took a stand in favour of Zionism. They didn't read newspapers a lot in Vysotsk; subscription to a newspaper was regarded as a luxury. There were only isolated homes where it was possible to find a daily paper. I remember Father sneaking out of the house, sitting for hours in the chemist Khmara's place, leafing through Russian and Yiddish papers. He wouldn't leave them until he had finished reading the lot. He knew classical Russian

literature inside out. He enjoyed Mendele⁴²³, Sholem Aleichem⁴²⁴, Peretz⁴²⁵ and Bialik⁴²⁶. He was a brilliant mathematician. At home he would solve for us the most complicated problems we were given at school. None of this was done in public because the older generation frowned on this sort of activity.



Esther Zoliar

Chaya Zoliar

I remember my two younger sisters who had not yet been able to reach the Land for various reasons. This was particularly because of a lack of aliyah. They fell victim to the hands of the murderers of the Jewish people. Esther finished her obligatory schooling in the Polish state school and trained as a seamstress in the *ORT*⁴²⁷ school in Pinsk. She dreamed of a good future. She was clever, full of a fine and lively humour. She loved life. All her future was before her, but the hand of the murderer was brandished over her.

And Chayale, the lovely and pleasant daughter born to her parents when they were getting older. She was already without a mother when still very young. Since we, the older ones, quickly dispersed, one to training, another to the Land, the burden of the home fell on her while she was still a small girl. But she knew how to fit in both studies and housework, looking after Father and herself from a very young age. My sisters were at the beginning of their adulthood, full of hopes for the future, when they were cut down cruelly for the sin of being Jewish. We were bereft of those nearest and dearest to us.

I want to record the image of my best friend and comrade Tzipora Shuster from whose parental home not a soul survived. We were good friends from childhood, from school years. Together we passed the long journey of training, in the seminar of the HeKhalutz and in joint work in the movement. It was just by chance that she did not come to the Land. She was in poor health, and her parents were extremely fearful for her in the difficult conditions of the Land.

She was an exceptionally poetic soul, she loved what was beautiful in life, like singing, music, flowers and children, nature and life around her, everything in a natural and self-evident manner.

We did not receive a musical education in the shtetl. Her brother taught himself to play the violin. She was also attracted to playing, to whistling; she adored a beautiful song, a sentimental tune. Rich in spirit, she was full of the wisdom of life. She had great influence over the younger age groups in HeKhalutz HaTzair. She was

⁴²³ Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), pseudonym for Sholem Yankl Abramovich, was born near Minsk in 1838 and died in Odessa in 1917. He started writing in Hebrew, later switching to Yiddish in order to reach a wider audience. Regarded as the 'Grandfather' of Yiddish literature.

⁴²⁴ *nom de plume* of Sholem Naumovich Rabinovich (1859-1916), the most famous Yiddish writer

⁴²⁵ Yitzkhok Leybush Peretz was born in Zamość in 1852 and died in Warsaw in 1915. Regarded, with Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, as one of the three classical Yiddish writers

⁴²⁶ Chaim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), the most famous Hebrew poet of the modern age

⁴²⁷ The Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour among the Jews in Russia (Общество ремесленного и земледельческого труда среди евреев в России) was founded in 1880. In its first 25 years it provided training to 25,000 Jews. After the First World War *ORT* spread to other European countries and the USA. During the Second World War it continued to serve Jewish communities until they were liquidated, even functioning in the Warsaw Ghetto. To this day it remains an important provider of vocational training in Israel and in Jewish communities throughout the world, including, once again, countries of the former Soviet Union.

a gifted, talented leader in the movement. A bosom friend, she was on the threshold of being saved. What a pity she did not achieve it.

May her memory and the memory of her house be blessed.

Mina Zolyar Rotberg

Eynat



Gershon Kolodny and his wife Dina

A memorial candle to my family

Father

Perhaps fate was kind to my father, Reb Nisl of blessed memory, allowing him to die before the Shoah⁴²⁸. He passed away in his illness and was buried in the cemetery in a tiny grave.

In life he was a revered, patriarchal figure. A man who worked hard to support his family of many daughters. But in spite of his worries about earning a living to support his large family he was happy and goodhearted, showing love for others, without sadness or nervousness. Even words of reproach were said with a smile on his face and without raising a hand. One sharp look was sufficient warning not to repeat the incorrect action.

He was a figure of love for his family and was liked by his neighbours and by all those with whom he came into contact – and there were many that he came into contact with. These were: the merchants from whom he purchased; the purchasers to whom he sold; the Jews who came to our house every Sabbath to study a page of Gemara⁴²⁹, parts of Mishnah⁴³⁰ and passages for the week and who incidentally shared a drink of Sabbath tea: the Jews who came for Melave Malka⁴³¹.

When the rebbe Reb Elimelekh of Karlin came to the shtetl where else would he stay if not in the house of Reb Nisl? And the congregation of followers accompanying the rebbe filled the house. My father was never a prosperous man. More than once I was amazed by his ability to support his family. In order to feed his large family and entertain the many visitors the outgoings were great and many. But in his words, 'The Lord helps those who help themselves'. The burden of the family was only part of the work placed upon the man in the shtetl. Father, as a devout man, began his day at dawn. Even before Reb Nisl Meirs appeared outside the window with his special tune '*Shteyt oyf* [get up] to worship God'



Nisn Lopatyn (Nisl Leas)

Father was by then ready to go to the synagogue with his *talis*⁴³² under his arm. A malignant illness cut the cord of his life.

Mother

With the death of Father of blessed memory Mother of blessed memory took upon herself the whole burden of housework and supporting the family. Mother, Liebe Nisl Leas, was a typical Jewish mother. She bore her role and the heavy burden of the family in silence. I wonder how she found the energy, the strength and the peace of mind to feed and clothe her children and at the same time to look after the needs of the poor.

⁴²⁸ Holocaust, genocide of Jews in Second World War

⁴²⁹ section of the Talmud

⁴³⁰ the 'oral law' handed down by God to Moses on Mount Sinai but not included in the Bible

⁴³¹ 'Accompanying the Queen', the third and final meal of the Sabbath

⁴³² prayer mantle

On Sabbath eve she would remember a certain mother who had not yet come to buy what her family needed for the Sabbath. That meant she was not able to find the money. It then fell to me to be the 'envoy of charity', bringing bread for Sabbath to that family and a cooked meal for another family. She found time to look after the family as well as everyone else.

She was a devout and believing woman. At the same time she was tolerant towards other people's opinions. She listened with great patience to an opinion not accepted in those days.

There were many children in the house. Each of them had a group of friends, boys and girls, all of whom congregated in the house. In spite of the fact that the house was large there was a lot of noise - noise of conversation, laughter and excitement. She had patience for them all. More than once now, when my children bring their friends home and there is a lot of noise and my nerves are on edge, I remember how my mother received all the friends hospitably, giving one a caress, the next a warm word and treating everyone with honour and respect. When I remember that I also regain control. Her behaviour acts as a guiding light.



Liebe Lopatyn and her son Yehezkiel

You, all of you, my brothers and sisters: Ayzik, Khayke, Susil, Ida, Chana, Masha and Yosef and extended family, your memory will not dim as long as I live.

Lea'ke Lopatyn-Cohen

Kiryat Motzkin



Yoske Lopatyn



Ita Lopatyn-Sapir



Chana Lopatyn-Lykhtnfeld and her
daughters Chava and Belka



Masha and Reuven Khover

Father and Mother

At first glance a simple Jew, a tradesman in a small shtetl. What is there to boast about in that? But go and look and count how many fine qualities God blessed him with. Throughout his life he was frail, yet the large, heavy sledgehammer danced in his hands, both in the heat of the summer and in the cold of the winter. By day and also on stormy winter evenings the beating of his hammer was heard from afar. He worked all his life, never tiring. He was attached to his work. Even as an old man he did not lay down his sledgehammer. He earned a living for his family in the sweat of his brow. ‘God, do not make me dependent on other people’s charity’ he prayed three times a day. With those blessed hands of his he could make anything. He knew how to make a knife, hoe, sickle, scythe, rake, cart, he could shoe horses, repair hinges of windows and doors. At New Year he even made himself a shofar⁴³³.



Borukh Tkach

Everything sang in his blackened, cracked hands, covered with hard skin. But his hands were warm, always warm.

After a day’s crushing hard labour he would arrive late for Sabbath in the prayer-house where he would study the Torah. For he was not only a man of labour; for him love of the Torah surpassed everything. At home or in the prayer-house he would study *Eyn-Yaakov*⁴³⁴, chapters of the Mishnah⁴³⁵, Gemara⁴³⁶, Shulkhan Arukh⁴³⁷, Rashi⁴³⁸ and so on. The whole Sabbath was dedicated to study. Early in the morning he would go over the Sedra (weekly portion of the Torah). After returning from reading psalms and passages from the Bible and Targum⁴³⁹ in the synagogue, it was his custom to study Gemara in the afternoon.

In the long, cold nights of Tebeth [Dec./Jan.] and Shevat [Jan./Feb.] in the company of the children and his wife, who was sitting plucking feathers round the stove, he would tell legends from ancient times or about our blessed sages. He quoted their maxims and sayings. Sometimes he would explain a passage from the Bible with great feeling and understanding because he loved the Bible. He was a reverent Jew. He acquired his teaching without any special training; he only studied in the cheyder. The rest he did by himself, for at the age of twelve they took him to work.

My father loved the language of the past. A large part of each of his letters was written in Hebrew. And how he enjoyed and was proud of the letters his sons wrote in Hebrew! He read them several times. He took them to the synagogue, read them out to the town elders. The rov also heard them. My father not only loved the holy language but also dreamed of the Holy Land where his sons were among those making the dream a reality. He, who all his life had been opposed to bringing the coming of the Messiah forward before the due time. In one of his last letters he writes: ‘We don’t lack anything here. Of course we miss you, but there is no longing

⁴³³ ram’s horn (to blow on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement))

⁴³⁴ ‘Jacob’s Eye’, a book of tales and homilies from the Talmud, previously popular among the masses, collected by Rabbi Yaakov ben Shlomo Ibn Khaviv, probably in the 17th century

⁴³⁵ the ‘oral law’

⁴³⁶ section of the Talmud

⁴³⁷ a manual of Halacha (Jewish law) from the 16th century

⁴³⁸ acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, who wrote the first commentaries on the Bible and *Talmud*

⁴³⁹ Aramaic translation of the Hebrew bible

for the land of exile. The only thing we want is to be with you in our Holy Land. And if God will not grant me many more years I hope to be buried in Eretz Israel’.

And what a warm bond he had with trees and with animals! How did a Jew, a product of this small shtetl, know so much about the grafting of the tree, how to prune it, tend and nurture it? The same care for animals – for a cow, a horse, and even a cat. He would milk the cow with great affection, feed her and stand, looking into her eyes, lead her to the river to drink from the winter waters. He would smooth and caress the back of each of the cows tenderly. He would enjoy looking at a beautiful thoroughbred cow or horse. He would speak about them with great expertise and get enjoyment from them.

There is no describing his deep, silent love for his sons, against whom he never raised his hand, not even his voice. He aspired to raise them for good qualities and good deeds, to diligence, good manners, love of the Torah and love of the people, another characteristic of his.

Respect for and love of the common people were a guiding principle. This led him to share the sorrow of the next man and help wherever he could. He would hurry to ‘do good’, and not just to a Jew, also to a ‘Goy’. He would help a stranger and our neighbours. Even complete strangers were among those who visited our home. They loved and respected him.

He did everything silently and modestly. He was a sociable fellow, a peacemaker, modest, humble and shy. Although his seat in the synagogue was ‘in the east’⁴⁴⁰ in his life he would be distant from ‘people of the east’. He made friends with people, those who knew the Torah, humble and modest like him.



Yoyne Tkach



Chaya and Gitl Tkach

⁴⁴⁰ Wealthier people paid for seats in the eastern part of the synagogue, closest to Jerusalem

My Mother

‘A Hebrew woman, who knows anything about your life? You came in darkness and you will go in darkness. Your sorrow and joy, your heartbreak, your yearnings will be born within you, they will end within you.’⁴⁴¹

It is as if these words were said about you; it is as if the poet had you in mind in his expression ‘eternal slavery’.

A hard life, a life of labour and hardship, a life of suffering, sadness and distress was your lot - more than for others. You gave birth to seven sons and brought them up in terrible conditions without any help, without encouragement or solace, without a word of praise.

Then they grew up and scattered in various directions: ‘Like birds they flew, my children migrated,’ you would often say with tears in your eyes.

You were always busy; you would get up before dawn, you worked, laboured without rest or pause until midnight. And who recognised you as the heroine you were? Who bothered to praise you? It was all taken for granted. For apart from raising children in poverty and deprivation, you cooked and baked, you washed and cleaned, you organised your home, you brought water from afar, you cut wood for heating, you sewed and mended, milked the cows and bred chickens, grew vegetables and went to collect debts. And in the evenings by a small oil-lamp you would linger over Sabbath and darn socks and gloves for your children until sleep fell over you. A mother’s profound love, devoted without limit, but without complaint. You made your sacrifices instinctively. You saved from your bread and paid school fees for your children. You removed every obstacle from their paths. Your motto was ‘May they have as much as everyone else’. Not once did you sit to eat at the table with everyone else, you never tired, you only knew how to serve other people. Everything of yours was for your family. What was left over for you?

Blessed be your memory.

Dina Tkach-Ilan

Degania Alef

⁴⁴¹ by Yedua Leyb Gordon, born 1830 in Vilna, died 1892 in St. Petersburg

Our family in the shtetl

Although many years have passed since I left my shtetl, nonetheless everything still remains alive in my memory: the shtetl, the landscape, the surroundings, the people. Childhood stamps its impressions for ever.

Vysotsk, as it names implies, is situated high above its surroundings. It seemed like a tiny island among rivers and rivulets. There were many pleasant corners in the shtetl and nearby. You only needed to cross the Goy street and there was the rushing river Horyn, with green hills and fresh trees and meadows on the other side. You walked on a bit and saw the rivers kissing, merging with one another and raging. And forests spread for kilometres. In the forests there were berries. In the summer, in those long days, they would go out in groups to pick the berries from which they would make jam.

From the window of my house, which stood at the end of the street, I could see the landscape all around. Sometimes it seemed to me that some gifted and talented artist, rich in imagination, had drawn this landscape. There were four rivers and four strips of grass about a kilometre apart from each other. The landscape had been partly shaped by man. People had built bridges over the rivers and planted avenues of trees between them.

In your walks it was always a pleasure to follow these avenues again and again. It would all change and renew itself according to the seasons of the year. In spring the meadows were flooded. In front of you were sky and water. Only black dots were to be seen in the distance. These must have been the shacks where the peasants lived on the other side of the streams. In winter the boundary between water and land was blurred, everything turned into an enormous area of ice and snow, everything was clothed in white, including the straw roofs of the houses. In spring the snow would melt, blocks of ice began to burst and shift.

I remember one spring when we - a group of children - watched the adults standing on the bridges. They were holding iron bars and pitchforks with which they were pushing the enormous blocks of ice away from the bridges to prevent the bridges being uprooted. Hour after hour the battle continued. Blocks of ice approached the bridges, and the people pushed them away. But then suddenly some large blocks of ice charged and raged, uprooting one bridge on top of the people standing on it.

Pushed by the blocks of ice, it carried them with the stream. We stood rooted to the spot for hours until we saw the people returning safely in the boats that had gone to their aid.

How could we not remember the summer mornings, the time for women of the shtetl to take the cows on to the street and wait for



The Kortach family: the father Leyb, the mother Rivka, Chaya and Rivka

the herdsman to collect them and take them to pasture. And towards evening the time for the herds to come back, herds of all sorts, cows, horses and pigs, surrounded by clouds of dust.

And so life flowed past, silently, monotonously, weekdays and holidays. Every festival had its customs, the same festive food year in year out. Families with many children, if we want to compare what is normal on a kibbutz [in Israel] – a day nurse for every four children – every mother in the shtetl was equivalent to a nurse for two groups of children. In our family there were four children. This was considered a small family.

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to see our family as a typical example of many Jewish families in exile. Father was called up to the army when the four of us were at a very young age. Mother summoned up all her strength to raise us without any feeling of privation. She did all she could to make sure there were no clouds over our childhood. For five years, patiently and with understanding, she managed to raise four small children by herself, although Grandmother also helped her to the best of her ability.

For four years Father was in German-Austrian captivity. He was at the front for almost a whole year, enduring hellish sufferings on the Russian front. In addition to that, as a Jewish soldier he had his fill of hatred and humiliation. Assistance given by the state for the family, for the wife and for the children was minute in the extreme. Our shop was also plundered in the pogroms and robberies in the shtetl.

At the end of the war Father returned and here he was, badly wounded. His hair had turned white. He had to start everything from scratch and he was already tired from the years of suffering in the war. Like all the Jews of the shtetl our family endured the hellish torments of the murderous gangs that sprang up after the war. All the dark impulses found release in persecution and pogroms against Jews. The gangs had various names – Petlurovtzy⁴⁴² and Belkhovtzy and so on. One Sabbath a Belkhovetz soldier 'made himself at home' in our house. He brought his horses into the cowshed, turned the house upside down, searching in every corner, constantly talking about killing and slaughtering Jews.



Grandmother Minke Kortach

Grandmother, who was by nature brave, dared to answer him that death would not pass anyone by. To that he replied scornfully saying 'Death is only child's play compared with the bitter fate that's waiting for the Jews'. At the same time he showed he had some humanity when he advised us to leave the house and hide.

Indeed, on the Sunday a group of Belkhovtzy arrived. Immediately shouts were heard in the shtetl. We managed to leave the house and hide with one of the Germans who lived near the shtetl. In those days they were on friendly terms with the Jews (by the way, they said that in the period of Hitler's rule they turned into devoted Nazis). At the German's place we met the Ratner family. Together we hid in the loft of the stable where mice and rats were scurrying around. Then we hear the stamping of hooves, a horse galloping. We hold our breath. They will discover us and then what will happen? But our host comes at the right moment and manages to

⁴⁴² followers of Symon Petlura(Petlyura), born in 1879, a Ukrainian nationalist who became head of the government of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1919-1921). Jews held him responsible for the wave of pogroms. He was assassinated in Paris in 1926.

convince the hooligans that there are no Jews here. Once the hooligans had departed our host comes back to us and says: 'Jews have been beaten! Ayznberg has been murdered and they are now looking for Beylke's father...' These were terrible times which I shall always remember.

One memory chases another. In my head are echoes of one Kol nidrei ⁴⁴³ prayer. This was at the time when authority in our area passed from one side to the other, from the Russians to the Poles and back again. Our family and the Khover and Kolkovsky families together hired one of our 'Goy' friends to guard us, the children. Through the windows we saw gangs of soldiers roaming. Then they banged on our door. The terror grew, but we did not give in to it. It seems they were in a hurry and they went away! We were tense and fearful. The Goy 'guard' had meanwhile disappeared. Suddenly we hear sounds of crying and lament from the synagogue... We heard afterwards that soldiers, members of the gangs, had entered with their horses the synagogue - and on the Day of Atonement of all days!

I remember how, during the long winter evenings on a Sabbath or on festivals, we would all of us sit together at the table around the warm stove. Father would tell about various events from the time when he was at the front or in captivity, tell of the hard, crushing labour, about the various strange humiliations, about the sufferings inflicted on him as a Jew by his fellow prisoners. But all the horrors of the war did not succeed in eradicating his kindness. He was an honest, good-hearted man. His good-natured laughter never left him.

On that bitter day, the 27th day of Elul 5702 [Sept. 1942] Mother, Father and Grandmother and my young sister, Chaya, were killed, along with people of the shtetl, hundreds of brother Jews. It seems clear that Vysotsk, itself afflicted and hungry, took in hundreds of fellow Jews from the nearby shtetls in their distress. These Jews were housed in shtetl homes and also shared their food. Father, not for nothing, was always proud of the common folk of Israel. During the war years of suffering and captivity mutual help thrived among the Jews. Everywhere a great deal of fraternal help was given to the Jewish prisoners. Father said that as soon as they came to the German frontier a Jewish delegation was already there, waiting for them at the first station, ready to offer help to the Jewish prisoners. Throughout all the years of imprisonment the care offered by fellow Jews encouraged them and gave them relief. We, the children, learned and understood his stories about the help given by fellow Jews. From these stories we also absorbed a love of the Jewish people and of mankind.

May their memory be gathered in our life for ever

Lea Kortach-Baharav

Ramat HoKovesh

⁴⁴³ prayer recited at the start of the Day of Atonement

At home and in the shtetl

I remember a low tottering house. Windows sunken almost to the ground. A warm stove. Next to it a low wooden bench. On one cold winter day I am standing on the bench next to the stove. Mother is dressing me. Then suddenly the door opens. A man of short stature, wrapped in a long military coat, wearing a Russian hat and carrying a military haversack on his back, comes into the house with a surprising 'Good morning'. This was my father.

For four years he had been in the war, in the First World War. I was only a few months old when he left the home and the family and went wherever he was ordered to by the Russian Tsar. Here he was coming home, healthy, unharmed. But I, four years old, didn't recognise him at all.

These post-war years were extremely difficult. This was a time of hunger, pogroms and persecution. Gangs roamed in the shtetls and on the roads, killing and robbing. Various military groups, one after the other, were constantly attacking our shtetl. They stayed in the Jewish homes, terrorising and frightening the inhabitants.

I remember three such soldiers. Even their names I remember: Abel, Pushkrov and Nikolai. These were actually good soldiers, helping us in every way they could at that difficult time.

Then a soup kitchen (paid for by the 'Joint'⁴⁴⁴) opened in the shtetl. Children of the shtetl would stream towards it, morning and evening, in order to get a portion of bread and a mug of cocoa. I remember when I received a piece of white bread for the first time. It was the first white bread I had seen in my life. It was so strange for me that I threw it on the ground as something useless.

As has been said, this was a time of pogroms and fear in the shtetl and in the whole area. Gangs would attack the shtetl, enter the houses, look around, search and rob. One evening a member of a gang tied his horse to the fence of our house, came into the house and asked for my father. My father was then hiding in the loft and while the gang member was weighing up the situation his horse got free. Our 'visitor' ran after him. This is how we were saved that morning.

I remember one particular night of horror when a group of Belkhovtzy settled in the shtetl. Their only demand was boots for their people and fodder for their horses. In order to sew boots for the gang all the shoemakers of the shtetl gathered in the house of one of the shoemakers whose name was Zelig Asher. He was one of our neighbours. At the same time the house served as a refuge for Jews seeking shelter from the hooligans. The house was filled with men, women and children, sitting, lying on the floor in a huddle, waiting for dawn and for the hooligans to go away. Towards dawn they indeed got their boots and departed. We all were relieved.

This was a time not only of hunger and fear; it was also a time of hope and lofty inspiration, of the Russian Revolution and the Balfour Declaration⁴⁴⁵. As in all



Grandmother Basya Fialkov

⁴⁴⁴ American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, founded in 1914 to assist desperate Jewish communities in Palestine, the JDC was the main source of external funding for Jews in eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, between the wars. During the Second World War the JDC saved many thousands of Jews and assisted displaced Jews following the war

⁴⁴⁵ On 2 November 1917 British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, confirming that the British government favoured the 'establishment in Palestine of a national homeland for the Jewish people'

the shtetls of the neighbourhood, the youth in our shtetl were also roused to ambitions and to Zionist activity. A Zionist club house was established. It was in Binyamin Shnayder's house, next to ours. We, the children, would sneak slowly into it, crowd around the door and look in amazement. A blue and white flag, a picture of Herzl, Hebrew slogans and then also gatherings, speeches, memorial eulogies etc. The People of Israel, Eretz Israel, Hebrew, a new life. Everything inflames the imagination, awakening dreams and ambitions...

Then came the Fourth Aliyah⁴⁴⁶, the high tide of immigration to the Land. Many residents of the shtetl, among them those who were 'simply' Jews, go to the Land. Echoes reach us. The Land is being built, there is work, there is a new life. The awakening in the shtetl grows. There arises a branch of HeKhalutz and in its wake the Khalutz HaTzair. They go off for training. The first pioneers make aliyah.

But then came a crisis of the Fourth Aliyah and with it came Yerida⁴⁴⁷ from the Land. Also some of the residents from our shtetl came back. The pioneering Zionist spirit in the shtetl also declined and the misnagdim⁴⁴⁸ gained the upper hand. They were many and varied. Parents, Bundists, Communists joined forces to ridicule the 'pioneers' and fight them with all ways and means. But at the same time the Khalutz HaTzair was organised again. The pioneering aliyah grew with the renewal of the Fifth Aliyah⁴⁴⁹. Younger age groups joined the branch of HeKhalutz HaTzair. In the branch they were called 'the young ones'. After a short time, when the 'older ones' went off for training, they took over responsibility and continued the chain.

The heart pines when it recalls a vibrant life that was cut off and is no more, extended Jewish families that were torn out and destroyed, my father, my brother and my two sisters who were wiped out in the great Shoah.

My father was a simple Jew, a carpenter by trade, with a pleasant temperament. Everybody loved him.

He was always ready to offer help to others, even to a 'Goy'.

He lived a hard life, working a long day,

from dawn till dusk. The majority of the weekdays he would be working in the villages with 'Goys'. On Fridays he would return home and bestow on us, the children, a good spirit. He did not know anger, he did not scold us. Everything was done with a smile, without complaint.



The Fialkov family (1939)

from the right, standing: Feygl, Arie, Teybl and Aaron-Shmuel;
sitting: Gitl and Anshl (Arie was on a visit from Eretz Israel)

⁴⁴⁶ during the period of the Fourth Aliyah (1924-1929) 67,000 Jews arrived in Palestine, the majority from Poland

⁴⁴⁷ return from Eretz Israel

⁴⁴⁸ orthodox opponents of Chassidism (Hebrew: mitnagdim)

⁴⁴⁹ during the decade 1929-1939 almost 250,000 Jews went to Palestine, many of them professionals from Germany

I shall always remember my brother and my two sisters. My sister Teybl, 22 years old, went off for training to a kibbutz in Lodz. She knew how to cook, to mend. These were her occupations during training. How she longed to come to the Land. She was indeed already on the threshold of aliyah when the war broke out. She moved to Vilna to the training kibbutz, to the centre of pioneers intending to make aliyah. From Vilna she moved to Lithuania to the training kibbutz in Shavli⁴⁵⁰. With the outbreak of the Russo-German war she went with the wanderers and they did not see her again.

My brother Aaron Shmuel, 19 years old, finished his studies and helped Father in his carpentry work, bearing the burden of earning a living for the family. He engaged in a lot of sport. In his childhood he would sneak off from the house to the river bank to fish. Mother worried about him because he was skinny and thin. I would go out to look for him at the edge of the river and found him immersed in what he was doing. Afterwards he grew tall and became a strong young man, working and bearing the burden.

But suddenly the axe came down on him, as on all his friends in the shtetl. He went off with the column to his death. When they were passing close to the river there a commotion broke out among the column and many began to escape. He, Aaron Shmuel, was among them. They ran to the river Horyn. With all their might they tried to swim to the other side of the river. But the bullets of the savage animals pursuing them hit them while they were in the river. 'Goy' witnesses reported afterwards that the river was red with the blood of those who had been shot.

Why, for what did they kill my innocent brother? And Feygele, the youngest daughter, I shall remember for ever. Feygele, 16 years old, beautiful, happy, talented, full of life and hopes. How her soul yearned for life, for happiness, for beauty, and then, on the hillock opposite the cemetery, where you and Father were holding on to each other, you were murdered and fell. From behind they shot you, the murderers, and flung you down into the ground. Mother, unconscious, with blood flowing from her head from the blows she received from the murderers' rifle butts. They thought she was dead too.

Your memory, dear ones, will remain in our hearts for ever.

Rivka Fialkov

Na'an



Basil and Moyshe Katz and their daughter Sara-Miriam

⁴⁵⁰ now Šiauliai, the fourth largest city in Lithuania, 142 km from Kaunas and 210 km from Vilnius

A memorial to my ancestral home

My mother Rakhel, daughter of Reb Zalman, and her daughter (our sister) Feygl. In all it was a family of six. The sons Israel and Zalman made aliyah to Eretz Israel. With the outbreak of the war nothing further was heard from them. The father of the family, Reb Asher son of Reb Yakov, was sent away to a land of exile by the Soviets. Nothing further was heard of him. Itzhok, the young son of the family, also went, as a conscript into the Soviet armies. He disappeared without trace⁴⁵¹. Mother and daughter, the two of them, lost their lives for being Jewish. The loved ones, the modest ones, were not separated from each other even in death.



The Gutman family

sitting, right to left: Asher Gutman, his wife Rachel, Grandmother Lea Lopata, Israel Gutman;
standing: Zalman and Feygl Gutman, Gitl (Moyshe's daughter) Lopata, Itzhok Gutman

Mother, Mother, who did not know your kindness? Who was not enchanted by your beauty when it was at its most radiant? How beautifully you treated other people, how generous was your charity. How devoted you were to your children. Some days before I made aliyah you said to me while we were sitting together in the yard: ('Look, my son, here is the hen picking on the head of her chicks who grew up in order that they will leave her for independence. But I am not picking on your heads...') - although she was not against my aliyah to the Land.

Feygl, our good, devoted sister, where did your youth go? In one of the letters you wrote to us in the good days: 'I sorted all the domestic business and I think I can already go ...'

Dear Father! Where is your place in the world? Your parents cherished you as their only son. They did not grudge paying Kheykl the Kleyzmer⁴⁵² from Olivsk⁴⁵³ to teach you to play the fiddle. Until you were middle-aged you would play traditional Jewish wedding tunes at the end of Sabbath. How did they take you away

⁴⁵¹ In August 2006 a letter arrived in Vysotsk from a voluntary organisation in St. Petersburg concerned with the recovery and official reburial of soldiers' remains (Общественный Фонд «Поисковых Отрядов Ленинградской Области»). The letter stated that the remains of 'Gutman, Itzko Osherovych' had been found in Kosye Mosty in the Tosno district of the Leningradsky province (Tosno is c.50 km. south-east of St. Petersburg) and were to be reburied on May 9th 2007 in the military cemetery in the village of Miny in the Gatchinsky district of Leningradsky province.

⁴⁵² musician

⁴⁵³ Olevsk, on the railway line 80 km. east of Sarny, itself c.50 km. south of Udrytsk, the nearest railway station to Vysotsk

for ever?! To my question the rov answered that in the prayer Yizkor⁴⁵⁴ you do not say the words ‘that they go to the world to come’. And you, Ichile, what was your fate in the Soviet army? There is no voice and no answer. Only the heart is forever grieving, till the end of days...

And how did you, Grandmother Leah, go to your death? Every Sabbath you were surrounded by sons, daughters and grandchildren saying Shabbes sholem ⁴⁵⁵. On the eve of every Yom Kippur⁴⁵⁶ you used to try on your shrouds, which were ready, before lighting candles of the holy day. How did all of you go, Uncle Moyshe son of Reb Zalman, and his family, Uncle Dovid Leyb son of Reb Zalman and his family, Uncle Yakov son of Reb Zalman and his family, Aunt Pesil daughter of Reb Zalman and Uncle Nakhum son of Reb Zalman and his family. How is it that all of you were suddenly destroyed?

May their souls be gathered in eternal life

Israel and Zalman Gutman



Nakhum Lopata and his wife Feygl (1928)

⁴⁵⁴ memorial prayer service that takes place four times a year on Yom Kippur, the last day of Sukkot, the last day of Pessach and the last day of Shavuot

⁴⁵⁵ ‘Sabbath peace’, the usual Sabbath salutation (Hebrew: *Shabbat shalom*)

⁴⁵⁶ Day of Atonement

Memories of Father's house

The house of Reb Ichie der Melamed⁴⁵⁷ stood in a quiet street. The house was covered by trees and surrounded by bushes. The branches would come through the open window and spread out inside the room. A hand would stretch out through the window and reach all the goodness of the tree. Fruit would be eaten straight from the tree. The house bustled with life and was full of the sound of joy. The pupils, young nippers, felt at home in the house and joined in the life of the family. As the daughter of their teacher I was liked by the boys, who were very protective towards me. My mother, Rivke, was called die Rebbitzin⁴⁵⁸ by everybody. She was a good woman, devoted to the family and to the pupils who studied with Father. If an orphan was found among the children she would adopt him as a son, as her own son.



Reb Ichie Shabshi

I loved the festivals best. Father, who was also a khazan⁴⁵⁹, would fill the house with his pleasant voice and enchant the listeners with his prayers that flowed over everyone with warmth and powerful emotion. Tradition was always observed in our house. Every festival had its own order and character. At Purim Father would read the Book of Esther to Mother, and slowly the women neighbours would gather round to listen.

Special memories stayed with me from the days of slikhes (penitential hymns) and New Year. The slikhes that Father would sing in the synagogue at one o'clock in the morning would burst forth, cleaving the sky. The women would bless Father, saying: 'Light to the mother in the grave who has such a son'.

Similarly I shall remember the preparations for New Year. Uncle Asher Lapinsky would come. He and Father would 'rehearse' their chanting, each raising his voice with the other and helping each other. Mother was with them all the time, handing them warm sweet drinks. Throughout all the festivals the house was full of singing and joyful tunes.

The time arrived when I parted from my father's house and from all that was connected to it and made aliyah. When I was already in the Land in kibbutz Givat HaShlosha⁴⁶⁰ I and the other friends that were from my shtetl always remembered my father the khazan. Shmuel Hersch Borovyk, who was in the kibbutz, would always prepare the parents in the kibbutz to receive Reb Ichie. He would say: 'In a little while you will have a good khazan in the synagogue. Wait till Reb Ichie comes.' We were indeed ready to receive him on his arrival and, but we did not succeed, neither he nor us.

Also my sister Khinke was ready to make aliyah to the Land but didn't make it. She was a very clever woman, she knew how to help everybody. Her house was a model. It was always a place of refuge for those in distress who would come to pour

⁴⁵⁷ Yiddish: the Teacher

⁴⁵⁸ Yidd.: the wife of the rof

⁴⁵⁹ cantor in the synagogue

⁴⁶⁰ a kibbutz in central Israel, founded in 1925

out their hearts to her. She and her husband knew how to bring up their four children. She did not manage to save her soul from the claws of the murderers

No memory remains of her family. Thus a large family was torn to pieces together with all the other Jews who perished.

May their memory be blessed

Shifra Shabtai-Efory

Givat HaShlosa



Khinke Shabshi, her husband Yehuda Roytnberg and their children: Avram, Mordekhai and Shoshana



Nishke Borovyk



Sarale Reykhman

Shokhet the teacher

As man is commanded to honour and fear his father, so he is obliged to honour and fear his rabbi more than his father, as his father brings him into the life of this world, and his rabbi, who taught him wisdom, brings him into the life of the world to come. If his father and his rabbi are prisoners he must release his rabbi first and afterwards release his father. But if his father is a wise scholar he releases his father first – and there is no greater honour than the honour towards the rabbi and no greater fear than the fear of the rabbi.

The sages said: 'The fear of your rabbi is as the fear of God in heaven.'

The Rambam⁴⁶¹: *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*⁴⁶²

My dear teacher!

Even after so many years you remain alive in my memory. I can picture you, short of stature, with sad, penetrating, green eyes that pierced the soul, your high brow below a mass of long flowing hair, alert, lively, quick, clean and handsome. I can see you as you walk into the classroom in your Russian shirt, tied by a black cord.

The soft yet demanding sound of your voice echoes, incisive, urging us on. In my mind's eye I see all your pupils listening to your teaching. I know that you were an outstanding teacher!

And when I record your story in the life of Vysotsk it sounds to me like a legend and you stand out as a marvellous person.

You, you whom our parents would call Epicurus⁴⁶³ and a polluter of Israel – you were like a saint revealed in our small, secluded shtetl, far from the hubbub of the city. To the innocent children of the poor, who grew up like wild flowers in their shtetl, you came and lit in their hearts the desire to know, the love of learning; you awakened in them a longing and striving for a life mysterious to them, the desire to make headway, to search and to make progress.

You revealed to us the big wide world, which for us was distant, beautiful and strange, and its light shone in us. Study, read, increase your knowledge – that was your watchword.

And soon the first books appeared: 'Alone' by Kabak⁴⁶⁴, 'Love of Zion' by Mapu⁴⁶⁵, 'Daughter of the rich man' by Rabinovych⁴⁶⁶, 'Whither?' by Feierberg⁴⁶⁷. And in class you read Frishman⁴⁶⁸. Yes, various, multi-faceted aspects of life. And only now do I understand the aim you set yourself. You opened our eyes in order to know the history of our people.

I remember the history lesson and your great disappointment when you learned that we had not heard about the exile of the Jews of Spain. But you never lost hope. You continued to teach us the history of our people. It was only after many years that I understood what you were after. Above all I remember your nature study lessons. This was a new subject for us, strange and marvellous. 'Do you see this blue?

⁴⁶¹ acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Jewish philosopher, born 1135 in Cordoba, died 1204 in Egypt

⁴⁶² 'Laws of Torah study'

⁴⁶³ Greek philosopher (341 BCE-270BCE) who taught the pursuit of happiness and avoidance of pain and fear

⁴⁶⁴ Aaron-Avram Kabak, born 1882 in Smargon' (110 km north-west of Minsk), later moved to Jaffa.

'Alone' is reputed to be the first Hebrew novel in which the principal figure is a woman

⁴⁶⁵ regarded as the first Hebrew novel, it was written by Avraham Mapu (born Kovno (Kaunas) 1808, died in Königsberg (Kaliningrad) 1867) and published in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1853

⁴⁶⁶ Sholem Naumovych Rabinovych (1859-1916), better known as Sholem Aleikhem

⁴⁶⁷ Mordechai Ze'ev Feierberg, Hebrew writer (1874-1899)

⁴⁶⁸ David Saulovych Frishman, born 1864 in Zgierz, a town just north of Łódź, died in Berlin in 1922

That is air, many layers of air!' 'And the sky?' 'There is no sky, that is air!' 'But where does God sit?' On Sabbath in the synagogue they are all talking and seething: 'Shokhat, may he be cursed, is teaching the children that there is no God!'

And your walks! Those walks into the open field, into the splendid countryside where you point out every flower, calling it by name. How you brought us closer to the beauty of nature and to love it. There were also evening walks, when you pointed out the stars in the sky. But the purpose of these walks was not only to study; you brought us all together in every way, we learned to live together, to understand each other. You were always close to us. You explained, you told stories, you argued. Hurry, use every opportunity, make progress! It was as if your heart told you you were the last teacher of Hebrew in the shtetl.

I remember the joint Seder⁴⁶⁹ nights in your house, the performances and the parties, the private conversations. The help you offered outside the classroom. Nor did you forget us after you had left the shtetl; for many years you stayed in contact with many of us via letters. You joined in all areas of our life, you embraced them all! You bestowed on us your noble spirit, and the words entered our hearts. We all loved you, respected and adored you.

We also knew the difficult struggle you had for the existence of our Hebrew school with the unenlightened ones in the shtetl on one side and with the *shkola*⁴⁷⁰ on the other. We could also see your material hardship. You struggled for every crumb of bread for yourself and your wife. But you did not abandon the shtetl. Only many years later did it become clear to me at a time when I myself underwent a similar test to yourself. Only then did I understand your battles in all their severity. I chose you as a guiding light.

Your activities bore fruit, for it was because of you and your friends that the children of Vysotsk were attached to the Hebrew language; they knew and loved it. Vysotsk became famous as a Hebrew-speaking shtetl. Thanks to you every young person in the shtetl aspired to make aliyah to the Land, seeing in this his only path in life. And indeed how large is the camp of those fulfilling the dream, the sons of one shtetl living here in the Land! It is thanks to you, only to you and the Hebrew school that we came here, one person directly, another indirectly. You formed the young generation! I, like many others, drank from the pure, clear water of the well, I swallowed it and it touched my heart deeply. I owe double and multiple thanks to you. Unknowingly you marked out the path of my life – to continue in your project. I also count your name among all those who are dear to me.

On the tombstone of all the saints of the shtetl your name will also be engraved.

Dina Tkach-Ilan

Deganya Alef

⁴⁶⁹ ritual feast marking the start of Passover

⁴⁷⁰ refers to Polish *szkoła*, i.e. the Polish government school

Grandfather's house

Volf and Reyzl Gelman

The shtetl of Vysotsk is situated about seven kilometres from the railway station of Udrytsk. The road from there to the shtetl passed through fields and woods which cut through by the river Horyn. In order to get to Vysotsk it was necessary to cross to the second bank of the river by *porom*⁴⁷¹ (ferry) or boat.

Between the Christian and the Jewish streets stood a large church which served the farmers of the surrounding area. About 100 metres away from it stood a large residential house where the Gelman family lived. Grandfather and Grandmother lived there with their children and their families.

As far as I can remember my grandfather was one of the important cattle merchants in the area, but in about the year 1908 he decided to turn to agriculture. He was the first Jew in the area to become a farmer. He acquired 600 *dunams*⁴⁷² of land which he worked with the help of his sons.

I remember Grandmother as a quiet woman who would do a lot of 'secret giving' which I would bring to the needy.

Uncle Feybil Gelman, a generous man, educated his children in Vilna and Pinsk.

Uncle Itzik Gelman - I shall not forget the eves of Yom Kippur⁴⁷³ when the whole family gathered in Grandfather's house and prepared wax candles in memory of the dead, and in contrast also for the living. Uncle Itzik would go in the morning to purify himself in the Mikve⁴⁷⁴ in order to get himself ready for the prayer Kol nidrei⁴⁷⁵. When he sang the prayers in his clear voice we would open the windows of the house, bringing us nearer to what was happening in the synagogue, and listen to him in excitement.



Malka Gelman



Itzhok-Dovid Gelman

⁴⁷¹ Ukrainian

⁴⁷² 1 dunam = 1000 square metres

⁴⁷³ Day of Atonement

⁴⁷⁴ Hebrew: Mikvah, ritual bath

⁴⁷⁵ prayer recited at the start of the Day of Atonement

Father's house

Hershil and Dvoyre Petrukh

My parents lived in the centre of the shtetl, eight houses away from my grandfather's house. My father was a generous, warm man, loved by those who knew him and family alike.

I am obliged to tell this story as a memorial to the parents whom I defied by leaving them. When Motil Lopatyn came from Warsaw to organise new members in 'Khalutz' I was among the first to join this movement, afterwards making aliyah to the Land.

On the last evening before I left home friends came to invite me to a party that had been arranged in my honour. As I wanted to avoid distressing Mother for as long as I could I didn't go to the party. Poor Mother stood all that night by my bed to prevent my departure. Early in the morning I asked her to make me a light meal, promising not to leave that day. However as soon as she went to the kitchen I got up and escaped from the house. I went first to the cemetery to say goodbye to the dead. There I felt most intensely the natural beauty of the shtetl. From one side I could hear the sound of the river and from the opposite side the sound of the flour mill. And there I stood struggling with myself whether to stay or whether to continue on my way.

After a number of hours spent there acquaintances appeared. They were looking for me and told me that Mr Lopatyn had persuaded my parents to go to the station and bless me in peace. My parents were waiting there, not knowing that I had not yet left the place.

I hurried back, bidding farewell to my grandfather. After that I went to my parents' house, where there was nobody at home. I glanced farewell to the house and everything in it. As I went I did not meet any neighbours or acquaintances and I went in the direction of the river. When I came to the river I was surprised by all the people of the shtetl who had come to say goodbye to me with a blessing for the journey.

As if it had happened yesterday I recall how Father said to me before I got on the train '*Mayn kind*⁴⁷⁶, always remember that there is somewhere for you to come back to.'

Six years after my aliyah to the Land my parents saw for the first time that I had done the right thing. Then they sent my sister Sara Petrukh and my brother Itzhak Petrukh after me, but Hershil and Dvoyre and their families, along with Berl and Figa and their families, remained behind as prey for the murderers.



Feybl Gelman, his wife Belka and their daughter Shoshana

Rivka Petrukh-Lykhtigshteyn

Netanya

⁴⁷⁶ Yiddish: my child

Sonya Gelman-Bichik



Aaron-Zev son of Feygl (Petrukh)
and Arie Furman

In memory of one branch of the '*Nisalekh*' [little nuts] tribe

Grandfather Itzhok Lopata had eight sons: 1) Itzhok was the grandfather of Aaron Itzhok and Gitl Lopata whose family name remained Lopata; 2) Shleyme the grandfather of Etil of blessed memory and of Khaya, Meir, Yakov and Rushke Vaks - as a result of his being called up to the army the family changed their name to Vaks; 3) Mordekhai my grandfather and grandfather of Tova and Khaviva and also of Israel and Zalman Gutman; 4) Reuven the grandfather of the Kolkovskim whose name also remained Lopata; 6) Nisn the grandfather of the families of Nisn and Rivke; 7) Benyamin, my father of the family of Akiva Leyb. The eighth alas I do not remember. All of them had children and grandchildren who all remained in the shtetl. These lines are dedicated in particular to one branch of the extended family and this is the Nisn Veles family or Bas-Shevas Lopata.

My parents had three sons and five daughters. The sons, the eldest Itzhok and Shleyme-Mendl remained in the shtetl and were killed by the Nazis. I am the third. I made aliyah about seventeen years before the destruction. The daughters Yentil and her family who lived in the nearby shtetl of Vladimertz, Teybil who lived with her family in Vysotsk, and Rachel who lived in nearby Stolin – the three of them and their families were destroyed in the great slaughter, each one in the shtetl where she lived. My two sisters Khaviva and Tova made aliyah to the Land several years before the destruction. My mother Bat-Sheva was able with our help to reach the Land where she lived for some years. She reached a good age and was highly respected when she passed away. She was buried next to my sister Tova in the cemetery of Sede Nakhum⁴⁷⁷ where she lived for the last years of her life near my sister Tova..



Shleyme-Mendl Lopata

In memory of my wife's family

Nisl 'Des Shatkhns'⁴⁷⁸ (Nisn Kaftan) and his wife Tsipa, the parents of my wife Sima and of Tsibl Levin, had three daughters. Two of them have already been in Israel for many years. The third, Yentl, and her family lived in Sarny. My wife's mother, who had arrived in the Land in 1930, went back to Sarny in 1932 to her daughter and grandchildren whom she was missing so much. All of them were killed in the Shoah.

⁴⁷⁷ a kibbutz near the Jordanian border, founded in 1937

⁴⁷⁸ Yiddish: the Marriage-broker's

In memory of my father's home

(from a letter from Rabbi Chaim Abelson, Uruguay)

...For how dejected is my soul and how I yearn when I remember all that was taken from us. I am still in mourning and grief, grief for one and for many, for my large family and for all God's people who fell by the sword. In you, my brothers, I see the wonders of the Creator, how those who survived the sword, tiny embers saved from fire, are able to continue their life and raise generations. We saw evil, the furnaces and the strange deaths by which they killed and burned our loved and dear ones.



The rov Reb Avram Yoel Abelson

God, who gives strength to the weary, will give us the strength to forget, in order to carry within us 'God will not neglect his people or forsake his inheritance'.

The prophet Isaiah said: 'For thus saith the Lord...unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name⁴⁷⁹... I will give them an everlasting name⁴⁸⁰.' What that means is that by telling in my house of their good deeds I shall grant them an everlasting name, for our children will learn from their good deeds and through this will achieve the world to come, for they do not have sons left whose good deeds grant them this (look up in the writings of RaDaK⁴⁸¹).

My grandfather's father was the rov Avram Yoel Abelson of blessed memory. He was the high judge in Odessa. He wrote many books. He had four sons, three of whom I knew. One was my grandfather, the rov Yehuda Abelson of blessed memory who was the president of the court of justice in Pitrikov⁴⁸² who after the first war was rov in our shtetl Vysotsk. The name of his wife, my grandmother, was Miriam, may her memory rest in peace.

One of grandfather's brothers was the rov Itzhok Abelson. His name is found in the interpretation of the Mishnaot⁴⁸³ in the Vilna edition. The second brother, whose name was Nisn Abelson, died in New York. Grandfather, the rov Reb Yehuda Abelson, had four sons. They were: my father and teacher, the rov Reb Yehoshua Abelson, may God avenge his blood. When my grandfather Reb Yehuda moved to the shtetl of Plotnitsa⁴⁸⁴ to serve there as rov, my father, the rov Reb Yehoshua, remained, taking over from him as rov in our shtetl. My mother and teacher, may God avenge her blood, was the daughter of the rov of Aniksht⁴⁸⁵ in Lithuania. Her name was Vitel Berezansky.

My father's brothers were : Reb Yehezkel, may God avenge his blood, Reb Bonam who had a daughter (they were killed in Lithuania) and the rov Reb Yakov, may God avenge his blood, who served as rov in Latzkave⁴⁸⁶, Lithuania. They had three daughters and a son. All of them were killed in Lithuania.

My elder brother was the rov Reb Avraam Yoel, may God avenge his blood. He married the daughter of the rov of Menivich⁴⁸⁷. Her name was Chana Gordon,

⁴⁷⁹ *Yad vaShem*, after which the Jerusalem Holocaust museum was named

⁴⁸⁰ Isaiah chapter 56, verses 4/5

⁴⁸¹ Rabbi David Kimchi (Kimkhi), Talmudic scholar and grammarian, lived in France 1160-1235

⁴⁸² Petrikov, a district centre north-east of Vysotsk in Belarus on the river Pripyat'

⁴⁸³ plural of *Mishna*, the 'oral law' handed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and not included in the Bible

⁴⁸⁴ north of Vysotsk, now in Belarus

⁴⁸⁵ now Anykščiai, a small town c. 85 km. north of Vilnius

⁴⁸⁶ Letzkava, close to the Latvian border

⁴⁸⁷ now Manevychi, on the railway line 80 km. west of Sarny

may God avenge her blood. They were killed along with their three children, may God avenge their blood.

My sister Sheyndl, may God avenge her blood, married the rov Menachem Eliezer, may God avenge his blood, son of the rov of Sernyk⁴⁸⁸ near Pinsk. During the war he served as rov in Plotnitza⁴⁸⁹. They and their three children were killed in Vysotsk. May God avenge their spilt blood.

Chaim, son of Rov Abelson

Montevideo, 19th Shevat 5723

[Jan/Feb 1963]

In memory of the oldest family of rabbis in the shtetl

It was about sixty years ago. Before Yehuda and Yehoshua Abelson served as rabbis in the shtetl the rov was Moyshe Melamed, a native of the shtetl. His sons were Leybush the slaughterer, Mordekhai (father of Yakove Rabinovych also called Yenkl Mordkhes) and Shmuel Rabinovych (Melamed). This Shmuel had daughters about whose fate I know nothing. Yakov, son of Mordekhai Rabinovych, had two sons. One, Itzhok, died before the Shoah. The second, Shleyme Rabinovych, emigrated to England. One daughter, Sara, is in Israel. There were two other daughters of whose fate I am unaware.

The son-in-law of Feybush the slaughterer, Shleyme Levin, had four sons and one daughter. One of them, Yakov Shmuel, was a slaughterer and was killed with his family. The second, Mordekhai Tzvi Levin is still alive in Israel. The third, Zelig, was also killed with his family. The fourth, Moyshe, stayed in Russia. The one daughter Khava, whose husband was Yosef the slaughterer, was killed with her family in the great Shoah.

May their memory be blessed.

Mordekhai Lopata



The Rabinovych family
sitting: Yakov and Dvoyre Rabinovych
standing: Leybl, Sara, Brokhe and Yehudit Rabinovych

⁴⁸⁸ Sernyky, c. 25 km. west of Vysotsk

⁴⁸⁹ a village 30-40 km. north of Vysotsk

In memory of Chava and Yoyne Borovyk

My parents, Chava and Yoyne Borovyk, were known in the shtetl as people always busy helping others. My dear mother would go and visit well-to-do people to collect contributions for the poor, the sick and wretched in the shtetl. She would dedicate most of her time to that. When somebody in a poor family was sick she would call the doctor herself, buy medicine and so on. After a woman gave birth she would visit her and help her with whatever she needed. Many women would come to ask her advice. She would respond and help everyone. On Friday she would visit homes in the shtetl to collect food, clothes and so on, which she would herself distribute among the needy.

My father, whose house was always open, was also always ready to assist others. On Sabbath he would always bring home a guest, who would eat and spend the night in the house until the Sabbath had passed. For nearly twenty years my father was one of the collectors of the prayer-house. He was also a member of the burial society. He always acted for the good of the public as much as he was able to and more.



Chava Lifshes and Yoyne Borovyk

My father was a religious Jew with all his heart and soul, an enthusiastic follower of the Karlin rebbe. Whenever the rebbe visited our shtetl my parents were busy day and night in preparations and activities to welcome the rebbe and to make his visit pleasant. They would cook, bake, clean, arrange communal meals etc. At the same time my father was also a devoted Zionist, imbued with a love of the Land. He was among the first contributors in the shtetl to Keren Kayemet and Keren Hayesod⁴⁹⁰. His ambition, about which he spoke, was to make aliyah to Eretz Israel. But he didn't

succeed. I remember when I parted from him he said to me: 'At the present time I am happy because I have hope that through your efforts and God's help I will also be able to make aliyah to the Land...' His hope was not fulfilled. He vanished in the great slaughter, along with all people of the shtetl.

I remember my brother Yekhiel, his wife Khava and their three daughters, three beautiful daughters. One, the oldest, Dina, was 19 and a half. The second, Lifshe, was 18 and the third, Khasya, was 16. The family was preparing to emigrate to America. They were killed in the middle of the preparations. The family had the 'honour' to be the first in the column as it went towards the grave.

My sister Khana shall be remembered here, 18 years old when she was killed, honest and innocent. Of all my family in the shtetl only my brother Nisan Borovyk survived. His wife Besil and their three children were killed in the great slaughter, along with the people of the shtetl.

May their memory remain in our heart for ever.

Rivka Borovyk-Iger

Haifa

⁴⁹⁰ United Jewish Appeal, founded in 1920, the main international fund-raising organisation



Yikhiel Borovyk and his wife Chava and their daughters Dina, Khasya and Lifshe

In memory of the family of Yakov Feldman

A traditional Jewish home, a warm family nest. It was difficult to earn a living. By contrast love and devotion were plentiful.

The source of income: a grocery shop, a sort of miniature *kolbo*⁴⁹¹.

The authorities become more oppressive, taxes are heavy, policemen harass rudely. There are many rules and regulations. The life of exile is bitter.

A ray of light breaks through from the east. The era: the 30s of the 20th century. The youth is organised in Zionist branches. A network of kibbutzim spreads to all corners of Poland. My sister Chana is the first to find her path to training and arrives in Eretz Israel. I set sail after her to the land of the ancestors.

Contact by letters with home is strong. Those in exile draw all the strength of their spiritual existence from the Land, from us, their daughters here in our motherland. They live only with the hope to join us, to abandon exile and to achieve a life of freedom with us. Our one and only hope is to unite the family here and quickly.

But we didn't succeed!!

The Nazi jackboot put an end to it.

My father, Yakov, son of Zelig Feldman

A pleasant outward appearance, endearing. Sensitive, cultured, quiet, generous, always smiling, joking, sociable, glad to give wise advice from his heart, honest and modest.

He studied and read a lot. If he read something good he would share it with others. He would chat and tell stories. And what talent he had for storytelling and explaining. We never tired of listening, just as he did not tire of relating.

⁴⁹¹ 'everything in it', the standard word for a small general store (e.g. on an Israeli kibbutz)



Yakov Feldman

Father was extremely devoted to his children. He would tell us little ones stories or sing us songs in his pleasant voice. That has stayed for ever in the memory. He radiated a good educative and calming atmosphere on everything around him.

My father died immediately after the Russians entered the shtetl.

Mother, Miriam, daughter of Borukh and Chana of blessed memory

Clever, energetic, full of life, organised, hard-working and skilled with her hands. She was always working. We never saw her sitting with her arms folded. She didn't visit women neighbours a lot. She used every moment for productive work. If this was done while she was sitting she could then easily fit in a most interesting conversation on all sorts of subjects with the work she was doing. She was skilled in solving crosswords and all sorts of riddles. She would easily work out the most complicated calculations, without pen and paper.

She was sharp-brained and gifted with the wisdom of life. Many people would come to ask her advice. She was hospitable to all, encouraging and consoling them with regard to what was needed. She always remembered those in need. Her usual custom was to send food to poor homes. She was modest, humble, honest. In this spirit she endeavoured to raise her children.

My brother Asher of blessed memory

A prodigy. When he was still a small boy his teachers prophesied that he would be a genius. He studied, took in and absorbed everything. He studied in yeshivot⁴⁹². His last place of residence was Warsaw, the capital city of Poland. There, where he spent the last years of his life, he was head of a large yeshiva. All those who knew him respected and honoured him. He was known for his immense genius. At the same time he was modest, sensitive and generous. These traits he inherited from his father.

My sisters, Freydil, Brokhe, Zelda and Breyndil of blessed memory

Quiet, honest, industrious. They were distinguished in their studies. They showed love and devotion to the whole family. My mother and four sisters were killed cruelly by the Nazi murderers. We shall remember them for ever.

Esther Feldman-Negbi

Kiryat Ono

I remember, while I was in training in Klosova⁴⁹³, after I had left home, Father wrote to me: 'My dear daughter, you did us a great wrong by travelling in secret. The parting was indeed difficult for us, but we understand your heart, for we are also fed up with the bitterness of exile. Perhaps, my daughter, when you arrive in Eretz Israel

⁴⁹² religious seminaries (singular: yeshiva)

⁴⁹³ From 1924 until 1937 Klosova, a granite quarry dating from Tsarist times near the village of Klosov (now Klesiv), c.25 km. east of Sarny (itself c.50 km. south of Udrytsk, the nearest railway station to Vysotsk), was the foremost training kibbutz in eastern Poland

our day will also come to abandon exile and join you, for here every day is worse than the last. Anti-semitism grows from day to day. We are unwelcome guests here.'

Although Vysotsk was a small, poor shtetl, the young people in it studied Hebrew, and parents would pay study fees out of their last pennies. My father would always say 'I am happy that my children are studying in a Hebrew school.' It was always his custom to check our reading books to see if they were suitable for our age. All their lives my parents and their children aspired to abandon the bitterness of exile and travel to Eretz Israel. To our great regret the murderer beat them to it and destroyed all our dear ones, our parents, our sisters, our brother and his family. The heart aches and there is no condolence. May their memory be blessed for ever.

Chana Feldman-Lifshitz

Kfar Azar



Rivka and Benyamin Shnayder, their sons
Borukh and Aaron and their daughter Pesil

In memory of the family of Benyamin Shnayder

My father, Benyamin Shnayder, was born in the year 1871 in Vysotsk. All his life he was a man of work, of trade. He worked in the building trade until his last days.

His first wife, Miriam, bore him three children: Sara, Moyshe and Dowl of blessed memory. His second wife - she was my mother Rivka - bore him five children: Aaron, Yoyne, Golda, Borukh and Pesil.

Aaron, Yoyne and Borukh perished in the great Shoah. May their memory be blessed for ever. Golda arrived in the Land before the Shoah. Pesil endured the horrors of war and the Shoah before arriving in Israel.

Pnina Shnayder-Feffer

Haifa

In memory of Mother

My mother was not in the habit of visiting other homes other than to visit the sick. In spite of that the women neighbours would visit our house, especially on Sabbath afternoon. Also whenever there was a wedding, a circumcision and so on she would only call round to visit those who were celebrating in order to bring a gift, as was the custom in the shtetl. When people had a celebration at home you would send a kind of small present, a drink, fruit, a cake etc. on a Saturday afternoon. And what would the neighbours chat about when they visited our home? About everything: about the cantor in the synagogue, about the neighbours, about food, and generally a little bit of gossip.

Our house was always full of visitors. The young Bundist⁴⁹⁴ 'proletariat' would come to us. There were only a few of them in the shtetl. They would visit our house on Sabbath evenings. This was the 'proletariat' in the shtetl (although members of the 'Khalutz' and Poalei Tzion⁴⁹⁵ were also workers). They would sit until late at night, dancing and having fun. These were young men who for some reason remained outside the pioneering Zionist framework in the shtetl.

At the age of fifteen I went to Brisk⁴⁹⁶ to study in the technical school. When I came home to prepare for aliyah I immediately visited the club of the branch, but it was not the same branch. I hardly met any comrades in the club apart from on Sabbath eve. I asked what this meant. I was told that they wanted to go off for training but because there was no training available there was no branch, and as there was no training available they just sat there for a long time which meant there was no aliyah. The desire for aliyah was strong and widespread. Our youth was famous for its pioneering spirit, for its Hebrewness, for the numbers going for training and for making aliyah to the Land. People used to say that Vysotsk was an Eretz Israel shtetl. Some time later Arie Fialkov visited the branch from the headquarters. There were meetings, questions and answers. The meetings were stormy; there was a universal demand for training.

Nobody survived from our family. I was a soldier in the Second World War. I was in Europe and kept looking for relatives but didn't find anybody. I remained the only one of all my family here in Israel.

Reuven Treger

Haifa

⁴⁹⁴ The Bund was the main non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement, founded in 1897 to represent Jews in Imperial Russia. It ceased its activities in the Soviet Union in 1921 but remained active in Poland

⁴⁹⁵ 'Workers of Zion', an independent Zionist-socialist party, divided into Left and Right

⁴⁹⁶ Brest, Belarus (formerly Brest-Litovsk)

Yona Asher Borovyk

He was born in Vysotsk in the year 1896. From his young days he was a teacher of Hebrew in the villages in the neighbourhood of Vysotsk. In 1914 he was called up to the First World War, in which he fell into German captivity.



After his release from captivity at the end of the war he lived for some years in Berlin and was active as a Zionist in the farm agricultural organisation, a sort of kibbutz for agricultural training near Berlin.

In 1921 he got ready, together with his friends from the training group, to make aliyah to the Land and came to Vysotsk to say goodbye to his family, but for family reasons he was detained and didn't make aliyah.

From 1921 he lived in Slupcza⁴⁹⁷, a little shtetl in Congress Poland⁴⁹⁸. He continued in his Zionist activities until he met his tragic death at the hands of the

Nazi monster at the time of the Shoah.

May his memory be blessed and remain with us.

Sara Borovyk-Tasher

Tel Aviv

⁴⁹⁷ just north of Sandomierz in south-eastern Poland

⁴⁹⁸ the Kingdom of Poland established in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna enjoyed extremely limited autonomy within the Russian Empire

The family of Chaim and Chana Khaznchuk

Our father Chaim, son of Reb Itzhok, was known as a simple and honest man, gracious and reverent. In spite of the fact that he suffered from severe asthma he would get up early in the morning for shaharit 'dawn' prayers in the synagogue in minyan ⁴⁹⁹. He made sure he prayed in minyan also in minkhe ⁵⁰⁰ and maariv ⁵⁰¹. He loved to study a passage of Mishna with the Mishnaot society which was founded in the shtetl at that time.

After being continuously ill our father of blessed memory died on the 24th day of Kislev [Nov./Dec.] 1922. Sorrow and distress prevailed in the house. Our dear mother, Khava daughter of Zelig, took upon herself the heavy burden of supporting her five little children. She laboured from morning till late at night, with the sole aim of making sure that, heaven forbid, her children should not lack anything. The children studied in the Tarbut school and with private teachers. They were obliged to learn the Hebrew language.



The Khaznchuk family
from right to left, standing: Bila, Avram and Shleyme Khaznchuk, Borukh Barkman, Moyshe, Tzvi, Aaron and Esther Khaznchuk
sitting: Khaykl Sheynman, Asher, Frida and Malka Khaznchuk, the child - Zelig son of Itzhok Khaznchuk

The children grew up. Beyla married Sheynman. They established an exemplary family home. Two daughters and a son were born to them. The other members of the family, Esther, Malka and myself, faithful to pioneering Zionist education, made aliyah to the Land and arrived at the centre of our desire. We are contented. All our efforts to bring our dear mother and our dear young brother Aharele came to nought. We were too late.

These are the members of our family for whom we weep: our father Chaim Khaznchuk, our mother Khava, our sister Bila (Sheynman) and her family, our brother Aarele.

May their blessed memory remain alive.

Tzvi, Esther and Malka Khaznchuk

⁴⁹⁹ quorum of ten men necessary for reciting prayers in the synagogue

⁵⁰⁰ afternoon prayer

⁵⁰¹ evening prayer

Reb Nisn, son of Reb Meir Lopata of blessed memory

On one rainy, muddy day as I was returning with him from the synagogue, he said to me: 'In the house of the Lord we shall walk with feeling'. 'With feeling' meant: hail, wind, rain, snow, i.e. in any situation and in all conditions. And he did indeed carry out what he said.

As is well known, he was poor, working his hands to the bone so he could feed his family. Every day before dawn he would come to the prayer-house and finish all the psalms, and on Sabbath he would wake up the people of the shtetl to psalms. In all weathers he would go out at night reciting: 'Israel, holy people, *shteyt oif* [Yidd.: Get up] to worship God' and would add: 'Arise, wake up, present yourselves to worship God, for that is what you were created for.'

He would come up to each house, knocking on the window: '*Reb Dovid shteyt oif* for psalms...' and wait a moment and come up to the window again: '*Reb Dovid ir hert?*' [Do you hear?] Until he heard the answer 'I hear' he would not move off.

At Purim⁵⁰² Jews would go from door to door to collect alms for the needy for Pessach. Nisn would then wear a hat, a kind of *kapelusz*⁵⁰³. Together with the others he would go into every house singing a Purim song, Nisn emphasising in particular: *tzole, tzole*⁵⁰⁴ that is, pay up, pay money.

His daughter Malka died all of a sudden. In her memory he took upon himself the task of repairing the Sefer Torah⁵⁰⁵ that had been torn by a mentally ill person. In a short time the money was collected by Nisn. The Sefer Torah was repaired. A celebration to mark the end of the repair work was arranged in Nisn's house. Many people were present when the Sefer Torah was brought into the synagogue with great joy.

May his memory be blessed.

[anonymous]

⁵⁰² a festival that takes place on either the 14th or 15th day of the month of *Adar* (usually late March), marking the victory of the Jews over their Persian oppressors (see Book of Ruth)

⁵⁰³ Polish: hat

⁵⁰⁴ Yiddish: *tzoln*, to pay

⁵⁰⁵ book of the Torah (Pentateuch/five books of Moses)

In memory of Father

The Khaznchuk family was known as a family of khazans⁵⁰⁶. I remember that my father of blessed memory told me that his father, Itzhok, had also been a famous cantor. Here I want to recall that at least once my father also served as cantor. The story was such: in Yamim Noraim⁵⁰⁷ almost all the people from our shtetl were praying in the large synagogue, apart from followers of Brezne. Sometimes they would even hire a cantor from another town, although generally they would also serve voluntarily as cantor in Yamim Noraim. Sometimes in morning prayer my father, who prayed in the large synagogue, would also have the honour to pass in front of the ark, but usually he would travel to Stolin for Rosh HaShana⁵⁰⁸ to the rebbe Reb Isroelke, bless his gracious memory. After the death of the Stolin rebbe Father became one of the followers of Reb Elimelekh of Karlin de Pinsk⁵⁰⁹, bless his gracious memory.

Then on one occasion it happened that Father was asked to pass in front of the ark in the prayer house for a fee in Yamim Noraim. Father responded to the request and prayed as cantor at Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur⁵¹⁰. The prayer indeed passed successfully, except that the 'evil eye' struck him. On the Sunday after Sukkot⁵¹¹ he became blind in both eyes. He could not see anything. After consulting his friends, followers of Karlin, among them Meir Katzman, we travelled with Father to Pinsk for an operation. Afterwards his sight returned and did not leave him for the remainder of his life.

Avraham Khaznchuk

Tel Aviv

⁵⁰⁶ Cantors (in synagogue)

⁵⁰⁷ 'Days of Awe', the period between the New Year and the Day of Atonement

⁵⁰⁸ New Year

⁵⁰⁹ Karlin, a suburb of Pinsk (now in southern Belarus)

⁵¹⁰ Day of Atonement

⁵¹¹ Feast of Tabernacles

In memory of the Reznik family

Once it became certain that the disaster of the Shoah had indeed happened, when everybody stayed close to their loved ones and clung to every keepsake, a picture and letter that remained from them, I received a letter from the WIZO⁵¹² organisation in America, containing the following story. A young woman by the name of Feya Reznik appeared in the WIZO office one day. These are roughly her words: 'I feel that my days are numbered. I am ill. It seems to me that I was given the wrong treatment, I received too much radium. I am alone. Nobody has survived from my family. All of them were killed by the Nazis. I have a friend in Eretz Israel. I have not corresponded with her since she made aliyah to the Land. Her address must be HaKovesh⁵¹³, Kfar Sava. Everything that is in my flat, the clothes, the furniture, money, pictures and such like belong to her and I ask that they be passed to her. The sum of money, 1000 dollars, I give to KKL⁵¹⁴ for planting trees in the Land...' And an



Reyzl Reznik

Feygl Reznik

additional note in the letter: 'Her face was sad and strange...'

Feygl, the youngest of the daughters, was the only one of the Reznik family who survived, who was saved from the Shoah. Her strength gave out. In her struggle for life she collapsed, fell after a malignant illness gnawed her body.

In the last moments of her life she remembered a good friend she had once had; her name came to her lips. I remember very well the friendship there had been between us. We were then young girls, pupils in the state school, full of innocence and lofty dreams. We talked about everything happening around us, crying out about anything wrong that we saw. Feygl was always serious and concerned about the fate of her family.

The disasters that befell her home shocked her through and through. Her older sister, Khanchik, with her husband Sander and their children, Nishke and Itzhok, lived near Hantzivitz⁵¹⁵, near the forests in which the father of the family was selling his wares. Once, during the night, a gang of murderers attacked them, killed her brother-in-law Sander and her sister Nishke who was by chance visiting them that day. They badly wounded my sister Khanchik and the children but left them because they thought they were dead. They robbed everything they found to rob, smashed, destroyed and disappeared.

I remember their father, Avram Reznik. He had fine facial features and a thick beard parted by white hair, with deep eyes. He was a devout Jew who accepted everything with love even though there was not always work to be found. He was quiet and humble and seemed to me a complete contrast to his wife Beyla Gitl, who was excitable, demanding and complaining. Despite all her understanding she had many outbursts that were not always to the liking of the children.

⁵¹² Women's International Zionist Organisation, founded in 1920

⁵¹³ Ramat HaKovesh, a kibbutz in central Israel founded in 1926

⁵¹⁴ short for Keren Kayemet le'Israel (Jewish Nation Fund)

⁵¹⁵ Hantsevichi, a town in Belarus whose population is nearly 15,000, on the railway line 120 km. north of Udrytsk (the nearest station to Vysotsk)

This father, Reb Avram Reznik, fell apart completely after the murder of his son-in-law and his daughter and at the sight of the distress of his widowed daughter and the two orphans. His heart could not take the distress and he passed away. Then Feygl suddenly grew up, as if all the burden of supporting the family was piled on her young back, although she knew she did not have the strength to do much.

In conversations with me and in her imagination she cried out for actions and for revenge. I do not know if she ever turned to the second mission but she took concrete measures: she learned to sew and helped her mother. Their uncle Zeydl came to their assistance from Warsaw. He was a wealthy Jew, a wood merchant. Her sister Khava travelled to their uncle in Warsaw. There she got married and had two sweet children. Reyzl also got married and moved with her husband to live in Pinsk. They had a nice little son. Khanchik married for a second time and moved to live in Stolin. Their brother, Chaim, his wife Dvoyre and their five children remained in Vysotsk. Chaim struggled hard to support the family. They earned very little, and people of the shtetl came to his assistance. Somehow or other a little light and joy came to Beyla Gitl. Then came the murderer and the whole family was destroyed. What happened with the last survivor, Feygl, my dear friend, is known to me from the above-mentioned letter.

May these few lines be a memorial to the Reznik family that was wiped out in the Shoah and in memory of the deep friendship that we had in the past.

May their memory be blessed.

Rivka Nafkhan-Dan

Eynat

In memory of the Fikman family and Aaron Vinnik

During the period of Russian rule, before the outbreak of the Soviet-Nazi German war, I was studying in the Russian school together with my friends, girls of my own age, Shoshana Sheynman, Golda Raykhman, Gitl Lopatyn, Feygele Fialkov, Yokheved Melamed and others whose names I do not remember.

Of my extended family only my Uncle Hershl and I survived.

My parents were Yosef and Susil Fikman. We lived on Pilsudsky Street. The family on Mother's side was large. Yakove Vinnik lived in Stolin, Eliezer Vinnik lived in Pinsk. Both of them and their families were killed. My Uncle Hershl was saved. He was in the Soviet Union. And he came to the Land.

My cousins were: Zelda, Sholem, Yakov, Moyshe, Brokhe and their parents, Aaron and Sara Vinnik. All of them were wiped out in the great slaughter in the shtetl.

I was saved thanks to the fact that ten days before the outbreak of the Russo-German war I travelled to the Soviet Union accompanying my grandmother, who was travelling to visit her eldest son. The terrors of the war did not enable me to return. This is how I survived and came to the Land.

Genya Shibak-Fikman

Rehovot



The Nisn Vaks family, 1925 (on the occasion of Etl's aliyah)
from right to left, standing: Chaya, Etl, Itzhok-Meir, an aunt;
sitting: Shoshan, Rachel Shtoper (from David Horodok)



The Shnayder and Perlman families

from right to left, standing: Feygl Shnayder, Chaim Perlman,
Khasya Mofchin, Golda Perlman, Khanan Perlman;

sitting: Mordekhai Shnayder, Darbrushke Perlman, Hodl Shnayder,
Hersh-Bar Shnayder;

the children below: Rusl, Esther, Alke, Itzhok, Breyndl and Mordekhai Shnayder



from right to left, standing: Zev Urman, Rivka and Tzvi Baum and their children Moyshe and Chana Urman;
sitting: Blume and Feybl Urman and their children Masha, Moyshe and Ephraim, the mother Chaya-Etl, Moyshe Kaviar, his wife Itka and their children Rivka, Sonya, Alke and Elazar



Tzipora and Zelig Berman

About the Vysotsk community that is no more

This tiny shtetl, a long way, about eight kilometres, from the railway station of Udrytsk, situated on the banks of several rivers. On one side the broad river, the Horyn, and on the other side small streams.

Throughout the year it was possible to get to Vysotsk. You would cross the river Horyn in a raft (*parom*), then you would arrive in Vysotsk.

In spring, when the snows melted, getting to the shtetl became difficult. The roads deteriorated, when the water from the streams rise on its borders, overflow, embrace, blend, flood all the surrounds, and the appearance of the shtetl is like an island isolated in a sea of swamps.

The traveller who feels like visiting this remote corner at this season is not to be envied. Quite a few hurdles confront him before he reaches his destination. From Udrytsk he would travel some distance by cart, get out of the cart and get into a fishing boat, the boat anchors by the *goishe gas*⁵¹⁶, pass on foot the *goishe gas* submerged in deep sand and come on to the 'main' Jewish street, the start of which was next to the local authority house (from the direction of Stolin) and come to the market, which was surrounded by Jewish houses. Several alleys branch off from the market.

The majority of Vysotsk Jews were hard-working people, tradesmen, honest people who earned a living from the fruits of their labour, who made do with little and were happy with their lot. Not many of them were shopkeepers.

Stocks of potatoes stored for winter, until the next crop, flour for baking bread, a barrel of pickled cabbage, a barrel of pickled cucumber, a portion of meat for Sabbath. Sometimes people even managed to get meat during the week. This is what Jews of the shtetl had to eat.

The amazing thing was that in this remote shtetl young people were full of life, educated, cultured, with national aspirations and a clear understanding of international issues, just as they had of matters concerning Jews. And they were divided up into various splinter groups.

Relations between the Jews of Vysotsk and their Christian neighbours were friendly, peaceful; they lived in peace and there was no resentment between them.

Clothes cupboards were not in fashion in the shtetl homes. Instead a wooden box on four iron wheels would be found in every home. Small wooden boxes, simple, without paint, without tin covering, without iron rims with a small lock. In these boxes the poor people kept holiday clothes, bridal dresses, bed linen that mothers had been collecting for their daughters for many years, and various other items they regarded as valuable.

Fires often struck the Vysotsk homes with their straw roofs. The people were very alert to *pozharim*⁵¹⁷.

When the call of *pozhar* rang out at dead of night and when tongues of fire took hold of the straw roofs, the first act of the Jews of the shtetl was to bring out of their houses the boxes on wheels in which 'the treasures' were hidden.

When the German murderers arrived the axe fell on the Vysotsk community. The axe fell on the survivors of the Jewish slaughter in Dombrovitz, who had found temporary shelter in Vysotsk. The axe fell on the women and children of the



Dovid, son of Shleyne Shtoper

⁵¹⁶ Yiddish: Goy street

⁵¹⁷ Yiddish from Ukr./Russ. : *Pozhar*, fire + Hebrew plural suffix

community of Horodok who had been banished to Vysotsk after the Germans had already killed their husbands and their parents.

The German murderers and their Ukrainian and Lithuanian accomplices, who abused Jews of Vysotsk, tormenting them, pillaging their property and possessions, robbing whatever they came upon, emptying the boxes, taking their people out to their death, to the valley of slaughter, to a pit that had already been prepared, dug out in the fields beyond the shtetl, in the opposite direction to the old cemetery.

Some time after the slaughter of the Jews of Vysotsk, one of its Christian inhabitants told us about Chava, wife of Yekhiel Borovyk, whom they saw walking her last path, her arms linked with her three daughters, as beautiful as flowers.

[He told] about the rov of the Vysotsk community, stepping on his last road/path covered in his talis ⁵¹⁸ [and about how] he refuses to take off his talis, wanting at all costs to avoid taking off his clothes and remaining naked, as the Germans had ordered. On the edge of the pit the killers killed him with the butts of their rifles. He told us about a Jewish doctor, a refugee from one of the towns in Poland, who on his final journey encourages the Jews of the shtetl as they are taken to the slaughter. These were his defiant words to the Germans:

‘Accursed killers, you turn the blood of innocent people into rivers. Your defeat is near, the day of your fall is approaching. One day we will take revenge on you, accursed killers, accursed Germans...’

They also killed the doctor with the butts of their rifles.

May these lines be a memorial on the graves of our martyred brothers who were killed at the hands of the German killers:

a memorial to my husband Dovid Shtoper and our two children;

a memorial to my sister Miriam, her husband Moyshe and their two children who were killed with terrible cruelty by the Ukrainians (gang of ‘Bulba’⁵¹⁹) in the forests near Prasidovke [Prasodivka].

A memorial to forty Jews of Vysotsk who hid in the ‘*zamlinke*’ ⁵²⁰ and who, one night, were all killed by the ‘Bulba’ gangs.

A memorial to Aaron Sheynman who was killed by the village of Rechitze on his way to us in the forest.

Bat Lea

Avramle, son of Dvoyre and Dovid Shtoper



⁵¹⁸ prayer mantle

⁵¹⁹ Ukrainian People’s Revolutionary Army followers of Tara Bulba-Borovetz (1908-1981)

⁵²⁰ this probably means ‘little gathering place’ from *zamlen* (Yiddish: to gather)



The family of Shleyme Shtoper – 1932
 from right to left, standing: Lea Shtoper and her husband Mendl
 Shabetz, Aaron and Mushke Shtoper;
 sitting: Dvusya, the mother Riva-Malka and Dovid Shtoper



Shleyme Shtoper



Dvusya and Dovid Shtoper and the child -
 Shleyme, Mushke's son

Tamar (Tama) Borovyk-Yesunov



She was born in Vysotsk in 1908. Her parents were Chava and Yoyne Borovyk. She grew up in her parents' home, a religious, traditional home with national aspirations. She studied in the Tarbut school in the shtetl, was a member of HeKhalutz HaTzair and the Khalutz. In 1934 she went off to the training kibbutz in Kamin Kashirsk ⁵²¹.

With the help of a relative of the family she made aliyah in 1938. A year after her marriage in the Land she gave birth to her daughter Bruria. While she was pregnant she became ill with a malignant disease and in 1943 she died leaving her 2-year-old daughter. May her memory be gathered in eternal life.



In Israel, October 1963, at the party to celebrate the wedding of Bruria Yesonov: some of those who had left Vysotsk



Arie, Tzipora and Dovid Durchyn

⁵²¹ Kamin Kashyrskyy, north-west area of Volhynia province



Nekhama and Dovid Kortach



The teacher A. Kant



Chaim Asher Lieberman (from Zhidin)



Tzvi-Arie and Menukha Lieberman (from Tuman)



from right to left: Bella Lieberman-Smokat, Aaron Roznkrantz and his wife Khashke Lieberman, Malka Liman (from Tuman)

Our family in Milyach

On the other side of the river Horyn as you come eastwards you see the village of Milyach in all its glory. About a hundred and thirty years ago, a short while after the peasants living in the village had been freed from the *panszczyzna*⁵²², from the yoke of slavery of the *porets*⁵²³, a Jew by the name of Hershil Perlshteyn came to the village from the nearby shtetl of Dombrovitz. He built a house for himself that was then called a *krechma*⁵²⁴, a place where villagers assembled every Sunday to drink a glass of spirit and buy some necessities such as paraffin, salt and so on. They did not need any other provisions. Everything they consumed they produced themselves. They would also make bread to eat and clothes to wear.

This Jew had three sons: Avrom, Ayzik and Yakov. The three of them helped their parents until they grew up and married, each building a house for himself. Children and grandchildren were born. Some of them also moved to other places and even emigrated, until about ten families remained in the village. All of them were descendants of one man among about one hundred 'Goy' families, peasant farmers.

My parents Feybush-Shraga and Shifra had three sons and five daughters. Two died while still very young. Chana, Chaya and Khasil survived. My sister Chana and her husband Rotberg had five sons and one daughter. Mordekhai and Yakov made aliyah to the Land. Chaim, Hershl and Kalman and the daughter Breyndl remained in the village. My sister Khaya and her husband Avram Leyb Feyglshteyn had three sons and one daughter, Chaim-Hersh, Asher, Menachem and their daughter Masha who lived in Klosov⁵²⁵. My sister Khasil and her husband Shleyne Tinkl had two sons and a daughter, Yehoshua, Pinkhas and Leah. Moyshe Beer my brother had two sons and a daughter, Hillel, Yosef and Sara. He had a grocery shop next to the railway station. And my brother Leybl, who got married in the shtetl Lakhva⁵²⁶ with Fanya Pinkhasovych, had two sons and a daughter. All of them were prey to the filthy teeth of Hitler's soldiers, may their memory be wiped off the face of the earth.

Jewish tradesmen would sometimes come to the village from the nearby shtetl of Vysotsk looking for work among the Goy peasant farmers, sewing a coat from sheepskin, sewing or mending boots in the winter days, building a house from wooden beams, making an oven from bricks inside a house etc. One Jew by the name Eliahu-Moyshe Borovyk, whom I remember at the age of about seventy, would come every summer to the village and would go for a week into the forest with oxen to put them to pasture. On Sabbath he would come to us in order to be among Jews and pray with us. At the end of Sabbath as darkness fell he would return to the forest to the oxen, a distance of fifteen kilometres, on foot.

One Jew by the name of Beynish would come to the village as a pedlar, bringing matches, needles, salt and similar products to the local homes. In return he received grain which he would grind in the village mill, then bring his family flour ready for baking bread. The income from peddling was extremely meagre, for the 'Goys' had very limited needs. Even matches they would use sparingly for they made fire with the help of stones. They made their clothes for themselves from the material that they themselves wove.

Beynish would come to the cheyder where we, the Jewish children, were sitting and studying. More than once he would demonstrate his great knowledge in

⁵²² Polish: serfdom

⁵²³ Yiddish: landowner

⁵²⁴ Yidd: tavern

⁵²⁵ now Klesiv, a village c. 25 km. east of Sarny (close to the village was Klosova, the granite quarry that became the training kibbutz for the Zionist youth)

⁵²⁶ a village c. 80 km. east of Pinsk (Belarus)

the content of the studies. He would ask and answer questions from the Bible orally as if from the book. There was not a question or a passage in the Bible that was asked about that he did not know how to answer precisely and promptly.

In the 80s of the last century the period of service in the army of the Russian tsar Nikolai was five years. A Jewish young man would look for all sorts of ruses, like bribing the authorities or inflicting harm on himself in order to show himself weak. Anything in order not to serve in the army. Of my grandfather's five sons it was my uncle Chaim's fate to serve in the army as he was strong and healthy. Nothing helped to get him released, not bribery and not self-inflicted harm. After that he hid from the authorities. But after some time they caught him and took him to court, where he received six months' imprisonment. After his release from prison he had to serve his period of time in the army in full. A short while after his release from the army the First World War broke out, and in 1914 he was conscripted as a reserve soldier for the war. His wife Sara-Leah and his only daughter Batya-Reyzil stayed with her parents, that is with my grandfather and grandmother. The house was large and spacious. In one large room stood the Aron Hakodesh⁵²⁷ and in it the Sefer Torah⁵²⁸ which my grandfather had bought for it. On Sabbath and holidays on Yamim Noraim⁵²⁹ they would gather in this room to pray together with other people.

After the First World War the young people left the village, some emigrating to Canada and others to Australia and some to Eretz Israel. Those who remained in the village were all killed in the Shoah. Not one survived.

What I have recorded here on paper will preserve the holy memory of the dear relatives who were and are no longer alive.

Eliezer Perlshteyn

Ramat Gan

⁵²⁷ Holy Ark, in which the Sefer Torah is kept

⁵²⁸ Book of the Torah (five books of Moses)

⁵²⁹ 'Days of Awe', the period between the New Year and the Day of Atonement



Pesya Gempl



Rivl Ryzhy, her husband and their baby son

LET US REMEMBER

Victims of the slaughter in Vysotsk and the surrounding area

Abelson, the rov, Yehoshua and his wife Vitl
 Abelson, the rov, Avram-Yoel, his wife Chana and their three children
 Abelson, Sheynke and her husband the rov Menahem Eliezer from Plotnitze and their three children
 Abelson, Yehezkeel and his wife Ita
 Abramovych, Miriam
 Ayznberg, Yossef and his wife Chana
 Ayznberg, Sima
 Urman, Chaya-Etl, Feybl, Blume, Moshe, Ephraim, Chana
 Baharal, Yosef, his wife Chaya and their five children
 Berman, Freydl, her daughters Feygl and Sonya and her son Zelig
 Bigon, Itzhok and his wife Tamar
 Borovyk, Basil, her son Natnael and her daughters Rifke and Yehudit
 Borovyk, Chava and her son Yekhiel
 Borovyk, Yekhiel, his wife Chava and their daughters Dina, Lifshe and Khasya
 Borovyk, Chaya Dvusya
 Borovyk, Yona, his wife Chava and their daughter Chana
 Borovyk, Rakhel and her daughter Sara-Tama
 Borovyk, Yekhiel
 Beygl, Dovid, his wife Feya and their children Menas and Zelda
 Beyzman, Sheyndl and her two daughters
 Baum, Tzvi, Rifke, Moyshe and Eliezer
 Bichik, Asher, his wife Sonya and their children
 Gelman, Itzhok-Dovid, and his wife Malka
 Gelman, Feybl, his wife Beylke, their daughters Shoshana and Esther and their son Sander
 Goldberg, Itzhok, his wife Ita and their daughter Shoshana
 Goldman, Avram, his wife Sara Minke and their son Israel
 Goldshteyn, Chaya, her daughter Esther and her son Shleyme
 Gottlieb, Aaron and his daughters Miriam and Nekhama
 Gutman, Asher, his wife Rakhel, their daughter Feygl and their son Itzhok [see note 451, p. 211]
 Gendzl, Itzhok and his wife Esther
 Gendzl, Khayke (from Dombrovitze)
 Durchyn, Arie, his wife Tzipa and their son Dovid
 Drizon, Chaya (from Horodnya)
 Vaks, Nisn, his wife Chava and their son Arie
 Vaks, Yakov, his wife Genya and their two children
 Vaks, Zeev, his wife Sara-Perl and their sons Eliahu, Tzvi and Borukh and their daughters
 Frumke, Miriam, Rifke and Chana
 Vaks, Hershl, his wife Susil and their two children
 Vaks, Frumke
 Vaks, Nisn, his wife Yentl, their daughter Henya and her family and their son Yakov
 Vaks, Henya and her husband Moyshe and their two children
 Vasserman, Nakhman and his wife Rakhel
 Vassershteyn, Zeyvl, his wife Pesya Rakhel Tzufrik (from Shadlitz)
 Verkl, Berl, his wife Sara (daughter of Shleyme Kolodny) and their son Gedalia
 Vidder, Myshe, his wife Rakhel and their children Hersh-Leyb, Betzalel and Yakov
 Vinnik, Shmuel and his wife Breyndl
 Vinnik, Zeydl
 Vinnik, Yosef, his wife Rifke and their children Shmuel, Tzirl and Henya
 Vinnik, Aaron, his wife and their four children

Zolyar, Aaron, his wife Sara and their son Yehuda
 Zolyar, Berl and his daughter Chaya and Esther
 Khaznchuk, Chava and her son Aaron
 Khaznchuk, Aaron, his wife Tzipora, their son Chaim and his two daughters
 Khover, Mordekhai, his wife Chaya and their children Chasya, Zalman, Dvoyre and Sheyndl
 Khover, Mordekhai, his wife and their two children
 Khover, Khina and her son Yehuda-Nakhman
 Khover, Reuven, his wife Miriam and their children Nisn, Dovid and Nishke
 Khover Mordekhai, his wife and their two children
 Khover, Simkha (murdered in Sarny)
 Khayat, Asher
 Kharpak, Isroel (from Sarny), his wife Chaya, (daughter of Shlomo Kolodny) and their daughter Pnina
 Tkach, Borukh, his wife Chaya and their children Yona and Gitl
 Treger, Berl and his wife Sara
 Treger, Sheyne-Hodl
 Treger, Moyshe and his wife Chana
 Treger, Shmuel and his wife Tzipora
 Treger, Yehezkeel, his wife and their two children
 Teshnuta, Mikhael, Sara and Moyshe (from Rokytny)
 Turknitz, Pessach, Chaya, Kheshke, Noakh, Meir, Chaim Aaron (from Tuman)
 Yodlman, Mordekhai and his wife Esther
 Yakhnyuk, Itzhok, his wife Teybl and their children Feybl, Eydl and Nisn
 Katz, Moyshe, his wife Basil and their daughter Sara-Miriam
 Katz, Dovid and his wife Tzipora
 Katz, Shprintze and her son Ephraim
 Katz, Shleyme, his wife Chaya and their two children
 Lopata, Arie, his wife Malka, their sons Zalman and Moyshe and their daughter
 Lopata, Meir, his wife Rakhel, their son Natnael and their two daughters
 Lopata, Yakov (son of Eliezer), his wife Chaya and their children Eliezer and Malka
 Lopata, Nakhum, his wife Feygl and their children Zalman, Ben-Tzion, Rivka and Tzvi
 Lopata, Moyshe, his wife Golda, their son Aaron and their daughter
 Lopata, Feyge-Mirl
 Lopata, Arie
 Lopata, Berl and his son Itzhok and ... and his daughter Nishke
 Lopata, Yosef, his wife and their four children
 Lopata, Mendl, his wife Feya and their children Nisn, Shmuel and Bat Sheva (from Litinitz)
 Lopata, Yakov (son of Zalman), his wife Rakhel and their children Shulamit, Sheyndl, Zalman and Yehuda (from Stolin)
 Lopata, Zalman, his wife Tzipora and their children Gitl and Aaron
 Lopatyn, Liebe and her son Yoske
 Lopatyn, Zeydl and his wife Dvoyre (from Luninets)
 Lopatyn, Ayzik and his wife Gitl (from Rovne)
 Lopatyn, Ita, her husband Yosef Sapir and their son Nisn (from Lodz [Łódź])
 Lopatyn, Susil (from Dombrovitz)
 Lieberman, Leybush, his wife and their children Sara-Pesl and Hershl
 Lieberman, Asnat Golda, her husband and their children (from Rovne)
 Lieberman, Natan and his wife Lea
 Lieberman, Arie-Tzvi and his wife Menukha (from Tuman)
 Lieberman, Chaim Asher (from Zhidin)
 Lapinsky, Chaim, his wife and their three children
 Lapinsky, Asher and his wife Golda Rakhel
 Lapinsky, Chaya and her husband
 Lakhmanchuk, Chaya Sara
 Lakhmanchuk, Moyshe Aaron and his wife Reyzl

Lakhmanchuk, Betzalel and his wife Yakir
 Lakhmanchuk, Aaron and his wife Sara
 Lakhmanchuk, Hershl, his wife Rakhel and their children Sara and Peretz
 Lykhtnfeld, Naomi
 Lykhtnfeld Lopatyn, Chana and her daughters Chava and Beylke
 Lykhtnfeld, Gronya and Yokheved (from Luninetz)
 Lin, Malka, her husband Tudras and their son Yossef
 Mayzl, Beynush and his son Asher and his daughter
 Mayzl, Hadassa and her husband Pinkhas and their two children
 Mentl, Yehudit
 Nafkhan, Yosef Leyb, his wife Freydl, their daughter Tirtza and their son Israel
 Nafkhan, Gershon, his wife Chaya, their son Isroel and their daughter Rakhel
 Nafkhan, Asher, his wife Golda and their daughter
 Nafkhan, Israel-Chaim and his wife Reyzl
 Susnik, Chaim, his wife Chaya and their two daughters
 Perl, Nakhman, his wife Malka and their children Sander, Itzhok and Rifke
 Perl, Chava and her children
 Petrukh, Hershl, his wife Dvoyre and their children Tzipora and Aaron
 Petrukh, Berl
 Frankl, Aaron, his wife and their two children
 Feldlayt, Yehoshua and his wife Dvoyre
 Feldlayt, Miriam and her daughters Rifke, Ferdit and ...
 Feldlayt, Etil, her husband and her children (from Dombrovitze)
 Feldman, Dvoyre
 Feldman, Miriam and her daughters Freydl, Brakha, Zelda and Breyndl
 Feldman, Asher, his wife and their children (from Varshe [Warsaw])
 Feldman, Hershl, his wife and their two children
 Feldman, Yakov, his wife Pesl and their daughter Yakha
 Perlman, Dobrushka
 Fikman, Yosef, his wife Susil and their son
 Fishman, Sara, her husband Zelig and their children: Merl, Lea, Nakhman and Itzl (from Dombrovitze)
 Fishman, Markl
 Pivovuz, Esther and her daughter Chaya-Yentl
 Pivovuz, Feybl, his wife Mushke, their son Shley mele and their daughter Bila
 Pivovuz, Yerakhmiel (from Rovne)
 Perlshteyn, Isasskhar and his wife Gitl
 Perlshteyn, Pessach, his wife Rivka and their three sons and daughters
 Fialkov, Anshl, his daughters Teybl and Feygl and his son Aaron-Shmuel
 Furman, Itzhok, his wife Esther and their children Freydl (from Vilne [Vilnius]), Lea and Motl
 Furman, Sara and her two daughters
 Furman, Feygl and Arie and their son Aaron-Zeev
 Feldshteyn, Pessach, his wife Rivka, their three sons and their daughter
 Tzuperik, Aaron, his wife Tama, their son Yikhiel Bar and their daughter Menukha
 Tzirkl, Shley me and his wife Malka
 Tzirkl, Sara, her husband and her son
 Chichik, Gushe, her son Israel and her daughter Rakhel (from Horodnya)
 Kortach, Leyb, his wife Rivka and their daughter Chaya
 Kortach, Nekhama and her daughter Tzipora
 Koltun, Shimon, his wife Freydl and their three sons: Yoshe, Pessach and Aaron-Shmuel (from Stolin)
 Kolodny, Shley me and his wife Pesya
 Kolodny, Perl
 Kolodny, Gershon, his wife Dina and their son Hershl
 Kersin Shnayder, Shifra (from Dombrovitze)
 Kaviar, Meir-Hersh and his wife Beyla-Rakhel

Kaviar, Mikhael, Rifke, Fanya, Elka
 Kaviar, Eliezer, his wife Beyla and their two children
 Kaviar, Moyshe, his wife Itka and their two children
 Kikhl, Khinke (from Stolin)
 Kaftan, Sender, his wife Freydl and their sons Boaz and Nison
 Katzke, Dovl and her children: Aaron, Mikhael David and Itzl (from Dombrovitze)
 Raykhman, Yakov, his wife Sara and their daughters Golda and Chaya-Mirl
 Reznik, Beyle-Gitl
 Reznik, Chaim, his wife and their five children
 Reznik, Khanchik, her husband, her son Itzhok and her daughter Nishke (from Stolin)
 Reznik, Chava, her husband and her children (from Varshe [Warsaw])
 Reznik, Reyzl, her husband and her son (from Pinsk)
 Ryzhy, Yikhiel, his wife Itka and their children
 Royan, Hershl, his wife Sara and their three children
 Rikhotsky, Berl, his wife and his three children
 Rikhotsky, Itzhok, his wife Reyzl and their two children
 Rotnberg, Yehuda, his wife Khinke and their children Yikhiel, Mordekhai, Avram and Reyzl
 Shuster, Shmuel, his wife Lea and their daughter Tzipora
 Shuster, Shlomo, his wife Breyndl and their two children
 Shuster, Sara-Mirl and her daughter Lea
 Shuster, Aaron, his wife Menukha and there two children
 Shuster, Feybush and his two sons
 Sheynbeyn, Hershl
 Sheynbeyn, Chaim, his wife Rakhel and their daughters Mindl, Chana, Miriam and Rifke
 Shtoper, Aaron, his wife Gitl and their son Yehuda
 Shtoper, Dovid and his wife Elke and their daughters Batya and Rifke
 Shtoper, Nisn
 Shtoper, Khasil (from Luninetz)
 Shtoper, Moyshe, his wife Shprintze and their three children
 Shtoper, Betzalel, his wife Rivka, their son Arie and their daughter
 Shtoper, Riva-Malka and her daughter Dvusya
 Shtoper, Dovid (son of Shlomo) and his son Avramele
 Shnayder, Moshe, his wife Zlatke and their two children
 Shnayder, Hersh-Bar, his wife Hodl and their three children
 Shnayder, Mordekhai, his wife Feygl, their daughters Risya and Esther and their sons
 Shnayder, Benyamin, his wife Rifke and their son Borukh
 Shnayder, Yona and his children Dovid and Itzl (from Pinsk)
 Shnayder, Aaron, his wife Meril and their daughter Tzipora
 Shnayder , Moyshe and his children Merl, Ephraim and Itztl (from Dombrovitze)
 Shamash, Zisl, her daughters Sima and Malka and her son Leybl
 Sheynman, Khikl, his wife Esther, their two daughters and their son
 Sheynman, Khaykl, his wife Beyla and their three children
 Sheynman, Hershl, his wife Gnesya and their daughter Gitl
 Sheynman, Aaron, his wife Chava and their four children
 Shlyapek, Yosef, his wife Reykhl and their two children
 Sher, Itzhok, his wife Dvoyre and their children Chaim-Aaron, Yona, Rifke and Freydl
 Sher, Benyamin
 Sher, Berl, his wife, their two daughters and their son Chaim
 Shabshi, Freydl and her son Itzhok
 Shvatz, Mendl, his wife Leakhe and their daughter Shulamit
 Tzarpichnyk, Yosef, his wife Etl and their sons Asher-Aaron and Itzhok

Residents of Ozery who perished in the slaughter in Vysotsk

Lykhtnfeld, Yehuda and Freydl and their children Khasl and Yakov (murdered in the forests after he had run away from the ghetto)

Vinyar, Nakhum and his wife Rosa and her children Chaim and Hanchik

Vinyar, Mirka and her two children Chaya-Sara and Tzvi

Vinyar, Aaron and his two daughters

Kristl, Avram (the husband of Manya Likhtnfeld) and her daughter Beyla

Kagan, Moyshe, his wife Esther and their five children

Kagan, Rakhel and her son Boaz

Goykrakh, Yosef and his wife Zelda and their daughter

Preklasky, Hasl, Frumme

Genzl, Peretz and his two daughters and his son

Shapira, Pessach...

...Brushk

...Rivka

Shapira, Mordekhai, his wife Chaya and their three daughters

Shapira, Esther (the wife of Shmuel who was murdered after the war in the forests)

Adler, Zeev, his wife Golda, their son Yosef and their daughter Khasl (they were murdered after the war in the forests)

Motorin, Dunya and her three sons

Markovich, Dr

Tzikhmarnik, Israel

Gempl, Miriam and her three daughters



By the mass grave, 1945

from right to left: Avram Lifshitz (from Byala), Isaak Kaftan, Feybl Pivovuz and Itzhok Lykhtnfeld (from Ozery) in Red Army uniforms

People from Vysotsk who settled in Israel

Those who had already died by the time the Yizkor book was published (1963)

(B) indicates that the original contains a biographical portrait and (F) indicates a photograph

Ayznberg, Stesya (B)	Lopata, Sara (F)
Ayznberg, Chaim	Lopata, Chava (B,F)
Urman, Darbrushka	Lakhmanchuk, Barukh
Borovyk, Shmuel-Hirsh	Lykhtigshteyn, Dov (B,F)
Borovyk, Sheyna Zelda	Lykhtnfeld, Misha
Borovyk, Arie (B,F)	Nafkhan, Moshe (B,F)
Borovyk Yesinovsky, Tama	Nakhman, Sheyndl
Borovyk, Shlomo	Perl, Chaim (B,F)
Borovyk, Merl	Katzman, Raskin Hinde
Ben David (Gelman), Mikhael (B,F)	Katzman, Gershon (B,F)
Beyzman, Velfl	Kryvoruchka-Mimon, Rakhel (B,F)
Goldberg, Esther	Ryzhy, Itzhak (B,F)
Vaks-Yaakovi, Etl (B,F)	
Tkach, Itzhak-Leyb (B,F)	
Kagan, Yaakov	

Those living in Israel at the time the book was published

Abelson, Chaim	Goldberg, Yaakov
Abelson, Reuven	Goldberg, Eliahu
Urman, Zeev	Geklman Anavi, Yaffa
Urman, Lea	Geklman Anavi, Rakhel
Urman, Sara	Geklman Patishi, Tzipora
Ayznberg-Ben Arie, Rakhel	Gelman, Pinkhas
Ayznberg-Mendlboym, Rina	Garbur, Malka
Ayznberg, Khava	Gottlieb, Itzhak
Borovyk-Aviv, Ephraim	Gottlieb, Arie
Borovyk, Shmuel	Gottlieb, Pnina
Borovyk, Shlomo	Durchyn-Kopyt, Sara
Borovyk, Sara-Riva	Vaks Yasinovsky, Khaya
Borovyk Nagel, Dvora	Vaks, Yaakov
Borovyk Vallensky, Lea	Vaks Egozi, Meir
Borovyk-Iger, Rivka	Vaks, Shoshana
Borovyk, Nisan	Vaks-Velvar, Rut
Borovyk Ziskovich, Khayke	Vinnik, Tzvi
Borovyk Rozenberg, Itka	Zoliar, Itzhak
Borovyk Halperin, Rivka	Zoliar-Rotberg, Mina
Beyzman, Hillel	Zoliar-Shmuklerman, Nekhama
Beyzman, Rakhel	Khovers, Yehoshua
Beyzman, Natan	Khaznchuk, Yona
Boliar, Eliahu	Khaznchuk, Mordekhai
Gempl Vallshteyn, Shoshana	Khaznchuk, Avraham
Gutman, Israel	Khaznchuk, Tzvi
Gutman, Zalman	Khaznchuk Shlovsky, Malka
Gutman, Dobrushka	Khaznchuk Goldberg, Esther

Tkach, Dov	Kaftan Zubovich, Bruria
Tkach Ilan, Dina	Kikhl Kendlshteyn, Bonya
Tkach, Khaya	Kortach Baharav, Lea
Tkach, Betzalel	Kortach Shteyn, Pnina
Tkach, Shmuel	Katzman, Meir
Treger, Reuven	Katman, Itzhak
Yakhnyuk-Yoniel, Zeev	Katzman Ben Assaf, Esther
Katz, Pessakh	Kolkovsky, Mordekhai
Katz, Zeev	Kryvoruchky, Amir Yehoshua
Lopata, Aharon	Kryvoruchky Nomberg, Roza
Lopata, Itzhak	Kolodny Eloni, Mina
Lopatyn-Cohen, Lea	Ryzhy, Pinkhas
Lopatyn, Yehoshua	Ryzhy, Avraham
Lopatyn-Rubinshteyn, Pnina	Ryzhy, Tzetzira Breyndl
Lopata Hershkovych, Gitl	Rabinovych Lesset, Sara
Lopata, Freyd Gitl	Shnayder Viton, Golda
Lopata-Erlykh, Khaviva	Shnayder Feffer, Pnina
Lopata, Mordekhai	Shnayder, Itzhak
Lopata Mendlboym, Breyndl	Shtoper Zamir, Zehava
Lopata Pommerantz, Yehudit	Shtoper-Nusboym, Tamar
Likhtnfeld, Dov	Shtoper, Aharon
Likhtnfeld, Itzhak	Shtoper Shapir, Zeev
Lieberman, Moshe	Shabbati, Aaron
Lieberman Plant, Mikhale	Shabbati, Moshe
Lieberman Smokat, Bella	Shabbati Efori, Shifra
Lieberman, Yaakov	Shabbati, Mordekhai
Levin, Mordekhai Hersh	Sher, Dov
Nafkhan Dan, Rivka	Sheynman, Arie
Nafkhan Sadde, Sara	Sheynman Cohen, Pnina
Nafkhan Tzam, Chava	Shuster Glik, Esther
Nafkhan, Aharon Barukh	Shuster, Berchik
Nafkhan Perlman, Itka	Shiff, Yaakov
Nafkhan Goldshteyn, Dvora	Shlyapek, Yehuda
Nafkhan, Breyndl	
Nafkhan, Yaakov	
Feldman Lifshitz, Khana	
Feldman Negbi, Esther	
Petrukh Moravnyk, Sara	
Petrukh Lykhtigshteyn, Rivka	
Petrukh, Itzhak	
Fialkov, Gitl	
Fialkov, Rivka	
Fialkov, Arie	
Perl, Gershon	
Perlman, Chaim	
Perlshteyn, Eliezer	
Fishman, Chaim	
Fikman Shibek, Ganya	
Tzuperik, David	
Tzuperik, Chaya	
Kaftan, Yona	
Kaftan, Tzvi Dov	



In the Martyrs' Forest of Keren Kayemet on the approach road to Jerusalem



At the unveiling of the sign 'Vysotsk Copse' in the Martyrs' Forest of Keren Kayemet
On the road to Jerusalem (Eshtaol) 1957

from right to left, top row, sitting: Rivka Fialkov, Aharon Shtoper, Itzhak Zolyar, Rivka Nafkhan, Israel Gutman, Lea Lopatyn, Miriam Gutman, Pesl Lopatyn;
second row from top, sitting: Zalman Gutman, Gitl Fialkov;
standing: Sara Rabinovych, Shoshana Vaks, Sara Petrukh, a female visitor, Israel Yaakovi, Dvora Abramovych-Neshkes

GLOSSARY

Admor (pl.–im)	adoneynu (our Master) moreynu (our Teacher) verabeynu (our Rabbi)
Aliyah	literally ‘ascent’, emigration to the Land of Israel
Aliyot	literally ‘ascents’, the honour of being called up to the bimah (readers’ platform) to chant a blessing before and after the cantor reads from the Torah
Amidah	‘Standing prayer’, originally consisting of 18 blessings, is the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, recited three times a day
Aron Hakodesh	Holy Ark
Bimah	platform in a synagogue from where the Torah is read
Brit (bris) mila	circumcision
Bund	a non-Zionist Jewish socialist movement founded in 1897 to represent Jews throughout Imperial Russia. It supported the 1917 February revolution but opposed the October Revolution. In 1921 it ceased to function in the Soviet Union but remained active in Poland (and in the United States)
Chabad (ch=kh)	Khokhma (Wisdom), Bina (Understanding) and Da’at (Knowledge), the name of a northern branch of Chassidism
Chassidism(ch=kh)	Chassidism, founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760, commonly known as Ba’al Shem Tov), quickly attracted a huge following among the Jewish masses of the Ukraine. It emphasised prayer and devotion, in contrast to the academic rabbinical orthodoxy prevalent in Lithuania
Cheyder(ch=kh)	private school providing a traditional religion-based education (see Melamed below)
Chumash(ch=kh)	the five books of Moses or Pentateuch (see also under Torah)
Chupa(ch=kh)	wedding canopy
Eretz Israel	the Land of Israel
Et Livnot	‘A time to build’ (Ecclesiastes 3,3), a relatively conservative, middle-class strand of Zionism
Eyn Yaakov	‘Jacob’s Eye’, a book of tales and homilies from the Talmud, previously popular among the masses, collected by Rabbi Yaakov ben Shlomo Ibn Khaviv, probably in the early 17 th century
Gaon	‘genius’, a title for a rabbi indicating great respect
Gemara	section of the Talmud (see also under Talmud)
Goy	non-Jew
Hagaddah	The story of Passover
Halacha (ch=kh)	Jewish law
Hanukkah (h=kh)	the 8-day Festival of Lights starting on the 25 th day of Kislev (December) marking the re-dedication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem following the successful uprising of the Maccabees
HaPoel HaTzair	‘The Young Worker’
HaShomer HaTzair	‘Young Guard’, a leftist Zionist youth movement
HaTkufa	‘The Era’, a Hebrew-language literary journal published in Poland
HaTsira	‘The Dawn’, the first Hebrew-language journal in Poland, founded in 1862. It ceased publication in 1927
HaZman	‘The Time’, a daily Hebrew-language newspaper published in Vilna (Vilnius) from 1904 until 1915
Havdalah	the ceremony marking the end of Sabbath and holidays and the start of a new week
He'Atid	‘The Future’, the newspaper of the Khalutz, published in Warsaw
HeKhalutz	the Zionist pioneer movement
HeKhalutz HaBoger	Adult Pioneers
HeKhalutz HaTzair	Young Pioneers
Hitakhdut	‘Union’, a Zionist Labour party founded in 1920, merging HaPoel HaTzair (the Young Worker) and Tzeirei Tzion (Young Zionists)
Horah	Jewish/Israeli round dance originally from the Balkans
Kadima	‘Forwards’, the temporary name of the local Zionist youth movement
Kaddish	Prayer for the dead

Keren Kayemet	Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 in order to buy and develop land in Palestine for Jewish settlement
Keren HaYesod	United Jewish Appeal, founded in 1920, the main international fundraising organisation
Khazan	cantor in synagogue, leading the congregation in public prayers
Kibbutz (pl.-im)	training camp in Poland, forerunner of collective agricultural settlement in Israel
Kiddush HaShem	'Sanctification of the Name': bringing honour, respect and glory to God
KKL	Keren Kayemet l'Israel (see above)
Kleyzmer (pl.-morim)	musician(s)
Kol Nidrei	prayer recited at the start of the Day of Atonement
Kolbo ‘	'everything in it', the standard term for a small general store on an Israeli kibbutz
Lag BaOmer	festival, 33 days after Passover
LeChaim	'Cheers'
Luakh	calendar indicating, week by week, the start and end of the Sabbath
Maariv	evening prayer
Melamed (pl.-dim)	teacher in a cheyder (see above)
Melave Malka	'Accompanying the Queen', the third and final meal of the Sabbath
Midrash	commentaries on and interpretations of the Bible
Mikva	ritual bath
Mincha (ch=kh)	afternoon prayer
Minyan	quorum of ten men required for reciting prayers in the synagogue
Mishnah	the 'oral law' handed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai but not included in the Bible
Misnagdim	followers of Lithuanian rabbinical orthodoxy opposed to Chassidism
Mussaf	an additional service, following the morning service, on Sabbath and festivals
Moshava	settlement in Eretz Israel, originally agricultural
Ole (pl. olim)	emigrant(s) to Eretz Israel
Pessach	Passover
Poalei-Tzion	'Workers of Zion', an independent Zionist-socialist party, divided into Left and Right
Purim	a festival that takes place on either the 14 th or 15 th day of the month of Adar (usually late March). marking the victory of the Jews over their Persian oppressors (see Book of Esther)
Purimshpil (Purim-game)	Purim folk theatre dating back at least to the 17 th century which parodies the main characters in the biblical story
Rashi	acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, who wrote the first commentaries on the Bible and Talmud
Rov	local Chassidic rabbi
Reb	appellation denoting respect = Mr
Rebbe	dynastic Chassidic rabbi
Rebbitzin	wife of local Chassidic rabbi
Seder	a ritual feast marking the start of Passover
Sefer Torah	handwritten copy of the Torah used during synagogue services and kept in the Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark)
Shabbes sholem	standard salutation on the Sabbath
Shavuot	holiday on the sixth day of the month of Sivan (late May or early June) commemorating the day God gave the Torah to Moses
Shekel (pl. shkalim)	certificates issued in return for payment of annual dues to the World Zionist Organisation
Sheygetz (pl. shkotzim)	Gentile man
Shiktze	Gentile woman
Shiva	seven days of mourning
Shoah	Holocaust, genocide of c. 6 million Jews in the Second World War
Shofar	ram's horn
HaShomer HaTzair	Young Guard, left-wing Zionist youth movement
Shtetl	small town

Shtibl (pl.shtiblekh)	small prayer house(s)
Shulkhan Arukh	a manual of halacha (Jewish law) from the 16 th century
Siddur	prayer book
Simkhat Torah	‘rejoicing in the Torah’ (see below), a festival marking the completion of the annual cycle of Torah readings
Slikhes (slikhot)	penitential prayers
Sukkot	the 7-day Feast of Tabernacles (between late September and late October), when Jews eat (and sometimes sleep) in temporary structures partially open to the sky, recalling the forty years in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt
Talis(talit)	prayer mantle
Talmud	collection of rabbinical discussions on the Bible, Jewish law, ethics etc.
Talmud Torah	a school providing a traditional religion-based education, free of charge for poorer pupils
Tarbut	‘Culture’, a network of Hebrew-language educational institutions founded in 1922
Targum	Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible
Tefilin	a small leather box containing hand-written passages from the Scriptures
Tisha be’Av	the 9 th day of the month of Av (July), a day of mourning marking the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people
Torah	‘Law’, the first five books of the Bible as revealed by God to Moses
Tu BeShvat	the 15 th day of the month of Shevat (January-February) when various fruits (presumably dried) and nuts were eaten
Tzadik (pl.-im)	the title of Tzadik (‘righteous one’), usually given to somebody of exceptional spirituality such as a rebbe
Tzeirei Tzion	Young Zionists
Tzionim Klaliim	General Zionists, centrists
Yamim Noraim	‘Days of Awe’, the period between the New Year and the Day of Atonement
Yeshiva (pl.-ot)	religious seminary
Yerida	return from the Land of Israel (opposite of Aliyah)
Yizkor	memorial prayer service that takes place four times a year. The term was also used for the memorial books commemorating the Jewish communities destroyed during the Second World War
Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement
Yored (pl. yordim)	returnee(s) from the Land of Israel
Zionist Organisation	the umbrella organisation of the Zionist movement, which later became the World Zionist Organisation, was founded in 1897 at the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland
Zohar	written in Aramaic, the basic work of Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah

