



ONLINE NEWSLETTER

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About Svislovitz

This is the story about a part of the world long forgotten

The following are excerpts from the

FORWARD FROM EXILE

Autobiography of Shmarya Levin

The book was translated from Yiddish and edited by Maurice Samuel and was published by the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1967. In 1997 the book is not in print, however is available in some major libraries. It can be found in many used book stores in the USA.

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Michael M. Miller's Great Grandfather:
Phillip Litwin aka Shraga Faivesh ben Yaakov
from Svislovitch

From Chapter One

The townlet of Svislovitz, in the Russian province of Minsk, stood on a "mountain." We called it a mountain though it was less than a hundred feet above the surrounding country; but I will be faithful to the spirit of my childhood, and so a mountain it shall remain.

On one side ran the Beresina, and along the other, parallel with it, the Svislo, which first finds historic mention in the famous chronicles of the monk Nestor, who speaks of "Minsk, on the river Svislotz." For the Svislo also ran through Minsk, but much nearer to its source, so that it had a premature look about it, and suggested an irrigation canal dug by human hands.

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There were in fact quite a number of Minskiers who did not know that their town possessed a river called the Svislo. It was best known amongst the poor, for it passed through their quarter; and often enough, in the early spring or the late autumn, the quiet, unassuming rivulet suddenly took on character, lifted itself above its banks, and poured into the huts and hovels on either side in revenge for the contempt it suffered in normal times.

In our town, however, the Svislo was as good a river as any. There it did not have to wait for the floods in order to make known its presence. Its waters were full, steady and tumultuous the year round. After running parallel with the Beresina for a certain distance it made a graceful half-turn and poured into the mother-stream, proudly, as it to say: "True, I am younger and smaller, but I bring you plenty of sustenance." The Beresina, broad and majestic, swallowed her up, and flowed on unheeding to join the Dneiper.

Each of the rivers had a virtue and a defect. The Beresina was broad and splendid in some places, imposing enough to rank with the mighty Dneiper; in other places it was miserably shallow; in fact you could wade across, and I was ashamed and mortified to see peasants drive their cattle through without any precautions.. The Svislo, though narrower, was deeper and swifter; and so, since the Jews of Svislovitch were passionately fond of river bathing, we made the best of the situation by allocating each river to the appropriate sex: on summer Friday afternoons the women would be lying in the shallow Beresina, cooling off, and the men would be swimming about in the deep Svislo. Between the two naked crowds

the town lay deserted, waiting for its inhabitants to put on their holiday attire and flock to the synagogue for the prayers which usher in the Sabbath.

To the farther side of both rivers lay meadows. The land was unfit for cultivation, because twice a year, almost without fail, the rivers flooded it, and most of the time it remained impossibly marshy. The meadows produced one thing--hay. Thus the levels round the town underwent three transformations in the course of the year. In the spring, and sometimes in the autumn, the meadows were covered with water; then Svislovitch was a tiny island in the midst of a tremendous sea. In the summertime the townlet was surrounded by an ocean of green. In the winter the stretches on all sides were covered with one vast mantle of white, smooth as a bedsheet and dotted here and there with tiny pyramids--the frozen haystacks. In the late summer it was not infrequent for one of these pyramids to burst into flames that reached like tongues to the dark sky. The town knew that these tongues spoke the language of revenge: someone had set fire to the haystack of an enemy. The government punished such crimes with great severity-but the culprits were seldom caught.

Far beyond the meadows the forests began, but between them lay the wheatfields of the peasants. They were fat, rich fields, soft to the foot, breathing an odor of fruitfulness and sustenance. That odor interpreted the Russian phrase Matyushka Zemlya, Mother Earth, a mother giving suck from bountiful breasts to countless children. When the peasants spoke of Matyushka Zemlya their eyes, usually dull and expressionless, were flooded with love, like the

eyes of children who see their mother at a distance.

The forests belonged in part to the local Polish nobility and in part to the crown. They were scores of miles deep; in fact, no one knew where they really ended. The nobles, making their homes in Warsaw, lived the life of spoilers, denuding their forests stretch by stretch, cutting down the young trees together with the old. It was only in the eighties that the government began to control the ruthless destruction.

Jews and gentiles alike lived on terms of intimacy with the forest, their best friend. It provided them gratis with countless fruits and plants, with berries, mushrooms, wild apples (these we used to lay on straw and wait till they began to rot; then we ate them with great relish), wild pears, nuts of all kinds, and guelder roses. In the things that grew in the soil Jew and gentile shared, but the gentile had to himself the hunt: hare, marten, mink, and occasionally even a bear. The Jews had nothing to do with the animals; that is, they would not shoot them. But they would buy the carcasses from the peasants for the furs. However, as against this, the Jews had two exclusive benefits from the forest. They got from it their willow withes for the fifth day of the festival of Tabernacles, and the fir branches to cover their booths.

But something more bound the inhabitants of Svislovitz to the forest: they were dependent on it for their daily bread. If the winter was a good one, that is, with plenty of snow and frost, and many rafts were lashed together and floated down the river, there was prosperity in Svislovitch. But if the winter was mild, and

there was not time enough to carry the felled trees to the river bank, Svislovitch hungered. The forests were primeval, virgin, thickly tangled; their owners neglected them and let them run wild.

Thanks to its topography--a long elevated strip between two rivers--the townlet of Svislovitz was well planned. It had no crooked and broken streets. It lay as on a chess board (chess being unknown among us then, our simile was: "straight as a kneading board"), six long streets parallel with the rivers and ten short ones at right angles. Only one street had achieved the dignity of a proper name: the Beresina Street. All the others were referred to by the names of their most prominent residents. But as degrees of prominence were not fixed, any more than its causes, a street might be known by two or more names. One and the same street might be indicated as Pessye the candlemaker's street, or Joseph the chicken-slaughterer's street, or simply as Stepan Harnai's street. Everyone was free to express his taste and preferences through the medium of the streets. As a matter of fact, street names were quite unnecessary; in Svislovitz everybody knew who everybody was and where everybody lived.

The dignified Beresina Street was the artery of Svislovitz. It was very broad. It began at the Svislo, climbed uphill, passed through the marketplace with its public well, and then split north and south. It was impossible to leave or enter Svislovitz without passing along Beresina Street. It was our link with the great outside world. But if you had asked me what on earth we needed such a broad, luxurious street for, I could not have told you. Nor could any other

townsman. But it would be quite wrong to imagine that the modest Svislovitzers ever used the whole of that boulevard. Trodden paths ran only down the sides of it. The middle was taken up by patches of wild grass and innumerable puddles which were knee-deep in the summer. On weekdays the children would play in the grass, but on Sabbath afternoons the burghers themselves would lie there, face downward, enjoying life. The mud puddles were the happy meeting-ground of all the pigs of our gentile neighbours on the side streets. But for that matter the "Jewish" animals, too, were fond of the puddles. It was a homelike place. They sprawled their bulk cosily in the ooze and were happy. More than once they settled so thickly on the street that it was impossible to drive through. But despite the familiarity with which it was treated, Beresina Street was the residence of the most important burghers, most of whom owned their own homes, and also housed the whole of the local administration, the representatives of the powers that were: the stanovoy, or district commissioner, the postmaster, the village healer, the volostnoy, or community clerk, the public-school teacher, and the clergy--whom we instinctively looked on as part of the administration--which consisted of two priests and a reader.

The grandest buildings in Svislovitz were the synagogue, the two Greek Orthodox churches in Byzantine style, and a Catholic cloister in Gothic style. The last was dilapidated, almost on the point of collapse, but the government would not permit the Catholics to build a new cloister. Nor did Svislovitz possess a Catholic priest of its own, though it may have at one time, for I remember as in a

dream house opposite the cloister, and a white-robed figure issuing from it.

In addition to the above there were the police headquarters and the public school. All these buildings were of wood, the great logs lying horizontally, except in the case of the churches and cloister, the logs of which stood up perpendicularly.

At the end of the southern spur of Beresina Street was "Castle Hill," topped by the only real structure in town, five stories high and built of crude cut stones. To be exact, only the first two stories were built of stone: the upper three, in the form of a hexagon, were of wood, and out of them four gigantic wings, ruined and motionless, extended. For the building had originally been intended as a windmill, and had been put up by a half-mad magnate of the locality. There was a rumour that at one time the mill had actually worked, and had ground out flour, but I remember it only as a ruin. On the hillock also stood an empty house--for the manager--and next to the house stood the tumbledown stables, as empty as the house.

The only guardians of the ruin were four old birches in the foreground, at the foot of the hillock, with wooden benches in their shade. Sabbath afternoons we used to take a walk to the ruin and ascend Castle Hill. The prospect was beautiful: the two rivers running parallel, one on each side of the town, then a graceful bend in one of the rivers where it turned to pour itself into the other; beyond the rivers the soft green meadows, and beyond the meadows, the dark forests. At night no one went near the ruin, for then it was full of doleful creatures; owls dwelt there, and satyrs danced there. It was said that in the dead of the night, when the

town lay wrapped in sleep, lights had been seen moving through the rooms, the vast wings had begun to revolve and the millstones to grind....In later years, however, I learned that there were boys and girls of spirit in our town, whom stories of ghouls and satyrs could not frighten away; they spent many a happy hour in the late evenings among the ruins on the hill--astonishingly enough, always in the darkest and most terrifying corners.

I come now to the last point in our townlet -- the cemetery, the Beth Olam, or House of Eternity, which strictly speaking was not in the townlet at all, for it lay at a remove of two kilometers, beyond the fields of the peasants, on the road to Minsk. The cemetery of the gentiles lay closer to town, but in the opposite direction, on the way to Bobruisk. As children we were taken to visit the cemetery on Tisha b'Av, the ninth day of the month of Av, the day of the Black Fast, when we mourn for the destruction of both Temples, the first and the second. For the children, however, the day of mourning was a joyous festival. The very young ones did not fast; for them the outing was a marvellous affair. We ran about the cemetery in our stockinged feet; we made ourselves little wooden swords, painted them in gay colours, and girded them like warriors of old. And then there was the pilgrimage itself to the cemetery and back, with stops on the road, when we dived into the woods in search of nuts, already half-ripe at that time of the year, and black apples, which we did not dare to eat, but which could be squeezed out for their juice to make the best kind of ink--as good as any you could buy in a shop. There were also blackberries, raspberries, wimberries, and other

fruits, some of which were forbidden but which it was a pleasure to pluck and throw around.

During the rest of the year we might see a Jew being conducted amid lamentations to his last rest, but we children were forbidden to accompany the funeral. Besides, despite our gaiety there on Tisha b'Av, we were mortally afraid of the Jewish cemetery. But with the gentile cemetery we were on the most familiar terms. It lay on the Svislovitz side of the woods, and on pleasant summer afternoons, just before evening prayers, we used to climb onto its fence and sit there telling stories, not a whit frightened either by the monuments or the crosses. The explanation for this difference in our attitudes may lie in the ideas which were planted in our young minds with regard to death and the soul and the beyond. In our little world it was an accepted fact that gentiles have no souls: they have only a spirit. If I were asked today what precisely was the difference between a "soul" and a "spirit" I could not answer. But as a little boy it was quite clear to me that a soul lives after death, and a spirit does not. And since the gentiles had no souls, what was there to be afraid of?

Svislovitz, on top of its "mountain," was always safe from the danger which threatened so many villages in our vicinity--the over-flowing of the rivers. It was a bad business, being cut off from the rest of the world when the Svislo and the Beresina rose above their banks and flooded the countryside, but at least we were safe. When the other villages were inundated, we felt like Noah in his ark, saved from the waters which covered the rest of the earth.

But this grant of grace was the source of another danger: lifted up as we were, we were exposed completely to the fury of the winds. There was nothing to break the impact. The lighter winds, though they brought much discomfort, were welcomed eagerly: they were the only street cleaning department we knew anything about, and when one of them had blown through the town and carried off the rubbish accumulated in the streets, the place looked astonishingly neat. But the real storm winds--and they came not infrequently--were another matter. The houses, or rather hovels, of poor were not firmly built, and the roof sat on them like a cap slipped over the head. I use this figure advisedly: most of the Jews of Svislovitz used to wear skullcaps under their hats to be safe from the sin of ever being bareheaded even for an instant; and under the flimsy roofs of their houses some of them used to build "skullcaps"--a defence against the storm winds which might whip the regular hats off the houses. But some of them had not this reserve, and a strong wind would leave their houses roofless, just like a booth in the Feast of Tabernacles, but without the covering of branches.

The hot summer winds, too, brought a great deal of discomfort, but they were tolerable compared with the mad rage of the winter blasts. When one of these storms descended on the town, the doors were sealed and no one dared venture into the street. On such days life was suspended, congealed. Then Svislovitz looked like a town of the dead, half-buried under the snow, with the wind howling a furious dirge over it. Within the howling of the winds we heard the howling of hungry wolves, and the covered city was hidden from

the heavens in the whirl of millions of snowflakes. No work was done. All we could do was wait for the storm to die down. And if the reader bears in mind the sanitary arrangements in the houses of Svislovitz, he can form some idea of the kind of life we were reduced to during those winter storms.

They would come several times during the winter, raging for anything between twenty-four hours and several days. The little ones trembled in every limb, and in order to reassure us, the older folk would tell us that the wild dance outside was the dance of witches and evil spirits, who could not hold out very long. Another purpose of this explanation was to give us some insight into the nature of things, so that we might not be altogether ignorant of the laws which governed the world. As to the first purpose, at least, the explanation was quite unsuccessful, because to the terror which the winds inspired in us was added the terror of the witches and the evil spirits. They haunted me in the night and entered my dreams. While I lay awake I used to repeat the Hear O Israel prayer, which drives evil spirits away, and I used to pack myself close into my covers. But I was still afraid.

SVISLOVITZ AND THE POGROMS

Yom Kippur 1881 - Svislovitz

Not yet visited by a pogrom, herein is described the terror and the fear of a Jewish population.

The sun went down, on that hot day, a ball of fire in a heaven of blood. Without arrangement or consultation the homes were emptied during the hours of prayer.

Grandfathers walking side by side with their sons led their tiny grandsons by the hand to the synagogue; they came silently from all the streets, grandmothers and mothers carrying sucklings in their arms. Not an infant was left in the cradle. They did not hasten, for who can run from his destiny? That evening the entire Jewish population of Svislovitz was assembled in the synagogue; the last comers could scarcely squeeze their way in. The tall white candles guttered in their sockets; the men stood silent in their white kirtles, and the children clung to them for protection. The Rav went up the steps of the ark, drew forth the scroll with its silver crown, turned to face the congregation, and said, in a low, trembling voice: "Jews, we are in the hands of God. Pray to him." And with these words there broke out a lamentation the like of which I have never heard again in my life. The old wept, the

young, the children; and the lament was taken up by the tiny ones in the arms of their parents and grandparents. In this better plaint there was felt a protest that was directed not against the makers of the pogroms, but against our own God.

"Art Thou not He who is called the Guardian of Israel? And is it not written, Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers or sleeps? We have left our possessions, all that is ours, in our homes: with empty hands we have assembled here, in Thy House. Do with us according to Thy will."

The Day of Atonement, too, passed in peace. That something odd in the eyes of the gentiles had been the reflection of the terror of the Jews.

You can find photos from Svislovitch at a Svisloch website:

<http://www.nsys.by:8101/minsk/svisloch.html>

This Newsletter is only as good as you, the readers, make it!

We ask for your help and cooperation: Please send in any material you think will be of general interest and that you wish to share with others. Your contributions should be related to one of the following categories:

Articles on the history and culture of Jewish life in Belarus.
Information about existing Jewish communities there.
Memoirs and interviews about the life in Belarus etc.
Maps, photographs, census information etc.

Information about genealogical sources.
Results from individual research which may be of general interest.
Recent travel experiences in the region.
Other relevant material which may be of general interest.

Family anecdotes passed down from Shtetl times.

Please send material to the editor: Elsebeth Paikin, Kildevaenget 37, DK2100 Copenhagen O, Denmark, for consideration and possible inclusion in future issues of this newsletter. Where information is derived from existing published sources (e.g. archival or census material) these should be fully referenced.

Elsebeth Paikin, Editor