

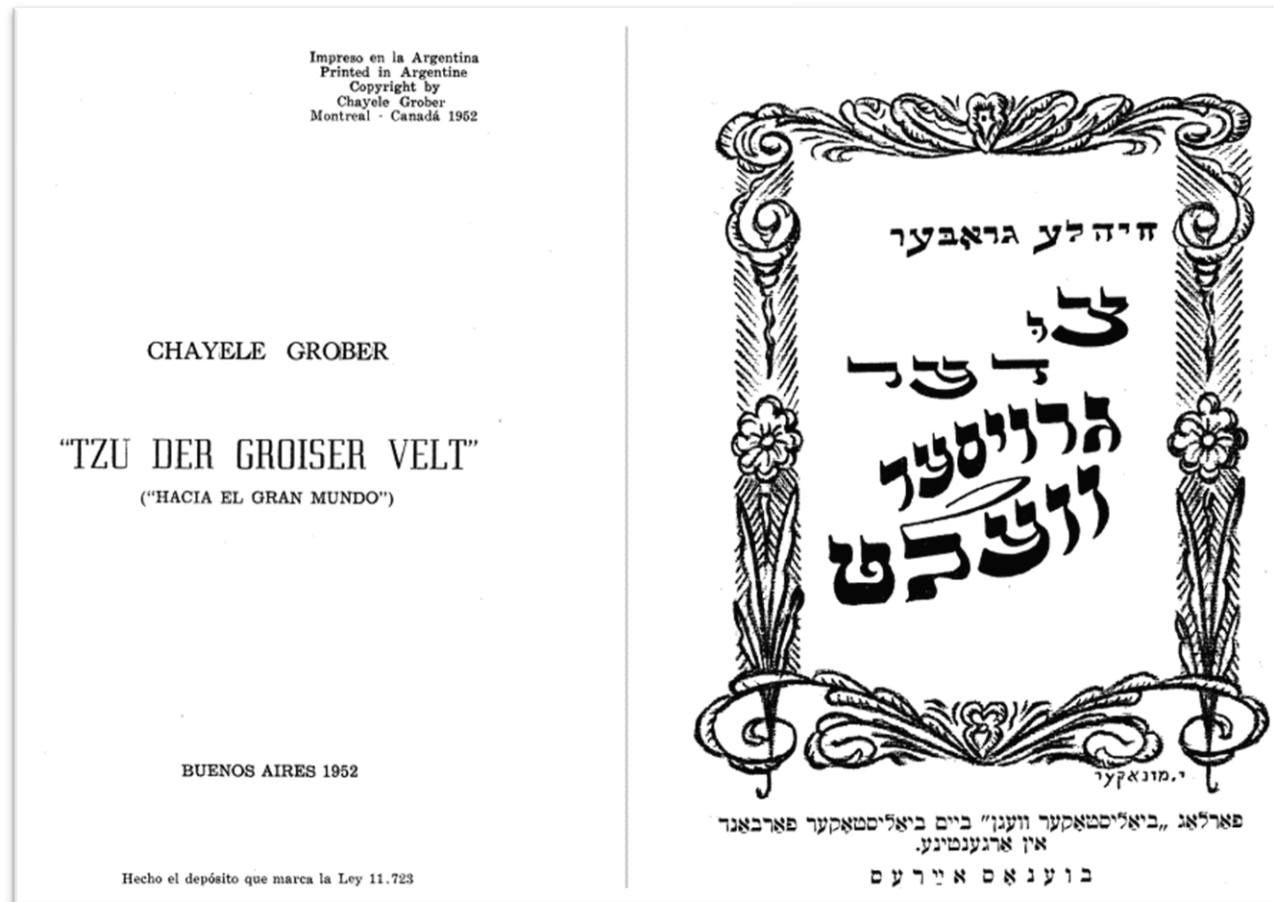
Tsu Der Groyser Velt- To The Great World

see: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc206806/grober-chayeletsu-der-groyser-velt>

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Translator's Foreword

Sheltered, bourgeois and yet lonely, little Chayelet from Białystok grows up in a world where she finds inner peace by dreaming, wandering through the woods and singing with her guitar in her hand. Her delicate, pale figure is overlooked, she is too often seen as a superfluous appendage to the family, and somehow only her long, thick braid attracts attention and respect.

Magically drawn to the world of art and music, Chayelet hides a big secret: she wants to be on the stage!

In a veritable frenzy of events, images and emotions, Chayelet captivates the reader and takes him on a journey through a life marked by political and cultural upheavals, full of suspense, full of suffering and hardship, yet recounted with a great deal of joy and humor. Her journey leads Chayelet Grober in a sometimes miraculous, but ultimately compelling way to where she belongs: on the stage of the big international world! We accompany her on a journey of constant learning, shaped not only by a remarkable destiny, but also by the greatest masters of acting and drama who continue to influence our theatrical culture today: Stanislavski and his favorite disciple, Vakhtangov.

Come and immerse yourself with me in a piece of the incomparable history of the Jewish "Habima" Theater, founded by Nahum Zernach in Białystok and told "first hand" by one of its founding members; Chayelet Grober.

As always, I would like to thank my friend Dr. Susan Pasquariella for her great support! Many thanks also to my friends Alisa Harth and my former teacher, Hella v. P., who introduced me to the first Stanislavski exercises.

For those interested in other contemporary Białystok and Krynki biographies, I recommend my translations of

"My Childhood Years in the Pyaskes" by Leybl Hindes

"Memoirs of a Woman from Białystok" by Rachel Kositzka

[until page 114] "Memoirs and Writings of a Białystoker" by Jacob Jerusalemski

"Krynki in Ruins" by Abraham Soyfer

"Destruction of Białystok" by Srolke Kot

"As It Happened Yesterday" by Yosel Cohen.

My translations of the mentioned books can be downloaded for free at JewishGen - The Home of Jewish Genealogy and [Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu \(jewishbialystok.pl\)](http://Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu (jewishbialystok.pl)). Some are also available as printed books.

Beate Schützmann-Krebs

Translator's note: Contents in [] are mine. Contents in () are by the author



רחל צימשטיין-זבאר

Rachel Tzimstein- Zbar [the author's friend to whom the book is dedicated].

Introduction

When an artist has been performing in a genre all her life and suddenly starts to write a book, people would ask her several questions: "when?", "how?" An old, distant relative of ours simply asked me: "Well, God bless you! But what were you thinking...?!" So that's how I want to answer all these questions.

During the winter of 1941-42, I was confined to my home in Montreal, confined to my bed, because of an illness whose cause has not yet been discovered. I think I was ill at that time because of our great khurbn [the Holocaust]. At that time, my English professor, Betty Meier, became and remained my best friend. I began to tell her episodes from my childhood. She made me write them down, and she was my inspiration for the first English manuscript (not printed). In 1945, after the earth of my ancestors had been burned down along with the remains and memoirs of their shapes ^[1], I felt an immediate urge to pass on what I remembered; to immortalize the names of those who blessed me with love and friendship; to pass on

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what I received from my great teachers and mentors. I wanted to share the experiences of my travels. I dedicate this book to my friend - Rachel Tzimstein-Zbar; our great-grandparents were still neighbors, our parents - friends, and we grew up next door to each other. "Mame" [Mother] Rachel was a noble, honest and good soul. The help of my compatriots in Buenos Aires in publishing this book is actually due to the initiative of their chairman, Yitzchak Munaker. My Argentine compatriots were pleased to have an educated and artistic man at the helm, a young and witty activist. I would like to express my joy that the book is associated with those who have the right relationship with an artist and his work.

Chayele G.

[1] The original sentence is abbreviated and cannot be translated literally, so I have interpreted it to the best of my ability.

Chapter 1

Town and Its Roots

Long, long before the third khurbn ^[1] there was a city - Białystok. Although its "gubernye"^[2] with its "governor" belonged to Grodno, Białystok remained the capital.

My ancestors obviously avoided the vicinity of the rulers and moved further away from the center of power. Białystok, with a population of over a hundred thousand, was not inferior to the big cities of Russia. There was a suburb, a capital and a back town; there were streets, lanes, alleys and small side streets; there were rich and powerful, aristocrats and gentry. And there were the "United"- revolutionaries and honest workers - there was a world and an underworld...

There were large textile factories, beautiful shops, famous doctors, elegant damsels and dandyish boys - Białystok had it all.

All I know of my great-grandparents is my mother's side of the family. On my father's side, I only remember my paralyzed Grandma and the cobbler who had the privilege of making us new shoes for every "peysekh" [Passover]. He had this privilege because he still worked for Grandpa. But that's all I remember about him. On the other hand, I know a lot about my [other] grandfather,

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Getsl Rozman. He, Grandpa, spread his roots outside the city and, without knowing it, made it possible for future generations to move on to the big city and from there to the big world!...

Far inside Khanaykes ^[3], opposite the "mogilkes" [Christian graves] at the corner of Shayes Street, stood Getsl Rozman's house, generously laid out in a large courtyard framed by a whitewashed fence. The long, one-story house extended deep into the courtyard - with its wide doors for entry and its large windows for looking out.

Inside, the house was divided into a bedroom, a dining room, a parlor, a maid's room, a vestibule, and a kitchen, all neat and clean, all designed for guests, both invited and unexpected.

The kitchen took up most of the room. A kitchen - a whole factory! There was work to be done with overtime - for a whole year.

Preserves were made throughout the summer, and after Sukes [Sukkot] they switched to cabbage, cucumbers, and beets. Shortly after "Khanuke" [Chanuka], geese were roasted for lard and "gribenes" [goose skin cracklings], and immediately after Purim they scrubbed [the house] and made the cooking utensils kosher for "peysek" [Passover].

After that, "the peysek" was carried out and the "khomets" [leavened dough] was brought back into the house. And shortly afterwards, "Shvues" [the Feast of Weeks] was celebrated, after which the cooking of "preserves" began again.

Through the wide open gate the droshkies came in the summer and the sleighs in the winter, so that the tired horses and drivers could rest and have a snack and a drink. And after a little cash had flowed in, they would go back through the wide gate with a "vyo" [giddyup] and back into town.

Throughout the summer, long tables were set up in the wide courtyard, where full vessels were emptied, piles of money were counted, and people and horses went back and forth - all day and all night.

My grandfather Getsl was hot-blooded. In his imagination he flew much further than his horses could carry him. I think if he didn't have asthma, he would have landed somewhere in England or America. But he was punished by God, and the only long journey he made was to Odessa, to the Liman ^[4].

My grandmother often told me how my grandfather went "oyfn liman" [to the Liman] and took his only daughter, Bobele,

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with him. And how she learned to swim there, lying "naznak" - on her back. When she told this story, Grandma always sighed deeply to express her great sorrow for her beloved husband.

Getsl Rozman was the "balebos" ^[5] over the horses and coachmen. A hot-tempered balebos. But one who was generous and had a good heart - and so people loved him even though they were afraid of him.

It is said that his wife, Toybe-Rive Getselikhes, was as quiet as a dove and as good as an angel, and ran the whole court like a kingdom. Apart from the "responsible persons", the employees, there was a coming and going of women and children on normal weekdays, but also on holidays.

Of their seven children, only one son, Zeydl, and one daughter, Bobel, survived. They were taken care of and pampered like two eyeballs.

Getsl, the balebos, the husband and father, was forgiven his irascibility because he was a sickly man due to his asthma. So Toybe-Rive carried not only the heavy burdens of household and children, but also those of her husband. But the quiet Toybe bore her burden uncomplainingly and humbly as long as Getsl lived. And she also quietly and humbly accepted her fate when he died.

Toybe-Rive Getselikhes remained a beautiful young widow with two little orphans in her arms.

Zeydl, the only son, took after his father, and there was not enough strength to protect him. From an early age, the rumors of a new world stirred his imagination and pulled him to America. Or rather, they did not pull him, but brought him there and back again.

And now that all the worries remained on Bobele, it was decided to marry her off, even though she was only fifteen years old. When the first groom came to look at her, she was so ashamed that she hid behind the door.

However, the fact that the first marriage contract was signed shows that the matter was predestined. At the celebration of the "tnoim" [engagement contract], people brought plates and wished the bride and groom, Bobele Rozman and Mulye Grober, "mazi-tov" [good luck]. In this case, as in all cases,

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branches of different "growth" came together:

From the bride's side came quiet, modest, poor but good-hearted relatives; from the groom's side came a little stubborn, a little haughty, arrogant relatives, both near and far.

But new worries began for Mama Toybe-Rive's young life.

On Yatke [Butcher] Street, next to the new, green Bes-Hamedresh ^[6] in the house of Elimeylekh, the young woman Bobele founded her own kingdom with the nineteen-year-old boy Mulye Grober. The first two boys were born there, but they also died there. And Toybe-Rive decided to sell the yard, build a three-story house and move - to protect her only daughter, the "apple of her eye".

The house was built a little farther away from Khanaykes, a little closer to the city and the "intelligentsia"... The house stood opposite the Jewish "bes-almen" [cemetery], on one side of it was the apothecary Lipshits, and on the other were the large houses of the "Serebdovitch's" and the "Tsimshiteyns" [Tzimstein's]. It was there that God gave Toybe Rive a bit of happiness - grandchildren. And that's where she raised her two grandchildren, my brother Motl and me!

When I felt the need to be born, my brother was already a boy of four. My mother nursed him herself, warming him with her breath, pouring into him all her love for the two boys who had died, and her whole being was filled with him.

But one frosty February, in the middle of a bright day, an ugly little creature - בצורת אישה - in the form of a girl came down and destroyed the idyll...

I brought neither my mother nor my brother much joy. The first great warmth of love was breathed into me by my grandmother, and I sucked the first drops of milk from a "shusterke"... the poor and parched wife of a cobbler from Horodok.

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When I was already eight months old and my father came to see me, he found me in the cobbler's only room, lying on the dirty floor, chewing a piece of brown bread instead of sucking on the cobbler's breast. So my grandmother came running and took me home, and from that day on I was under her care.

[1] חורבן: destruction, ruin, Holocaust

[2] gubernye: Governorate, an administrative territorial unit of the Russian empire, it was headed by a governor

[3] The Khanaykes district was one of the poorest areas of Białystok. Contemporary witnesses of the author wrote more than once about this poor but very interesting area, especially Jakub Jerusalimski and Rachel Kositzka in their biographies. My translations of these biographies can be downloaded for free as PDF files:

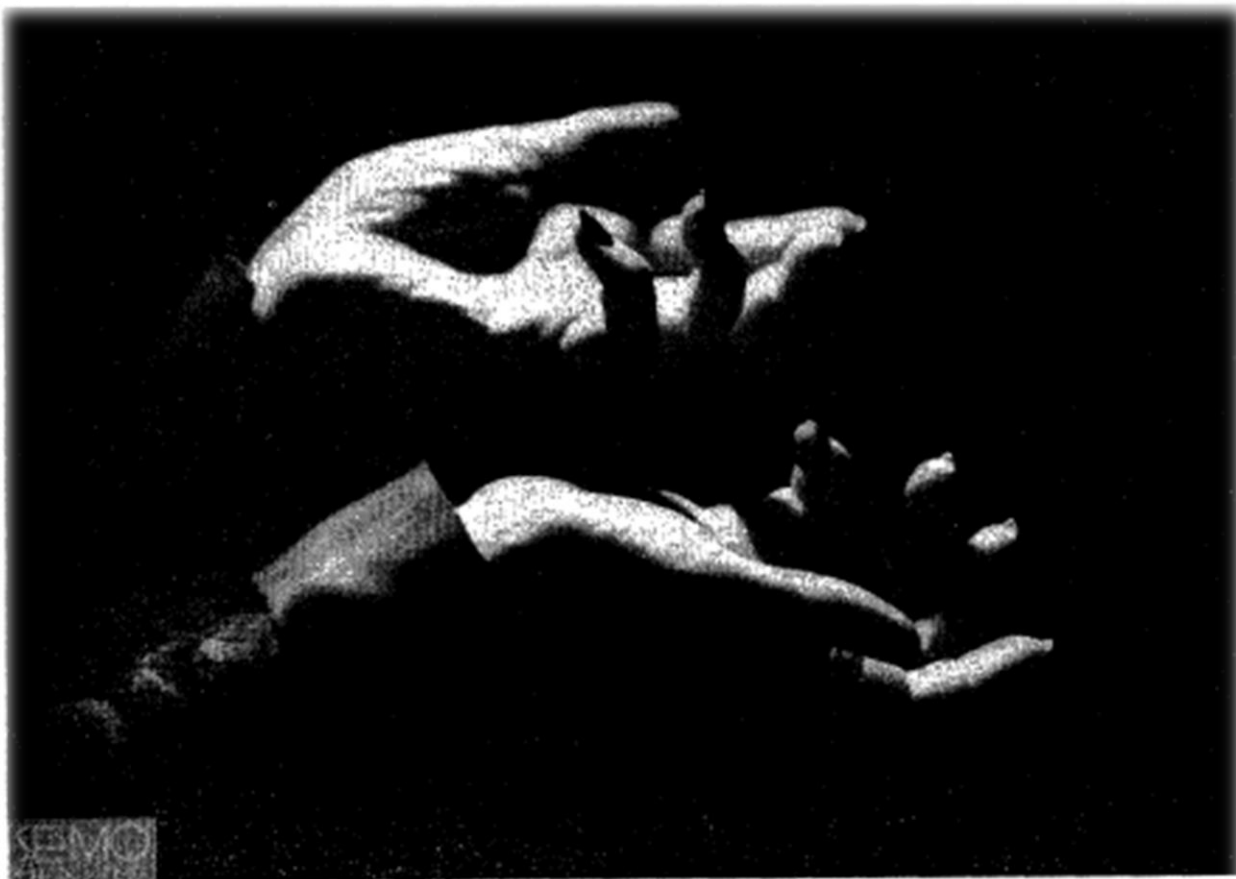
Memoirs of a Woman from Białystok translated from Yiddish - Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu (jewishBiałystok.pl)

Translation of the memoirs of Jakob Jerusalimski - Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu (jewishBiałystok.pl)

[4] see [Dniester Estuary - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dniester_Estuary)

[5] balesbos= boss, owner, hoseholder

[6] Bet ha-Midrash= house of study, see [YIVO | Bet ha-Midrash \(yivoencyclopedia.org\)](http://YIVO.org) and [Beth midrash - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beth_midrash)



הענט פון חיהלע גראבער

The hands of Chayele Grober

Chapter 2

My Home

As far back as I can remember, we had a three-story house. The bottom floor was our apartment with large rooms and an office for my father, and by that time in my childhood, my father was already running his own business. My mother used to tell us that my father worked as a bookkeeper for a "Yofe" before he started his own business. My father was a good bookkeeper, an honest "mentsh" ^[1] and a devoted friend of the Yofe family. He worked late into the night during the season. My mother hoped for a raise every year. But all my father brought home every year was Mr. Yofe's greetings. After my father had worked for Yofe for ten years, he brought home an envelope containing a letter with best wishes and a small photo of Mr. Yofe with his personal signature...

My mother then decided that my father should start his own business. So he became and remained a cloth seller on commission.

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My father was a handsome man, of medium height and elegantly dressed in European style. He had a clever mind, remained calm, spoke clearly and relaxed, and was punctual and honest. He was naturally gifted with a beautiful, lyrical tenor voice. He dreamed of becoming a singer and studied music (right after the wedding) to become a "khazn" ^[2]. But my mother did not want to become a "khazn's" wife, and his career ended at one of the "yomim-neroim" ^[3] in the old green Bes-Hamedresh. This remained his privilege during his life in Białystok.

My mother was tall, broad-shouldered and well-rounded. She had a proud head with dark hair and complexion, and dark eyes. She was at peace with herself and walked majestically; she was treated like a queen. My grandmother always took care of the house. My mother "ran" the house and the business. She also used to sing, she had a good soprano voice and loved music. But later she found it more and more difficult to sing because she had obviously inherited her father's asthma.

We children had inherited the musicality from our parents, and so a quartet was formed that resounded far and wide on Shabbat and holidays and became famous far beyond the borders of Białystok.

As soon as we returned from our "datshe" [summer house], the gaboim [religious functionaries] of the new green Bes-Medresh would arrive to talk about the upcoming "yomim-neroim". They used to remind us again and again "with what sweetness Mrs. Grober had performed the 'Musef' prayer ^[4]" and "how much he [Mr. Grober] had touched the women with his 'Neile' prayer ^[5]"...

They then expressed the hope that Mrs. Grober would fulfill the wish of the "entire Bes-Medresh" again this year, and – perhaps...sing a 'Kol Nidre'...'?" ^[6]

As for my father, they didn't have to ask him for long, he loved to sing and took great pleasure in his prayers.

My father didn't gargle, he didn't drink "gogl-mogl" ^[7] and he didn't walk around wearing a scarf. He was in the habit of singing something every morning as he got dressed - a song or a prayer, and he did the same before the holidays.

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Singing was as easy for my father as talking - he sang with the same naturalness as sitting at the table and talking and telling stories. I can't remember many days when there was no singing in our house. On Shabbat and holidays we had many guests in our house - and many listeners behind the windows. In the summer, our "datshe" always became the center of attention. Right after Passover, people would come and ask when and where we were going, because they wanted to be with "Bobke".

In the summers, when we still had our "datshe" in the Białystoker forest, Salomon Lev came to visit us every Shabbat afternoon. My father would go to meet him at the appointed time, holding my hand by his side. Each time on this walk, my father would begin to sing as he got deeper into the forest:

"O-o, beregis..." (*)

At first we could only hear a reverb- an echo.

But a little later a bass voice answered from the depths of the forest:

"Be-re-gi-s". Then my father sang again:

"O-o, beregis"...

And Lev always answered him:

"Beregis".

After that, the two voices from two corners of the forest merged into one:

"I po dalshe dierzhis" (**).



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Shabbat and the holidays have been celebrated in our homes for generations. As the sun set, the flickering light of the Shabbat candle was lit. The gleam of the silver candlesticks and the dishes on the snow-white, freshly ironed tablecloth filled us with joy. Father's "Gut Shabes" ^[8] after prayer and his sung Kiddush echoed in my ears all week, from Shabbat to Shabbat.

Everything was according to tradition:

The guests and the order in which the guests came would not change from one Shabbat to the next. And the first to come was always Slomon Lev.

Salomon Lev was a tall, fat man with a head that was more bald than hairy. I always thought that the few hairs he had were only there to tell that he was really a blond. His face was round, with wide, dark brown eyes and a strong, broad nose. His face always showed a soft and discreet smile, and his soul was always singing. He was a merchant; he had a fabric store. In the front of the store the goods were measured, and in the back, from a dark cell, rose the sounds of his violin, on which Lev played between visits to customers. I think he only played the fiddle because it would have been considered too bold for him to sing in the store with his bass-baritone.

Lev had a bass-baritone as soft as butter and as sweet as honey. When he sang, his nose usually widened even more and his dark brown eyes became as juicy and moist as full cups of wine.

Salomon Lev was my father's only long-time friend - and the permanent bass-baritone in our family quartet.

The next guest to visit us was always "dos ferterl" [the little uncle]. The "ferterl" was considered the uncle of the whole family, although he was actually only my father's uncle. Whether the uncle had also been young once? In any case, we knew him only as a short, thin, loving uncle with a long, thin white beard, small, moist eyes, and a rough, thin voice. He spoke very little or not at all. But he always felt the desire to sing. His children used to laugh at him at home when he sang, and his hot-blooded, black-haired Rochke was annoyed.

But he would come to us on Friday evenings, and that's where he "came to express himself".

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All these Friday evenings were part of the usual, reasonable, accepted evenings in our house. But every winter there were also the "big Friday nights". That was when an extraordinary guest would visit us. Not just a guest who came to us, but a guest who came especially to Bialystok, to the Jews of Bialystok, to those Jews who not only liked to sing, but were also experts in singing - and in Jewish liturgy!

None of these guests would miss spending a Friday night with us. The great "khazn" Sirota and the excellent musical singer Kvartin were frequent guests.

The less famous cantors used to corresponded with my father before they came. Well-off citizens visited us to get competent opinions on this or that cantor from Vitebsk, Odessa, Kishinev or Vilnius...

And as soon as a contract had been signed for a Shabbat or a holiday, my father's office became a kind of "ticket office"... That's how he gained a good reputation far beyond the borders of Białystok.

However, my parents were not content with liturgical singing alone, nor did they serve as religious functionaries. They also traveled to Russian concerts - they really traveled.

Białystok was on the direct Moscow-Paris line, so it was common for all the great singers and famous artists to stop there for guest roles and concerts. Białystok had a secondary school, a trade school, a boys' high school, a girls' high school and several private schools. This is how a youth was raised and educated here - a lively, carefree youth, whether rich or poor.

The main characteristics of the people of Białystok are hospitality and musicality. In fact, the voices of Białystok people resound with a special optimism and deep warmth, and therefore we have an open, honest look and a modest, sweet smile.

This is Białystok!

In Białystok, an evening at the theater or a concert was considered a great holiday. It was not an occurrence, because it was nothing new, but it was a holiday.

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We used to walk around with our tickets in our pockets weeks before the artist even arrived, and the day of the concert was like a festive eve. We had a snack in time, washed up and got dressed. It was important to get rid of everyday life and get into a festive mood. And already at eight o'clock we ordered an "izvoshtshik" [coachman] and went to the theater. Afterwards we would talk about it for a whole week until late at night, and on Friday evening we would sing whatever we could remember.

So we lived in the house from the merchants (if God helped us and they didn't go bankrupt...) and enjoyed the music. It gave us pleasure, and we helped the singers and players to survive.

When I was very young, the following happened: One spring day a Jew came to my father's office - a strong Jew with an equally strong voice - and said:

"I have come to you from Zabłudow, Mr. Grober. I have a carpentry there. My boy sits in the stable all day. He has made a small violin out of boards glued together, torn a pair of tails from a horse, tied them to the violin, and is playing on it. Perhaps you can help him learn to play?"

By Friday of that week, the shy little boy was already sitting at our table, and from then on he slept on the sofa in the office. He took private lessons in Białystok until his teacher declared him ready for the conservatory. Lev then accompanied him to Berlin with my parents.

After a while, "young and old" were still talking about how our family has raised a great violinist. Until one special day, in the middle of winter, our faces at home lit up with joy: Tsesler, the young violinist, was coming to visit us! Everyone and everything was whirling around as if in a round dance! Grandma was busy shopping, baking and cooking, the maids scrubbed and washed, furniture was moved from one corner to another, and one called to another:

"Make way, guests are coming!"

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That Friday, the candlesticks shone brighter than usual, the eyes sparkled, the faces lit up - everything was filled with joyful anticipation. Together with the Shabbat, a short, broad-shouldered young man entered with modest but sure steps, dressed in a long fur cape, wearing a wide black soft hat and carrying a violin in a black case under his arm. On Shabbat evening, even before "havdole" ^[9], the guests began to stream in. They took their places on the floor, at the buffet, at the tables - even the walls were filled with people. And from one corner resounded golden sounds - sounds that would flow into your limbs, merge with your blood and stay with you for the rest of your life!

I have often thought that this story of the boy from Zabłudov sowed the concept of "concert and audience" deep into my subconscious.

^[1] a fundamentally decent, deeply humane person

^[2] a Chazan, cantor

^[3] the Days of Awe, the 10 days from the Jewish New Year to Yom Kippur

^[4] Additional prayer after the morning prayer on holidays

^[5] last prayer on Yom Kippur

^[6] First prayer on Yom Kippur night to renounce a vow made under duress, [Cantor Sholom Mendelson Kol Nidrei \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

^[7] a home remedy against a sore throat, see [Kogel mogel - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kogel_mogel)

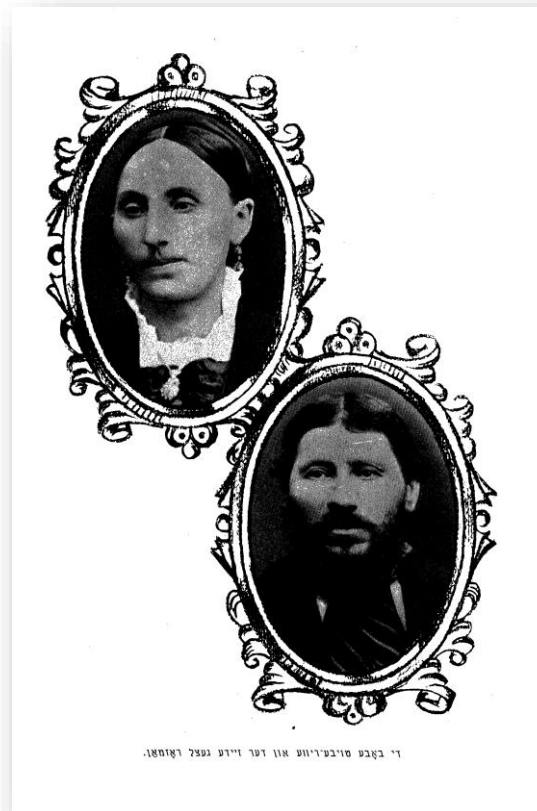
(*) Oh, beware of you!

(**) And stay out of the way.

^[8] Yiddish greeting on Shabbat

^[9] Havdalah, "distinguishing between the sacred and the everyday", ceremony at the end of Shabbat

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Grandma Toybe-Rive and Grandpa Getsl Rozman

Chapter 3

My Grandma Toybe-Rive

As colorful and festive as the Shabbats were, my weekdays were sad and monotonous. On many winter days, my mother would lie in bed, and this filled the house with a special silence; a kind of silence in which, from the last room, you could hear the tik-tok of our long wall clock, which hung near the main entrance. The winters were long and frosty, and I would cough and sneeze from Sukkot to Passover. That was the excuse to take my brother everywhere, but leave me with Grandma.

My father would sit at his desk late into the night. He would do the "correspondence". His pen glided quietly and easily, always with the same scratch. All the letters went through Mom's censor, then under the copy machine, and from the machine into envelopes, and with the envelopes to the mailbox on the street corner. This went on night after night, except in the evenings when "we" went to the theater or to visit guests (of course my brother was taken along). I stayed at home, ashamed.

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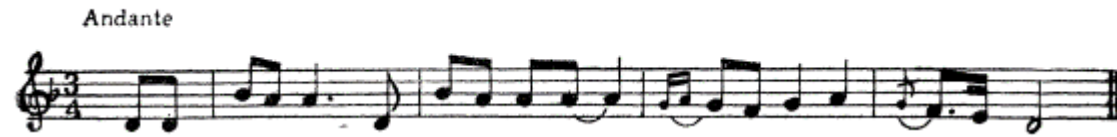
My grandmother used to comfort me by pointing out that my brother was older, which made me cry even more, thinking that I would never be able to catch up with him...

On such evenings, my grandmother would tell me stories - stories about robbers in the forest, lions and bears, gypsies and black cats, and she would end them with a song:

„Ay, oyfn mitn veg,

Vu ale forn,

Ligt a sheyner bleymele...



Ay, dos meynt men s'folk Yisroel, kind mayns!"^[1]

All this took place at the table on which she placed several kinds of preserves, halvah and two glasses of tea that shone like rubies. I spent my entire childhood with my grandmother, and all my memories of her are of the smell of fresh preserves and the sparkle of precious stones.

Grandmother Toybe-Rive was an orderly, light-filled figure. She moved quietly and rhythmically, spoke softly and warmly, her gaze was deep, loving and a little sad. Her hands were white,

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warm and always caressing. Her whole body was white as marble and smelled like almonds. Yes! Light, love and virtue were carried over the world in which she lived by the steps she took. It was not in the form of alms, but in the form of naturalness and understanding that she did good to the poor and the sick.

It was customary to go shopping for the Sabbath on Thursday, and on that occasion one could not forget to bring a knotted cloth full of change from the market for the poor on Friday^[2]. And those of the poor who missed a Friday would get their penny or kopeck the next Friday.

Baking and cooking began at dawn and continued until the candle lighting blessing. Before the light blessing, my grandmother would wash herself, dress in her black cashmere dress, and put on her black light wig with the parting in the middle. And when she took the diamond earrings out of the little box and put them in her ears, it meant:

"Done! It's time to welcome the Queen Shabbat!"

Every Friday before the light blessing, Grandma would call me into the kitchen to do my delivery duty. Every Friday she followed the same procedure:

"First, my child, run to the Tzimsteins and bring what she will give you!"

Then she would start cutting up the portions of preserves, fish, challah, and say to me:

"Now, my child, take this to Nokhmen [Nachman], and then bring this to Sorke Khane's, and from there run over with the pot to Lea'ke, she is unfortunately ill - may God help her....And from there come back, take the last few things and bring them to everyone else. Hurry! They must get it before the men come back from the shul [synagogue]."

When I had done these errands, she would kiss me and constantly remind me to share a chair with her in the 'gan-eydn' [paradise].

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Once, on a frosty Friday, I was returning from my errands. The white snow had covered the trees in the bes-oylem [cemetery], and it seemed to me as if corpses were coming from there towards me!...I ran, but they, quietly sliding ^[3], would have reached me at any moment. I ran into our courtyard and fell into my grandmother's arms. I wasn't shivering with cold, but with fear, and I cried without stopping.

The next morning, right after "havdole", my grandmother sent for the lady who removes curses. The small Jewish woman with the headscarf on her shaking head melted a spoonful of lead, poured it into a bowl of cold water, and immediately a goat with horns formed, just like the goats on the Serebrovitch's farm...

The Jewish woman held the bowl above my head, whispered something with her eyes closed and then blew at me, and the fright was "taken away as if with the hand"...

That was my first great fear. It didn't help that the Jewess had poured out the goat. I began to think of corpses rising from the graves and sliding ^[3] to little children. From then on, I started thinking about an "otherworld". A world where my grandfather and my brothers are. I asked so many times to go to the "bes-oylem" with me to see the "otherworld", but Grandma didn't want me to. So I went there for the first time when my grandmother could no longer stop me. It was again a winter day when I found myself in the cemetery. It was the winter after the pogrom in Białystok [1906].

One Thursday evening my grandmother went [upstairs] to see the grandchildren of her only son, Zeydl, and when she came back in the dark she fell down the stairs and hit her head. I remember the blood running, my mother cooling her forehead with ice water, and as if it had just happened, I remember my grandmother saying, "Don't be afraid, my daughter, because it's destiny - at least I'm alive!"

I don't remember my grandmother ever being sick until the last week before she died. I was very young, but I spent a week with sleepless nights. I myself guarded the last steps of her "Sein" until "eternity". If there is such a thing as a perfect person, an absolutely pure person, physically and mentally, it was my grandmother.

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When we returned from the bes-oylem, I wept and sighed bitterly: " Now I have no one to live for". My mother looked at me, and it seemed to me that it was then that she realized for the first time what a great mistake she had made in neglecting me. After my grandmother's death, the house became barren and empty, and my life became lonely. My grandmother's death was mourned in the house throughout the winter. My mother would light candles and cry silent tears the size of beans. We stopped singing on Friday evenings, and the first summer after her death our family went to the "datshe" [summer house] in Zverinyets.

^[1] Alas, in the middle of the road, where everyone is driving, lies a beautiful flower, it is dying, oh, that means the people of Israel, my child!

^[2] Alms were intended to enable the poor to spend the Shabbat at least a little appropriately. It was customary to give some coins before kindling the Shabbat candles

^[3] literally "glitshn zikh"= to skate

26 [blank]

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Chapter 4

The First Theater- Uncle Kalmen [Kalman]

I don't know why our beautiful pine forest [consisting of] "Gorodyani" and "Yegnatki" was called "Zverinyets"^[1]. I only know that the biggest animal I ever saw there was a frog. The "datshes" we stayed in were opposite the "park"^[2] facing the forest. So we breathed the pine air all day long, and every evening we walked near the park and sucked in the thick dust from the "konke" - a two-horse tram - and from the cabs that flew back and forth with the couples. At six o'clock in the evening, the free entrance to the park was usually closed, and so women and men - dressed for their stay in the park - flocked to the ticket office.

In the park there was a large closed theater, an open-air stage - the "otkrite stsene", and a large restaurant with long terraces called "the Shantan". A certain troupe performed on the open-air stage throughout the summer. The women of this troupe were called "shansonetkes" [chansonnières].

Respectable family women looked down on the shansonetkes. Young people who dined with the shansonetkes in the gallery of the "Shantan" were

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regarded as "sharlatantshiklekh" [seducers], meaning that they were boisterous people with whom it was better not to make friends...

A hidden desire for an audience made me sing whenever I felt that someone was listening. And this summer the neighbors listened to me- the "shansonetkes" themselves. They called me in once, asked me for various things, and invited me to the park to watch them play. One of them gave me her dress and told me to show it to the man at the entrance and he would let me in without a ticket. I was very excited. The excitement was about what I was going to do and how I was going to keep it a secret from my parents and especially my brother.

The big moment had arrived! I stood right at the edge of the stage, watching and listening with bated breath....

The woman who had led me there was small and black, with a black dot of paper on her cheek. The dress I had brought for her was very short, with lots of ruffles and flashing black sequins. She was more naked than dressed in it...

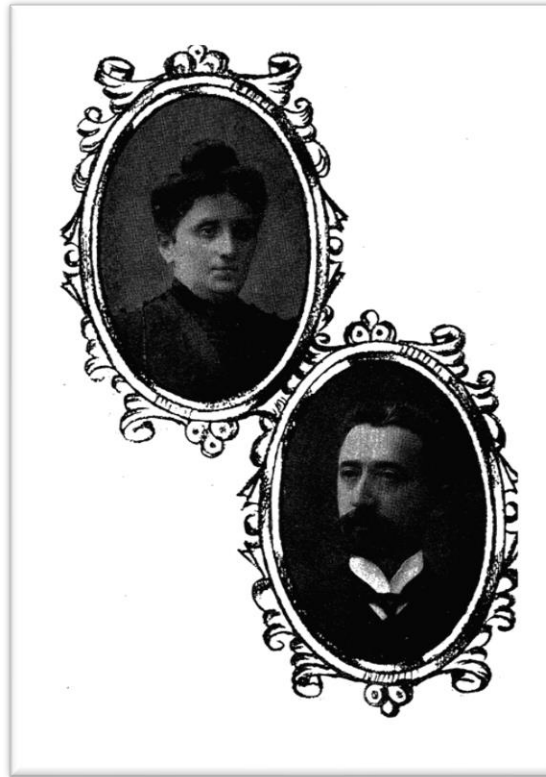
She sang, danced and laughed out loud with the audience after each couplet ^[3].

At the end she blew kisses to the audience. Her face lit up and her big black eyes sparkled in all directions.

She sang:

"O, kukt aher,
O, kukt ahin,
Es hot a tam un s'hot a zin.
Neyn, neyn, nisht dort, o, kukt aher,
dos iz alts far ayer bager..." ^[4]





The parents of the author: Bobl and Mulye Grober

She robbed me of my peace. I was ready to endure any punishment in case I was caught. She became my god to whom I bowed. It was she who revealed to me the great mystery of the world I dreamed of. She introduced me to the first theater.

In the early years of our century, society did not only look down on a "shansonetke". Even dramatic actors and famous singers were not accepted in "society". Years later, when I was already in the theater [troupe] "Habima"^[5] in Moscow, the world-famous singer Fyodor Shalyapin told us about his first experiences:

He was invited to a large, rich salon to sing for the guests. This was the time of his first great successes in Russia. He was listened to with enthusiasm, and immediately after the concert the servant sent him an envelope with the reward for his "work" and a "good night"...

That was the relationship of "society" to art and artists in those years. Fortunately, I was born long before movies and long before television. But it didn't help that all my senses yearned for music and all my dreams were connected to a world of art. It just didn't occur to my parents to set me on that path.

My first teacher was a dry "melamed" ^[6]. I only remember my first "rabbi" like in a dream. He was a tall, thin Jew. I subconsciously perceived the atmosphere at that time as very sharp. I can still sense the smell of dirty laundry mixed with the smell of cooking. I can still see the small windows covered with ice. I spent one winter in the cheder. I don't remember if I really learned anything there. My second teacher was my uncle Kalman, my father's stepbrother. I remember him very well, as well as his third wife, Dvoyre'ke. He wasn't the first man for her either. My uncle Kalman was a handsome, wealthy Jew. A tall, slim man with a reddish, short, beautifully combed beard.

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There was never a stain on his dark gray suit and black coat. His shoes were always polished. He wore a white shirt with a black tie and a white, neatly folded handkerchief in his pocket. He was a good man and never yelled at me. He was the only one on my father's side who liked my mother. He always spent time with her, telling her about his Dvoyre'ke - the "marshas" [the vicious one]... It was all about his dear, sweet neighbor ...

Once he brought a big picture of his dear neighbor and my mother had to hide it for him. So for many years there was a picture of a fat, "black" Jewish woman with a big wig in the locked closet. Uncle Kalman would often take the picture out, look at it and smile...

Before my uncle started teaching me, he was in "employment". Somewhere in a village, with a "forest merchant", he taught children. He often ran away from his "marshas". She was an "akusherke" [midwife] and earned very well, but nobody knew where she hid her money, and she used to argue with my good uncle Kalman all the time. They used to say "zi hot geshrign un er hot geshvign" [she would shout and he would keep quiet]. But she didn't want to divorce him either.

He always ran away and she did everything she could until he came back. Since his "romance" had begun, heaven and hell was moved! His whole sin was that he used to eat and work there, drink a glass of tea, look at the Jewess, smile and sigh...

All this was told over a glass of tea after my lesson. Dvoyre'ke used to visit us very rarely – and I was their guest every Passover. She used to entertain me, but she looked at me with her big evil eyes, so I was afraid to touch anything.

She wasn't a vile, ugly woman, but either her lips spewed evil and brimstone at everyone and everything, or they stayed closed and a little crooked, and then her eyes screamed. They had no children. My uncle had been able to study, could write evenly and beautifully, and taught me for a long time.

After that I was given to [Mr.] "Gevirts" at school.

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Gevirts and his wife were already old. He had high shoulders, she had a high chest. Of all the teachers there, I remember only Berman - our singing teacher. All his life Berman was the conductor of the choir of the great choir school and the vocal teacher of the schools and high schools in Białystok. With his hat and pelerine coat he looked more like a poet ^[7]. The whole town respected him. He was the musical authority in Białystok. After Gevirts' [school] you went to the middle school, to the high school or to the commercial school.

I associate Gevirts' school with the great "pozhar" [fire], when the city burned from all four corners. And that's how it was: One Sunday, a spring day, my father came running and carried me home in his arms. People ran in panic, saying as if to one's self: "This is partly the work of the 'United'!" I wasn't afraid at all, but felt a joyful satisfaction that people were thinking of me at such a serious time, holding me in their arms and stroking me. All the times when I was caressed - in general, when my mother caressed me - were deeply engraved in my memory. This was probably because such instances were rare and also because I longed so much for tenderness.

My mother was very reserved. She didn't talk much about her suffering or her personal life. My parents never quarreled. When my father was upset, he would shout, but even then I never heard a harsh word. My mother used to keep quiet and not move; but after such incidents, they would talk long and quietly in the bedroom, behind closed doors, and my mother would come out with reddened, teary eyes.

This rarely happened. In general, their life together was such that the whole town pointed to them as a good example: "Look how the Grober 'hershafn' [masteries] live!"...

My parents loved each other so purely and beautifully! I always felt that their love for each other was stronger than their love for their children. But when something happened that involved imminent danger,

I was in seventh heaven!

Because at that time, they really didn't know what to do with me.

In my childhood there was the "danger" of the "United". They were the revolutionaries who shot at the "balebatim" ^[8] for exploiting the people. [They were] the ones who placed a bomb at the "Tsar's Gate" before the governor had to pass through. We "thanked God" that the bomb exploded after the governor had already passed through, because "God knows what would have happened if he had been killed"...

For me, these were all echoes from the wide world - actually from Lipowa and Nikolayevske Streets [Ulica Mikołajewska]!

The first time I saw the "United" with my own eyes and heard them with my own ears was one summer when we lived in the "datshe" in Slobode. It was a Shabbat afternoon, a hot day. We children had gone deep into the woods to pick berries. Suddenly we saw groups of young people coming from all directions. Men in black shirts and girls in long black dresses. They were talking quietly and heatedly, standing around a tall, sturdy tree, and suddenly I saw a man with long hair on the tree, with a pince nez, and I heard his strong voice...

We ran home, completely frightened.

And there people were already looking for us on the balcony of our "datshe". They let us into the room and locked all the doors and windows. Then they talked about [the United] and said that if the police found out, it would cause a "violent scene". From childhood, we children were ingrained with a fear of revolutionaries and the revolution.

At school with "Gevirts", and later when I was in high school, I always had a Hebrew teacher at home. My last Hebrew teacher was Berkh. He was a famous teacher. A modern, intelligent Jew. But with his walk, he always reminded me of the "yeshive-bokher" [yeshivah student] who used to "esn teg" ^[9] with us.

He [Berkh] studied Ivrit ^[10] - Russian with me. Actually, I didn't really understand why Russian. He spoke with a really terrible accent, and we often had to pull ourselves together not to laugh. Years later I often thought: Why didn't he introduce me to our Hebrew or Yiddish writers? Why was he drawn to the Russian classics? Why should we translate Pushkin in particular?

It was only later, when I met one of his daughters, that I discovered the secret. His youngest daughter, Fira, told me that her father had been a yeshivah student, but that the "kloyz" [prayer hall] had gotten on his nerves, and it had become too cramped for him in the closed four walls of the Bes-Hamedresh...

Rumors of new schools, of religious freedom, of literature outside the Torah reached him from all over the world... So he tore himself away from the small shtetl, went to Białystok, threw off his "kapote" [caftan] and began to learn Russian. He actually learned a lot by the end, but he never spoke the language. So his Ivrit-Russian lessons were "fifty-fifty": Hebrew for me and Russian for his own enjoyment. However, I feel a deep sense of gratitude to "Berkh". He prepared me well for Hebrew, which I learned with such ease years later in the "Habima".



חיהלע גראָבער אַלס גימנאַזיסטקע.

Chayele Grober as high school student

[1] zverinyets=зверинец= menagerie. The today's name is Branicki Park.

[2] Park "Roshkosh". If you want to know more about the locations, I recommend my translation of Jacob Jerusalem's "Memoirs And Writings Of A Białystoker". The PDF can be downloaded free of charge here: [Translation of the memoirs of Jakob Jerusalem - Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu \(jewishBiałystok.pl\)](http://www.spoeczne-muzeum-zydow-bialegostoku-i-regionu.pl)

[3] a multi-strophic witty, ambiguous, political or satirical song with a distinctive refrain.

[4] O, look here, O, look there, It has a reason and it makes sense. No, no, not there, o, look here, This is all for your desire...

[5] The Habima theatre was founded in Białystok in 1912. After its closure, it was reopened in Moscow, see [Habima Theatre - Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habima)

[6] melamed= Jewish cheder [elementary school] teacher. Also called "rebe" or "rabbi" in the sense of teacher. They often lived in great poverty and were not held in high esteem.

[7] In his biography, also Jacob Jerusalem describes Yakow Berman: "Conductor Berman was also popular and beloved among us. Knowing that he was our teacher, we took special pride and pleasure in looking at Berman: his proud, upright figure with his noble, white face, his wise eyes and his wonderfully beautiful, carved features, his silver hair and his pointed, finely trimmed little beard. He always wore his double blue pelerine over his shoulders, which made him look like a professor at a music conservatory".

[8] here: Rich upper class, the owning and ruling class

[9] esn teg: "eat days", it refers to the community custom, once widespread in Eastern Europe, of supporting teachers and education by hosting yeshive students for meals in private homes on certain days of the week, with stays probably changing from day to day.

[10] עברית= Ivrit= Hebrew or modern Hebrew.

Chapter 5
My Aunt Teybele- Our Neighbours

Five generations of tenants lived in our own brick house. My mother lived on the third floor in an apartment with the two boys. Gitele, the maid, grew up in our house almost from the day she was born. I don't remember my uncle Zeydl in regard to this house because he only came home to visit, either before he left for America or just after he returned from there.

My aunt, Teybele, came from Vashlikove. The small shtetl is located seven "vyorst" ^[1] behind Białystok. People used to travel there by horse and cart, and the price depended on whether you had your feet inside or outside... That is, you paid five kopecks if your feet were inside the cart and three kopecks if they were outside.

I talk so much about my aunt Teybele, so it's worth telling how she came into our family.

My uncle Zeydl was a "bon vivant" and my grandmother believed that he would be a "well-behaved" man when he got married.

That's how they started planning his wedding. Once I heard that my grandmother was getting ready to go to Vashlikove to look at a bride for my uncle. My grandmother left, and everyone at home waited impatiently for her to return and tell them. She didn't stay long, and when she came home she said the following:

"...So I'm standing at Hertske Katsev's [the butcher's] waiting for the matchmaker with the girl, and the door opens and in comes a beautiful girl. She asks for a piece of 'flank' and a 'khnokhn-beyn' ^[2]. And I don't know why, but I am attracted to her. When she's back outside, I ask Katsev: 'Is she still a girl?' He tells me: 'And what a girl she is! With a very distinguished pedigree! Her grandfather was the 'rav' [rabbi] in the shtetl, and her father was the chairman of the community'... And I say to him: 'This is exactly the girl I want to see again'!"

My mother immediately decided to welcome the bride. To this day, my aunt remembers how she walked in to us and I snuggled up to her. I can still see my mother walking into the office with her and saying: "I want you to know that my brother is a good and honest man, but a bon vivant!"

Teybele replied: "I will marry You!"...

And my mother did indeed take great responsibility for her all her life. My aunt became the closest person in our family, my mother trusted her completely. And after my grandmother died, she really took her place. She just saved my life:

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, as I was getting dressed to go to school one early winter morning, I was coughing. My mother immediately called me to her bed and said: "Get undressed and go to bed!" I didn't understand why, because I didn't feel any pain. But from that morning on, I was in bed for six weeks, and for the only time in my life, I was at the point of death.

They sat at my bedside day and night. In addition to my family, a "linistke" from Lines-Hatsedek ^[3] came every evening. Once, in the middle of the day, I called my mother to me and said: "Mom, don't be afraid, but I feel like I'm going to faint..."



בעטי מעיער

Betty Meier



געניטשקא און חיהלע.

Genitshka and Chayele



ח. ג. און איר ברודער עליוקע
מיט זיין פרוי רחלע אין תל-אביב.

Ch.G. and her brother Elinke with his wife Rachele in Tel-Aviv

My mother cried bitterly, they ran to fetch our family doctor Flatau. The next day, on a frosty morning, my aunt Teybele went to the cemetery to "raysn kvorim" ^[4]. When she returned, she put some grass from my grandmother's grave under my pillow. That night was the crisis- and the next day I began to feel better.

מיין מומע טייבעלע,
פעטער זיידל מיט
די קינדער.



My aunt Teybele, uncle Zeydl with the children

But, "crisis-shmisis" ^[5], my aunt Teybele saved me from death...

After that, my best friend, Rokhl [Rachel] Birger, slept in my brother's bed across from me. She slept there for four weeks and kept her hand outstretched to me all night so I could reach for her if I needed anything.

I slowly got better and felt so pampered because everyone treated me like a tender child.

I remember the first day my friends and girlfriends were allowed to visit me, I asked my mother for all her rings - I put them on all my fingers and lay there as a decorated one.

The first day the doctor allowed me to be taken outside on the street, they made kettles of boullion and stewed fruit, hired a cab, and Rachele Lev and my aunt Teybele took me to the "moyshev-skeynim" [old people's home]. There they divided the portions, and I brought them to the old people. - May they all rest in peace ^[6] for the blessings they wished me...

After that, a big ball was organized in the house. Throughout the day and night, relatives and friends came and went. The house was full of the scent of flowers. Moysh'ke Tsukrovitsh, Moysh'ke Bialostotski, Rachel Birger and Isak Goldberg stayed until late at night. - This was the last great day of celebration for me in Białystok.

After such an illness, there was no question of me continuing to go to high school. Instead, my parents took me to Otvotsk. They stayed with me for two days and then went home, leaving me in [Mr.] Gurevitsh's pension. For the first time I was left all alone. The first Friday evening came, I went down to the table and suddenly felt a terrible loneliness! I saw before me our lighted dining room, our set table; I saw the candles burning and ducking into the silver candlesticks, and I heard Father's Kiddush... It tore my heart so much that I ran back to my room and burst into tears....

I was a grown girl, and yet I was so childlike. Mr. Gurevitsh and all the guests were very concerned about me. I even had a little romance there with Shayke.

I sang Russian love songs for the guests.

After Purim, I went home. It may sound like a fairy tale, and I felt like it was just a dream, but the guests and musicians from Gurevitsh's pension walked with me to the train station singing. And when the train started, the musicians began to play.

Who could have imagined that this was the beginning of the end of a carefree, peaceful world!

Next door to my aunt lived Toybe-Gitl with her two daughters and a niece. All three were already grown up... They were already negotiating with matchmakers for all three. But the widow Toybe-Gitl herself was also "available" again...

One daughter, Lipshe, was tiny and underdeveloped both physically and mentally. The second daughter, Chaye'ke, was somewhat taller, more beautiful, and fuller. The niece, Libke, on the other hand, was just big, fat and bloated. However, she was the "best commodity" because men in those years loved women who were "something to look at". We used to say that the fashion that favored fat women came from Catherine the Great.

But big, fat women are naturally lazy. So they really just sat at Toybe-Gitl's day in and day out and "rocked on the chairs".

As mentioned above, all family members were in negotiations with matchmakers. When a potential "khosn" [groom] came to look at one of the girls, the other two would usually leave the house, except for Toybe-Gitl, as she had to receive the guest. Libke was "looked at" more often than anyone else. I don't know if it was because she was the oldest or because she was so "predstavitelne" [representative]...

The procedure of being "looked at" went like this:

The other two girls would go to my aunt and sit there until the "khosn" was gone. Libke would dress up very festively and come down to us. She would squeeze herself into a high corset that lifted her sagging breasts up to her double chin. Her dress had many ruffles that [visually] lifted her breasts even higher and shortened her neck even more. She also wore a boa made of small feathers. She had a large hat on her head, and on the back of the hat was a large bird with outstretched wings. The bird gave the impression that it had just stopped flying to do something and was about to take off again...

On her hands Libke wore "mitinkes" - gloves without fingers, and in her hand she held a small stick in a sheath that looked like an umbrella.

Libke used to leave the house for two reasons: Firstly, the "khosn" should see how indifferent she was to the whole affair - as a sign,

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she didn't even wait for him. Secondly, the "khosn" should see her, the bride, in all her splendor. Then, when the groom arrived, Toybe-Gitl would usually apologize profusely for the bride's tardiness, and my aunt would come running down breathlessly to announce that "he, the groom, is already here" and make the first report....

Later, Libke would go out into the street, stroll through the Lipove [Lipowa] alleys, and, refreshed by the air, go upstairs to introduce herself. After that, Toybe-Gitl would "inevitably" have to leave, so that the [potential] bride and groom would be left alone at the well-laid table. The "bride" would skillfully pour the tea into the glasses herself to show what an efficient housewife she was.

Toybe-Gitl could give no dowry to a [groom]. But she had a noble lineage!

She was a descendant of a chain of rabbis, and what's more, she was the sister of [Mrs.] Nimtsovitch! The "Nimtsovitchs" were very rich, and her sister, the "Nimtsovitchikhe", played an important role. She used to travel abroad every year and bring back the finest, most beautiful clothes. Once she brought back a plush costume decorated with little bells, because "people on the street should know that a Nimtsovitchikhe is walking there!" From then on she was known as "the Nimtsovitchikhe with the bells".

On the second floor lived Yeshaye [Isaiah] "Lupe" (he got the nickname because he had a split lip) with his daughter Sore'ke "Krasavitse" [the Beauty]. Sore'ke was an ugly old maid, but a real "koketke" [coquette]! One Pesach, when the lights went on in the wooden room in our yard for the first Seder evening, Sore'ke ran out into the street in her nightgown with her corset under her arm... From then on she was called "Krasavitse".

In the second apartment lived Ogushevitsh, the teacher. Ogushevitsh taught Russian - he used to prepare the students for the higher classes. He had a lung disease and was often in bed. In this case he was given beer with egg yolk and sour cream. The drink made him cough more easily. When he spit, he did it in a strangely artistic way: while lying down, he used to spit up and behind him, just as one would write a "ר". His wife was the daughter of a well-known water carrier, but she always walked around snootily. I didn't like that at all, so I gave her the name "Madame Tru-lyu-lyu". I taught it to all the children in the courtyard, and when she crossed the courtyard, they all shouted in unison:

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"Madame Tru-lyu-lyu!" She ran scolding to my grandmother, who started [to pretend]:

"That girl is in for it! But where is she?" But when I came, she just pretended to hit me and her eyes were laughing.

Downstairs, across from our apartment, lived the "Pratshkarnitse" [laundress]. She washed clothes until late at night and ironed them from dawn. The "Pratshkarnitse" was a widow with girls in her room- one young man was already in America. Despite her work in the "pratshkarnye", she also made cigarettes. In the winter she would sit at the big table in our dining room until late at night, stuffing the tubes [with tobacco]. She worked with extraordinary speed. However, the income from both activities was so small that she often went without bread. She would eat cooked food only when we brought it to her.

At home, we didn't "take a quick bite", as was the case in many Jewish homes. We ate at certain times, and there was a specific menu for each day and for each meal. For example: Sunday was a light lunch, because on Shabbat there had been a fat cholent, plus "sweet kugl" [pudding], "gefilte fish" and "tsimes" [baked sweet root-crop]. So on Sunday we often had lokshn [noodles] with boiled potatoes in milk with butter and a piece of milchik fish. On Monday we cooked oaten grits with flank, on Tuesday we had roast with a dumpling filled with boiled eggs and black porridge, on Wednesday we had the national dish - "lindzn with klyutskelekh" (lentils with round potato dumplings), on Thursday we had another light lunch, because on Friday we cooked meat and fish, chicken and geese and all kinds of dishes.

We lived with our neighbors in a good and friendly way, and it was like a family relationship. This applied to the neighbors in our yard, but there were also neighbors from our street - and of these I remember the "Serebrovitshes" and the "Tzimsteins" best.

[1] verst, one verst= 0,66 miles

^[2] knokhn-beyn = bone with skin and shank

^[3] Linas-Hatzedek= charitable organization that cares for the poor and sick and their medical care, nursing and accommodation.

^[4] Weeping profusely at the grave of ancestors or wise scholars and asking them to intercede for the living in heaven

^[5] in English=crisis-schmis, something like "tempest in a teapot"

^[6] literally= May they all have a bright Garden of Eden



אויף דער דאטשע אין גאָרָדניאַני
 פון רעכטס: ח. גראָבער, ג. טשערטשעווסקי, רחל בירגער, ר. דאָוידאָווסקי,
 געניעטשקע, באָבל גראָבער (די מוטער פון דער אויטאָריין).

At the "datshe" in Gorodnyani, from right: Ch. Grober, G. Tshertshevski, Rachel Birger, R. Davidovski, Genyetshke, Bobl Grober (the author's mother)

Chapter 6

Friends of My Childhood Years

The Serebrovitchs and the Tzimsteins

The Serebrovitchs had large houses that stretched from the "Popovshitzne" backwards, to the first of the Lipove [Lipowa] alleys. There were always goats running around the big yard. The old grandfather used to milk the goats for his sick daughter-in-law, for Mrs. Serebrovitch and her three high school girls who were studying for [honorary] medals. The grandmother, a modest, pious woman, took care of the household goods, and it is said that grandpa took care of the health, and grandma took care of the "kashres" [ritual purity]...

In the beginning, the children were not allowed to go to grammar school on Shabbat, they were not even allowed to read a Russian book on Shabbat...

But as time went by, people "reformed" at home. The inside of the house was always dirty, the beds were not made, clothes, socks and other small things were thrown around the house, and potatoes were peeled on the long, big piano...

The father didn't talk to the mother, the children didn't talk to their father, grandma quarreled with grandpa and the maid was the "baleboste" [mistress of the house].

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The Tzimsteins' houses stretched on both Novolipe [Nowolipie] Alleys. Their home was a really wealthy one. The head of the family was the mother - a small, delicate, graceful woman, agile but also sad. The family dealt in bricks, tiles and, in later years, rags. The little woman ran all the businesses, and the father also bustled about with something, but nobody took it seriously. The whole house with the sons and daughters was run by maids. It was customary for young girls to remain in the service of the Tzimsteins until they were married off. And Mama Tzimstein used to arrange their weddings with dowries, trousseaus and music...

My first impressions of this house were on Friday evenings, when my grandmother would send me out to fetch the fish and soup for the old, the sick, or the proud but poor... I would walk through a dark corridor, open the kitchen door, and immediately my eyes would be dazzled by a wall full of [utensils made of] brass and copper. Brass and copper in various shapes: a jug, a tray, a dish, a "medinitse" [large brass bowl], a pan, a "patelnye" [frying pan], and on the shelf a pestle and mortar, a teapot, a pair of candle holders, tiny candlesticks, and everything shining like the sun.

At the bottom of the wall ^[1] was a white tiled stove where pots of fish, soup, and sweet root vegetables were boiling - for her own large family and for the poor. The lady cook distributed the portions before they were taken to the houses, and Mother Tzimstein, with the same quick movements, kept pouring in a little more and adding another piece...

And I would collect the blessings and good wishes and always feel very important in my errands.

The youngest of the sons and daughters was Rokhl [Rachel]. Rachel Tzimstein was my first friend. We grew up together, playing and learning together. Rachel was small in stature, beautiful to look at, with fine movements and a very good character. She was careful like her mother, always worried about something - about later, about the next day, about something else...

Rachel was still a very young girl and was still studying with us at the private high school when the Tzimsteins' business was down. One fine day, Rachel stopped coming to school.



ח'ה'לע גראָבער.

Chayele Grober

She became the bride of Leyzer Zbar because she was afraid to remain a poor old maid... All her life she was haunted by anxiety. Something in her lived in perpetual fear. She was constantly under the blind urge to try to prevent something - but what? She never knew the answer. I have spent most of my life with Rachel. The events of World War I could not tear our friendship apart.

[1] Given the regional Yiddish dialect, it could also be translated as "behind the wall".

The Levinzons

My friends on the other side of Khanaykes were the Levinsons. Their white house stood on the corner of Kratshak's Alley. The entrance from Khanaykes led into their little grocery store, and another entrance from the alley led into the house, or rather into a room that served as a dining room- a guest room with a kitchen, and a stove in the corner. Right next to the entrance was a pipe in the wall that supplied water to everyone in the environment. You had to put a penny or a kopeck through a small window (for two buckets of water), and then you could turn on the faucet inside the house. This was the second source of income for the Levinzons. The two daughters took care of this "business". They combined it with their studies - alternately reading and turning on the tap; or writing and turning on the tap...

The shopkeepers in the area envied the Levinzons for this "business", but only in the summer. In winter, they pitied them. In winter, the pipe would freeze and the children would have to put hot compresses on it to keep it from bursting.

Mrs. Levinzon ran both businesses. Mr. Levinzon was a Hebrew teacher. I don't know how many children lived there, but I remember that Mrs. Levinzon was pregnant and had a child at her breast. There was another child crawling around the room, and two girls - one in high school and the other in business school. How this woman managed to take care of the house and the business is hard to understand. But I remember that she always walked with her beautiful head held proudly high, her skin like ivory, and a little smile on her lips. I think her satisfaction and pride came from her two daughters, who looked better in their uniforms than any other girls from the rich houses,

and they were also the best students in their schools. All of the woman's hard work and care was to see that her children were educated and well brought up, and in this Mrs. Levinzon was very successful.

My hometown of Białystok has produced many prominent personalities. And there were even more people who didn't make it to the big time, but are still worth mentioning. On Yatke Street in Białystok (opposite the house of Elimeylekh, where I was born) there was a bakery - a kind of home bakery. The family consisted of a woman, her husband, two daughters and a son. The name under which the bakery operated was and remained "Libe-Keyle Sore's". It is possible that Libe, Keyle-Sore's daughter, inherited the bakery from her mother. However, if she did not inherit the bakery, she certainly inherited the talent to bake in such a way that she would be remembered forever. Her business had no need for special publicity or big, flashy lights. She didn't even need a sign! But everyone made their way there.

Libe-Keyle Sore's was a quiet, sweet, well-fed woman, pale and puffy like risen dough. Like her husband and children, she moved slowly and quietly. She spoke softly. It was not a place for grand gestures and quick movements, nor was it a large room for loud voices. The store, the bakery, and the apartment- all together it was no bigger than the basement of a two-family house in Brooklyn. I don't know if they were very happy there, but there was a lot of niceness, high-mindedness, a little wisdom, a little culture, and a world of peace!

The desire to make friends developed in my early youth. It was an urge to find friends and to remember them well. I constantly see people in front of me that I haven't seen since my early youth. My first friends were those

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who came to our house or yard - they were the poor.

The first was the blind, lanky Jew who kept raising his head to the sky as if he wanted to pierce the clouds and reveal the sun to himself. I felt a warm affection for him because he sang heart-rending songs and was always smiling. In our house, the [alms] penny was never thrown down, but always gently placed in his hand, and I can still feel the trembling of his hand and see his dull, sad smile. How I regret that I can't remember his name, for he was always simply called "the Blind".

And there is Keyle... Keyle was not a professional beggar. She was - on her normal days - a quiet, modest girl, small in stature with a beautifully cut face. She was one of three in the family: her old mother, her sister Peshke, and herself. Peshke was a graceful girl. She passed our house every day on her way to and from the cigarette factory. Quiet, with an inner sadness and always dressed in a long black dress, she would float down the street with quick, hurried steps.

On festive days, all three would come to our house as guests and be entertained. I often stayed with them in their single whitewashed room. There were no beds there, just a bedstead built like a narrow, long box, covered with a board. For the night, the board was removed and placed on two chairs, making a second "bed". The third sleeping place was on the floor.

Keyle used to get wild and confused in the summer, probably from the heat... She would come into our yard, smash the windows, scream and cry, and everyone was afraid of her. But all winter long she was calm, loving and friendly, so we loved her.

And there I see Glike before my eyes - Glike was already a grown woman, intelligent, poor, but finely dressed. She usually visited us once a month. It was a long stay. On snowy winter days,

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she would come to us at two o'clock in the afternoon and stay until late in the evening. She would be served hot, fresh tea with a small snack and sit in the dining room all the time. Mom and Grandma would spend those hours comfortably with her. She always supplied us with tea - you could buy "Visotski's" tea in every big and small shop, but we at home didn't buy tea anywhere - Glike was our only "podstavshitshe" [supplier].

It was said that she had been widowed at a young age and had several children to raise. That is why she had started to earn her living with the [above-mentioned] activity. She once told my mother that I met her early one morning on my way to school, stopped and asked her how she was. When I heard that her daughter was very sick, I gave her my breakfast and the small change I usually was given to take with me. When she refused to accept it, I ran away. Throughout the winter, they proudly told all our friends and relatives what I had done.

"Man-Orchestra"

Our Białystok "One Man Orchestra" man always appeared in the spring and disappeared with the onset of the rainy fall days. I don't know his name, because he was just called "One Man Orchestra". He alone played several instruments at once. In front of him hung a large hurdy-gurdy, behind him on his shoulder was a large drum, above the drum were two copper plates connected to his foot by a long cord, and on his head he wore a hat with bells. It took an extraordinary sense of rhythm and control to play music as artfully as he did. Everything was so fast and precise that it was impossible to remain calm while playing. And he always sang along! His right hand turned the hurdy-gurdy, his left hand drummed on the timpani, his foot pulled the [copper] plates together, and his head shook [and rang] the bells...and we children's feet lifted up to dance - what a joy!

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He was very successful, and young and old used to run after him from yard to yard.

Zoshe

Among my childhood friends were our maids. I spent a lot of time with them in our quiet, warm, clean kitchen - on so many winter evenings. The one I remember best was our maid, Zoshe. A maid usually stayed with us for many years, but Zoshe was the longest. She came to us before my grandmother died and stayed with us for a long time after. Zoshe was an honest soul, she was worth her weight in gold and a hard working person!

However, she had one small flaw: she was continually pregnant! She was not a beauty, her face was a little pockmarked and one of her arms was shortened. But when she approached a man, he usually looked at her with strangely open eyes. Her lips would turn pale and her hand, which usually held a plate or cutlery, would tremble. I often noticed this when we had guests - merchants from other cities. The only one who didn't look at her at all was Avrohemke, my mother's relative. He always lowered his eyes to his plate and only looked up when Zoshe had left the room. Avrohemke had served in the Czar's army, had come back, and now had no job in sight to start. He was born in Grodno, and it was decided that he could stay with us. My father assigned him to a storeroom as a "prikashtshik" [overseer].

Avrohemke slept on the couch in the office. Once, in the middle of the night, I was awakened by a strange creaking sound, and I held my breath in fear, thinking that thieves were there. I felt very strange, and soon after I saw Zoshe in her white nightgown floating out of the office, through my room, into the kitchen, and back to her couch. Since that night, I often lay there with bated breath and pricked ears, listening for the strange sound emerging from Avrohemke's couch...

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The bigger Zoshe's belly got, the more she cried. My grandmother and my mother used to talk to her very softly. But they would give her a sermon and tell her to think about how miserable it was for her to be carrying a child and to have a child. Thereupon she would promise that it would be the last time. I never found out where she gave birth or where she took the baby. But I saw my grandmother pack a basket with a pot of chicken soup, add a jar of preserves and some cakes, and take it somewhere to Zoshe.

My grandmother never used to send me on these errands...

After several weeks, Zoshe would return, still pale and weak. For a while they didn't let her do any heavy work and kept an eye on her. After that, she would be quiet, work hard, and - soon become increasingly plump again.

Sore [Sara] the Braye [1]

An entire generation grew up with the character of Sara the Braye. Everybody knew Sara the Braye. But I myself associated Sara the Braye with many deep dramatic experiences, and her figure became deeply rooted in my creative mind and artistic spirit. Sara the Braye is a character for a playwright, a character for the theater. And that is why I am telling the story of Sara the Braye as I remember it from my parents and as I have internalized it:

There was a rich family in Białystok - their name is not important now, when everything and everyone, rich and poor, has disappeared with the smoke...

The family had taken in Sara, who was fluent in languages, for the education of their children. Sara became the French governess in the rich house. The eldest son of the rich family fell in love with the poor but highly intelligent governess. Years passed and the business went downhill. The rich family was broken, but Sara, the governess, did not leave them. The elder son graduated from high school, and when it was time for him to go to university, there were no financial means to send him. Sara, the governess

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withdrew from her bank the small amount of money she had saved over the years of her employment and sent her "cavalier" to Paris to study. After his departure, she began giving private French lessons in Białystok and regularly sent the "genius" money for his living. So the years went by until the happy day came when the son of the aristocratic family, who had finished his studies, was to return home. The family prepared very well for his arrival - and of course Sara, the most important person in the family, prepared much more than anyone else. Little did Sara know, however, that in the recent past the "good" parents and family members had prepared the son for the fact that "there is something wrong with Sara...". So she does things that are not quite normal and that would make them a little afraid of her. In other words, she was about to lose her mind!....

The day came when they went to greet the "Frenchman" [the graduate] from the University of Paris. When the family was ready to leave the house, they looked at Sara very kindly, caressed her face, and when the son came from the station, he saw his bride standing before him, her face smeared with soot... Proudly he turned away. The family surrounded him, and Sara, realizing what had happened to her, went mad. She became silent, melancholy. She was always dressed in a beautiful lace pelerine with a small round hat, all in black. She spoke only French. She never asked for alms, but was always collecting money for someone who needed help with his studies... And Sara remained in my memory as the quiet, saintly, French governess.

In my eyes, Białystok and the people of Białystok were friendly and kind, carefree and cheerful. I did not know our gentile neighbor. Apart from our Christian maid, the policeman and the chief of police, I didn't know anyone [Christian]. And the latter bowed to my grandmother and my father and laughed heartily after a bronfn [schnapps] with the [Shabbat] fish...
And then they bowed again,

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squeezing a green "little paper" in their hands, which had slipped into their hands when my father said "Goodbye"...
I got to know Russian high schools with blond "shiksies" [Christian girls] only later, when the first deep wrinkle had settled on my still childlike mind, and when my still very childlike heart was gripped by the first great experience: For me, 1906 and 1907 were the years that sowed a deep sadness in my soul.

[1] Interestingly, Jakob Jerusalimski, who was almost the same age, also tells this story in his book "Memoirs and Writings of a Białystoker" on page 74. The two authors gave different details, so I will quote Jakob's account here.

One striking aspect is the slightly different naming of the main character Sore [Sara]. Chayele, who knows the nickname from hearsay, pronounces it as "**Sara di Braye**", although she uses different spellings for the surname. Her first way of spelling ברייע [=home brewed beer, rotgut] does not seem to make sense in context. Her second spelling בראיע does not really make sense either, unless it is a proper name. It is possible that either בריאה = creation is meant, or בקריה = knowledgeable, hardworking person. The word בקריה = "in evidence" would also be appropriate.

Jacob Jerusalimski spells her [Aramaic] name דבריא עשרה , pronounced "**Asara Dibraya**", which means "Ten Commandments".

Jacob's story reads:

An exact opposite type of a tragic mental patient was the popular "Asara Dibraya". Her madness was actually based on a personal life drama that brought her to this state. The [real] name of "Asara Dibraya" was Sara Kaplan. She was the sister of the well-known Białystok editor Pesach Kaplan, who after her death inherited her small wooden house on "Nayvelt" [Nowy Świat], not far from Białostotshanske [Białostoczanka].

Sara Kaplan was the victim of a love tragedy, the plot of which could be the material for a theatrical drama. Sara, who was beautiful and educated in her youth, had an intimate love affair for a long time with a student whom she supported financially and to whom she was faithfully devoted.

She loved the student with all the passion of a young, Jewish-Russian, sentimental, romantic girl. But the student, having finished his studies to become a doctor, fell in love with another girl and married her. Wanting to forget her lover, Sara decided to marry another. But under the chupah, she realized the full tragedy of a romantic girl about to marry a man she does not love.

Her love for the former bridegroom burst forth in her with strong passion, and unable to bear it any longer, she went mad under the chupah.

She was not completely insane, but, as they say in French, "déséquilibre" [unbalanced]. In Yiddish, they say: she lost her balance, the control over herself.

She walked the streets of Bialystok finely dressed, always in black or dark clothes, often with a black veil over her face. She walked erect, stiff and proud, with a face that was always thoughtful and excited. She talked to herself as she walked, and that's why she was nicknamed "Asara Dibraya".

She had a little girl living with her, whom she raised in her own way. It was tragicomic to see her dressing the little ten-year-old girl in dark clothes with a veil over her face. But when the melancholy left her, in normal moments she became a philanthropic lady, going to parties and weddings to collect money for the poor and doing many humane good deeds.

I often watched her. How she walked with quick steps and talked to herself, often gesticulating, getting more and more agitated as she talked. But her stiff, proud figure and dark clothes inspired respect, compassion and pity.

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Chapter 7

The Białystoker Pogrom

We spent the summer of 1906 in Mileytshits [Milejczyce]. Before that, as in all previous years, we began to correspond with Fishke the Katsev [Butcher], Shimen Beynish and Khayim [Chaim] Stolyar. And this year, as in all previous years, a contract was signed with Khayim-Stolyar. This year we rented a new house in the yard for ourselves. Soon after Passover, my grandmother was very busy choosing which preserves to take with us and which to keep locked in the sideboard. Every day between Passover and Shvues [Shavuot], a few hours were set aside to plan when, how, and in which pillows to pack the bedding and dishes. And this year, as in all previous years, the same pillows were used for the same purpose. We usually left on Monday after midnight prayers, which was actually Tuesday, so that we would arrive safely and with luck still in Milejczyce on Tuesday.

In the afternoon, my father "systematically" tied up the pillows and baskets

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and skillfully sewed together the bags that my mother had carefully filled in a certain order. This year, as in all previous years, two cabs were arranged to take us to the train station early in the morning. Although we usually got to the station much too early, we never had any time to

spare... Luggage had to be unloaded and weighed, receipts had to be written, put in a "safe" place, but then checked several times to make sure they were really there. Finally, we began to say goodbye, kissing each other and saying:

"Bobenyu [dear grandmother], be careful coming down from the "ploshtshadke!"^[1] "Mulye, don't miss dinner, it's time, and above all, lemanashem [for God's sake], write often!"....

This was constantly and brutally interrupted by the whistle of the locomotive, the big ringing bell and the singing voice of the driver: "treti zvonok [third call], Belsk, Kleshtsheli, Brisk!"...

My mother's eyes were usually permanently moist. My father always smiled, and I felt filled with summer joy.

My father always reserved a seat for us by the window, through which we saw my mother waving her snow-white handkerchief for minutes on end, even after the train had already set off. All this happened at fifteen minutes before two in the morning, and at fifteen minutes after six that morning we were already in Kleshtsheli.

From Kleshtsheli to Milejczyce we traveled by horse and cart. Every wagoner swore that he had come "especially" for us - that he had spurred his horses in the dark, had taken only the best horses, had filled his wagon with fresh hay, had covered it with a blanket and a tarpaulin in case of wind or rain - they flooded us with their speeches until we had walked to the forest merchant Perets (not far from the station) and sat down at his breakfast table.

And he, Perets, took care of the negotiations with the wagoners and then sent us on the loaded wagon to the "krakh" [big city] Milejczyce.

The distance was 14 vyorst (two miles). We passed the mill (at that time I didn't know that the most beautiful "pine" of the Polish-Eastern forests had already "grown there in the mill" - Perets Hirshbeyn ^[2]), drove over the first hill and turned into a sandy road.

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Then we drove into a fresh forest. Tall pines cast shadows, the morning sun cast its rays, the air was full of the "zubruvke" [bison grass] odor and smelled like perfume.

Here the "odlers"^[3] trotted step by step and inhaled the sweet air with us. My mother slowly began to untie the packages of fresh fruit and distribute them among us children, the Christian maid, and the carter. Everyone got a piece of fruit and a napkin. This always made the carter talkative. So he gave us the first report on what was going on in the shtetl, what was happening in the houses, he told us all the names of this year's residents of the "datshes" and who lived with whom - and the atmosphere was good.

After the forest we went uphill again and through deep sand. The cart driver shouted, whistled, cracked his whip, cursed the horses and complained that he had been negotiated down for a few guilders... My mother then compensated him for his loss, she unpacked cold chicken with

white bread, a crisp cucumber, and the fresh, tasty snack improved the mood. A [special] tree- an "old man with a hunchback" - was the first sign that Milejczyce was near. The second and last sign was the eternally young "sosnele", a little pine tree that never wanted to grow old. This little pine somehow remained in my memory as a symbol of eternal blossoming. At this "sosnele" at the top of the mountain, people used to stop the cart, improve their seats, comb their hair, adjust their hats, smooth their lapels. The driver would jump on his seat, crack his whip, and the horses would pull the cart again [with a jerk]. It threw us backwards, so that we actually screamed, but it was more a scream of joy. After a few minutes, we would drive onto the cobbled Kleshtsheler Street. Here our "odlers" [horses] jumped, the wheels rattled, the whip cracked, and all the dogs of the gentiles' huts barked. Here and there a barn door would creak, and little gey boys and girls, barefoot and dirty, would look out in amazement, but we were carried along like the wind and "galloped" to Khayim-Stolyar - the first Jewish house.

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That summer, as in all previous summers, letters flew (by two-horse stagecoach) to and from Visoko-Litovsk, until one Monday when my father's letter warned us to remain calm if we did not receive a letter after the second Thursday. Rumors in the air predicted a pogrom in Białystok on Maundy Thursday.

A black cloud covered the blue sky over Milejczyce, obscuring the light of the hot July sun. My mother - as always in a critical moment - was silent, and so we all fell into a sad silence. On Thursday morning all Białystokers gathered in our yard and in our house - our house was always the center. On Thursday evening the post arrived from Visoko Litovsk with the last letter and a verbal greeting: the planned pogrom in Białystok had been going on since the morning.

The lamentations of the women and the cries of the frightened children rose to the heavens. A fast of three days and nights and a three-night vigil began.

My mother lay there in her clothes, eyes closed and lips pursed. From time to time, a tear, like a pearl, would slip through her lowered lashes and roll slowly down her cheeks, pale as wax. It was so heartbreaking, choking the throat and biting the nose... But we didn't dare cry, afraid to break the silence. It was as if we had to [listen] and wait for sounds that would come to us from a distance. But the distance was miles - and now it seemed ten times as far.

On Shabbat, right after Havdole, the mail horses were harnessed for a special errand to Visoko-Litovsk. Late after midnight, the horses trotted back with their heads bowed - there was no letter to anyone, from anyone... On Sunday, very early in the morning, the rabbi declared a fast for all non-Białystokers. Women ran [to the cemetery], "raysn kvorim". Gentiles walked around in shame. Shops were closed, and people moved like

shadows down Kleshtsheler Street, looking toward Kleshtsheler Way. From the other corner of Kleshtsheler Street, someone had just arrived from Warsaw via the Nurets railway station and was telling how people's heads had been smashed at the Białystok railway station and how hooligans were raging there.

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We received news from the railway authorities: Jews who wanted to go from Białystok to Warsaw had not arrived there since that Thursday.

On Monday it was decided to send two riders to Visoko-Litovsk, and my brother Max was one of them. It wasn't until late in the evening of that Monday that the two riders came flying home to us, sweating and on horses that were barely breathing, and they had only one letter with them - my father's letter.

My mother was not able to read more than the address before she collapsed and fell on her bed. A bitter lament from the dozens of people around shook the house... Afterwards, my mother held the utterly shocking letter in her trembling hands and read it aloud with a trembling voice and silent sobs:

"The holy procession began, as it does every year on Maundy Thursday, very early in the morning. At ten o'clock in the morning the procession reached the main street, Lipowa. All the shops were closed. Not a single Jew dared to go out on the street. Not far from the church, one Christian in the crowd bumped into another, and a thunderous roar rang out from the crowd:

Jews are beating Christians!

And as if struck by lightning, the whole crowd caught fire. The provoked pogrom had been prepared in such a way that not only was the mass of the procession well armed, but at the same time robbery and murder began in all the side streets and corners of the city.

The first victims were the Jews who arrived by train and got off at the Białystok station. The police, following strict orders, stood aside and did not make the slightest attempt to stop the rampaging crowd. The houses were sealed with all locks, the gates were closed. All the people in our courtyard and those in the neighborhood who managed to get to us went down to the basement. The younger men guarded the yard. For three days and nights the hooligans raged and the Jewish screams tore the sky apart. In our cellar sat my aunt Teybele with her two boys, Getsele and Hershele, the latter still an infant. The baby began to cry, and everyone

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panicked that the crying child would attract the attention of the murderers. My aunt became so desperate that she pressed on the child until it almost suffocated – [later] she couldn't understand why the child stayed alive. Our neighbor, the 'lamdn' [Jewish scholar], sat the whole three days and nights over a religious book on a small bench, as one sits 'shiva'."

My father had written this letter when the pogrom was in full swing. Interrupted again and again, then continued writing. And it was only very early on Sunday that he dared to go to the nearest mailbox to post the letter.

After that, letters and messages began to arrive from all sides. Sad news of the murdered and tortured... More and more names... Familiar and unfamiliar names...

The forest of Milejczyce was covered with mourning, and this year the inhabitants of the "datshes" left earlier than usual.

On the streets of Białystok the spurs of policemen rang again. On the first Shabbats, the police did not come to drink a "bronfn" with the Shabbat fish. But only for the first few Shabbats - after that everything was back to normal.

However, the youngest generation well remembered that in 1906 the "green" Thursday^[4] was turned into a black one, leaving a bloody stain on the ruling nation - the Russian-Polish people.

^[1] Площадка - Ploščadka, actually means "place". A "ploshtshad" was a permitted district for Jews, an area where one could live.

^[2] As far as Chayele's poetic description of Perets Hirshbeyn is concerned, he was a famous writer and theater director. His father operated a rural water mill, where Perets Hirshbeyn was born. [YIVO | Hirshbeyn, Perets \(yivoencyclopedia.org\)](http://YIVO.org/Hirshbeyn/Perets)

^[3] odlers: in this case the meaning is not "eagles" but "horses" [carter's language]

^[4] The Yiddish word for "Maundy Thursday" is "griner donershtik" = "green Thursday", corresponding to the German "Gründonnerstag".

Chapter 8

My Shtetele Mileyshitsi [Milejczyce] [1]

This first profound experience of the Białystoker pogrom sowed in my subconscious an urge for Yiddish and Judaism, for people and folklore. That is why Jewish Milejczyce remained my shtetl - forever! The village was located in the triangle between Białystok, Brisk and Warsaw, not even on the map, and yet so famous - Milejczyce.

Milejczyce consisted of two streets: The main one was Kleshtsheler Street, and at the end of Kleshtsheler Street was the perpendicular Pakinyover Street. At one corner of Pakinyover Street stood the church - new, white and built on solid ground. A golden dome shone from above, between all the buildings. There were gardens and flowers growing all over the large area around the church. There were benches around the gardens, and each bench was sheltered by a healthy tree that grew mightily in height and width, casting shadows on the lovers.

Every Sunday, very early in the morning, the church bells rang out, echoing over all the surrounding villages and bringing hundreds of young Christian girls and boys to the church.

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On the second corner of Pakinyover Street stood the "shul" [synagogue], a black old building clad in rotten shingles, with a low entrance and two small windows on either side. The whole shul stood on low old poles and was bent to one side as if it were about to topple over. Perhaps this is why all weddings in Milejczyce took place outside the shul rather than inside.

The market was held in the square next to the shul. Every Thursday, as soon as the sun rose, hundreds of horses would gallop like eagles to bring their "khrabyes" [counts, nobles] and peasants from the villages to the market; and every Thursday at sunset they would bring their wild, drunken "balebatim" back to their homes.

Besides the shul, Milejczyce had another very important center, and that was the bathhouse. The bath was located behind Fishke's house, next to the river. It was so that the area around the bath was always wet, but the bath itself was always dry. The bathhouse was a long, one-story building made of mouse-grey, crooked planks with a hacked-out hole for an entrance. There were two bathtubs and four buckets in the bathroom. On

Thursdays the women bathed, and on Fridays the men went to the bathhouse... The "bederke" [bath-keeper's wife] Dobe-Reyne was a withered small Jewish woman with a pale, melancholy face and dull eyes. She spoke so softly that she could hardly be heard. Moyshe the "beder" [bath-keeper] was a sturdy Jew with a thick black beard, open black eyes and a firm step. A quiet one. Dobe-Reyne rubbed the backs, and Moyshe poured the water...

My mother was tall and plump, she could only sit in the bathtub with her knees sticking out. And I used to sit on her knees like a little birdy. Once, sitting in the bathtub, my mother said:

"Dobe-Reyne, there's so little water in the tub, and what little there is is cold."

Dobe cried out in her weak, asthmatic voice, "Moyshe, Moyshe, bring in a bucket of water!"

My mother replied: "What are you doing, Dobe-Reyne, I'm completely naked!"

Dobe-Reyne: "My Moyshe is not looking!"

On a second occasion, Dobe-Reyne said to my mother: "Bobe, hear

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that I lived with my Moyshe for six years. We didn't have any children and his family had begun to influence him to divorce me. I saw that things were going badly and asked him to go to the rabbi... He agreed with me and left...

When he got to the rabbi, the rabbi asked him:

'Where are you from? My husband said: 'From Milejczyce'.

'What do you do for a living?'

'We have a bathhouse'.

'You have a bathhouse. Well, listen, Moyshe: when the women come into the bath, look at them... look at them...'

Hey, Bobe, ever since he came back from the rabbi and started looking, I have a baby every year."

I don't know if I was only six years old, but I'm sure I developed a sense of folklore at that moment.

At that time my mother was already well known to the people of Milejczyce, and she in turn had made Milejczyce popular. This tiny town, "the size of a yawn", had been discovered by my father. He got in touch with a local merchant who invited him to see the beautiful pine forest of the shtetl. My father came back very enthusiastic, and we actually went there the very next summer. It must have been in 1901 or 1902.

We often told this story about Milejczyce:

When my mother went there for the first time, there were 25 Jewish families and about 50 Christian families (not counting the surrounding villages). The only guests were our little family and a friend whom my mother had invited. However, they were so enchanted by the extraordinary air of the Milejczyce pines that they spread the word throughout the winter, and more and more people traveled together each year. The word of mouth continued, from one person to the next. Every year the number of "datshnikes" [residents of a datshe] who met there grew, and in 1914, our last summer in Milejczyce, there were already about five hundred guests.

At that time there were already larger and newer "datshes", even boarding houses, and there was already a post office and a "prikhodskoye shkole" [parochial school].

The local Jewish population of the shtetl consisted of shoemakers, innkeepers, butchers, and carters. But Milejczyce also had a great nobleman-

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and that was the rabbi of Milejczyce. This rabbi, they said, was a "goen" [gaon], a sage who was famous throughout Poland. The people of Milejczyce bragged about him and used his noble lineage in all their dealings, especially in marriage relations. Who would have dared to negotiate a dowry with a Milejczycer "mekhutn" [relative of the bride or groom] when he had such a distinguished lineage as the Milejczycer rabbi!

During my years in Milejczyce the rabbi was no longer alive, so for me he was just a legend. However, I well remember the Milejczycer "rebetsn" [the rabbi's wife] Fradl. She was of medium height, slim, had a quick, proud gait, was always dressed in black - this gave her an aristocratic appearance. And when she walked through the shtetl, her head would move slightly, and her double chin would wobble a little, as if to say: "Don't forget, here comes the wife of the Milejczycer rabbi!"

No one ever forgot. Jews would greet her with "Gut Morgn", and Christians would bow to the ground.

Fradl, the "rebetsn", had a grocery store in the market across the street from the shul. Her only daughter, Khaye-Dobe, had her dry goods store right across the street from her mother's. Khaye-Dobe was a tall, thin merchant - an enthusiast! Her husband was not a rabbi, but a student of the old rabbi and a great chassid. It was in Khaye-Dobe's house that I first heard chassidic nigunim [melodies]: it was during "Simkhes-Toyre" [Simchat Torah]. The house was filled with chassidim. After a good meal and several drinks, the chassidim turned their heads away, closed their eyes, and devoted themselves entirely to singing.

Suddenly I saw Khaye-Dobe's husband on the long table where the goods were usually measured. He had lifted the lapels of his caftan and was dancing the length of the narrow table. I felt like I was in a dream. Although I understood little, I felt that night as if I had come back to earth after a long, wonderful journey to the seventh heaven.

Many years had passed since that "Simkhes-Toyre" - years of pogroms, world war, resettlement, revolution, famine and migration - and I am still fascinated by the ecstasy of that great chassid! Who could have imagined that the mission of preserving and passing on this chassidic

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ecstasy would be bestowed upon that thin, pale girl who was standing there on the bench?! ^[2]

The Milejczycer rabbi gave Milejczyce its noble lineage - the Milejczyce forest gave the village its good reputation. On one side of the shtetl, along the entire length of the Kleshtsheler road, there was a healthy, hundred-year-old pine forest. The tall, straight trees stood firmly rooted, crowned with long, thin, fresh green needles. Each branch tip ended in a green, sticky cone that smelled of pine and soothed aching lungs. Under the hot sun, strong trees secreted great drops of a yellow, sticky sap-drops that flashed in the sun like tears. This sap, which scented not only the forest but the whole area, was the secret of how the sick who were brought here as bedridden patients in the spring were up and about by the fall. The sap worked in their lungs all winter long until they were brought back to the little paradise.

Every morning my mother used to walk slowly along a sandy path to keep her "cure", just as a "good Jew" kept his prayer times. Little Gutshe walked by her side with a folded bench on which she, the "aunt", would sit to rest several times during the short walk. Among the first trees was the hut where David kept the hammocks. As soon as he saw one of the "datshnikes" arrive, he would immediately take out a hammock with the appropriate name [of the guest] and hang it in the "right" place. This special place - meaning two healthy, thick trees on the sunny side with a little shade - was chosen at the beginning of the summer upon arrival and remained there until departure, just like - lehavdl ^[3] - the special bench in the Bes-Medresh.

We were always the first "datshnikes", and everyone who arrived after us would admit that "this was Bobke's place".

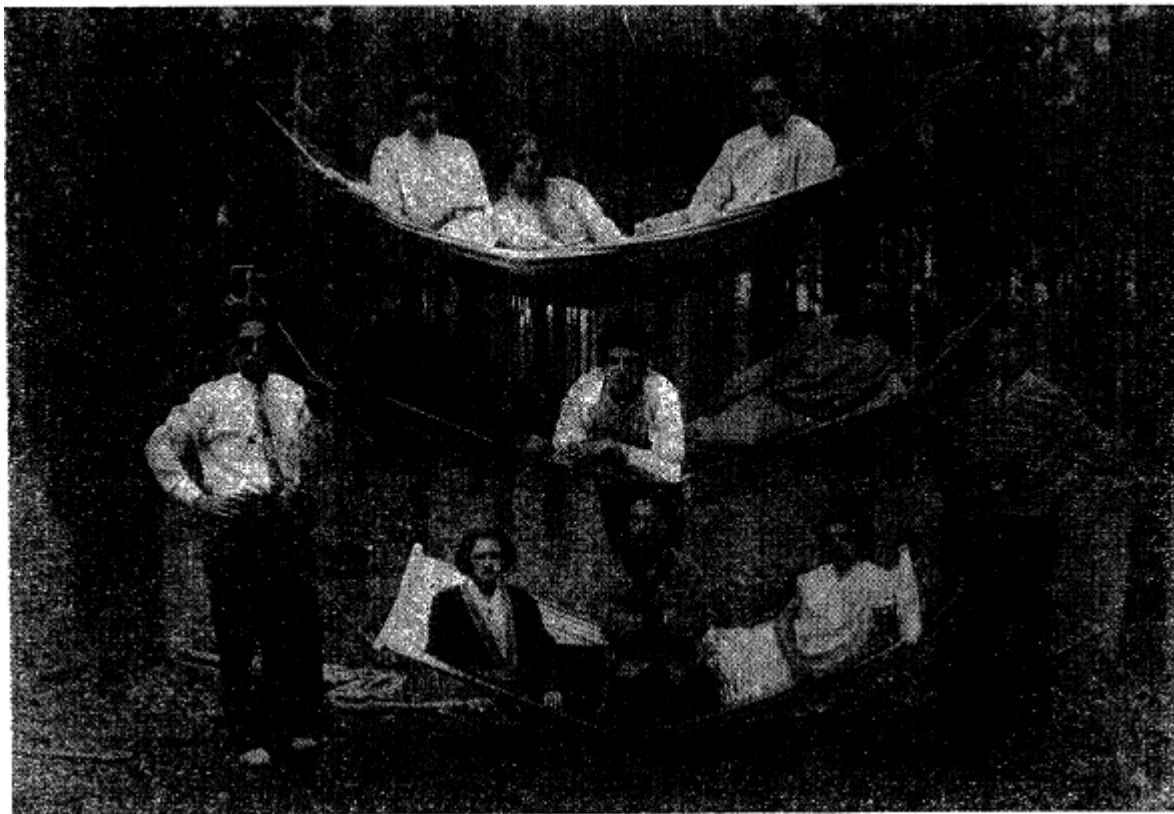
The "balebatim" from the city enjoyed their stay and the pleasure of the forest only on Shabbat afternoons. Then the sweet, still air was filled not only with weekday coughs, but also with snoring, a blowing or whistling of tired bodies stretched out on the green needles under the trees,

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with roots sticking out under their heads. From time to time a hard green cone would slide playfully down from the top of a branch, piercing the nose or ear and interrupting the snoring, whereupon a sleepy hand would stroke the pierced part of the body as if swatting away a fly. The children would then quietly "laugh their heads off" and repeatedly try to swing a branch so that another cone would fall...

Deep in the old forest, as if in a crown, grew a young, fresh little forest with thin, delicate little trees - with light, transparent branches, soaked in the sun. When you entered the depths of the little forest, you could see a net of the thinnest French silk lace - Chantelle, adorned with the finest feathers - Esprit.

Freshly trodden paths led here, through which the soft footsteps of virtuous couples made their way to the peace of Shabbat...



In the Milejczyer Forest

There was always a hot silence here, which on Shabbat afternoons was pervaded by a whispering and holding of breath from barely moving lips, stirring the air like a breeze, flowing into the limbs, touching the heart and filling the whole being with a sweet tiredness that sank down to the earth...

No matter how safe and protected one felt in the old forest, it was the small young forest that magically attracted children. When we were already back home, my dreams on frosty winter days often took me back to the little forest, enriching the air around me with the scent of young pines and filling me with a gnawing longing...

But in Milejczyce, every winter, other heroes of the shtetl made their way across the sea, carrying away the first love of a virtuous Jewish woman, and the waves behind them swallowed up the first hot passions...

And every winter, young, delicate hands sewed the deepest longings into burgundy velvet for little Torah mantles and cloth ark curtains. Autumn winds blew away the magical experiences... winter frosts burned the innocent, young, beautiful dreams. And in Milejczyce every summer there were weddings, which had been decided abroad.

[1] see [Milejczyce - Wielka Synagoga - Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu \(jewishBialystok.pl\)](http://Milejczyce - Wielka Synagoga - Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu (jewishBialystok.pl)) [with the remains of the “new” synagogue, built in 1927].

[2] listen to „In front of the rabbi’s table“ [Lifnej shulchan harabbi \(2 of 2\) - UWDC - UW-Madison Libraries \(wisc.edu\)](http://Lifnej shulchan harabbi (2 of 2) - UWDC - UW-Madison Libraries (wisc.edu))

[3] a term to distinguish the profane from the sacred.

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Chapter 9

Abroad - I Am Being Discovered

1906 was the year of the pogrom, and 1907 was the year of my grandmother's death. Those were years of mourning. Then there was another event that brought an extraordinary silence to our house: it was the great bankruptcy of a merchant whom my father had endorsed [a check]. But then happiness struck us like a bolt of lightning: my father's lottery ticket won; I don't know exactly how much, because we didn't talk about it.

But that summer my mother went to [Bad] Reichenhall, a spa town in Germany, and she took me with her!

When we arrived in Berlin, we went to a boarding house. The following days we looked at the department stores, Tietz and Wertheim, ate in nice restaurants, drank coffee with "whipped cream" in nice big cafes, visited museums, saw "embalmed bodies", and in the evenings I stood on a high balcony and saw so much light and so many people for the first time!

From Berlin we traveled to Reichenhall; it was quiet and beautiful there. The sun warmed us gently and the air was wonderful. The guesthouse was nice and clean, but the German "baleboste" [lady owner] was strict and angry.

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In addition to the guesthouse, she ran a grocery store. Her husband drove around in a phaeton. Every afternoon at four o'clock he would drive to the store, where his wife would bring him a pot of coffee with a knob of butter floating in it. She also handed him a roll with so much fat ham in the middle that he had to open his mouth as wide as his horse usually did.

I watched every day with the same amazement and couldn't understand why such a big, coarse German with such a red, strong neck had to gulp down so much solid food.

There, in Reichenhall, my mother would take a cure every day, and I would wander around on my own. I liked to walk along the wide streets and through the beautiful parks and ponder - but I can't remember what. Once the guests of our boarding house took me along to the woods, where I felt like I was in Milejczyce and sang loudly. Afterwards, an elegant man with glasses went to my mother and talked to her about it. He said that she should give me a musical education. His name was "Erlich". When we got home, there was a lot of talk about it, and so my "khshives" [importance] grew.

When I shared my secret with my grandmother before she died, that I wanted to be an artist, she chased me away. But then she told my mother, my mother told my brother, my brother told my father, and it became the first big drama in my life. For many months, whenever a friend came to see my brother, he would always say: "You know my sister wants to be an artist, look at her - an artist!..."

And to tell you the truth, there was really nothing to look at. But now, when my mother introduced the opinion of "Mr. Erlich, of Dr. Erlich, and from abroad, too", they saw me- they saw me, and for once they began to take notice of me...

And only now did people remember that in my first school with Mr. Gevirts, my first singing teacher, Berman, had stopped my father in the street to tell him:

"Mr. Grober, something great is growing in your little girl, take care of her!"

And it was only now that people began to think that my wandering through the woods with a guitar in my hand and my singing in the face of the sun and the moon

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were the expression of an inner urge... My family envisioned a future already, when I would be sent to the Warsaw Conservatory after graduating from high school, but only to entertain guests after the wedding... There was no thought of me going to the theater professionally.

After my grandmother's death, I was suddenly "out of my childhood's shoes". Right after that summer, my uncle Kalman visited us three times a week and taught me "loshn koydesh" [Hebrew] - there was no need to learn Yiddish, we already knew it anyway. But Hebrew was on the one hand the holy language and on the other hand a language that not all girls knew...

And finally, it was a nice thing if a girl could include a few Hebrew words in her correspondence with her future bridegroom...

However, no thought was given to teaching me business matters. I don't know why, because my parents were already modern people. But that's how it was. Maybe it was because I was weak, or maybe it was because I was just "graceful". So everything was done with the idea that one day I would make a good match...

After my father won the lottery, my parents decided to sell our three-story house and move further into the city; we children were growing up and had to move into "refined society". Young as I was, I couldn't understand why we needed a better society than, for example, the children of the quiet, honest shoemaker Libermann - after all, both daughters were high school students, even the best in their class. Or the children of the schoolteacher Levinson and his wife, the shopkeeper: of their two older girls, one was a merchant, the other a high school student, hard-working, quiet and dear children. Or the Furies' children: They ran a tavern! All the [other] children studied, were Zionists, and even went to Israel in their blooming youth to dry up the swamps there.

I didn't understand the "refined society" and didn't accept it. My childhood friends remained my friends for life.

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Our new apartment was on Plevaya Street. The new neighbors were: The Tsukrovitshes from across the street, the Lunsks a little farther away, the Birgers on the old highway. The Lunsks were called "Americans" because one of them had been in America. But now they were all in Białystok, owned big factories, big houses, had servants and - open doors. People went in and out. There were always all kinds of good things in their house, but somehow a coldness emanated from that house. There was no sense of togetherness within the family. Somehow everyone lived for themselves and in their own worlds.

The Birgers lived upstairs in the house of Ambush's hall. The apartment was too small for the family, and the rooms had slanted skylights that let in very little light. But the constant darkness of the house created so much atmosphere, so much warmth, that I was drawn to it like a magnet. The walls were draped with plush covers and the beds were covered with clean blankets. On the table, on the buffet and on the end tables - clean lace tablecloths, photographs, dozens of little things, and every single thing was dusted and cleaned every day. And every Friday there was an

extensive cleaning of the house. Being with the family on Friday night was an event for me. You would open the door, your eyes would light up and your limbs would warm up.

Who would know that the silver candlesticks that shone on the table were pawned every Shabbat evening and released every Friday for the blessing of light, and even if we did, who would care? There was so much light in poverty, it was so clean and so warm!

The „gvirim“, the rich and distinguished in our town, were always worried about dowries. Those who had sons worried from whom they would get the dowry, and the parents of daughters worried from where they would get the dowry...

Mr. Birger, the "podryatshik" [contractor], and his faithful wife took care of raising, clothing, and educating their daughters (as far as they could), but before they were really grown up, they were already "taken away" from them.

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Years later, when all the children were married and scattered all over the world, and the Birgers were left alone, albeit in a house of their own, Mama Birger told me with a smile:

"Boys would still knock on our door and ask me if I still had one like that".

My grandmother used to say: "You don't have to be rich, you don't have to be beautiful, you don't have to be smart - but you have to have 'kheyn' - grace, oh yes, grace! Grace before God and later before men!"

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Chapter 10
At High School- in 1914

I received my general education first from [Mr.] Bishkovitsh, and later, in high school, from Shtsheglov. At Shtsheglov's high school, we formed a "troika" of friends: Me, Rachel Birger, and Sonye Shmukler. There was another one - Peshke. But first, she was very passive, and second, she disappeared from my memory quite early. Sonye was a passionate person. She was a brunette beauty, with big black eyes, and she sang so beautifully, so beautifully! And she was also a happy girl. In her family's house on Lipowa Street, there was a restaurant. I remember their first restaurant in the basement, next to "Lis with the shoes and Shvarts with the machines". The second restaurant was already in a building opposite the church, on the second floor. Her parents were old, tired, quiet and good people. The doors were always open and we would "balebateven" [manage the house]... I still have the taste in my mouth of the fried chicks we used to snatch out of the ice box on Friday nights....a taste of paradise!...

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Sonye and I were real "shalunyes" – cheeky girls. We always walked to and from school together. Rachel had the longest walk. She would go down my street from the highway and we would both walk by Sonye's house and call her. Mornings were happy and carefree. I had a weakness for ringing the doorbells...I always had the look of a "little innocent", so I would ring the bell and hear the door or gate open. I could really feel the look on my long braid, which commanded great respect...I had the most pleasure ringing Gordon's gate - then it was "the rich posh man has been had!" again. ^[1]

I never had much desire to study, and so every year before the examinations a tutor was hired to push me up from one class to the next. But my importance was no less than that of the "medalists", and that was only because of my ability to entertain both my teachers and the students. There was enough time for entertainment - half an hour during the big break - and then we used to sing Russian love songs. If a teacher was sick and couldn't come, we would imitate him. And there was no one who wasn't imitated. We had a historian who was as lanky "as a noodle", there was also a class lady who was as small and round as a dumpling, and there was a teacher with the voice of a frog. But the best entertainment we had were the "zakon"[law] lessons; in these lessons we wrote love letters, and this continuous love correspondence took place in a regular exchange with the boys from the high school across the street.

The first young instincts were cruelly shattered by the outbreak of the First World War. The shocking news reached us in Milejczyce. On that hot summer morning I came out of the young grove singing, accompanied by my guitar, and stopped in the old large forest, in which a sad emptiness silently rustled.

"Where have all the datshnikes gone?"

I ran breathlessly into the shtetl. All the Jews and Christians of the shtetl were gathered in the always noisy market, and a silent sadness wept from their faces. That early morning I sang my last

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carefree song in the Milejczycer woods; that summer I said goodbye forever to "my shtetl Milejczyce". This time our journey along the narrow roads to the station "Kleshtshel" was besieged by convoys of soldiers - artillery and infantry. It was no longer a peaceful trip. All of Russia was on the march! The Białystok railway station was besieged by civilians and military. A great wailing muffled all the bells of the train drivers and all the whistles of the locomotives. Our house was also in mourning: - My only brother had to serve in the army.

The school year began, but the bombing from the air often made it impossible to leave the house. So we decided to leave Białystok and move further away from the German border and out of danger. We went to the small shtetl of Mimkovitsi, to a merchant of my father - Mrs. and Mr. Sadovski. They took us in warmly, and we gratefully shared with them the cholent from the stove every day. We stayed there only a few weeks and then returned home. But in the spring of 1915 the war flared up and the real destruction of our town began.



Chayele Grober in the Milejczycer Woods

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A real evacuation of the civilian population began. This time we left our home and Białystok forever. In those days my family consisted of my parents, myself and little Genye ^[2] - my uncle's only daughter. My uncle was in America and my aunt Teybele and her two little boys, Getsele and Hershele, had joined our family. Since my grandmother had died, Aunt Teybele took care of our household goods and also had partial custody of me. Saying goodbye to my aunt was heartbreaking! Not only were we moving away, but she also had to say farewell to little Genye.

The little girl had been with us since she was a child, but now she too was being taken out of danger.

Although my mother assured my aunt through bitter tears that we would be back soon, our Teybele could not be calmed. Her heart told her that she was saying goodbye to her dearest sister-in-law forever.

This time we went to Pinsk, and from Pinsk to Minsk, where we stayed for a whole winter.

^[1] I understand the sentence to mean that Chayele, with her innocent lamb face and her thick, long, "respectable" braid, looked so innocent and well-behaved that no one believed she could pull off the prank.

^[2] Khayele dedicated her second book, "Mayn Veg Aleyn" [My Way Alone] to her cousin Genye, aka Gitele-Zhenitshke Rozman-Levit. It was printed 1968 in Israel [Mayn veg aleyn : Grober, Chayele : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

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Chapter 11

I Want to Become a Nurse - to Kharkov

In 1915-1916, the whole city of Minsk was one big military camp. Every other house on the main street was a Red Cross base. Convoys of wounded soldiers blocked the streets for days and nights. No wonder everyone around us was calling for help, and I was swept up in it. An extraordinary restlessness had taken hold of me and I decided to become a nurse. If I had told my mother, I'm sure she would have resisted - my mother hadn't been able to sleep for a long time anyway because of my brother, so she wouldn't have let me go.

I decided to enlist and come home in uniform - by then it would be too late to stop me. One autumn night I sneaked into a Red Cross house. I was standing right in front of a big, fat man in a military uniform with all kinds of medals. I was really scared - I felt as if I was facing the Tsar alone... He asked me how old I was, what I could do, and finally he stroked my long braid and said:
"That should be dancing a polka, not the dance of death!"
So I had failed and walked home through the dark back streets disappointed.

At home, too, it was dark and silent. Since the beginning of the war, my mother had been quiet and silent; after all, what was there to talk about? My brother was in the army, my father was in Moscow, and Minsk was soaking in the rain and sinking in the mud. Every day more and more

people arrived, "byezhentses" - homeless people, and more and more Białystokers. In one corner of our large room was the "salon". There the newly arrived Białystokers would shed tears and ask God to take them back to their homes.

In Minsk we shared our apartment with the Zabłudovski family. My mother used to say: "Well, it's cramped, but at least we live with the Zabłudovskis!" The Zabłudovskis belonged to our Białystok aristocracy and they also had an only daughter - Sara!

We quickly made friends with young girls and not-so-young men - after all, the youth was gone during the war. Together with Sara I was able to come home a little later. So, despite the raging war, we created a cheerful society with home concerts.

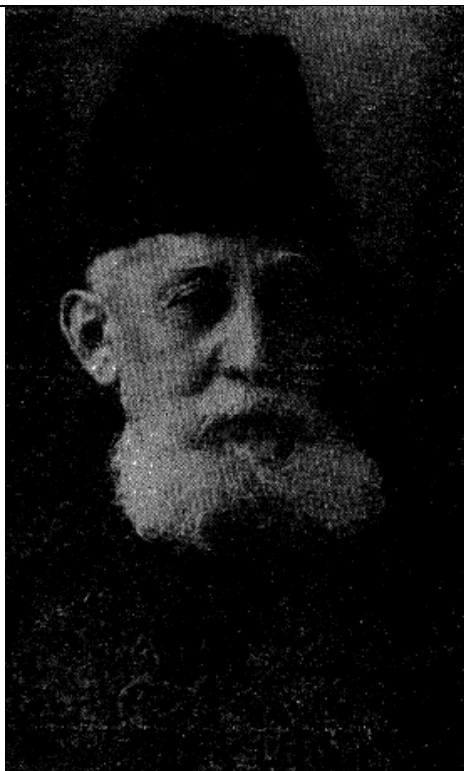
In 1915 I became an adult damsel. At the end of the winter the German army approached Minsk and we fled again. This time to Kharkov. In normal times it took 36 hours to get from Minsk to Kharkov, but now it took us 12 days to reach Kharkov. We traveled in wagons marked "8 horses or 40 people", but in fact there were probably more of us. During the day, the train ran in such a way that you jumped off and walked a little beside it to jump back on. And at night the train would stop in a field or a forest. We made a fire, boiled water or cooked a meal. Old and young would sit around the fire, each lost in his own thoughts. Usually the silence was broken by whistling or singing. The song gradually infected the others. Through the singing, however, a sigh or a silent lament was carried...

Where had I experienced this before?

Oh, right!

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Our old nanny used to tell us stories about people who had no land and no home - people who were always wandering and whose home was a field, a forest, and they also made fireplaces. These people were called "gypsies". They also sang songs - sad songs. And we sang even sadder songs. We were just like those gypsies, but with one difference: when a shtetl heard that gypsies were coming, they would hide the horses and children - but we didn't steal any horses or children.



Samuel Abramovitsh Shmerkovitsh

In Kharkov, we stayed in the Shmerkovitsh family's boarding house. My father had transferred his business to Moscow.

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Moscow had become the commercial center. We had no right to live in Moscow, only businessmen were allowed to live there. So my mother, Genye and I settled in Kharkov. The whole disruption in our lives made my mother's always sickly condition much worse. The intense Ukrainian heat weakened her heart and made her short of breath. After long discussions, it was decided that my mother would go to Crimea, but this time without me. Little Genye had already missed a year of school, and now she had to go back to a high school. On one of the hottest days in August, we - myself and little Genye - took my mother to the train station. We stood on the platform, my mother at the window of the train. Now, as always on the trip to Milejczyce, my mother stood there - tall, proud and calm, her hands in light-colored gloves, waving a handkerchief at us.

Her dark brown, deep eyes became even larger and calmer. A slight smile played around the corners of her closed mouth... The little girl hugged me tightly. In silence we went back to our room.

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Chapter 12

A Dream- At My Mother's Bed

The weeks passed quickly. I prepared for the conservatory, the little girl for high school. One day we received a letter from my father saying that the season was over and that business was good. He had decided to stay with my mother for a few weeks. He gave us the dates when he would be passing through Kharkov and told me to meet him there at the station. This made our hearts so happy! The night before my father's arrival, we went to bed early in order not to be late at the station. When I fell asleep that night, I saw a dream, a dream after which you will begin to believe in the immortality of our spirit:

I was standing in the Milejczyce forest on the side of the road leading from the shtetl to the forest. On the right there was David's hut with hammocks. Suddenly my grandmother Toybe-Rive appeared in the doorway of the hut, wrapped in a long black shawl with long black fringes, and her eyes were fixed directly on the path. I turned my head and saw my mother in the same black scarf with black fringes. She was walking majestically down the sandy path. My mother walked past me and into the hut. I went to the hut and looked inside: Everything I saw was black! A long, black

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table covered with the same black fringed fabric and two lit candles. There were two long black boxes on the floor...

I started from my sleep and immediately ran to the door to see what time it was. As I opened the door, a telegram fell at my feet. My heart stopped. When I finally opened the telegram, I read:

"Mother feeling better, father's visit not necessary. Chayele - if she wants, she can come. Your mother."

That meant that she had telegraphed my father because she was ill, and that was the reason for my father's trip.

The train was supposed to arrive at eight, now it was six. I ran to the train with the good news. When the train arrived, my father got off and I saw for the first time how stooped my father was and how his shoulders sagged - as if he had grown old overnight...

I ran to meet him, waving my telegram and smiling happily to show him that everything was all right, and my father threw his arms around my neck and began to cry...

I had seen my father cry before, every day before Yom Kippur, before he went to pray Kol Nidre. My father used to call each child into his office, put his hands on the child's head and bless them. And he would cry - but it wasn't really crying, it was a kind of panting, and hot tears would run down my head.

I still tend to cry when I think of it...

And now my father was crying in the same way, only he wasn't blessing me, he was rather looking at me for protection. I asked my father to give me his seat on the train and then I would leave, as true as I'm standing here!

But my father didn't agree and he went away.

A few days later, my father came back to us, happy and reassured: my mother had felt bad and was afraid of being alone, so she had called my father. But now everything was all right. He wanted to go back to Moscow, and for the holidays, all three of us wanted to go to Crimea. My father left, and I couldn't rest until I managed with a lot of effort to get on the train and go to my mother.

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I telegraphed her on the way and found her dressed and half sitting on the bed. I ran to her and fell into her arms.

She kissed my head, my shoulders, my hands; never before had I felt my mother so fervently. Now, for the first time, I had found my true mother!

But my joy soon faded, for my mother went back to bed. She had only dressed so as not to frighten me, but in reality she was already unable to leave her bed.

I spent ten days with my mother - ten restless days and sleepless nights. The day before Rosh Hashanah, she wrote postcards to my father and friends. That evening I sang to her on the mandolin, and she hummed along a little. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, early in the morning, she asked me to call our uncle Shatya, who also lived in Alushta [Crimea] at that time.

At one o'clock that day, I saw that she was feeling very bad. I lay down on pillows across the width of the bed and supported her on my chest. The windows were open to the Black Sea. I stared into the depths of the blue-green water. Unconsciously, tears flowed from my eyes, a hot tear rolled down onto my mother's young head, right onto the crown of her black hair...

She was so young, much too young!

She didn't have a single gray hair yet. When she felt my hot tears, my mother grabbed my hand and I hugged her.

She squeezed it even tighter and said calmly and quietly:

"Hang in there, my daughter, hang in there".

It was one o'clock in the afternoon. While I was lying on the bed with my mother, a little mouse suddenly appeared - I don't know where it came from or why - on the cupboard opposite the bed. The little mouse ran away and stood in the middle of the cornice, looked at us, stayed quietly for a while, and then quickly disappeared.

Then my mother said softly: "There are clean white linen sheets in the closet downstairs".

I didn't understand why she said this to me. Suddenly my mother felt very sick. I jumped to the table, grabbed the syringe, and turned back to the bed - my mother had hastily sat up in bed, looked at me, opened her mouth to say something, and I suddenly saw blue streaks covering her eyes...

My first thought was, "My mother has gone blind!"

I went over to her and [tried to] insert the syringe, but the liquid flowed back. ^[1]

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I put my left hand under my mother and felt her body getting heavier and heavier until I heard a slight crack in her throat...I instinctively turned my hand over and looked at the clock. It was 10 minutes to three...

Someone pulled my hand forward from under my mother's body; someone picked me up from my knees and led me downstairs where I remained unconscious on someone's bed. Suddenly I heard heavy footsteps above my head. When I opened my eyes, it was evening. I went to the door and saw my mother being carried down the stairs. No matter how much I begged the Jews to take me to the house where my mother would spend the night, no matter how many times I told them that I could pray and that I wanted to be with her for the last night - it was no use, I was left alone.

Very early the next morning, David Shatya found me on a bench in the hotel park. He put me in a phaeton and we drove to the cemetery. On the way I fell into a deep sleep. I don't know if it was the heat or the shaking of the phaeton, but suddenly I woke up and saw:

We were standing on a path, and on the right side was a hut, like David's hut in the Milejczyc Forest. I jumped out of the phaeton, ran to the booth and looked inside. Everything was black and there were two black boxes on the floor... In which one was my mother? I fainted.

The journey back to Kharkov took two days and nights, and all the time one thought kept nagging at me: how was I going to break the sad news to Genye, since the little girl loved her aunt more than anything and was so attached to her? A few minutes after I returned to my room, the little girl ran in and threw her arms around my neck with joy. I calmly released her and looked into her

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bright eyes, big black eyes. I had been thinking for forty-eight hours about how to do it, and now it came out in a second: "Auntie is no more". I started laughing and kept saying, "Auntie is no more, no more!" The little girl became hysterical and cried wildly: "Chaye! Chaye!" but I still laughed...

That's how I reacted to my mother's death. It was the only time in my life that I reacted that way.

Immediately after returning from the cemetery, I cabled my father in Moscow from Alushta:

"No need for you to come to Alushka. I'm going to Kharkov".

I had suddenly become an adult, independent, and the mother of a grown-up child. The morning my father was to arrive from Moscow, I prepared the table very early, with a white tablecloth and the same little things on the table as my mother had done after my grandmother's death. My father arrived - tearful and silent. It was impossible to calm little Genye. She was sick for a week. After Shavuot, my father returned to Moscow, and his silence left a kind of cool alienation.

The responsibility of being a mother to the little girl was like a heavy yoke on my slender shoulders.

^[1] The original is a bit ambiguous here, and my translation is not entirely reliable. I think the text implies that the mother had died shortly before. The vessels of a deceased person contract and it is difficult to insert a syringe.

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Chapter 13

The Shmerkoviches- Spring 1917

It was still my mother who had chosen the large room in the Shmerkovich family boarding house: first, because my father's cousin, Manye Shatay, lived across the street from the Shmerkoviches, and second, because the Shmerkoviches' daughter, Bertotska, was a pianist who had already completed her final course in composition - and I was able to begin my preparation for the conservatory with her.

In addition to the boarding house, the family also owned a "typografye", a printshop, where both Mrs. and Mr. Shmerkovitsh worked from seven in the morning until seven in the evening. Everyone in the family worked: the eldest son was a doctor in the army, the younger son was a veterinarian, and the eldest daughter, Roza, was a lawyer.

Roza had her father's gentleness and her mother's sense of responsibility. She had been involved in refugee work since the beginning of the war. In those days there were many "lady patrons". They were bureaucratic, aloof visitors to hospitals or refugee bases, and the greatest thing they achieved was

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to hand out chocolates or flowers... But Roza Shmerkovitsh tore herself up! Every day she brought home sorrow and tears.

One day Roza came to me with a request: since the house was full of students, I should take a Jewish poetess, who was still in the hospital after an operation, into my room.

Roza spoke of her with such deep emotion that I agreed to her request.

I will always remember how Roza, truly by her hands, brought me a petite girl with long blonde curls and big, open, sky-blue eyes. This was the poetess Yudika^[1], who now lives in Canada.

Many years have passed since then, and that Roza is no longer with us. But for me and for Yudika, Roza remained a living, luminous figure.

Every Sunday, the family would have lunch with many guests, and then it would get loud and cheerful. Lunch would last two or three hours, and then the doors would be opened to the large living room, where the grand piano stood, and the informal but already professional concert would begin.

Mrs. Shmerkovitsh held everything and everyone in her hands. She was responsible for the physical, spiritual and moral education not only of her own children, but also of the students and course participants entrusted to her by the parents of small Ukrainian towns. From the day I returned from the Crimea, I also came under her care, without understanding why, and her whole family took me in as if I were their own relative.

Thanks to the printshop and the [connection with the] conservatory, they always had free tickets to the theater and

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concerts, and I was the first to get them. We became very close friends with my teacher "Bertotshka".

The year I spent in Kharkov was a year of mourning for my mother, a turning point in my life and a turning point in Russian history. During that year in Kharkov I became acquainted with loneliness, misery and embarrassment. Our home in Białystok was petit bourgeois, and going to work

didn't fit in. And I felt lost, if only because I didn't know what to do. At that time I didn't know anything about "dayges-parnose" [worrying about earning a living], but my father's silence before he left had to do with a second dream I had seen, which caused me anxiety and fear about the future.

My second dream was related to my home in 1914: In 1914, after the outbreak of the war, a woman came to our house, a merchant from Brisk. Her husband used to come to Białystok to buy goods, but after his death his wife started to run the business. It was customary for merchants to stay with us, our apartment was big, the table was wide and the doors were open, just like my grandmother's at the time. All the rooms were already occupied by "byezhentses", homeless people evacuated from the shtetlekh near the German border and the front. The woman from Brisk slept in the same room with me. Now, two years later, I saw the same room in a dream, and the woman across from me was half-naked and smiling at my father. Since that night, my fear grew. I could no longer sleep.

Konstantin Stanislavski ^[2] once said: "Tragedy borders on comedy". He used to draw a horizontal line from one side - the line of tragedy, and from the other side he started the line of comedy and led it to the point where the two lines met. Just as Stanislavski's entire theory was based on experience and observation of life and human nature, so is his assertion. In my sleepless nights, not once did my tragic line collide with the comic episodes of life around me.

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At that time, the characteristic sleep of each of the Shmerkovitshes was very strongly imprinted in my memory. And the thought occurred to me that only lazy people sleep peacefully - energetic people go through the process of their daily work in their sleep.

Mr. Shmerkovitsh, who spent the whole day in the print shop, worked exactly to the rhythm of the machine: inhale - a snore, exhale - a puff, snore-puff, snore-puff, one-two, one-two...

Mrs. Shmerkovitsh, a secure and dominating one: inhale- a deep snore, exhale- a whistle- sostenuto...

The veterinarian who spent the whole day with the horses: a deep breath in, a horse-like whinny out...

The doctor, who came on leave from the front: breathing in - a trembling snore, breathing out - a shuddering cry of pain.

Bertotshka, who lived in the world of sounds, inhaled the scent of roses with every breath, and her exhalation was a melodic improvisation...

And the whole symphony of the night sounded to me like this: "Work for independence, work for independence".

And I worked, preparing myself for the conservatory. I applied for August 1917, not knowing that 1917 would be the year of the greatest events in the history of Russia. There were a lot of rumors in the air, but nobody dared to talk about it...

One day, at the beginning of spring, Bertotshka brought from the conservatory the address of a woman, a "fortune-teller": "All the professors go to her, she foretells the revolution"...

I brushed off my sadness and went to see her. I can still smell the pungent scent of the various plants that filled the big room,

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including the ceiling overhead.

A small, gray-haired figure with high shoulders and large, gray, intelligent eyes welcomed me. There were cards on the table and a crystal glass. She began:

"You are in deep mourning for someone very close to you... you play an instrument, but you won't make a career out of it. I see you on stage, perhaps in a musical drama...". She marked two dates when my lifeline would change radically. The first one I had predicted and it actually happened.

After seeing my father in a dream with the woman from Brisk, I wrote to my friend Yasha. I wrote that if it was true that my father was getting married only a few months after my mother's death, I didn't want to live anymore...

Yasha came to see me on the first train. Yasha and I had met in Minsk. He was my closest friend. For nine years he stood by my side in Russia and protected me, the great distance didn't stop him for a single minute from coming whenever I needed his help. He was like a brother to me and everything he did became a matter of course. He was much older and I was too young to understand how much suffering these "things taken for granted" caused him. Now, in the time of our brutal destruction, I send my silent prayers to you, dear Yasha, for a free, peaceful world and for a better humanity.

A short time after Yasha's visit, my father came to see me. He looked well, was relaxed, and calmly asked me for advice about which of the two women he had been proposed to (one of them was the woman from Brisk) he should marry... Allegedly, he only would ask me, because he would do it for me... I would need a home, and so on and so forth... I had a spasm in my throat. I couldn't speak, couldn't cry, couldn't even breathe...

And I was silent for a whole 24 hours.

Then I invited my father to a café, away from the house and the people, away from little Genye. And there, at that small, quiet table in the café, my father met a mature person for the first time - a person who was his equal.

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And this person demanded that he should honor her mother's memory; just to respect their more than 25 years of peaceful, happy [living together], he should wait until the year was over....

My father was very unhappy about this lesson, but he didn't dare get angry about it. When he left, he assured me that he wanted to wait, and my father's word had always been sacred to us. But this time my dad broke his word! My dream came true this time as well!

In that same spring of 1917, the dreams of millions of people came true. The Russian soil was soaked in blood: Blood of Jews during the pogroms, blood of fighters for freedom, blood of workers and peasants, blood of peaceful citizens - victims of the war - blood, blood!

And the most bloodthirsty ruler was called the "Vayse Foterl", Tsar "Batyushka-Byeli" ^[3]. In the spring of 1917, the sun set for the bloodthirsty Nicholas the Second, and it rose for the many millions of tortured, enslaved people of Russia! The sun's rays broke through to the farthest corners of frozen Siberia; freedom broke all fortresses and the Russian earth echoed with the sound of [breaking] iron chains! Hands that had been bound in chains for decades reached out to embrace Mother Earth! Those who had fought with their swords the day before had now fallen under them. Factory magnates, who only yesterday were riding in their fine carriages, were now being pulled along the streets in dung carts! Young and old flooded the streets. Orchestras appeared out of nowhere. On every corner of the main streets they played new motifs and new rhythms of freedom!

Strangers kissed in the streets and wept with joy.

Overnight, platforms sprang up like mushrooms, and [Alexander] Kerensky ^[4] stood on one of them. He shouted wildly and gesticulated heroically with his hands. Elegant women applauded hysterically and threw flowers at him. It all unfolded like a provincial operetta.

Immediately afterwards, a procession of workers dressed in gray and black appeared, and in the middle of the crowd they carried a footstool on which sat a figure - the figure of an old woman, eighty years old, a little bent, but with her head proudly raised.

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Her big, childlike, astonished eyes seemed to ask: Is this reality or a dream?

The crowd around me pushed me into the Sin(y)elnikov Theater. The footstool was placed on the stage, and the loud applause fell into dead silence. A soft, trembling voice rang out as if from the underworld... It spoke of freedom, work, fraternity and justice - it was the voice of

Breshko-Breshkovskaya, the grandmother of the Russian Revolution! ^[5]

Now all barriers were broken and all of Russia was open to Jews and Christians. Thousands and thousands of Jews were moving deeper into the country. I suddenly realized that all my personal worries were disappearing. I didn't even mind going to Moscow, to my father's new home. I threw myself into the stream of great historical events.

Moscow was the third large city I had seen. Before Moscow I had seen Warsaw and Berlin, but now I had the impression that this was the first real big city. There was no peaceful rhythm like in Berlin in 1910. Life in Moscow now pulsated with hysteria. The chic of the women, the elegance of the men, the real brilliants in the shop windows, the sable, chinchilla and ermine [furs], the colors of the carpets and embroidered velvets and silks, the carriages drawn by four and six horses in a row decorated with pompoms, all this dazzled the eyes. In this respect, the simple, separate building with two small, modest signs with the inscription "**Moscow Art Theater**" stood out all the more. You entered a theater, but you felt as if you were in a cathedral.

The audience did not speak, they whispered with bated breath. According to the rules of this theater, they did not dare to applaud until the last curtain fell. For almost three hours, the entire audience "wandered with the artists" - they wandered in search of "The Blue Bird" by [playwright] Maurice Maeterlinck ^[6]. For several minutes after the last curtain fell, nobody was able to clap.

I remained a dreamer until my friend Yasha whispered:

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"We have to go". We were the last to leave the theater. This was the first performance I saw there.

"Work, justice, freedom" - when had I heard these words? And had they vanished into thin air? Was it legend or reality? Now we have inflation, prices are rising with terrible impetuosity... People are buying, people are selling...

The telephones and telegraphs buzz and rattle:

"Bought sugar for a thousand, they offered twenty thousand, should I sell?"

"No, because tomorrow you'll get forty thousand!"

"All the flour has been confiscated by the government, the code for sugar is now 'glass'!"

"Do you want to buy rice?"

"But I deal in cotton batting!"

"What's the difference - sure profit!"...

And so the activities spread and the prices went up!

Ten thousand!...twenty thousand"...fifty thousand!...five hundred thousand!....

And you get nothing! No sugar, no bread, no butter, no meat - nothing reached the market! Everything just went from hand to hand until it got back to the first one, and then it started all over again. The speculators took over, and when there was nothing left to speculate on, someone proposed a new invention: To speculate with "smoke".

"But how?"

"Quite simply, if today the government agrees to sell me the smoke of Moscow, tomorrow I will announce that not the slightest bit of smoke will be allowed to come out of the chimneys until a tax has been paid!"

Many thousands of people would have paid any price to stop the smoke!...

But the land went up in flames more and more, until it was all gone - along with the smoke.

[1] Yudica was the pseudonym for the Yiddish poetess Yehudit Zik. Read more here [Yudica | Jewish Women's Archive \(jwa.org\)](https://jwa.org/education/yudica) or [Judith Tsik Was Born July 7 in Gargždai – Lithuanian Jewish Community \(lzb.lt\)](https://lzb.lt/en/jewish-community/jewish-women/yehudit-zik)

[2] see [Konstantin Stanislavski - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstantin_Stanislavski)

[3] both mean "White Dear Father"

[4] Kerensky played a not uncontroversial role at the time, see [Alexander Fjodorowitsch Kerenski – Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Fjodorowitsch_Kerenski)

[5] see [Birthday anniversary of Yekaterina K. Breshko-Breskovskaya](https://prlib.ru/en/press-releases/2017/06/20170620-01) ("grandmother" of the Russian revolution), Russian political figure | [Presidential Library \(prlib.ru\)](https://prlib.ru) and [Catherine Breshkovsky - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_Breshkovsky)

[6] "The Blue Bird" is a play, a symbolic, mystical fairy tale about the search for happiness. The premiere took place in 1908 at the Moscow Art Theater, see [The Blue Bird \(play\) - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blue_Bird_(play))

Chapter 14

Nokhem Tsemakh [Nahum Zemach] -The founder and Spiritual Leader of "Habima"

When I was still in Kharkov, my friend from Białystok, Shimen Zemach, came to see me and told me that his brother Nahum had sent him from Moscow to persuade me to come to Moscow and join the group that was about to found a Hebrew theater. Nahum Zemach still remembered the "moonlit nights" in the Białystoker forest "Gorodnyani" when I used to stand on felled pine trees with my guitar in my hands and sang Russian love songs. Now, when I came to Moscow, he sent his sister to tell me that he wanted to see me. Nahum Zemach was born and raised in Rogozhitsa. He was the eldest in the family, where most of the children did not remember their father. His mother hoped that Nahum would become a rabbi, but he did not achieve the ordination because he had to start earning a living for the family. Every day he walked with long steps from the village to the shtetl to give several Hebrew lessons. A short time later

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Nahum moved to Białystok - in his "light" clothes and always barefoot - to begin his "metropolitan career".

For years, Nahum traipsed the sidewalks of Białystok on his worn soles and broken heels until he brought one link after the other of his family's chain to Białystok. His youngest brother Benyamin remembers very deeply the first time he saw Nahum in Białystok, limping because of the many blisters on his feet.

There are people who walk with a kind of "hop" - before their foot touches the ground, it is already in the air. It seems to me that these people don't feel the ground under their feet very much. There are also people who sway from side to side - they are somehow neither here nor there. Nahum Zemach was a person who always walked with a sure step, with all his weight directly on the ground.

Throughout his life, there was something of a village man about him - in the way he walked, the way he talked, and the way he carried himself - earthiness, simplicity, and primitiveness. His slightly tilted head as he walked emphasized his complete trust in "Mother Earth", and it seemed to echo: "I know my way, I know my way"...

His way- it was a difficult way! It was the way from Rogozhitsa to Birat Arba *) ^[1].

In Moscow, I was surprised to find Nahum - elegantly dressed - in a large, beautiful room of a spacious apartment that the family had occupied. He welcomed me with joyful warmth. There, in his workroom, he told me about the studio that was already open, about [Konstantin]

Stanislasvski and [Yevgeny] Vakhtangov, who were directing there. He told me about his dream to build a Hebrew theater, to stage the Bible, to go to the land of Israel - the land we came from. As he spoke, he paced up and down the room with his hands clasped behind his back, and I saw before me the same village man of yore. Then he suddenly stopped and started talking about his two brothers who ran big businesses.



יעוֹגֶנְי בַּגְרַטְיוֹבִיטֶשׁ וואַכטאַנגאָוו
1883—1922

Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov
(1883-1922)

It was only because of them that the family had settled down so well. At this point, however, Zemach added: "But what good are the millions? The most important thing in life is to create cultural values. And for us Jews - our national values... You see, Grober, you will become one of the founders of the greatest miracle of our time! Here in Moscow, where a Jew was not allowed to stay more than 24 hours, here in Moscow we want to build a Hebrew theater - and that's worth living for!"

That excited and stimulated me and awakened my national consciousness. Nahum had an extraordinary power of persuasion. This strength of his was the main means to all the great things he accomplished. With this power he attracted the actors to come, and with this power he convinced Stanislavski and Vakhtangov that it was their special mission to help us build the national theater. And when his comrades (especially his first, closest comrades) would join forces, pounding on the table and making demands, Zemach would suddenly stand up, ashen-faced with white lips and trembling hands - his voice would sound deep and hoarse, his body would sway from side to side, and his feverish, glowing eyes would literally hypnotize us all.

And when he had finished his speech, we used to join him again in the greatest ecstasy and soar on his wings to the highest heights. On those nights, he used to rise up before us like a true prophet, and we actually saw the gates of Jerusalem open before us and our prophet lead us into the new temple.

And there, at the highest height of ecstasy, Nahum Zemach would cry out:

"Prepare, prepare, **the Stage** in Jerusalem" ^[2].

His eyes would fill with tears, his movements would become heavy and wild...and we would follow him like sheep until we fainted!

How could those who experienced such nights with him ever forget? How could they?! It wasn't long ago that Nahum's brother, Benyamin, told me that an old friend of Nahum's, still in the small shtetl, had said about him: "The eagle without wings" - what an apt comparison the shtetl friend made! Maybe that's where N.Zemach's expression came from: "You're cutting off my wings!" Anyway, in Bialystok his wings began to grow and he organized the first group: "**HABIMA**" ^[2].

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This was long before the Moscow "Habima". I don't know much about that group and I don't know anyone from that time. But I know that N.Z. brought this group to the Vienna Congress, where they performed for the first time. I also know that N.Z. was responsible for the group, so when he returned to Bialystok, he gave the comrades who stayed behind money for travel expenses from his income from teaching, and they returned home individually.

I met N.Z. in my early youth, when the idea of "theater" was still in my subconscious. We met one moonlit night in "Gorodnyani", when I was giving one of my improvised concerts, standing on a mountain of felled pine trees with my guitar in my hands. In later years, when I knew N.Z. well, I realized that the fact that I was so well remembered by him then had nothing to do with my merits, but with the fact that Zemach was already obsessed with his great idea, and indeed every suggestion was burned into his memory.

The first attempt to create a Hebrew theater was made at the time of the pogroms, and the second in 1916, still during the reign of Tsar Nicholas II. The idea was realized after the revolution.

As soon as the Red Army entered the Kremlin, the whole of Moscow turned into a turbulent whirlwind. Every day new laws were passed. The walls of the houses were covered with symbols of "old" and "new" - a fat man with a monocle - the symbol of the bourgeoisie, a withered, poorly dressed man with outstretched hands - the proletariat, the round-bellied policeman and the proletarian forged in chains, the salon lady with opera glasses and the disheveled maid - all shouting: "Down with the bourgeoisie and power to the proletariat!"

Private enterprises were immediately confiscated, and later private property. Trade was forbidden.

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Those who evaded the law were severely punished. Russia was once again drenched in blood: on the one hand by the liberators, the "Reds", and on the other by the fighting "Whites"^[3]. Moscow looked like an enormous ruin. Shops were sealed, restaurants were closed, all the shining shop windows were empty. Here and there, a small, frightened mouse paused in the window of a former clothing store and peered at you with its sharp little eyes, as if to say: "Guys, I just need crumbs!" But the human bowed his head in shame: "We are very close friends now, my dear hungry little mouse!"

There's a saying: "A hungry stomach makes you sing!" Now the saying was confirmed. The more hungry Moscow became, the more it needed theater and music. Theater studios sprang up like mushrooms. "Habima" became one of many studios, but the Hebrew language echoed like the voice of a prophet calling from the desert.

Word spread quickly throughout Moscow that the small studio at "6 Nizhnye Kislovke" [Kislovski Alley number 6] was attracting Moscow's greatest actors and artists. And that they were attracted not so much by the perfect acting as by the overwhelming ecstasy that reigned there.

The language of the Bible attracted the greatest artists of the time, such as Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, Fyodor Shalyapin [Feodor Chaliapin], Maxim Gorky. But at the same time that "Habima" was attracting so much attention from the non-Jewish artistic world, the Jewish section^[4] announced that Hebrew was a counterrevolutionary movement. At the head of the Jewish section was the small, withered, embittered Litvakov. He waged a bitter struggle against "Habima", demanding that we be liquidated, that we be dissolved.

N. Z. organized a public discussion in a large theater, and the most important artists spoke there about the great artistic value of the small Hebrew theater.

Lunatsharski, the commissar for education and art, defended us. But the bitter "yidele", the great "idealist", could not be convinced. Only a few years later he himself was liquidated. During the bitter struggle N. Zemach once again touched everyone with his tremendous energy

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and idealism, and his popularity grew even more. As his popularity grew, so did his ambition and self-esteem. If there had been someone else in the group to compare with him, perhaps the tragic split would not have occurred. But there were no great spiritual leaders, not even later... I think the greatest tragedy of this great man was that he didn't have a single friend- not a single real friend who would fight for him objectively and solely in the interest of the idea. Every one of his opponents had purely personal interests. And in America, where the split occurred, the old story of a "theater that is like all theaters" had already begun.

A part of "Habima" went to Europe. Zemach stayed in America with only one young group, and with them he wanted to start rebuilding again, but great things can be built only once in a short life, and in fact his attempts failed. Both groups of "Habima" on both sides of the Atlantic were left with only broken parts of the mighty wings.

Nahum Zemach's head bowed more and more under the yoke of unsuccessful attempts. The theater he had built for the land of Israel, he could not lead there himself. Several years later, he came to the land of his dreams, and there the chapter of

"בנים גדלתי ורוממתי והם פשעו בי" ^[5] came to an end. Miserable and sad, he wandered the streets of Tel Aviv, where "his" theater was playing.

Lonely, he drove across the country to which he had given the most beautiful gift - Nahum returned to New York a broken man. But to us he was now only the shadow of himself, from a poor little shtetl - the Zemach with the deep sad eyes and worn-out feet. The one who walked the wide streets of New York silently dragging his sick body and broken spirit to eternal rest.

*) בירת-ארבע - the place from which the prophet comes (in the drama by David Pinski, "יהודי הנצח") [Eternal Jew]

^[1] see [The Eternal Jew \(play\) - Wikipedia](#)

^[2] הכונו, הכונו, הבימה בירושלים, "Hikonu, Hikonu, Habima B'Yerushalayim". Habima= The stage. It should be noted that בִּימָה "bima" also refers to the speaker's platform in the synagogue where the Torah is read. The spelling in bold is the translator's.

^[3] This refers to the Russian civil war between the Red Army, founded by Trotsky, and its main opponents, the so-called White Army, see [Russian Civil War - Wikipedia](#)

^[4] Possibly the "yevsektsye", the Jewish organ of the Soviet Communist party, is meant, [YIVO | Communist Party of the Soviet Union \(yivoencyclopedia.org\)](#)

^[5] "I have raised children and brought them up, but they rebelled against me", a quote from Isaiah 1:2



נחום צמח

Nahum Zemach, the founder and spiritual leader of "Habima"

Chapter 15

My First Steps in the "Habima"

It was the middle of the winter of 1917-1918 when I climbed the stairs of a large building and entered a narrow corridor that led to a small, cold, unheated room. The group of girls and boys I met there gave the impression that they were about to hold a political meeting. They were serious, spoke softly, and looked at me with some suspicion.

We were all strangers, except for one, Rashel Starobinyets [Rachel Starobinietz] - like me, from Białystok. I felt a little insecure. But that lasted only a short time. The door of a second room opened and Nahum Zemach and Y.B. Vakhtangov came in.

All I remember from my first meeting with Vakhtangov is a pair of large, open, blue-green eyes that smiled, slipped into slight irony, and immediately became serious and sharp.

I was invited to a rehearsal. Based on the Jewish theater performances I had seen, I expected to see a heartbreaking drama, to hear strong trembling voices, to see people

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beating their chests in deep emotion, falling to their knees in great love - but instead I heard Vakhtangov speaking. He spoke calmly and quietly, softly and simply, sitting at the table. He spoke about the great esteem in which the theater is held by all peoples, and he spoke about the great truth revealed by K.S. Stanislavski - the founder of the Moscow Art Theater. He said that theater and actors must edify the audience, he spoke about the great responsibility of the actor who must educate the youth who come to the theater. Then he spoke about the means to achieve this: The actor must devote himself entirely to the art and withdraw from society; art requires seclusion.

And at the end of his speech, he urged everyone to listen carefully to the call of their own being, their own spirit, and to test themselves to see if they are ready to make the sacrifices that theater requires.

He said that theater is hard work and often brings with it a tough life, and he ended by saying that theater is the finest and most important branch of art...

I couldn't sleep that night. An unknown feeling was awakened in me, a gnawing longing. Hot tears covered my pillow until I felt a sweet calm, a strange joy - I felt the birth of a new life! From that night on, I lived ten years of suffering and joy in my only theater "Habima".

Joy makes life colorful. Tears enrich the spirit. I am thankful to God for every tear I have shed in my life. My cup, which was not yet full, was now overflowing. Our uncle David Shatya had given my father my mother's last words:

"Take care of my Chaye!"

Her only husband, to whom she had entrusted her entire life and now her entire fortune, turned out to be unreliable. My father became one of those "millionaires on paper", like all the Moscow merchants of that time. It remained an eternal mystery to me why, at the time of his greatest

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"prosperity", my father told me that I could expect nothing more from him.

It was one of those bitterly cold days. While Moscow was snuggled up in a high collar of heavy bearskin, I rushed into the [his] house after my music lesson. The house was full of light and warmth, the table was set for lunch. I took off my hat and coat and entered the dining room, where my father confronted me with his announcement: "Today I want to tell you that I will no longer pay for your studies!"

I was speechless. My father continued with even more sharpness until he concluded: "None of what you see here belongs to you. I work for someone else, not for you!"

I quietly left the room, put my hat back on, and put on my coat. I walked past the kitchen where my father's wife was standing and faced the frightened eyes of 14-year-old Elinke - her son. I passed her brother-in-law, a guest from the provinces. No one said a word to me, no one stopped me - and I left the apartment.

Slowly, even more slowly, I walked down the stairs. No one called me back. My legs carried me to the last flight of stairs - then they collapsed and I sank into the deep snow. It was my friend Yasha who found me. He helped me to my feet and took me to a cafe. He wanted to know what had happened, but all I could say was: "I was thrown out of the house I thought was mine."

Yasha talked to me all evening, making various suggestions, none of which I could accept. Again the words echoed in my mind: "Work for independence, work for independence...", but how?

A strange thought came to me - that it is fortunate for a young girl in such a condition to have inherited not beauty but intelligence...

I returned home, where I stayed for another year, but my father lost me that night, and he lost me forever.

The house was shrouded with silence, the sort of silence in which only people with a clear conscience can sleep. I entered my room and heard a trembling whisper: "Chaye, I thought you had left me".

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My little Genye was scared to death that I wouldn't come back. She was the only one who needed me now, and maybe the only one who loved me so much. I never found out what was going on in my father's heart, but I think we both had the same stubborn will, and neither of us gave in. My father wanted to force me to go his way: To have a wedding with a dowry and a trousseau, and to lead a "decent" life. But I kept moving forward with sure steps toward my goal: work, justice, and freedom through art. I have stayed on this path until today and I will follow it until the end!...

This was one of my worlds - the second world was the one in which the two pillars of "Habima", Nahum Zemach and Yevgeny Vakhtangov, had already laid the foundations of the Hebrew theater "Habima", which in its perfect cast took its place in history and was immortalized. "Theater in its comprehensive manifestation is the result of the study of drama, music, diction, movement and manners", explained Vakhtangov, adding: "It is Prince Volkonsky who teaches 'diction' at the Moscow Art Theater". ^[1]

It didn't take long for the then already "revolutionized" prince to put on his "khaki ride breeches" with a small sack on its back and start learning "clear diction" with us:

"No letter should be lost; every phrase has its own melody; speaking is not singing, but every speech is melodic - it is different for all peoples, but it is melodic for all peoples". And Prince Volkonsky was a master in this field. Volkonsky soon announced that an instructor from the famous Dalcroze School ^[2] was arriving from Switzerland to teach rhythm and plasticity ^[3] according to the Dalcroze system.

A few days later, we were already working on movements with this instructor in the "Habima". I was placed in the special Dalcroze studio. So during the day I worked on movements and music, and at night I worked in the "Habima". At the rhythm school, I received music lessons from David Salomonovitsh Shor. He was a very nice person, very popular in Moscow.

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His school of music was one of the best. He took part in Jewish life and was one of the first "Chasidim" [follower] of the "Habima". At the same time I took private singing lessons with the professor of the Moscow Philharmonic, Madame Zhukovskaya. In addition, I had one lesson a week with Mr. Stakhovitsh.

Stakhovitsh was a nobleman and taught manners. "In the different plays you meet different characters; it can happen that you have to play a king and a queen, and you have to act as naturally royal as if you were born with it".

And for months we spent the most pleasant hours with the Russian nobleman. I can't help pointing out that Stakhovitsh was not able to carry the "sack of potatoes or cabbages" over his shoulders like Prince Volkonsky was: he couldn't adjust to the state of humiliation in which the Russian aristocracy now found itself - and he hanged himself in his room.

If one wants to convey what Stakhovitsh's teaching consisted of, it is best to describe that he never taught what or how to do something, but what and how not to do something. For example: Don't pick up a glass or a spoon or whatever with only three or four fingers, spreading the fifth finger like a sickle. Don't sit stiffly like a stick, and don't bend like a twig in the wind; don't try to make a pose, just make yourself comfortable; don't run

your hands over your coat cuffs, your tie, or your pants pockets when you enter a strange company... - Stakhovitsh used to demonstrate all this, and it made him laugh a lot. One particular scene is engraved in my memory: He pointed out how, at a big ball, he was walking through the hall with a lady to whom he had confessed his love and asked for a rendezvous... And while he was talking, he was quietly looking around the company, giving the impression that he was just chatting about trivial things. When he played this for us, it had already become a scene of pure, high comedy. So our "Habima" became a true academy of art.

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But all this work was for physical development - our spiritual source from which we drew was Vakhtangov. And we drew full buckets from a source that never ran dry, a source that is still being drawn from today.

^[1] [Serge Wolkonsky - Wikipedia](#)

^[2] [Dalcroze eurhythmics - Wikipedia](#) and [Rhythmische Erziehung – Wikipedia](#), see also [Jaques-Dalcroze Eurythmics.pdf \(rhuthmos.eu\)](#)

^[3] Chayele later uses the terms "plasticity" or "plastic movement" more often.

"Plasticity" in the context of theatrical performance can have several meanings, including physical, emotional, and creative plasticity. Actors need to adapt their body movements to the role and character. This requires flexibility, suppleness, and the ability to physically change to achieve the desired effect. Actors must be able to portray their emotions and feelings believably. This requires the ability to switch between different emotional states and to assume different roles. Directors and set designers create the stage and visual elements of a theatrical performance. They must think creatively and be flexible to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. Overall, plasticity in the theatrical context is a key concept that emphasizes the adaptability and versatility of performers and creative teams.

"Plastic movement" in theater refers to the way actors use their bodies and movements to portray emotions, characters, and stories. It is about how the body acts and reacts in space and how these movements influence the audience's perception. Plastic movement could mean that the actors' movements are three-dimensional, vivid and expressive. They could use and change the space around them to enhance their performance and engage the audience more. Plastic movement, especially in relation to Dalcroze's system, has something to do with fluid movement patterns and metamorphosis-like changes involving the whole body, combined with rhythmic-musical elements. Symbolically or "painterly", processes of inner experience could also be represented in this way. The body is developed into a finely tuned, flexible, malleable instrument of expression and representation in space. Depending on the type of performance practice or time period, the nature of the plastic movements can vary greatly, but I think the movement patterns can certainly be translated as "sculptural". It is important to note that the exact context and use of the term may vary depending on the specific theatrical practice or theory being referenced, especially with regard to the transition from purely realistic to more symbolic, abstract representation in theater.

Chapter 16

Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov

Sharp and dazzling as lightning, the name Vakhtangov cut through the theatrical horizon, and as quickly as lightning he disappeared, leaving his mark on the history of the Russian theater.

Yevgeny Vakhtangov was born in Vladikavkaz on February 1, 1883, the son of a Russian-Armenian father from whom he inherited his toughness, dominance and excitement. He was the owner of a large tobacco factory and ruled over both the factory and the home. In an atmosphere of constant fear and obedience, "Zhenye" grew up humble and self-centered.

From an early age, he showed a love of musical sounds and a good ear for music. Even at his first school, it was obvious that little Zhenye was a reserved and lonely child. At the same time, however, he responded very easily to a friendly gesture. His father raised him with the great hope that he would one day take over the factory. But young Zhenye made his way

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to university. Due to his father's harsh and domineering character, the ambitious young Yevgeny, the son of a rich factory owner, had to face hardship and even hunger during his first years of study.



י. ב. וואכטאנגאוו אין יאָר 1889.

Y.B. Vakhtangov im Jahr 1889

He became an "eserovet" [social revolutionary]. In 1906 Vakhtangov began to work in the theater, both as a director and as an actor. When the young student Yevgeny came home for his first vacation, he immediately organized the workers of his father's factory and put on a performance

with them. When his father saw the posters with his son's name plastered all over the city, he went wild with emotion. He shouted that this was a disgrace to him, an insult to his name, to his whole family, and above all to the whole aristocratic business world: "His son has allied himself with the workers in his factory!"

He had hoped that Zhenye would one day become a "balebos", and now... - what a shame and disappointment!

But, what is destined, will be. Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov was born to become a genius of the Russian theater. He left home for the university, and then he left the university for the theater. He received his first real theater training from Sullerzhitsky - or Suller, as he was always called in theater circles. Suller had played a role in Russian theater since the beginning of our century, and his name was known far beyond the borders of Russia. Vakhtangov tells in his memoirs - or rather, in his notes - that when Suller received his first invitation to perform a play in Paris, he invited him, his student, to be his assistant. Vakhtangov also noted the terrible impression the French actors' play made on him.

He remarked: "None of them acted - they just declaimed their parts, and it sounded terrible".

Vakhtangov mentioned the name "Suller" very often at work, but also in private - and always with great reverence. I have the impression that Vakhtangov, the educator, is a faithful follower of his great teacher - Sullerzhitsky.

Vakhtangov was introduced to Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski even before he finished his studies with Suller. And he was introduced by Suller himself. Vakhtangov was associated with the Moscow Art Theater

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for only a few years, then he joined the group of artists who split off and founded the "First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater". By that time, Vakhtangov had already performed dozens of plays, both with the M.K.T. [Moscow Art Theater] and with other theaters and theater groups. He had a pronounced thirst for knowledge; the eternal search for new forms corresponded to his innate nature. When we read his notes, we have to keep in mind that there are hardly any rules or theories to be found. It is as if he took it for granted that this was only appropriate for the great master K.S. Stanislavski. Everything we find in his notes - and even more in his countless letters to his students - is education!

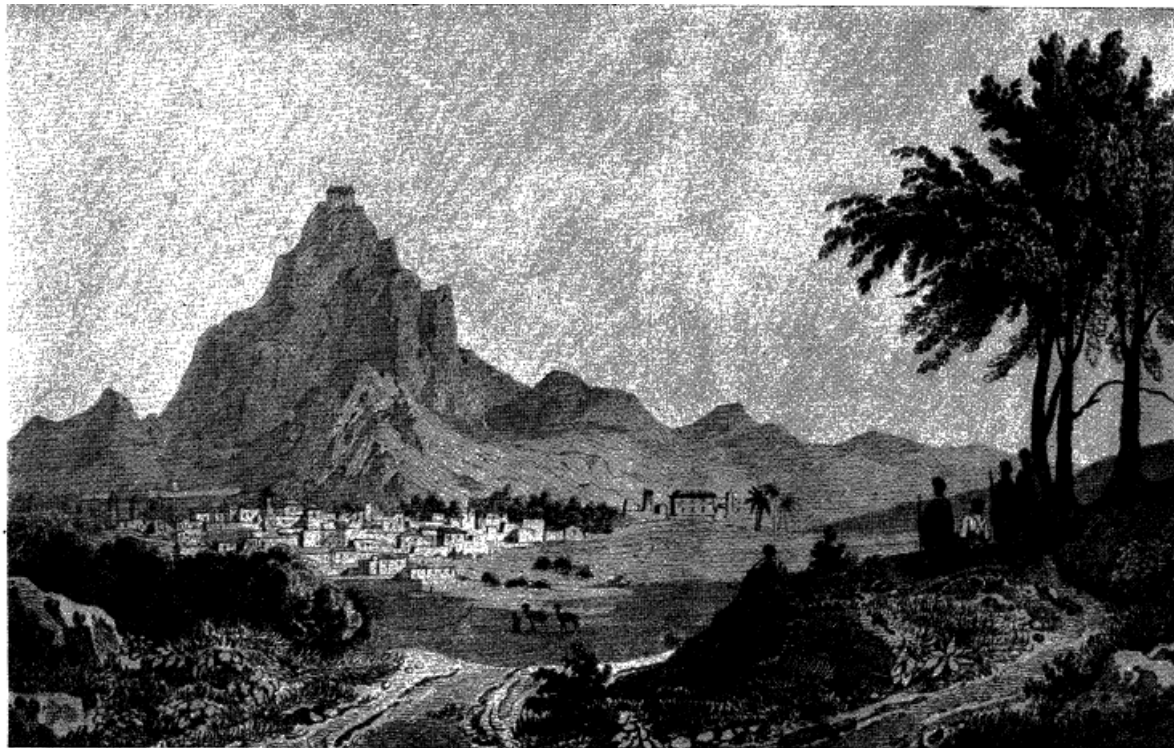
From the very beginning of his pedagogical and directorial work to the last day of his conscious existence on earth, he never ceased to emphasize:

"Through art we must educate a better man; an artist must be an example of a pure, honest, good spirit. An artist must learn and transmit to others the willingness to help, brotherhood and love".

One more thing is clearly underlined in his notes, and that is:

"Do not make the slightest plans for the performance...". Nothing was planned, nothing was calculated. All his work was creative! Imagination worked and sparkled in his fantasy, creating images with the lightness of a spring breeze. For years we floated with him in a fantastic sphere. It was amazing how dependent this person was on atmosphere and mood. There were days when the muse didn't kiss him and he couldn't do

anything. Vakhtangov used to accept non-creative days as carefree and easy as a child! Such evenings were spent telling stories and singing songs - just for us. And on those evenings Vakhtangov was so young, younger than the youngest of us. He was full of life and humor. On those evenings we were all like old friends. On those evenings he would open up the most hidden corners of his heart. How discreetly he talked about his private life!



Armenia - Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov was born here.

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Vakhtangov, this man was passionate, and yet - as clear as crystal!
In all human sentiments, Vakhtangov was elevated to the highest heights.

"Life, beauty and love are wonderful; the only thing that disturbs is the physical, but since this too is life - it must also be elevated to spiritual heights!"

And his comments on sexual life were - pure poetry!

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Chapter 17

Rashel Starobinyets

The first program Vakhtangov performed with us was called "Neshef Bereshit" ["Genesis Ball"] (because "In the beginning G'd created..."). The program consisted of four one-act plays:

1. "The Elder Sister" by Sholem Ash;
2. "The Sun" by Y. Katsenelson; ^[1]
3. "It Burns" by Y.L. Peretz; and
4. "Pega Ra" by Y.D. Berkovitz ^[2]

Most of the actors in "Neshef Bereshit" were more or less known to Jewish audiences and Jewish writers. Their names were on posters and in programs, and many of them even appeared in the non-Jewish press. But there were quite a few who ended their careers right at the start. I will mention only those who, right at the beginning, took up positions that are still empty, unoccupied places in the "Habima" today. There was a student of the Bialystok high school, Rashel Starobinyets. The daughter of a merchant, a girl from a "balebatic" home. You would think she was a girl like all our girls, and yet she was so different.



ר. סטארוביניעץ

R. Starobinyets

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We had beautiful, graceful girls, musical and well-educated girls, but no one else had the kind of harmony that was present in Rashel. It seemed to me that all the gods had consulted and unanimously decided to create a model of a divine woman! Rashel was slender and agile, flexible and rhythmic, beautiful, wise and good. She sang with the voice of a harp, she danced, and she was a born actress!

She played two roles in the first "Habima" program: In *החמה* - "The Sun" she played a young, flirtatious woman, and youth blossomed from every lock of her black hair. Her black cherry eyes were filled with love and warmth, her laughter echoed deep in the heart and her two rows of teeth were incomparable.

There was no actress in Moscow who could compare with Rashel. In the second act of "The Elder Sister" by Sh. Ash she played a girl who was left on the shelf. And her character alone showed the strongest expression of misery and sorrow! She had a still, well-coiffed head, extinguished eyes that looked inward, a closed mouth, and the shawl on her shoulders made her seem isolated from the whole world around her.

She had to play a "mise-en-scène" ^[3] in which a groom comes to look at her younger sister - everyone goes to him and she remains alone in the scene. She bends down and looks through the keyhole just to see the young man. With this movement, the audience already felt a pressure in their throats. Then, with her back to the audience, she slowly begins to stand up again. And when she turns to face the audience, large tears roll down her pale face as the curtain is lowered. We imagined that only the great French Rashel could play like that. Our Rashel not only delighted the audience, but when Stanislavski saw her play, he was so enchanted that he asked Zemach if he had a contract with this actress, because if not, he would hire her for the Art Theater.

Rashel Starobinyets lacked only one quality to become a great Jewish artist, and that was ambition! And neither Vakhtangov's speeches nor Vakhtangov's letters helped. An inner struggle between art and love began in her, and a simple, beautiful young man won.

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So simple that he didn't even realize the extent of his crime when he took her from the stage.

A Letter to Rashel Starobinyets from Vakhtangov

November 1, 1918

To R. Starobinyets.

Forgive me, I can't call you by your name or your father's name because I don't remember it. So it will have to be like this:

Dear Starobinyets!

If you have any confidence in my humble self, if you are at all fond of the art of the stage, you will seriously consider my words; and, being alone in solitude, you will think over what I am going to say to you, and you will answer clearly and distinctly to the end. This must be done, for what we are working on with you requires clarity.

Think carefully about this question: do you love the stage so much that you want to serve it and make it the main thing, the most important thing in your life, your life here on earth, the life that is given to us only once? Or do you have something else for which you think it is necessary to live, for which it is worth living, something that justifies your existence and which only shifts the stage to the second life plan? Does it become something superfluous - just a wonderful decoration of your days, for which you gladly sacrifice the main thing?

If you answered the first question in the affirmative, if the art of theater is the main thing for you, then think about it: Are you really sacrificing as much for this most important thing as it needs to be to justify its place in your life? Because the most important thing always demands much; the most important thing always demands that you sacrifice. Compared to the most important thing, everything else is superfluous.

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Accept the most important thing - and everything that has supplemented it, be it comfort in life or love, be it books or friends, be it the world in its entirety - all this becomes superfluous, and the person [as an individual] also feels superfluous.

If you answer my second question in the affirmative and say that you have something else that is closer to your heart than the stage, then consider this: even if your commitment to the arts is your second priority, is it permissible to give as little as you do? Is it permissible to give as little as you do to such a great, joyful thing as the theater, as the creativity of the theater?

Look: God has given you so much! You just accept it, freely and easily. You are "scenic". You have a good temperament. You have charm. If you work on one or two plays, in a few years you can become a good actress, an artist. And if you work a lot, you can - you have the ability - become a really great artist!

I consider it my duty to tell you as my student, as someone who loves your talent, as someone who works in the theater, as someone who enjoys the light of talented people: You have succeeded in the very first steps of your path. Something like this rarely happens (later you will remember these steps and this letter). You must not stop, you must not miss a single day. If I know something, if I have something that I can give to others, then I am obliged to work very hard, every hour that I have before me.

Do not sin against God! Do not ruin your life! Make a sacrifice for the greater cause- [as related to] your personal interests, which may only be important to you now. Remember, you can get back all that you have lost; but you cannot get back your youth; and you must not waste your youth on fleeting things.

It is with sincere, warm compassion for you, with full understanding of your feminine, wonderful and open soul, with no malice toward your careless relationship with yourself, that I dare to write this to you. If you do not reflect this now,

it will be too late, and we will see how carelessly and gullibly God's gift has been trampled, how the wonderful has been dried up and destroyed, which could have brought so much joy to people.

I tell you this with the deepest sorrow of which my heart is capable.

He who loves you,

Y. Vakhtangov

(From the book "Vakhtangov- Notes, Letters, Articles"). ^[4]

^[1] החמה = "Hachama". Chayele herself translates the title as "di zun" = "The Sun".

On pages 343-358 of his book "In teg fun milkhom un revolutsyes", which can be found at <https://archive.org/details/nybc200610/page/n372/mode/1up>, Jacob Zerubavel [1886-1967] writes about the "Habima" and refers to the title as "di zun, di zun" ["The Sun, The Sun"]. However, the word can have several meanings, and so I also found the title translated as "The Smart" in an English translation.

^[2] פגערע = "Pega Ra". The ambiguous title can be translated as "Bad Hit", but also as "Devil". In a German-language publication about the "Habima" by Bernhard Diebold, I found the translation of the title as "Der Aufdringliche", see [Freimann-Sammlung / Habima \[4\] \(uni-frankfurt.de\)](#). This 1928 publication also contains 32 photographs of the main characters of "Habima".

^[3] "mise-en-scène" = Staging. It encompasses everything that is visible on stage, including acting, lighting and color design

^[4] please find more here [preview-9781136979972_A23877185.pdf \(pageplace.de\)](#)

Chapter 18

Shoshana Avivit - Miriam Elias - Benyamin Zemach - David Itkin

There was another actress, Shoshana Avivit. Shoshana was in our youth group, which (except for Rashel) looked all gray, [she was] the colorful stripe, both in her personality and in her appearance. All of us girls dressed "skromne" [simple and plain], as it was called, but in reality it was quite unflattering. However, she came to us from Odessa, and before "Habima" she had already been to a drama school. She was elegant and colorful. It was Kh. N. Bialik who recommended her to "Habima" after hearing her read in Odessa. With such a recommendation and with the very positive acceptance by N. Zemach, Shoshana already felt like the future prima donna. I think that if the repertoire of the theater had been secular, she would certainly have taken one of the first places. But the "Habima" was looking for the way to the "Tanakh" [Hebrew Bible], and Shoshana wanted to impose this [repertoire] on herself. It was not the Tanakh and not Greek tragedy that she had prepared herself for on her travels in Paris years before, but she was a light comedy actress- and for "Habima" her departure was a great loss: as an actress, as a great personality, as a cultural person, but also as one of the best teachers.

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Miriam Elias was the daughter of a rabbi and came from Zhvanyets. She grew up the only daughter among eight brothers, all rabbis. Whether by accident or the influence of her environment, Miriam grew up with many masculine characteristics. Her height and broad shoulders towered over a woman's figure, her voice was deep and strong, her walk was wide and confident, and her movements were also very masculine. I don't know if Miriam really sat over the Gemara with the rabbis, but we all knew that she used to learn, in addition to the Tanakh, also a page of Gemara. She even learned it with the melody marks.

When I arrived at "Habima", my knowledge of Hebrew was not very good, and Miriam became my teacher. By the way, she was a professional teacher before she came to the theater.

The lessons with Miriam Elias were not dry lessons, but the study content was interwoven with melody: a Gemara-nign [melody], a "May ko mashme lon"^[1] or a "Shirhashirim"^[2]; she constantly lived in the atmosphere of her home, which was characterized by rabbis. Russian culture and the big city of Moscow had no influence on her; instead, she was extremely Jewish and provincial. There are many anecdotes about her, but the two most characteristic are these:

When Miriam was forty years old and asked what her mother's name was, she replied, "Zay-zhe-moykhel" [Excuse me], because that's how her father always addressed her mother.

After the revolution we had to fill out questionnaires, and one of the questions was:

"Vashe sotsyalnoye polozhenye-What is your social status?" She answered:

"Plokhoye"-worse!"

It was a pity that she knew so little about herself and left "Habima" so early. All her theatrical and concert rehearsals failed. "Habima" was the only theater where she could express herself.

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These were the ones who participated in our theater during the Moscow period. But there was also a whole group of actors who took part in the European tour and went to America, where they stayed. I will mention their names here.

One of the young "Habima" actors, Benno Shneyder, remained in America. With him, "Habima" lost its best director. Benno founded the Jewish theater "ARTEF" [Workers Theater Association] in New York, and his performances with this theater attracted the attention of all Broadway actors and directors. After several years of work with the theater, he was invited to join the "M.G.M." [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] in Hollywood. His private studio there, where he worked with his wife Bat-Ami (also a young "Habima" actress), was considered one of the best studios in Hollywood. Another young actor also stayed there: Benjamin Zemach.

Benjamin Zemach was the youngest of the large Zemach family and the youngest man in "Habima". His talent went in two directions at the same time: Drama and dance. So he worked both inside and outside the "Habima". The "comrade idealists" were not pleased that he seemed to be wasting time on his dance work, but the hard-working Benjamin never missed a lesson or a rehearsal, let alone a performance. And the great contribution he made to his role as "Satan" in "Yacob's Dream" was extraordinary. He had built the whole role on plasticity. His movements were strong and exaggerated, and he created an unforgettable character.

Benjamin worked systematically for years until we were ready for our big tour. And that's when Benjamin the dancer was discovered: Benjamin the "concertist" [performer in a concert performance]. He brought with him from Russia a finished programmatic dance, with which he began to increase the already great prestige of the group many times over. Many smaller towns, which did not have the opportunity to have the whole "Habima" perform, were given the group of "concertists", and Benjamin had the greatest merit in these performances.

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Naturally, Benyamin stayed in America. He immediately took up his position there; together with other artists he began his educational work. His studio in New York attracted the best young people. The concerts of his group took place in the most beautiful halls and the largest theaters.

After performing in New York for several years, he finally went to Hollywood. Hollywood was a magnet for any artist. And it wasn't long before he was hired not only to perform in movie theaters, but also to host the biggest spectacle at the Hollywood Bowl. He also received an invitation to work permanently in the film industry. Those who saw the great spectacle "The Eternal Path" by Franz Werfel, directed by the famous director Reinhardt, will never forget the dances set by Benyamin Zemach and performed by his students. He was the only one who found such a highly artistic form for our deep Jewish content.

Benyamin does not have enough time for all the performances that the big American cities demand. However, he travels for several weeks each winter, flying to Montreal, Toronto, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia, working sixteen to eighteen consecutive hours each day, leaving behind a great performance - and an even greater longing among audiences and performers thirsting for a little spiritual joy.

In recent years, Benyamin has begun to build a theater in line with his constant urge to combine drama and dance. In fact, this work is as successful as anything else he does in the field of theater.

In the "Habima" was a character actor, Ben-Ari ^[3]. There in New York he founded a Hebrew studio, a Jewish group, then became an assistant to the famous German director Piscator and took an important place in the American theater world.

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It was one spring day in 1919, at the beginning of our heyday, right after the performance of "Neshef Bereshit", when a tall, handsome man came rushing up the stairs and into the foyer of our studio, bowed a little stiffly, and announced theatrically in good Yiddish Russian:

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is David Itkin ^[4]. I am a student at the Philharmonic, there, just behind your studio. Rumors have reached us about the wonderful Hebrew language, so I have come to tell you that I would like to become a friend of your theater."

With this short monologue he gave the impression of a professional, provincial actor. He immediately sat down, crossed one leg over the other, put his right elbow on his left knee, raised his hand to his forehead and began to speak freely and easily. He actually wanted to [play] theater, in our theater, but in fact he talked more about music.

Itkin was a tall, broad-shouldered man with an exceptionally beautiful head on a strong neck, with black, thick, shiny hair that fell in waves - disorderly - with a straight nose with very sensitive, movable nostrils, with lips always slightly open - ready for a kiss. His especially large, open eyes looked at everything and everyone with a lovely smile. His eyes always had this smiling expression, even when he had to read or tell something very serious.

Itkin's voice was not metallic and did not echo in our ears, but the softness and warmth of his voice penetrated our souls and spread a feeling of trust and friendship. Immediately after his first visit, he did not miss the opportunity to embrace one of our group, to touch another with a fatherly caress, and to look curiously at a third. And before he left, everyone knew David Itkin well, even though we were still strangers to him.

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It is not easy to assign a role to such a profound actor, because Itkin's character was that of a hero, his temperament that of a lover, and his voice that of a singer. Anyone who spent half an hour with Itkin knew that he was an open-hearted, honest, warm, trustworthy man - a real Russian "nash brat" [our brother]! And so the "Habima" actually took him in. Among our young group, Itkin was the one who "romanticized" and liked to share his experiences... and every day we heard something about new "Nadyas and Tatyanas", but most of all we heard something about "Belotshka and Izotshka". It was really incomprehensible how someone with such an infatuation could talk about two [ladies] at the same time - until it became clear that Izotshka and Belotshka were his two little daughters. This is characteristic of Itkin: to talk about everything and everyone with pathos and enthusiasm.

Itkin assimilated into the first group faster than any of the other newcomers. In a short time he settled in and consolidated his position as an honest, dedicated comrade ^[5] - dedicated to "Habima" in general, but especially to his comrades. Little by little, "Itkin the lover" disappeared, and "Itkin the fatherly" remained, both in relation to the stage and to us comrades. Such a profound person and actor as Itkin is generally a rarity in our "profession", and he was a rarity among us.

He acted in every play, whether it was a small or a large role. And every role was equally important to him. The most important thing for him in the theater was not to make a career, but just to play, to perform, to live and to express himself. He played one of the old men in יהודי הנצח [Eternal Jew], one of the angels in חלום יעקב [Jacob's Dream], the father "Sender" in דיבוק [Dybbuk], and Stretshon [Streaton], the bartender, in מבול ["Deluge"] ^[6].

Itkin, like all those who remained in America, was a true follower of the great teacher, Nahum Zemach. But he did not want to build on him further.

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So he stayed in America and chose Chicago as his artistic home. It has been eighteen years since he began his new path to the American theater, and he has now been the director of the Goodman Theater for sixteen years. The Goodman is the best theater in Chicago. In those sixteen years, Itkin has produced hundreds of young actresses from his classes. Many of his students have gone on to starring roles on Broadway and in

Hollywood. He has directed dozens of plays from the Jewish, American, English and European repertoire. He is appreciated and loved by both the theater staff and his students. In addition to the Goodman Theater, he has a drama department at Saint Paul [DePaul?] University. There he has already trained his two daughters to become teachers. In addition, he still finds the energy to teach a number of classes at various universities around the country. He works tirelessly and his creativity knows no bounds.

^[1] מאַי קאָ משמע לך "What does he make us hear?", from the Talmud

^[2] שיר-השירים = The Song of Solomon

^[3] Raikin Ben-Ari wrote a book in Yiddish about the "Habima", see [Habimah : Ben-Ari, R : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

^[4] [David Itkin - Teacher - Goodman Theater - Chicago | The Art Institute of Chicago \(artic.edu\)](#)

^[5] In reference to the members of Habima, Chayele uses the word חבֿר, khaver= comrade, friend, and not קאָלעג, koleg=colleague.

^[6] The title is also translated as "Flood".

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Chapter 19

"Neshef Bereshit"

Although we worked with Vakhtangov for five years, he performed only two programs with us.

The "Neshef Bereshit" [Genesis Ball] and the great play דיבוק "Dybbuk" by Sh. An-sky ^[1], which became famous and made the "Habima" famous all over the world.

The first piece [Neshef Bereshit] was performed realistically ^[2]. On this basis the students had to learn to "play", i.e. according to Stanislavski's system, to learn to live on the stage. Thus, Vakhtangov did not focus on the performance itself, but on the actors.

In "Dybbuk", on the other hand, he worked primarily with the actors, but above all on the performance itself. For this and other reasons, we worked on "Dybbuk" for more than three years.

At the same time, there was complete anarchy on the Russian-German front, which spread more and more throughout the whole country. At the front the commanders and officers lost their authority over the soldiers, and in the cities the police lost their power over the population. It became dangerous to walk in the streets of Moscow. Not only

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at night, but as soon as the sun went down, people rushed home. Every morning there were rumors of robberies and murders that had taken place the night before. Bandits would attack trains at full speed. One of my good friends who was traveling from Smolensk to Moscow died in this way. The train driver came into his compartment and found him robbed and shot. Several times, on the way back from Vakhtangov to our studio, we ran into a doorway to protect ourselves from the bullets whistling over our heads. From the frozen soil of "white" Russia, the power of the strong working class grew in full force. Thousands and thousands of shops, factories and workshops were organized; the Russian peasant - the greatest slave - became conscious and gradually liberated.

And suddenly, as if by a signal, the whole of Moscow turned into a battlefield. This was the decisive battle between the "Whites" and the "Reds". We all stayed in the basements. One by one the food ran out, the electricity stopped, the water was turned off. But the feeling of hope outweighed the feeling of fear. The mood wasn't so bad. We played cards, lottery, told jokes - because we felt that with every bang of shrapnel, eternal peace on God's earth came closer and closer.

Six days and nights passed, and then a silence fell in which we heard the first sounds of the anthem of a liberated people. People ran to entrances, windows and roofs from which they could see the Red Army marching. Our first thought was "Habima". And each of us ran to "Kislovski Alley number 6" with our hearts beating, completely out of breath...

We hugged each other, we kissed each other with tears of joy because we were alive. We all linked arms with Zemach and began a "Hora" dance. Zemach - pale, with white lips and tear-filled eyes - tapped the beat with his whole body, stomped his feet, and with his hoarse voice drowned everyone out with his own hymn: "Hikonu, Hikonu, Habima B'Yerushalayim".

But the path to Jerusalem was a long one for all of us, and for Nahum Zemach that path would forever remain only a dream!

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As strong as the belief in fate may be, you have to admit that chance plays an important role in our lives. I came to Hebrew theater by chance, through an encounter with Zemach. It is very difficult to determine when the urge for art is awakened in us. I think it is inherent in us from the moment we are created. My parents sang songs and musical sounds into my innermost being, and I would say that I began to sing and speak at the same time. I was involved in singing even earlier than in theater, and when Zemach invited me to his "Habima" studio, I was on my way to

the Moscow Conservatory. I passed my exam, which I took before Vakhtangov in the "Habima" group, with "Tsu Der Shkhite" [On the Slaughter] by KH. N. Bialik, but I did not pass. And Rashel Starobinyets immediately shouted: "Yevgeny Bagrationovich, let Grober sing for you a Russian love song, then you will surely include her in your theater...".

Vakhtangov smiled discreetly, Zemach muttered something under his breath, Shoshana Avivit - with her constant pose of a prima donna - said that you have to pass an exam...

But Vakhtangov calmly listened to the opinions of the others and said that he liked me, and I was accepted into the "Habima".

I was still a stranger to "dramatic theater" and wasn't sure if I was capable of it, so I wasn't too happy when I was accepted. I prepared myself for the Conservatory and just worked in the studio to see how it would go. N. Zemach ignited in me the will to build, and Vakhtangov awakened and developed in me the urge to be creative. In the first program of one-acters I played a small role - Shrintse, the maid in "The Elder Sister" fun Sh. Ash.

Before my first performance, I felt like I was swaying higher and higher on a swing, and just like when you're sitting on a swing, I couldn't feel my legs anymore... Gnessin was playing the old Yudl, and he was standing next to me, behind the scenes. He was already an experienced player, noticed my condition and pushed me onto the stage. I only stayed on stage for a few minutes and said a few words,

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fumbled with the ties of my apron and just couldn't manage to tie them... The audience laughed, the press wrote: "The maid is the only splash of color in the performance", and Vakhtangov gave me his picture with the inscription:

"You played Shprintse very well and very comically, and I congratulate you on your birth as an artist on the day of the birth of "Habima".

That was October 8, 1918, and so the difficult path of the theater opened up for me in an easy way.

The main principle of our group was collectivity ^[3], which meant "equality". But this lasted only for the first few years. As soon as we began to work on D. Pinski's "Eternal Jew", individualism began to develop, and this development toward individualism was accompanied by envy and resentment - and intrigue.

In the peaceful, quiet, purely creative atmosphere created by Vakhtangov, hysterical noises could be heard, muffled sounds of fists on the table... Within the walls of the small studio, which the environment considered to be an ideal, it became more and more difficult!

We had started the setup with the slogan "one for all and all for one" and now we were becoming strangers to each other, each one a world apart.

The desire to look for other ways grew in me. I was not gifted with a revolutionary spirit, and my weapons were not physical strength. I lost faith that having talent and being recognized would be enough to grow and take a deserved place in the "Habima" collective.

[1] “Dybbuk” [“Attachment”, according to Jewish legend a spirit of the dead that invades the body of a living person]. The second title of this play is “Between Two Worlds”. The “Dybbuk” will be discussed in more detail later.

[2] I understand this to mean that, in the style of "Russian realism/naturalism", reality on the stage was portrayed truthfully. In other words, it was about the illusionistic reproduction of real life on stage, with all the props that go with it - there were even real waterfalls. Stanislavski even went so far as to have the anterooms behind the stage realistically arranged so that the actors could get into the right atmosphere before their performance. According to this style, the focus was not only on the external action, but above all on the processes within the "psychic life" of the characters portrayed on stage. Therefore, the actors' facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and vivid expressions were particularly important for a natural, believable, and realistic portrayal of the psychological being of the characters, i.e., for "bringing them to life" on stage. In later years, especially under the influence of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Vakhtangov, for example, this absolute realism and naturalism was replaced, as the beginning of the expressionist style, more by symbols, abstraction and allusion, and the movement patterns of the actors, musical rhythms and forms also changed.

[3] Quotes from press reviews, which can be read in the book "Moskauer Theater" [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) on page 63, come to the point; I translate some excerpts from German: "Habima" is not a theater, in which the leading role is played by the individual actor, the star. "Habima" is a collective theater, without central personalities, without major or minor roles... [...] Every single role is calculated down to the last detail for the overall effect. [...] "Habima" therefore excludes the star around whom everything is concentrated. [...] Every extra is also an excellent artist. All the power and artistic value of "Habima" lies in the intense effort to bring out the general content of the play clearly and distinctly [...].

Chapter 20

"The Youth Is Getting Restless..."

From 1915 to 1919, my hometown of Białystok was cut off from Russia along with all other Belarusian and Polish cities. First, it had been taken by the Germans and then it belonged to the Polish people. During all those years I had no contact with my family and friends. Suddenly smugglers from Białystok started coming to Moscow. The roads were still closed, but people were smuggling goods across the border and things were getting lively...

I was drawn "home". There was no one to stop me. My mother wasn't there anymore and my father wasn't particularly worried about me. Work in the studio was stopped because Vakhtangov was in the hospital undergoing surgery. The spring sun broke the ice and exposed the trees. The birds began to sing and the young people became restless. "Let's go", they said - and I was already on the train to Minsk-Mazovyetsk. In Baranovitsh hundreds of people were kept in quarantine, which meant living in a barrack with hundreds of people, sleeping on planks, eating „kadokhes“ [absolutely nothing], warming up in the spring sun. I had to stay there

for a long time...as long as they kept me there. When my friend Moyshke Bialostotski heard about this, he came over and hastened my release from quarantine.

I arrived in Białystok the day before Purim. I threw off my light luggage and ran to see my aunt with the children. In the small, dark kitchen, I found the cheder boys at the stove, cooking something hot for their mom. I went into the bedroom to see if the bedclothes were still there, or if they were sleeping on boards, and I saw: clean bedclothes, freshly ironed blankets, and a fresh slice of "lokshn" [noodle pancake] peeking out from under a clean tablecloth.

There was the odor of home cooking, of grandma's challah, the scent of gefilte fish and stew, of Shabbat and holidays, and also of the wax of memorial candles....

My big city, Białystok, seemed somehow shrunken: the large buildings looked as if they had caved in, the cobbled streets were damaged, the large stores were more like small shops... my childhood friends had scattered - one to Russia, one to America. Many of the beautiful girls from the high school and the commercial school had left with German officers. Many of those who remained had lost their "bourgeois" appearance... there was a feeling of neglect. Many of the girls had been stamped as "tsuker-pushke" [sugar box]. The intelligentsia had become somewhat Germanized, and many had also become "Polishized", and the small cultural groups that remained struggled to rebuild Jewish life.

The first night after my arrival I slept in a hotel, but the very next day the father of my closest friend Rachel, Mr. Birger, came and said, "My wife has instructed me not to come home without you," and as he said this he took my suitcase and headed for the door. There, with the Birgers, I felt the homeliness and warmth of the past young years. They were already alone: their children had gone far away, to China and America, and my friend Rachel had already married and moved across the sea.

So now they poured all their love into me. At "mother" Birger's I cried, talked, warmed up, and began to long for Moscow, for "Habima". My childhood friend Moyshke received me like his bride. The more I told him about going to the theater and returning to Moscow, the more he sighed and cried. I can't see tears, that's one of my biggest faults, so I promised him that I would come back. And after a few months in my hometown, I returned to Moscow - illegally.

The road through Baranovitsh was already lined with Polish soldiers, and the only way to get through to Russia was the long detour via Suvalk[i]-Dvinsk. I didn't think about it for long, but I set off. I took the train to Suvalki, but I got stuck there. There was talk of carriages that would take passengers through the dense forests to the Russian border. I stayed in a hotel. The shtetl was foreign to me. The last relatives I had met - the

Grasovitches and the Libermans - had been in Grodno. But how surprised I was when I heard a knock in my hotel room and saw an unknown, beautiful, black-haired young woman, elegantly dressed, who asked me:

"Are you Chayele Grober?"

"Yes, I am."

"My name is Chane-Rivke Shapiro. My Aunt Rivele is your father's wife, and my parents said that you should take your suitcase and come to us"...

Chane-Rivele's black cherry eyes and her pearl-like words really impressed me.

"All right, I'll come with you, but I'll leave my suitcase here in the meantime, because I have to introduce myself to your parents first!"

Ten minutes later, we opened the Shapiro's door. A fat woman with a headscarf and a wide apron on her hips came up to me, threw her arms around my neck, and began to speak nervously through her tears:

"We're so happy you're here. And what do you mean you want to stay at the hotel? The whole town knows you're here. Do you think, God forbid, that there's no room for you? There's plenty of room for everyone, see –

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(and she opened the door to a large parlor) - see the two beds there? In one sleeps Chane-Rivke and in the second sleeps Chaye-Soreke; you can sleep next to whomever you like"...

This reception made me feel homey and I said that I would like to sleep at Chane-Rivke's place. We had already walked through the streets, talked and got to know each other better. Mr. Shapiro - a small, handsome man with a fine little beard and the same black eyes as Chane-Rivke - squeezed my hand warmly and waited quietly until his wife had arranged everything for me. Only then did we go into a dark but spacious dining room and sit down around a large table; and over the simmering samovar we began to ask, to question and to talk. I felt at home there again. And my visit to the Shapiros brought me new friends, good memories and a story that must be written down as a real folk tale:

As we sat at the table, having our cozy conversation, an old, short, bearded Jew arrived, a distant relative from a nearby shtetl. When he saw me - also a guest - he stopped in embarrassment. Mrs. Shapiro assured him that I would be sleeping at Chane-Rivke and that there was a place for him on the sofa in the dining room. We went to bed early because the next day would start very early in the morning [given the preparations needed] for the following Shabbat.

And on Friday, very early in the morning, I was actually awakened by a commotion in the other room. The "baleboste" [housewife] said to the maid:

"Say, I gave you money yesterday to bring a pot of cooking oil from the store, well, there is no oil, where is the pot?"

The maid swore that she had indeed brought up the pot of cooking oil and didn't understand where it had gone. Suddenly the door to the living room opened and Mrs. Shapiro tiptoed around the table and approached the bed where Chaye-Soreke was sleeping:

"O...O...what pot, what cooking oil, oy!..."

Her mother: "sh-sh-sh-shush!"

Then she came to our bed, leaned over me and said to Chane-Rivke:

"Chane-Rivke, Chane-Rivke, have you seen the pot of cooking oil anywhere?"

Chane-Rivke: "What pot, what cooking oil, what is this early morning commotion?"

Her mother: "Sh-sh-sh... don't shout like that!"

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A person came tired from traveling, just leave it be! "

The mother left the room. I fell asleep again. When I woke up, I no longer saw the sisters in their beds but heard the clattering of spoons in glasses and knives cutting hard cheese from the dining room. I said, "Good morning", and asked, "What has actually happened to the pot and the cooking oil?"

The "baleboste": "Oy vey, so we really didn't let you sleep? But isn't it strange that..." and at these words the spoon fell out of the hand of the Jew, the guest from the small shtetl.

And he stammered: "Do you mean the pot that was under the sofa? I thought someone had left it before me - so I poured it out..."

This is one of our folk plays, from our spring, which is so deep that it never can be exhausted.

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Chapter 21

Through Gunpowder and Blood

I stayed in Suvalki for almost a week until I was informed that a load of passengers was being prepared and that the driver had agreed to smuggle us across the border. I - a woman - and seven men set out. We drove on the highway from very early in the morning until the afternoon, but then we turned into a dense, partly swampy forest. My [fellow] passengers were:

Two Chassids - one was carrying a prayer shawl and tefillin, the other a small suitcase that he wouldn't let out of his hands; two Christians - one was deaf and dumb (the other explained to us)... ; a Jew, middle-aged, a watchmaker from Dvinsk; a young man, already in khaki uniform (he was a commissar in Białystok when the "Reds" were there); and another man, like me, from Białystok - the beautiful young man Shternfeld, of whom our high school girls were afraid - and ran after him...

We rode all day until the sun began to set and the sounds of cannon fire from the front could be heard from afar.

Our driver tied the horses to the trees and looked for a way to smuggle us into Russia.

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The Chassid turned to the west to pray, as he did in the Bes-Medresh. We waited quietly, while the two Christians were nervous and restless. After a short while, the wagoner returned with terrible stories, that there were dead horses in the forest, and that he couldn't risk his life, that he had a wife and children, and that he had to go home!

"How come! What about us? Then take it and go on foot"...

The talkative goy didn't think twice, jumped on the seat of the cart, spurred on the horse, and we set off along a narrow, damaged path into the dense forest...

I often think about the fate of that horse, which so faithfully led us into Russian territory. None of us knew the way. We flew with our "odler" [horse] into the deep night. Our horse was exhausted and stopped more and more often. The sound of the cannons grew louder and louder, the smell of gunpowder and blood was in our nostrils. The black night began to turn into dawn and became brighter and brighter. And when the first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky, the Chassids asked the horse and cart to stop. The Chassid put on his prayer shawl and tefillin and stood up to pray, his faith and prayers at a time when death was in sight filled us with a mystical confidence that a miracle would happen, and...we entrusted our fate to our little horse....

Suddenly we heard a cry: "Stop!"

Fear gripped us. We turned around and saw a soldier in Russian uniform between the dense trees. I ran towards him with great surprise and joy.

He pointed his rifle at me and shouted: "You're under arrest!" I was more surprised than scared.

Anikshti was the name of the Lithuanian shtetl to which he took us, and we slept that night in the rabbi's house under the supervision of the Russian soldier. As soon as we arrived, I was taken to the headquarters, where I was warmly received by a young commissar. We even walked around the shtetl, talking about Moscow and the "Habima", and only later did I realize

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that this was my first interrogation. The next day we were taken to the other shtetl, Kupitshki [Kupiškis], where we were arrested at the headquarters.

The first misty autumn rain fell on our faces, the wind whistled in our ears, and the biting cold crept into our bones. We stopped in front of a dark, one-story building. We were led into a large room lit by a kerosene lamp. A fire crackled in the stove where a group of soldiers were warming themselves. We gladly accepted the invitation to share the baked potatoes with them, and a cheerful conversation developed between us. There I made a friendship that followed me all the way to Moscow. The investigation continued for two days, and on the third day my new friend, the Red Army guard, brought me the bad news that we were being sent to prison in Dvinsk, and that it was very serious - so serious that he took me for a walk and advised me to escape.

"I'm responsible for you now, but I'm telling you: run - you have nothing to lose!"

I thought about it for a moment and realized that even though I was quick to think, I probably wouldn't get far by running...

And already under close guard, I walked determinedly towards my destiny...

In the large Dvinsker prison, behind the high, walled-in walls, I spent the first night with my seven men in a cell so small that everyone had to stand to rest on the stone floor. We took turns. But for me, quite unexpectedly, a soft, warm bed was provided: My friend from Białystok, Shternfeld, stretched out and let me lie on him. Not only once did I find a ray of light in the darkest minutes of my life...

The second night I spent with a woman, a doctor from the Dvinsker Red Cross. In her weak voice she told me how her husband, also a doctor, was unexpectedly called away from home to the commissariat and never came back...

Then she too was taken from her home and kept here. Two children were left at home,

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one boy 10, and another 12 years old. We talked as we sat on the hard floor and leaned against the cold wall. Night fell, and the darkness began to confuse our eyes. The silence around us smelled of death. The clock in the marketplace struck twelve when I heard a car stop at the gate...

At the same moment I saw the small, delicate figure of the woman jump up and press herself against the wall with all her strength. I pushed myself towards her and heard her weak, hoarse voice: "Sh-sh-sh-shush!"

My blood froze in my veins!

After a few minutes I heard from the second room, where there were up to a hundred prisoners, that their names were being called out. Then I heard the car drive away and saw the woman's faint shadow sink powerlessly to the ground...

A moment later she broke into a silent, stifled cry. The first gray light of dawn fell on her pale, tired face as she said:

"This is how it goes every night... and in the morning you know who the victims were".

I spent three days with the woman, sharing the soup sent from her home and reading the children's notes hidden in the lid of the thermos. And for three nights we both listened with bated breath and frozen blood to the arrival and departure of the "automobile of death".

The days dragged on with interrogations until one early morning I heard names being called from my group. Then I heard my name. My limbs were paralyzed and I felt like I was dying. My eyes saw something, my ears could still hear, but my thoughts had stopped and my feet were stepping into the abyss. And then something approached me, as if it came from another, distant world:

"You are free, you can go in all four directions".

With a pack of papers in my hands, my steps led me slowly to the prison gate. A group of young women met me on the other side of the gate. The group kissed me, handed me flowers and packets of food; I was still in a trance. My first clear

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thought was: this is what Stanislavski means with his theory of "life and truth" ^[1]. I had experienced the feeling of death so naturally and strongly that it was difficult for me to come back to life. One of the girls was the sister of my new friend, the Red Army guard, who had informed her about me and asked her to do everything possible for me. I was liberated with only five other men. The two Christians, the Germans, never saw the light of day again. One of the five stayed in Dvinsk, and the others came under my wing. The girls gave me train tickets and food for the trip, and I went with "my men" to Moscow.

I got off the train and went straight to "Habima". There I met my friend Moyshe Halevi, who, with all sorts of papers under his arm, signed by Stanislavski, Lunatsharski and others, had to take the next train to Dvinsk to free me. I owe this also to the conscientious Red Army guard who telegraphed the "Habima" that I was in captivity.

I arrived from "abroad" with a pair of high lace-up shoes of white leather with black varnish, in a very elegant costume of garnet red fabric decorated with mink, sewn by the best tailor, Metelits; with a beautiful hat, which I had bought in the French "salon" from Madame Gotlib, who always greeted us with "Bon Jour", sent us back with "Revoir", and also sold hats, because "c'est chic" and "c'est Camelot".

She also brought big, long, heavy earrings set with sapphires and real diamonds - they were truly antique. By the way, in that rig-out I met the head of the Dvinsk prison for the first time - I also had my guitar in my hand and sang a love song, which the prisoners listened to.

Even today I can't explain why I behaved that way. Maybe it was to prove that I was really an actress, and maybe it was a kind of carelessness. In fact, I fell into the studio with this story, and the whole drama

of the last few weeks turned into a comedy. I don't even remember how long I wore the shoes and the hat... It didn't fit in the destroyed Moscow.

My father, my aunt and the children - her son Elinke and my cousin Genitshke - left for Białystok after a short time. For the first time I stayed all alone. As a member of the Artists' Union, I was granted a large room, but after my father's full, rich house, it seemed empty and miserable. I missed my little Genye more than anything ^[2]. Only now did the real misery and utter poverty begin for me.

The first time after they left, I stood in line for soup at the cooperative restaurant with the little Genye's ration cards. When it was over, I and the whole group switched to "payok", black bread, which was baked in the studio's kitchen. The winters of 1919-1920-1921 were terrible. There was frost and hunger in the environment and emptiness and despair in the studio. All the artistic successes failed to bring an audience to the "booking office" because no one understood Hebrew. And it was during this time that the wonderful, grand spectacles began in the Jewish Chamber Theatre, actually only in Yiddish. There they laughed heartily at Sholem-Aleichem, and the people left the theater in such a light mood, while here they cried over the destroyed Temple and searched hopelessly for the Messiah...

That's how it was when the "Eternal Jew" by D. Pinsky was performed in the first production by a director named Mtshidyelov. There were already two programs in the repertoire: the evening of one-act plays and the "Eternal Jew". But there was no audience. The group's dissatisfaction led to more nights of discussion, anger, and resignation. Nahum Zemach spoke again, ending for the umpteenth time with the words:

"You will see hundreds of people lining up for tickets!"

But in the meantime he decided that if there were less than six people in the auditorium, he would announce that "for technical reasons the performance will be postponed"...

And the two winters passed with only "technical problems...".



דוד איטקין
David Itkin

During this time we were already working on Sh. An-sky's "Dybbuk". However, the work progressed slowly and with difficulty. There were two reasons for this: First of all, we didn't have enough people for the big play, and secondly, Y.B. Vakhtangov's illness was getting worse and worse. That's why it took us three years to finish the "Dybbuk". I played only small parts in it. In the first act I played the Jewish woman who rushes to the "orn-koydesh" [Holy Ark] to pray for mercy for her daughter! ...

But this episode became a great role on which all the press focused, and the audience remembered it, it seemed to me, forever.

In the second act I played the old woman who hadn't danced for "forty years"...

I played her honestly, but I didn't "create" her at all. I saw an artist in the Vilnius troupe, Pola Walter was her name, and only then did I realize how much I hadn't created in the role. When Pola Walter performed her dance on the grave of the deceased bride and groom, a breeze passed over my body and I trembled when I heard her voice! For me this was the most powerful moment of her performance. I saw the Vilnius troupe in Białystok before our "Dybbuk" was finished, but we were already completing the rehearsal. This was my second visit to Białystok.

^[1] According to Stanislavski, the actor must live his role, experience it and feel it inside. It is only through one's own life experience that an "emotional memory" is formed, the feelings of which can be "recalled" on stage. Only in this way does the performance gain credibility and guarantee truth.

^[2] I would like to mention here that Chayele Grober dedicated her second book, "Mayn Veg Aleyn" [My Way Alone] to her "only cousin Gitele-Zhenitshke Rozman-Levit".

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Chapter 22

Legato and Staccato

The Dybbuk ^[1] was our only major play directed by Vakhtangov, so I will take the liberty of describing our work on it in more detail. The author of "Dybbuk", Sh. An-sky, had proposed his play to the Moscow Art Theater, and Stanislavski was indeed enthusiastic. They had already started to distribute the roles in this theater. But when N. Zemach came to Stanislavski and said that the "Habima" wanted to perform the play, and when he

began to tell the "non-Jew" about our world of Chassidism and legends, Stanislavski, with his strong artistic intuition, felt that this play belonged to the Jews...

And when he later saw a rehearsal of the first act, he said: "In our theater, it was decided that the Chassidim would wear short, polished jackets"...

In all countries of the world, different people asked one question:

"How did Vakhtangov - a Christian - understand and create the deep-rooted Jewish legend?", and this is also one of the reasons why I want to stay longer in this chapter. I have already written about the fact that Vakhtangov was an Armenian.

The fate of his people is very similar to our Jewish fate. The Armenians are an ancient civilized people who were

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under the rule and persecution of Turkey.

The Turkish sultans systematically massacred the Armenians. There was a time in the last century when the massacres of Armenians by the Turks provoked protests from the entire cultural world. The blood of the millions murdered left its stamp on the remaining Armenian people. Armenians have always had warm feelings toward Jews. With this innate warmth, Vakhtangov came to "Habima". The first stage of the work, immediately after reading and accepting the "Dybbuk", consisted of telling legends, folk plays and singing Chassidic "nigunim" [melodies]. Whole nights passed in the world of the old Jewish Chassidic shtetl.

Vakhtangov felt homey in our atmosphere, and he began to love our Chassidic nigunim: he loved them, settled into them, and sang our nigunim well himself. It is a fact that the nuances in the nigunim, as well as the intonation [timbre, pitch, emphasis] of the speeches, were created by Vakhtangov. According to Stanislavski's system ^[2], an actor does not begin to repeat, and a director does not begin to perform a play, until the text has been worked out:

You look for the idea that the author wanted to express with his piece; then you look for the main plot of each act; then you look for the meaning of each individual part of the act and also for what is between the lines (hidden, unspoken thoughts).

Only then did we begin to search for the particular task of each actor, and not just his task. We also searched in his life until he really felt the situation in that role in the play. Only then did we begin to work with each actor individually, then with two actors in dialogue with each other, and so we expanded and broadened the work until we had a complete act. Vakhtangov never gave any actor an intonation, but he always worked with one actor and let him search and explain to himself until the real meaning of the interpretation was found [together] ^[3].

As already mentioned, Vakhtangov was a faithful follower of his great master Stanislavski in his work. But immediately after the revolution

there was a tendency to destroy everything "yesterday" and create a new "today". The old had to be forgotten and life had to begin anew. The same slogan applied to the theater. At the same time, however, Vakhtangov made his proclamation: "Stanislavski's theory must remain the foundation of the theater for all time! 'Life' and 'truth' are eternal - only the form and rhythm change".

Stanislavski began his work at the beginning of our century, before the "mashin" began to rule our world, and when trains still traveled at a speed of 25 miles an hour... It was the time when Chekhov's "Sisters" ^[4] could only dream of Moscow, when women paid long visits, when a lunch lasted four hours. It was a time when many people could only dream of owning a gramophone, and the barrel organs in the streets still attracted large audiences. It was a time when "damsels" sighed in the middle of winter, longing for a spring breeze. It was natural then that Stanislavski, who sought "life" and "truth" in the theater, constantly spoke of round, plastic [sculptural] lines, long pauses, deep sighs, soft voices, fine comprehension - in short, "gracious life". He was faithful to the life of those people and to the rhythm of those times.

But Vakhtangov, coming out of the cellar after the days and nights of the civil war, heard through his window the victory march and the jubilant mood of the Red Army, and at that moment the word "rhythm" flashed into his mind! And already at the first rehearsals in "Red Moscow" he introduced the idea of "new rhythm" and "new form". Instead of the subjective sigh of an individual, one heard the collective lament of a people; instead of calm, plastic [sculptural] movements, one saw jerky gestures, bent figures with strong hands demanding their right to work.

Yesterday's dominant sign was the "legato" of a waltz. The dominant rhythm of today was the "staccato" of a march.

Nature itself echoed other sounds, and life itself had taken on a different form. But while life itself is only "realism", it was through realism that Vakhtangov came to symbolism ^[5]. [In terms of performance,] Vakhtango divided the legend of Sh. An-sky

into two worlds: The poor world and the rich world. Then he created a whole range of figures symbolizing the poor world, and all the figures of the rich world were elevated by the new form to symbols. Next he contrived the sharp, choppy gestures that emphasized the new rhythm of the new time. And all this created a spectacle that influenced not only the Russian theater, but also the theaters of Europe and America, where "Habima" later performed.

^[1] At this point I would like to include two quotes of *"The Dybbuk Century"*, edited by Debra Caplan and Rachel Merrill Moss for a deeper understanding of this play and Chayele's following remarks, source: [The Dybbuk Century: The Jewish Play That Possessed the World \(oapen.org\)](https://oapen.org/), rights: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

[Excerpt of pages 2,3:] "*The Dybbuk is a play deeply steeped in the history, culture, and legends of eastern European Jewry—so much so that during his lifetime, An-sky struggled to get directors and producers to even consider staging the play at all. Directly inspired by An-sky's ethnographic expeditions into the heart of Jewish eastern Europe,*

The Dybbuk is a play full of Jewish specificity: legends and folktales, holidays and ritual observance, religious and mystical sacred texts, and, at its core, a supernatural creature familiar only to those versed in Jewish mythology. It is an intensely Jewish play—an unlikely candidate to join the canon of world drama. And yet, over the course of the past century, The Dybbuk became a cultural touchstone with broad significance not only in theater, but also in dance, film, music, and television. How did such a culturally specific text develop such a vast, cross-cultural scope of influence? What does The Dybbuk mean to people across cultures, languages, countries, and time periods? The essays contained in The Dybbuk Century reflect on this landmark play, its productions, and the multitude of work it inspired. We argue that The Dybbuk did not retain its initial culturally specific meaning for long. Instead, the play turned into a theatrical conduit for a wide range of conversations about the place of Jews in modern society. This mystical play with Jewishness at its core became a catalyst for a century of transhistorical performative discourse. Constantly expanding and contracting to absorb various languages, cultural contexts, and historical events, The Dybbuk has inspired many artistic interpretations throughout its century-long production history and vast web of influence. Unlike a typical canonical piece, which exerts stability over time, An-sky's play operates more like a foil to a canonical work: it is inherently malleable, transforming to embody the needs of each specific place, time, and conversation. In fact, The Dybbuk never really had a fixed form at all, even for its creator, S. An-sky, who wrote the "original" version of the play in three languages and tried to get it produced in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts."

[Excerpt pages 4,5:] "An-sky first encountered stories about dybbuks as a professional ethnographer on a series of research expeditions between 1912 and 1914, in which he and his team traveled across the Pale of Settlement—from what is now Moldova to western Belarus—and collected thousands of photographs and songs and hundreds of folktales. In Jewish folklore dating back to at least the sixteenth century, a dybbuk is the dislocated soul of a dead person (typically a sinner) that inhabits and possesses the body of a living person. The ethnographic mission was to collect oral traditions before modernization swept them away, though it ultimately proved prescient as World War I brought a different means of destruction. The Dybbuk emerged from these collected fragments of a vanishing world. Originally titled Between Two Worlds (which later became the play's subtitle), The Dybbuk tells the story of Leah and Khonen, who, unbeknown to them, are betrothed by their fathers before birth and who subconsciously fulfill their destiny by falling in love as young adults. But Khonen's father is long dead, and in his absence, Leah's father breaks his vow and instead chooses a wealthy groom for his daughter. Khonen turns to Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) to win Leah back, but the dark power he raises gets out of control and kills him. On Leah's wedding night, Khonen's soul returns from beyond the grave in the form of a dybbuk and takes over her body. Together, they refuse to marry the groom. Leah's family turns to a wonder-working Hasidic rebbe to exorcise the dybbuk from their daughter, but though the exorcism succeeds, Khonen's soul still lingers between life and death. Leah follows him, dying in order to reunite with her beloved. In death, Leah and Khonen find a way to fulfill their destiny."

^[2] In her second book, "Mayn Veg aleyn" [My Way Alone], Chayele Grober devotes a chapter, starting on page 192, specifically to Stanislavski's "system". I translated an excerpt from pages 195, 196:

"It then became clear to Stanislavski that concentration, liberation [relaxation] and pauses were the most important elements in the art of acting, and from this point Stanislavski began to build his 'system':

- 1. exercises to free [relax] the body - every part of the body extra [...].*
- 2. concentration exercises [...].*
- 3. breathing exercises [...].*

Stanislavski had realized that the actor is a living person and not a puppet. He began to bring the actor closer and closer to his nature of a living human being. Acting is not an artificial thing that is forced on people. Acting is a natural urge to express oneself - just as music is for those with an innate musical talent. "

Concerning Stanislavski's system, you can find more here [The Stanislavski Method | Acting Methodologies \(stagemilk.com\)](https://stagemilk.com/the-stanislavski-method-acting-methodologies)

[3] A quote from Michael Chekhov [from "The Vakhtangov Sourcebook" pages 13/ 14, [preview-9781136979972_A23877185.pdf \(pageplace.de\)](https://www.pageplace.de/preview-9781136979972_A23877185.pdf)]: "Vakhtangov, as it were, invisibly put himself next to the actor and led him by the hand. The actor never felt any coercion from Vakhtangov, but neither could he get away from the concept that Vakhtangov created as a director. In implementing Vakhtangov's instructions and concepts, the actor felt as if these ideas were his own".

[4] [Three Sisters \(play\) - Wikipedia](#)

[5] I would like to quote and translate a comment from the press of the time ["Warschawianka", K. Makuszynski], which I found on page 67 of [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) :

"A sweet curiosity led me to this theater to see what this, apparently the only Hebrew theater in the world, which has such a reputation that even Stanislavski himself issued and signed a bill of exchange, might look like. The comity, which knows no prejudice in the field of art, compels me to say that this excellent man who supported the 'Habima' did not do so out of any considerations of compromise; it is really a theater of such a high level that one can only speak of it with the highest admiration. This young theater, as if to show that it has absorbed all the new achievements of the theater, brings the perfect form of realism in the first act of 'Dybbuk', in the second act it chooses the method of stylization and leads the same people, who were previously overly real, into the magic circle of a stylized tragic grotesque. [...]"

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Chapter 23

Yuli [Joel] Engel- M. P. Gnessin

Besides Vakhtangov, there was another artist who contributed much to the great success of the "Dybbuk", his name is Yuli [Joel] Engel. Yuli Engel was one of the group of young Jewish composers, a close friend of Sh. An-sky, and one of the first collectors of our Jewish folk songs. At the beginning of our century, the primitive folk creations of many peoples were already being sung by famous singers on great concert stages. At that time, however, our Jewish folk song was still considered a creation of and for ordinary people. And the songs were sung by maids in the kitchens, by street singers in the courtyards, by workers in the factories. In 1906, 1907, 1908, the Petersburg Ethnographic Society sponsored a group of young composers who traveled through Russian towns and shtetlekh to collect our folk treasures. This group consisted of Yosef Akhron [Joseph Achron], who became so famous in later years with his "Hebrew Melody"^[1], Milner, Klein, Saminsky, and Yuli Engel. Yuli Engel collected songs, arranged them and inspired professional singers to perform them for a large audience. In 1919, when the "Habima" accepted the "Dybbuk", Nahum Zemach invited the Jewish composer to write the music for the great folk legend. And it was a happy coincidence, because Y. Engel traveled a lot with Sh. An-sky, who collected legends. Engel had many episodes

to tell about their travels, and I would like to share one of them here because it so clearly reflects the relationship to folk song in those years.



יולי דמיטריעוויטש ענגעל

Yuli Dimitryevitch Engel

Engel and An-sky stayed in a small shtetl for Shabbat. On Friday morning, Engel went for a walk across the shtetl. As he was going, he heard a Jewish song coming from an open window. He approached, looked in, and saw a maid in the kitchen chopping fish and singing a beautiful folk song. He paid her some compliments and said that he would like to meet her and hear her sing. When he told her that he was from St. Petersburg and that the purpose of his visit was actually to write down and collect what he heard, the girl invited him with great pleasure to be her guest that Friday evening. Engel took the news to An-sky, and that evening they both went there. Girls and boys sat in the kitchen, at the stove and around the table, cracking

nuts and casting shy glances at their guests. Engel introduced his friend and asked the girl to sing. But...how embarrassed he was when the young woman warbled an aria!

Engel began to stammer, "No, no, please, sing the song you sang in the morning...". But the girl replied angrily: "Don't think that a maid doesn't know what songs to sing for St. Petersburgers guests!"

When I first met Engel in 1919, he was forty years old. He was of medium stature, with a slightly rounded back, like a young lad who had spent a long time poring over the Gemara. He had a fine head of curly black hair, black eyes that burned constantly with a pure Chassidic fire of faith and creative spirit. He looked like an Oriental Jew, although he had been raised and educated in a true Russian environment and had been trained by the greatest Russian composers. Mrs. Engel was a very talented pianist, a wonderful personality, a good nature, fine and noble-minded. They lived in perfect harmony with their two daughters. Mrs. Engel was the type of villager, and she and her husband made you feel more like you were in a village house than a city one. Yuli Engel was completely Russified and reflected all the characteristics of his original parents, both outwardly and inwardly, and echoed the immortal sounds of his own people. As far as I understand, working with us awakened in him the hidden feeling for Chassidism. In the "Habima" we organized special evenings dedicated to the folk legend and the Chassidic "nign". Everyone brought to the "Chassidic table" whatever they could think of. It is worth mentioning that the leitmotif in the "Dybbuk" is the "Shir-hashirim", and this is the great contribution that Miriam Elias brought and with which she touched each of us actors so deeply, as well as Vakhtangov, Engel, and later the whole audience.

On our evenings, you could see how the accomplished composer Engel was transformed into a young student who craved every bit of knowledge from none other than us. It is unforgettable how this person lit up and how his

childlike burning eyes would glow with ecstasy. Although Engel was not of Chassidic descent, he felt the true Chassidic fire within him. Engel also had an innate theatrical talent. He demonstrated this strikingly in the way he orchestrated the "Dybbuk" music. He personified each of the main characters with an instrument: the deeply tragic Khonen was portrayed by the soft, deep tones of the cello; the light dance of the youngest girls was played under the notes of the flute; the angry relatives of the bride and groom moved to the choppy notes of the double bass.

Many musicians had already begun to compile our folk songs. The weaker ones just wrote down the melodies. Some of the better composers thought that our folk melodies were too primitive for "sophisticated" listeners, and they modernized the songs so much that they lost their folk character and were destroyed. Yuli Engel was the one who always preserved the beautiful, pure melody and composed a good piano

accompaniment or created a truly Jewish orchestral version, as for the "Dybbuk". Yuli Engel not only collected folk songs, but also popularized them. What a triumph it was when the primitive, humble folk song was heard for the first time on the big, lighted stage, wrapped in silk and tulle, with the glitter of real diamonds. This is how our song was performed by the international singer Iza Kremer. It was a triumph for the unknown creators of the pearls, and for Iza Kremer it was a stroke of luck, because it was our folk song that made her so famous and popular.

My friendship with Yuli Dmitriyevich Engel was based on our common urge to develop the recognition of our songs and the Chassidic "nigunim". He expressed to our group his full belief in my future as a folk singer much earlier, before I was even prepared for the career. He did everything to encourage me: he worked with me privately, he convinced Mrs. Engel that she should accompany me (Mrs. Engel suffered from anxiety in front of an audience); he dedicated to me the first two compositions based on the poems of Kh. N. Bialik: "מנהג חדש" [A New Custom] and "אחת שתיים" [One Two].

He invited my singing professor

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and she sat in the front row. The hall (really a small one) was packed, and all in all my first performance was a complete failure! But that didn't stop the sensitive spirit, Engel, from continuing our work. He believed his intuition more than the facts. Many years passed before my dream came true!

Immediately after we finished working on "Dybbuk", Engel traveled to the land of Israel [Palestine]. The "Habima" invited the famous composer Alexander Krein, and also Mikhail Fabianovich Gnessin, who had just returned from Palestine. M. Gnessin brought with him his latest composition - sounds from "mizrekh" [Orient]. With it he introduced a completely new sound. It was new both in the sound of the melody itself and in the ultramodern arrangement. I was already prepared to accept the songs musically, but they were foreign to me and did not resonate in my soul, as was the case with the folk songs and the Chassidic "nigunim". I didn't use these songs later either. But the ingenious hours with Mikhail Fabianovich Gnessin during our collaboration have remained deep in my soul. Like many great Russians, M.F. Gnessin was simple, modest and unassuming. Unlike the great people of our nations, the Russian is quiet, he is not conceited, he does not boast and does not show his superiority. He takes his position for granted. And Gnessin's melodies reflected his whole being.

His "mizrekh-lider" [oriental songs] are really fine, lyrical and warm. My memories of Gnessin put me in a mood of calm, of peace. I don't know why, but when I think of Gnessin, a smile spreads across my face, like an image of his eternal, childlike smile. It is a joyful feeling to realize that my brief friendship with M.F. Gnessin, his attention to me, his belief in me as a future concert performer, were a great encouragement to me!

^[1] see [Hebrew Melody, Op. 33 \(version for violin and piano\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

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Chapter 24

A Winter With Konstantin Sergeyevitch [Sergeyevich] Stanislavski

Nahum Zernach did not fail to involve each and every one of the great theater people in the development of our group and "Habima". Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, the founder of the Moscow Art Theater and the creator of the famous [theater] theory, was the god for all young students in Moscow. Every new beginning of a theatrical movement was indirectly connected with Stanislavski; his students or his actors taught in various studios, but it was impossible to get him, the great master, himself [as a teacher]. The actors of the Moscow Art Theater did not allow their creator to divide his creative powers among foreign collectives; it was a kind of jealousy in relation to the great teacher.

The first group to win over Stanislavski was a group of young opera singers. Why opera? First of all, because Stanislavski loved music. In his youth he wanted to be a singer. He told us:

"My voice is best in the bathroom!"

And his hearty laugh resonated with his bass-baritone.

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Second, he was interested in the group because he didn't like to see the helplessness of great singers in opera.

He used to say: "I sit in the opera with my eyes closed".

When Konstantin Sergeyevich began to work with the singers, there were heated discussions in the opera circles. Singers said that he would destroy their voices, because a singer should pay attention only to the sound, the "zvutshok"...

I was lucky enough to see the first performance directed by Stanislavski and Vakhtangov, and it was a joyful experience! The opera they were experimenting with was "Eugene Onegin". And for the first time the actors broke with tradition: Onegin did not stand with his arms outstretched in front of the audience, but with his profile facing the spectators, and in such a plastic [sculptural] position!

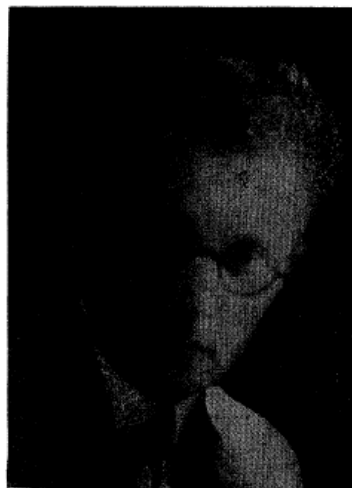
And Tatyana did not jump on her toes during her aria, but sat quietly on a bench. How touching the singers were in their simplicity, and - by the way - how good their voices sounded!...

After Stanislavski's experiment with the opera group, Vakhtangov decided to do everything possible to get him to accept the invitation of the "Vakhtangov Studio" and the "Habima". One day, Vakhtangov expressed to Zemach a "flash of inspiration" that the two groups - the Russian and the Hebrew - should unite for the lessons with Stanislavski. He succeeded in his plan. Stanislavski was inspired, and the magical Sundays in our foyer began!

Every Sunday, at the appointed hour, the foyer of our little theater was filled with restless young people waiting for the great master! And every Sunday, with the same reliability, the Russian "vanke" (coachman) galloped forward and stopped with Stanislavski in Kislovski Alley, number 6. No matter how many times I looked at him during the rehearsal, the shy excitement in his eyes remained a mystery to me. Only when he was already "in the circle" - his own expression for complete concentration - only then did he begin to move and talk freely, to work tirelessly, to explain and illustrate,

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to justify every movement and gesture. Shakespeare's "Shylock" was chosen for the first experiment because this piece [The Merchant of Venice] ultimately reflects the Jewish and Christian worlds with their conflicts. Stanislavski stuttered a bit as he said in his bass-baritone:



ש. קולדובסקי

Sh. Koldovski

" Um... well... it's quite strange, um... I mean, the Russian and the Hebrew together, um... it will sound Italian!" ^[1]

Our Moscow foyer was transformed into a Venetian canal: chairs and benches became "gondolas"; the reflection of the Moscow snow was as blinding as the hot Italian sun! Suddenly an order was heard: "Romance", "romance"!

And immediately couples were formed, who spoke of love with subdued breathing and soft voices;

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there were also groups that sang and whistled improvised melodies, and the sounds of singing voices and whistling melodies filled the air. Stanislavski, wrapped in the green tablecloth of our long work table, paced back and forth as if on the bank of a canal.

We saw clearly how his gray hair shone with youthful gold; his extraordinarily tall, slender body moved rhythmically, his beautiful, expressive hands carried out the plastic ^[2] movements with the "toga", which took on more and more new shapes. An indescribable grace of a princely "caballero". It usually took us hours and hours to get back to real life, to get out of the "magic circle"!

The extraordinary idea of a bilingual spectacle was never realized. That winter, however, we perfected our work with Stanislavski and completed our studies. In the following two years we created three new performances: H. Leyvick's "Golem", Beer-Hofmann's "Jacob's Dream" and Berger's "Deluge".

The three plays had already been staged by our directors - also students of Stanislavski. But the work and the results were not the same ^[3].

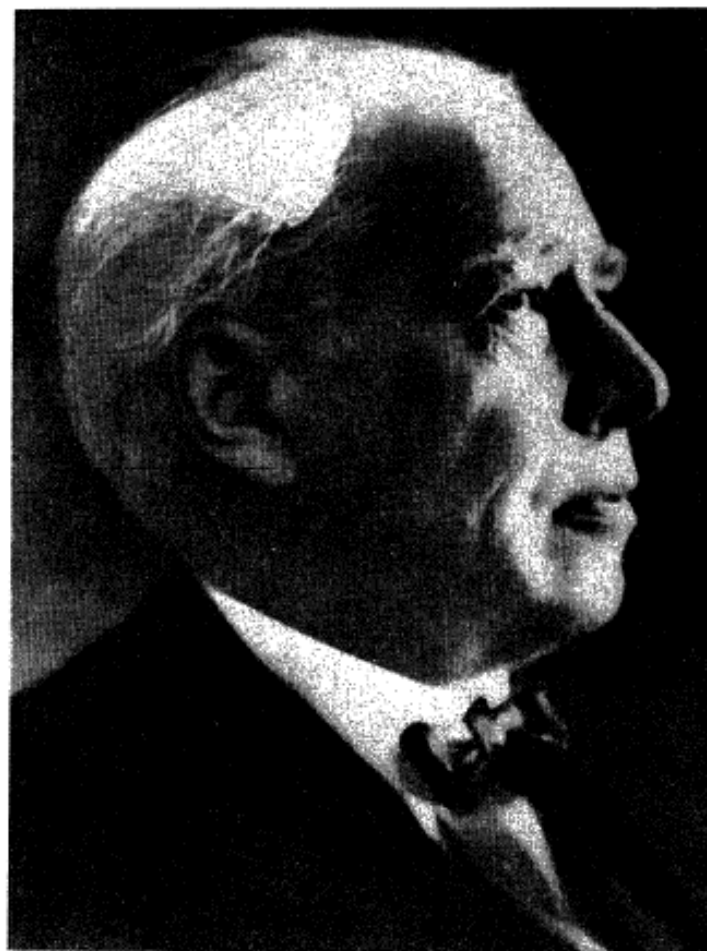
^[1] I would like to point out that in her second book, "My Way Alone", ChayeLe describes some of the same events and situations in a different way than in this book.

^[2] I would like to return to the term "plastic" movements, a phrase ChayeLe often uses. I had previously tried to describe what I thought was meant by it and translated it here as "sculptural" movements. However, the nature and form of these movements changed in the course of the reform process of Russian theatrical art - among other things, in rhythm, pictorial movements, music of speech and acting, expressiveness of fingers, special hand and foot movements.

^[3] I do not want to withhold from you Stanislavski's touching farewell letter to "Habima", dated January 24, 1926, which I quote and translate from "Habima" written in Yiddish by one of Habima's founders, Raikin Ben-Ari.: [Habimah : Ben-Ari, R : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#), page 14:

"I was also involved in the creation of the Hebrew artistic theater 'Habima'. I am very happy about this, because during this work I recognized one of the greatest missions of the artist. Art is the spiritual field in which people come together with the purest and best plans, without politics, without any unworthy personal purpose, only for the sake of beauty and aesthetic pleasure. In art there are no differences of social status, religion or nationality. Art is an area in which the brotherhood of nations can prevail.

It was in these high and pure spheres of art that I met the members of the 'Habima' theater and its talented director - my friend - N.L. Zemach. Now that we must part for a time, I send 'Habima' my warmest and kindest wishes that it may present and preach abroad all that we have loved, sought and created together with my student Vakhtangov."



קאנסטאַנטין סערגעיעוויטש סטאַניסלאַווסקי.

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski

Chapter 25

The Last Days of Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov

The "Dybuk" remained the greatest spectacle, and Vakhtangov remained the greatest director. But Vakhtangov was also a brilliant man! He was humble and self-respecting; he was simple and companionable, and he was severe and reserved; he was serious and concentrated, but also light and funny. Vakhtangov showed his full potential during rehearsals. He depended on the atmosphere and often said:

"If you feel that your imagination is turning off and you are not being creative, look for the cause and consider that the cause may even be the color of the wallpaper on the walls, the light in the room - not just your own condition."

His imagination worked best at night. He often came to see us right after the performances in the first studio of the Moscow Art Theater - his theater; that was after midnight.

He was never tired, but very often he was in terrible pain. It was in the early stages of the development of cancer. And in such cases, an hour, then two hours would pass, talking about the play and all external aspects, and then the rehearsal would begin. The longer he worked, the more creative he became.

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"Work and a 'stop!'" That was his phrase - and so we worked, and again there was a "stop". And after each "stop" we created a new [scene] image. One and the same image would take on new forms in an awesome way. Vakhtangov's fantasy just flashed! And the images used to change as quickly and easily as the juggler's balls. A simple room in gray and blue, soft light and the silence of the night around it, this was what used to stimulate his imagination the most. And such rehearsals often lasted until sunrise, even in the middle of winter.

We often accompanied him home, especially at dawn in the spring. He lived half an hour from us. He was always cheerful and funny on our walks. He was very fond of Mikhail Chekhov and often imitated him. They also had similar characters and often played the same role - in other words, one was the double. And when he imitated him in a role that he himself was playing, he used to say: "I imitate him well, but he plays it wonderfully!"

Vakhtangov was extraordinarily sincere. He used to create a [stage] image, interrupt us and say: "I created this?! Talentless!!"

And then he'd start again. Sometimes he would just provoke a student to see how he would react. For example, here's what happened once: At the dress rehearsal of a one-act play I was assigned to as assistant of the director (and Stanislavski was sitting next to him in the box), it was getting dark in the auditorium, but the curtain still didn't go up. About a minute passed, and he [Vakhtangov] called from the auditorium: "Grober, what's going on?" I was standing behind the curtain, and I couldn't turn on the light that was supposed to be on the table. I was shaking like a leaf, but I didn't answer, I just calmly operated the curtain. Immediately after the act, he came down [from the box] and gave me a kiss "because I hadn't answered.

There was so much greatness in his humility, in his purity, in his love for the individual and in his concept of collectivism!

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He was most embarrassed when his salary was discussed. A student of Vakhtangov received much more than just dramatic education. We are proud to say that we were educated by this great man. What Vakhtangov gave to his students was education. A lesson of Vakhtangov was a sermon! He preached: Honesty, truthfulness, understanding between people, beauty and love!

For Vakhtangov, art and humanity belonged together. That was his greatness! He was always surrounded by his own atmosphere. And when he drew us into his atmosphere, we felt that we had entered another world, a world somewhere above our everyday world - his world! That was the world he lived in, and that was the world he passed into! He did not die! He just floated into a world of immortal creation. His last hours passed in a struggle with the shadows - around his bed stood students from his studio and from the "Habima". There was a dead silence in the house. And we all, together with his wife, witnessed his last struggle:

"Black shadows, stop, stop!"

He shouted this for the last few hours, the words getting softer and softer, weaker and weaker, until we heard his last whisper:

"B-l-a-ck sh-a-d-o-ws..."

The beating of his heart stopped and the sound faded...- a muffled sigh filled the air...

His body lay in his studio for eight and forty hours. Thousands of people passed by, leaving their last tears. Thousands of people walked for miles to escort him to his eternal rest. Hundreds of artists, young and old, breathed for the last time the air in which the great spirit still floated. The grief of the Russian theater world was personified in the great master

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski. His old gray head was bent over the grave of his pupil, and great tears fell on the freshly dug earth that was heaped upon the young genius of the new Russian theater.

Moderato

Allegretto

וואַכטאַנגאָװס נִיגוּנִים.

Vakhtangov Nigunim



חיהלע גראָבער

Chayele Grober

Chapter 26

My Great Premiere

With Vakhtangov's departure, my hope of performing a musical comedy, of which I had dreamed so much and in which he had believed so much, died. The young "Habima", which was based on two pillars - Zemach and Vakhtangov - was now left with only Zemach - the national leader. Zemach's idea was that the "Habima" should only perform plays with Jewish content: Bible, history, legends, customs; he did not want to hear anything about a secular repertoire. But there were few purely Jewish plays. So the "Habima" was left with the big problem: Repertoire. I almost believe that Zemach's principle was not subjective, but pure ideology. In any case, it was directed against the artistic development of a theater and also against the young actors who were not born as biblical heroes.

However, Zemach had begun to look for heroes, or rather heroines, because he counted himself among the heroes, and this was the beginning of the split within "Habima" that later took place in New York.

The main foundation on which our studio had begun to form was collectivism, fraternity and a pure, peaceful atmosphere.

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Vakhtangov preached this from the first to his last day. In our case, however, the whole collectivism was only expressed in the fact that we cut the clay-black bread into equal pieces and distributed the pennies from the sparsely filled till evenly.

But the young people who embarked on the theatrical journey were not looking for bread. Artists can satisfy their hunger and thirst only by being creative, and they can be creative only in an artistic atmosphere. But this atmosphere had died with its creator...

There was nothing left of what our great and unique teacher had preached. Struggles began between Zemach and his colleagues. Zemach, however, always spoke in the name of a great idea, which he always put first, even when his personal interests were involved. Of all my comrades, however, not one remained who would go beyond his own personal ambition. The great difference between Zemach and the others was that Zemach wanted to strengthen the position he had gained through years of toil, suffering, and struggle, while each of his opponents wanted to usurp Nahum's position.

The difference between the two streams was as great as the difference between Nahum Zemach and his opponents.

I can't remember a single time during my years in Moscow when one comrade stood up for another. Yet this is one of the main principles of collectivism. It was exchanged for "starism" [striving to become a star yourself], and in a theater of stars it wasn't enough to have talent, to be praised by the press, by the public, by great teachers. You had to have elbows, you had to have selfishness, you had to have tenacity, and if you were born without these qualities and you inherited a little inferiority complex, you had to start looking for other ways. It was a long and painful process for me.

The "Habima" was my first and only theater. Here I made my first artistic experiences; here my first love for the theater blossomed; here I conceived my first role in Berger's "Deluge"; here I gave birth to my first "Lisi" [ליזי]. In order to get this role, I had to go through a whole winter of pain because of the ulcers that my stressed nature

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caused on my delicate body. This softened the stubbornness a little and the first play that came up was hurriedly grabbed. Everyone was already busy with the performance of גולם ["Golem"] by H. Leyvik and יעקבס חלום ["Jacob's Dream"] by Richard B. Hofman. The whole theater was already preparing for the first big tour through Europe and perhaps America. The מבול ["Deluge"] was the big compromise that Zemach made - it was the first performance with a European repertoire.

After the דיבוקים "dibbukim" ^[1] and the צדיקים "tzadikem" ^[2], "Lisi" was the first woman from the underworld ^[3]; none of us had any experience in this, least of all me. Apart from the fact that there were two directors working with the "Deluge" group, consisting of seven men and one woman - one focused on the roles, the other on the performance - I had no idea how to settle into such a role. There was little time before the performance, the season was ending and spring was beginning, and after the summer the company would be touring Europe. That spring, I went through all the fevers of my youth.

When I was working on "Lisi" - the girl who was thrown into the underworld due to her pure, honest love - all my previous feminine instincts morphed into real, physical desires. And when I had almost finished [studying] the role, I was overcome by an extraordinary restlessness. It chased me from the house back to the studio, and from there through the streets and boulevards. I used to wander as if in a dream through spring and summer nights until the light of dawn. It was on one of these evenings that I experienced for the first time the great mystery of womanhood - the mystery of "fargeyn"...^[4]

It was not connected with a long-lasting romance; it was not the result of dreams or suffering - it developed out of a quiet warmth, out of an echo like a distant thunder.

At that time, a flash of lightning passed through my eyes, I trembled, and the whole world around me and within me was in turmoil. It seemed to me to last an eternity, and there remained a joyful song in my young blood and a tender, lasting vibration in all my limbs...

A new - so far unknown - world opened up before me. I couldn't think about anything - and nothing disturbed me now.

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Work was interrupted during the hot summer weeks. So, for perhaps the only time in my life, I was just a woman.

The first call back to our work in the studio sobered me up. I suddenly realized the "great misfortune" that had befallen me! At this very moment, when I was already at the end of my long journey, at this very moment, when I was approaching the finish line and when the premiere was about to take place, my first big premiere - with a role based on youth, on figure and agility - now I began to feel such a heaviness in my legs and such a depression of my spirit. My temples throbbed like hammers and a thought penetrated my mind: "Get free, get free as soon as possible before it's too late". But it is not easy, it is forbidden by the government. That is why even today I feel a deep sense of gratitude to my friend Dr. S.

A new source of energy opened up for me and I threw myself feverishly into my work. The days were full of worries. Outside of rehearsals, I had to find additional material resources for "my" performance, as it was called. It had been assigned to me, and now I had to take responsibility. The little support we got from the government had to be used for the main play...

God helped me that my warm-hearted friend Koldovski returned to Moscow with the "Dzhoint" ^[5] at that time. Koldovsky became a faithful follower of "Habima" and an admirer of the "great talent in small roles". In the office of the "Dzhoint", sitting at his table, he listened to the description of my difficult situation. He was the only one who knew that my whole world was at stake in the performance, and he, Koldovsky, gave me the money for the performance of "Deluge". He told me then that he personally gave me the money, not the "Dzhoint".

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Although this removed the financial worry, it increased my responsibility: what if, God forbid, the play fell through?! Instead of resting after the difficult summer and my first deep experience, restless days and nights came rushing in. I used to come back to my room tired, but instead of lying down, I took my guitar and strummed and hummed until the early morning. The sound of the strings stimulated me, and it was easy for me to continue the dialogue between "Lisi" and her lover "Bir" [בִּיר], who had betrayed her so much. Vakhtangov often said: "Be free! Perceive every event with open senses - this will arouse various sensations that will be useful to you!"

I really benefited from such an event.

The director who produced "Deluge" had fallen in love with one of our young female students. F. was young but not beautiful, she was "well-built" but rather untalented. We were very close friends with her, but also very good friends with the young Z.

Z. had an inclination to direct and the strength to do whatever it took to get the director's attention. Early one morning, after the restless, feverish nights, I entered the courtyard of our studio in a daze and heard my dialogue with "Bir" sounding like it came from another world... This rudely awakened me and I felt a sharp pain as if a spear had pierced my chest. I ran up the stairs and met two pairs of startled eyes, F.'s and Z.'s.

That night, after this event, I realized my deep pain in my monologue of "Lisi" and decided to perform it accompanied by my guitar. Zemach was shocked when I presented him with my surprise - after all, the guitar has always been associated with "gypsy" songs - but the tears that the scene brought to Zemach and his comrades removed all arguments.

In the new season, the three new plays were already performed in a large theater. "Deluge" was the last premiere at "Habima", but the first premiere for me. On October 8, 1918, I was born for the theater, and now the theater was born for me.

Behind the scenery it was said that the militia had to hold back the people

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who had flooded the "Strasnaya ploshtshad" ^[6]! And that scalpers were getting fantastic prices for a ticket. - My teeth were chattering, my hands were shaking, so it was difficult to put on makeup. I don't know anything about my first performance. I don't even know how I did the scene. But I sang the waltz as I always did in the woods of Milejczyce, and that can only happen when something is innate and stays with us all our lives. I only came to when I heard thunderous applause that lasted for several minutes. So this scene from "Deluge" went through all the cities and countries where we performed it. The biggest surprise for me was when my sister-in-law Tanya told me that Max, my brother, had cried. It is said that "if there is nothing to look at", there may at least be something to listen to...

This was my first discovery and my first victory. Immediately afterwards we left Moscow. Thousands of people flooded the Moscow station; no bells or whistles helped - the train was held up for a long time until the track was cleared. Rain and tears accompanied us from Moscow, but we said goodbye to Russia only at the border. After the railroad officials inspected our belongings and papers, they asked us to give them a farewell concert. In the long, cold and gloomy "tamozhnye" [customs], standing on the benches on which we had thrown our luggage, we sang and played our last notes on Russian soil. From there we left for the big, free world.

^[1] Plural of "dibbuk"

^[2] Plural of "tsadik" or "tzadik"= pious, righteous man, in Chassidism also "holy man", rebe

[3] Bir, a stockbroker, pretends to love Lisi and promises to marry her. But he leaves her and this brings Lisi "into the underworld", into the shady world of prostitution. Lisi meets Bir again as a prostitute in a bar... Meanwhile, it turns out that a heavy storm, a flood, is approaching and all the people in the bar are trapped... In "Deluge", the phenomenon is described that when danger approaches, people are willing to repent and "refine" their minds, but when the danger passes, they fall back into old ways and the pursuit of vain things.

[4] literally, "dem sod fun *fargeyn*". "Fargeyn" can have more than one meaning, but it is usually translated as "to pass away" or "to disappear". In my opinion, at this point it refers to the feeling of surrender, to the "mystery of the dissolving or merging of the self" during the sexual act. In view of the later allusion, I would like to mention that the word "fargeyn", albeit in conjunction with certain other words, can also have the meaning of "conceiving".

[5] דדזװײַט= Ddzhoint, the "American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee"

[6] Strastnaya Square, the today's Pushkinskaya Square in central Moscow.

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Chapter 27

Triumphal Procession of the "Habíma"

Our European tour started in Riga. At the Latvian border, where we arrived in the middle of the night, the tall, black-haired young man Aronshteyn came in and introduced himself as our manager. Our new European manager found the "famous" troupe - the "sensation" - huddled together on the hard benches, covered in thin, worn coats! Twisted heels, tattered soles and woolen socks peeked out from under the covers. Above and below the benches, where suitcases, pillows and bundles were usually thrown, everything was neat and tidy... So he introduced himself and delivered us this "mesedzh" [message] from our "entrepreneur":
"We are not to leave our hotel or meet anyone from the press until we are taken to a store and dressed". I don't know why and how I became the "liderin" [leader] in the store and also in the restaurants. Anyway, we went into a big store like a herd; an elegant man in a white starched shirt and tails came running up to us, greeted us in German and "put himself at our service".

I went ahead and

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said rashly in Russian, "First, undress us, and second, clothe us!"

This was the moment Riga heard the first outburst of laughter from the "Bible Troupe".

In Riga we played in the big opera house. The tickets were already sold out. The dark lighting in the first act of "Dybbuk" frightened the audience, and it was silent as the grave during that act. In the second act, the audience was already lit up and we saw a hall full of "salesmen" - all in the same starched vests and black tails. They acted very "proper" and serious, and their faces were frozen! The ladies hid their faces behind opera glasses and applauded elegantly with their white gloves.

Every Hebrew word that flew towards them hit the hard white vest, bounced off and came back to us to stay with us for the whole time of our guest performances in Latvia.

The first banquet for the "Habima" was arranged in a Jewish restaurant. The elegant gentlemen and ladies had disappeared and we were surrounded by warm, simple people. Hebrew was spoken in an Ashkenazi [German] dialect ^[1] and we gasped with laughter. The reputation that we were a hungry group preceded us, and the tables at the banquet were full of bread: black bread, rye bread, whole wheat bread, brown bread, white bread - bread! Somewhere between the piles of bread, a herring head and a piece of sausage would shyly peek out. We drank tea with lots of sugar, ate thin egg cakes and honey cakes.

The next day, all the innkeepers in Riga knew that Hebrew actors eat a lot of bread and don't speak Yiddish.

In Riga, for the first time in years, we saw open shops and stores full of goods, and we discovered the wonderful "Lux" soap. It was so surprising that our young actress, [A.] Paduit, bought a suitcase full of boxes of Lux soap, and when we came to America a year later, the customs there suspected her of smuggling it into New York...

In Latvia we played not only in Riga, but also in Dvinsk. There we performed in the only "zhelezno-dorozhnes" [railway] theater, which was actually at the railway station.



חיהלע גראָבער אין דער ראָל פון „ליזי“ אין „מבול“
פון ח. ה. בערגער.

Chayele Grober in the role of “Lisi” in מבול [“Deluge”] by M.H. Berger

All eighteen women had to do their makeup in one room, and they even had to do it standing up. But I quickly found my way around and climbed onto a "shelf" that was at the top - in a life of travel, quick orientation is a fantastic quality...

Again, the theater was full; people had come from the surrounding towns, and the atmosphere was warm and more folksy. All the actors were serious and disciplined, just like at the premiere in Riga.

Zemach played the "Tzadik" from the third act, and as always, he took his big break between the [spoken words] "Dybbuk" and the "tze" [get lost!]^[2]. But along with his "tze", the passing train blew a whistle, "Khu-Khu". It's just lucky that all the actors had their backs to the audience during this scene, because everyone laughed so hard, and we got a fit of laughter at this scene for many performances to come.

In Latvia we ate and spent our wages, including those from the Lithuania tour.

Our second stop was in Kovne [Kaunas]. Here we met the great Zionist youth in person for the first time! The dozens of Hebrew schools in Lithuania raised a youth that was well prepared to receive and evaluate our theater. In addition, Talmud students from the Telzher [Telšia] Yeshive [Talmud School] - public or otherwise - came to see and hear the first great Hebrew theater. Besides the evening performances, we also gave performances for the youth during the day. Contact with an audience that understands you creates harmony between actor and audience. The auditorium and the stage become one, and that gives real satisfaction. So our performances in Lithuania have remained with me forever. Kaunas didn't have its own theater or opera house, and there wasn't much to see. Friends gave receptions at home, the bank manager invited [us] to a "five o'clock" - at nine o'clock^[3] ... So it was best to spend time with the young people in the theater.

Latvia and Lithuania were the two small countries that were supposed to prepare us for the big, Jewish Poland. Zemach felt a great responsibility for the "Habima" and also for the Jewish audience. Such a big meeting had

to be prepared very carefully, and he was right. We had performed and tested the plays in Latvia and Lithuania. We even had some ideas about how to convey a joke to an audience that doesn't understand Hebrew. This was especially important for "Deluge" because there is a lot of humor in it. People had gotten used to "Zionism"^[4], which they didn't like very much. Even our Hebraists didn't have much sympathy for "Zionism". Well! And despite all these things, there was still a large part of our group that could get along with the idea of "Habima" as a theater in a foreign language, like - lehavdl [to distinguish] - French, German or Italian. There were people [among them] who didn't study in a Russian theater, but went to a Hebrew theater. They didn't speak Yiddish on principle, even though their parents were from our Jewish people. They had learned

Hebrew, but they didn't really know it. For the months in the small countries, they had learned a little more, gotten used to it a little, and understood a little.

From Lithuania we went to Warsaw. Mighty Warsaw! The city with the largest Jewish community, the best Jewish press, the greatest scholars! Poland - the land of Y.L. Peretz, of Chassidism, of folk legends. Poland - the land of the greatest Jewish theaters, of the best actors - and here was our Hebrew theater, which grew up in Moscow under non-Jewish leaders and in a non-Jewish atmosphere! We had to prepare ourselves intensively for such an encounter. The older members of our group already knew Warsaw - they had either lived or studied there. For me, however, Warsaw - Jewish Warsaw - was completely new! My home environment was not Zionist, and in Moscow Zionism was considered a "counterrevolution". The Zionists worked in Red Moscow just as the socialists did in Tsarist Russia. The "Habima" defined its line as "national-artistic".

Here, in Warsaw, the powerful Zionist organization and its great Zionist leaders revealed themselves to me. Not only did they fill the theater, but we were surrounded by hundreds of friends, followers ["Chassidim"], supporters and persecutors. Here, in Warsaw, cultural life and the theater were now flourishing, although anti-Semitism was growing.

On Nowolipie and Nowolipki Streets ^[5] hooligans cut off the beards of Jews, tore their temple curls, but on Obozhne [Obożna] Street ^[6]

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the "Esther-Rachel Kaminski Theatre" flourished with the popular Sigmunt Turkov and Ida Kaminski; in "Simon's Passage" [Pasaz Simonsa] the cabaret theater "Ezazl" flourished with the charming, elegant Ola Lilith, and in "Novoshtsi" the "Habima" reigned [royally]. Habima reigned, and Polish Jewry rejoiced, not only in Warsaw.

Our arrival in Białystok was a real parade. There were six of us from Białystok in the "Habima": Nahum Zemach, his sister Shifra and brother Benyamin, plus Mulke Shviv in the administration, Chanele Gendler and myself. We arrived in Białystok at the beginning of spring. The people of Białystok opened all their windows, doors and balconies. From the railway station, along the new highway, Lipowa Street, to the large "Ritz" hotel, the sidewalks were crowded with old and young people. Babies were taken out of their cradles so that they too could see the great miracle. My uncle Kalman said to me:

"This is what Białystok looked like when the Czar passed through!"

Here, in Białystok, I was again in a homey atmosphere. My father and my "second" mother already lived there. When we were still in Riga, right after our arrival, a letter from my father was waiting for me - his first letter. My father admitted that he had not really appreciated or understood me - and the main thing - he thanked me for immortalizing his name... They were now living alone in Białystok, my stepbrother Elinke was already studying in Berlin. My parents' happiness was now unprecedented.

The week in Białystok was like a holiday; but Łódź turned out to be no minor holiday.

In Łódź I met Rachel again - Rachel and Lazar Zbar. We had spent not only our childhood years with Rachel. As soon as I arrived in Moscow, we met again. Little Rachel was already rocking a tender "Lyubotshka", and young Lazar had already become a great merchant. Rachel ran her home in Moscow just like her mother Tzimstein did in Białystok. When we, the "Habimanikes" [members of "Habima"], lived on "payok" [rationing], a cart with flour,

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sugar and rice came to our studio every few days - sent by Rachel to her comrades and friends.

In 1919, when I was left alone [in Moscow], Rachel rented a house for herself for the summer and another house for me and my comrades. Her doors were always open and the table was always set. That's how it was in Moscow and now in Łódź. Rachel was like a sister to me, and her house - my second home.

In the summer of 1920, we, a group of "Habimanikes", spent the summer in Klyazma - behind Moscow. Rachel Zbar had rented the "datshe" [summer house] for us, because she also lived there. The only pastime in all the "datshes" was playing cards. But Rachel didn't play cards, she had fun with us, singing songs and telling stories. My guitar was always with me. I didn't use the instrument professionally then, but I used it much more often than in later years.

Klyazma was like a rebirth of Milejczyce for me. A pine forest, sun and carelessness bring out the best songs. The mischief went so far that I sat down in a wheelbarrow with my guitar, and Kolke Zbar (a nephew of Lazar) led me around the neighboring "datshes" as one would lead a little dancing bear...

That summer, a year had passed since my father had traveled to Białystok with my aunt, my step-brother Elinke, and little Gutshe. Our town was occupied by the Germans and it was impossible to write or receive letters. I hadn't had the slightest contact with my brother Max for more than a year. At that time he was living in Voronyezh (where he had done his military service). There were constant civil wars in that part of Russia, and the city of Voronyezh passed from the hands of the Reds to the Whites, then from the Whites back to the Reds. I was generally not very close to my brother, and we didn't write to each other very often.

One summer night in Klyazma, while I was sleeping with Rachel, I had another dream and began to cry in my sleep.



פון רעכטס: הערמאן סוועט, חיהלע גראבער, חנה ראָווינאַ
'און אלעקסאַנדער גראַנאַך (לייפציק 1926).

From right: Hermann Svet, Chayele Grober, Chana Rovina [Hanna Rowina] and Alexander Granach (Leipzig 1926)

Rachel woke me up startled and asked me: "What happened?" I sat up in bed and tearfully told her:

"I just saw myself standing by a wide, white staircase. My brother was at the top, bent over, leaning on a stick. I yelled, 'What's wrong with you, Max?' He pointed to his stomach and said, 'I've been shot in here.'"

Rachel tried to calm me down, but I went into town early. I looked for his last postcard with his address, and although they couldn't promise me it would arrive, I sent a telegram: "Please let me know where and what happened to Max Grober".

After a few days I received a letter from an unknown woman who wrote: "Max is better. We were very surprised to receive your telegram the very morning after the night of Max's operation.

According to this reply, it was clear that my dream took place at the exact time of the operation. I don't dream very often, but always when something very important happens.



מאָקס גראָבער — זײַנעם ברודער.

Max Grober- Chayele's brother

[1] A little note: Yiddish speakers generally pronounce the Hebrew-rooted words in their own, Ashkenazic way, and sometimes even spell these words as they pronounce them.

[2] In this scene, the tzadik tries to exorcise the dybbuk and shouts, דיבּוק צא, Dybbuk, get lost!

[3] This sentence is extremely abbreviated in the original. I suppose Chayele was trying to express in an ironic way that the bank director had invited the "Habima" for tea at 5 o'clock, but then kept them waiting until 9 o'clock.

[4] Zionism: Theodor Herzl and others defined Jews as a "people" and were convinced that, as a separate nation, they also needed their own independent state. Because of their history and religion, many Jews for generations felt a strong connection to the area [with "Zion", the Temple Mount] where Jews had lived alongside an Arab population for thousands of years, and supported the idea of establishing their own state in "Eretz Israel", in the Land of Israel [Palestine].

[5] see [Warsaw: Maps | Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](https://ushmm.org/learn/teaching-tools/warsaw-maps)

[6] see [Ulica Oboźna w Warszawie – Wikipedia, wolna encyklopedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulica_Oboźna_w_Warszawie)

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Chapter 28

Spring and Youth

When we left home in 1915, I was haunted by the longing for my first "great" love, which had already begun at school desks. It had begun at the "age" (or rather "youth") when one "falls in love with love". Early spring had greened our city garden ("Gorodski Sod"); heavy branches hung from the trees, the lilacs had not yet bloomed; the fresh green buds of the chrysanthemums shone from the flower beds; the rose blossoms had not

yet opened; only a few violets and fresh grass sprouted from the still cold earth, and together with the garden my youth awoke - as quiet as the grass, as pure as the starry sky, as mysterious as the shadows in the alleys of our garden.

Moyshke was an intimate, simple, dear boy. His declaration of love was a deep sigh, a full look, and after that I went through a period of guarding my innocence and making plans for a life fit for the only daughter of decent parents.

His delicacy and honesty won my mother's friendship, and though it was not yet time for a "takhles" [straight talk],

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I was left with the impression that my mother had somehow quietly agreed to the match. The outbreak of World War I tore us apart. When we parted, he cried and I promised him I would come back. During the years of war and revolution, my imagination created a hero and a legend [out of the romance]. I ran to him right after the war. But in those years my eyes were also opened to people and the world, and the dream was shattered at the first meeting. I met a person who was really fine and honest, but so far away from me... He was like a long-distance relative with whom my childhood was once connected...

I was not disappointed, but surprised, very surprised! However, Moyshke's love had grown stronger over the years, and our second farewell was even more tragic. So I promised again to come back. I left for Moscow. But although my longing had disappeared, I was now haunted by his tears and tormented by my promise to come back.

So I ran to him again, and this time my uncle Zeydl also hurried across the seas to meet me with the words: "I am in the duty of my only sister's only daughter and have come to marry you off!"...

I felt like a fish in a net. We got married. Between us, however, we decided that it was a sham wedding. A few days after the wedding, I sold my few pieces of furniture and my piano, and a novelist would put it like this:

"One winter's night, as the moon poured its blueness over the snow, the lovers ran away from home... In a small shtetl close to the border they hid during the day from the moralizing of the town, and after midnight a sledge came gliding up to the entrance of the house, on which the young couple jumped and disappeared into the dense forest. There, in the forest, they were taken to a "zemlyanke" [mud hut], where they remained alone, wrapped in the darkness and silence of the night...

Suddenly they heard a whistle. They jumped onto a second sledge and made their way past the guard - who stood with their backs to them like wooden soldiers - onto Russian soil..."

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A small wheelbarrow was dragging my little dowry from the Moscow train station, and I was walking after it like a corpse... Suddenly I was overcome with sadness at the whole mess I had gotten myself into. There was no "ploshtshad" (residential district for Jews) in Moscow, so we had to share my room. I "secured" myself with a fringed curtain that we hung across the entire width of the room. Throughout that winter and spring, the curtain hung like an iron lock...

But that first summer on neutral ground, among the pines of "Pushkino", the curtain fell by itself...

Happiness didn't stay with me, but neither did anger - indifference remained. In Moscow it's easy to get married, easy to get divorced, but impossible to separate - because there is no "ploshtshad"...

So things remained as they were until I left the country.

From the day we left Russia, a holiday began!

All those years in Russia we were hunting, working, worrying, starving, freezing and suddenly - we were carefree, full and so warm! All those years in Moscow we were fascinated by the great idea of "theater", and this had become the only meaning of our lives. Zemach wanted to get his colleagues from the first group in Moscow to sign a point: "No one can have a wedding until 'Habima' is in Jerusalem". But he didn't do it himself, and neither did I.

During the first months abroad, we were drunk on our artistic success... After the recognition of the Polish and Polish-Jewish press, we felt like fully professional actors. With our artistic success came personal success, and there, in Warsaw, a young actress had her first great romance.

Bernard was the only son of wealthy parents. Raised in Russia, educated in Poland, he had received his doctorate from the Sorbonne.

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Although he came from the assimilated youth, he was carried away by Jabotinsky's ^[1] fiery call! And our encounter solidified the ideal for the Land of Israel. Here in Warsaw, the life of the great world was revealed to me. Not only did Bernard follow me, but the whole Y. family treated me like a "prima donna," although I never felt like one myself. Both his parents and his sister, B.G., lived in large apartments in a long courtyard of houses on the main street in Warsaw. In the large salons, illuminated by crystal candelabras and hanging lamps, countless banquets and official and unofficial receptions were held. Special dance rehearsals of "foxtrot" and "shimmy" were arranged in the large saloons, where I learned the latest hits of 1925-1926.

The whole of Poland echoed with "Valencia" ^[2] and "Czy Pani mieszka sama, czy razem z nim" ^[3]. On free evenings, when a play I was not in was being performed, I was taken to the magnificent Polish and Jewish theaters. The night life in Warsaw could be compared to the nights in Paris.

My and B.'s big plans for the future became the sensation of our guest performance there. That winter and spring, the sleighs and cabs carried me as if on wings over the streets of Warsaw, over the Praga Bridge and Ujazdowski Avenue, into the vast pine forests, through moonlit nights and sunny days.

As many days as we played in the provincial towns, as many telegrams flew and telephones vibrated, often ringing as soon as we got up.

In Łódź, in the house of Rachel and Lazar, it was decided that I would return to Warsaw right after the season. The family already knew that "B." would open his workroom and home the following winter. By the time all the plans were finished, we were done with Poland and set off for Berlin.

^[1] Ze'ev Jabotinsky was one of the leaders of the Zionist movement, see [Ze'ev Jabotinsky - Wikipedia](#)

^[2] [Valencia \(1925\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

^[3] [Czy pani mieszka sama - Olgierd Buczek \(youtube.com\)](#)

Chapter 29

On the Great European Stage

Still in Moscow, Zemach insistently pointed out the most important venues for us: Jewish Warsaw - from the national point of view, and the greatest theatrical Berlin from the artistic point of view; and if we climbed these two high levels, then we would also be able to go to the highest peak of the mountain - to New York!

The arrival in Berlin was the most thrilling. Every actor was filled with anxiety about having a premiere there. There was also a sense of excitement in the audience; no one had come to see "Habima" out of indifference. Even before the curtain went up, we could sense the great anticipation of everyone in the auditorium.

Not only had Berlin already heard about the young theater from the press, but Zemach had also been here before and had prepared the ground. The great poet, Kh.N. Bialik, had also already told [about us] “nisim-venifloes” [miracles after miracles] ^[1], and the famous [actor, Alexander] Moissi, who had visited us during his guest performances in Moscow, had already brought a greeting from Vakhtangov's brilliant performance [to Berlin]. In less than a year, a legend had already been woven around "Habima".

The "Dibbuk" was on its triumphal march, terrifying the actors who played the leading roles in other plays.

We were ready to believe that

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Vakhtangov couldn't fail at all, but what about the other, weaker pieces?!

The מבוול ["Deluge"] was the last of the plays to be performed, and that's how it was done in every country. Here in Berlin, I waited six weeks for my turn. My expectation became more and more tense, and more and more often the thought came to me that my play was a European one, and surely no one could be surprised by it...

It happened that one night before the premiere of "Deluge" Alexander Granach ^[2] invited me to see "the Bergner" [the actress E. Bergner] play. The childlike figure and the "little bird's voice" of "the Bergner" surprised me, and I asked:

"By what means does she play the drama?" Granach laughed out loud, "with the means of 'the Bergner'..."

And then something really extraordinary happened: in the third act, the "lover" picked up his "beloved" and crept with her to the bed behind the curtain. After a second, a thin, short, high-pitched cry echoed through the theater from behind the curtain, like the squeak of a canary... The whole theater held its breath and froze in a long pause - the great tragedy was understood as that of a helpless bird attacked by a wild animal.

That was the effect "the Berger" had on me, and it put me in a kind of fear that didn't leave me until I went to my premiere. On stage, I felt my insecurity from the very first phrase. Everything I said sounded wrong. Even the applause after the dialogue sounded wrong to me. When I left the theater after my big premiere, I felt lost and unhappy! I didn't go to the banquet that had been arranged after the performance; in my large room in the "Fasanenplatz" boarding house, I lay in bed in the dark, still fully dressed, soaking the pillows with my tears.

I simply could not get up, even though so many of my comrades knocked and begged me to let them in.

The gray day barely illuminated the room when I opened the door for my comrade, Benyamin Zemach.

Already completely tearstained, I said:

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"I have failed. I can't climb to the heights that "Habima" has reached, because my talent doesn't go further than the cabaret"... and I continued like this...

With a warm smile on his lips, Benyamin said something and I fell into a deep sleep, totally exhausted. A loud knock on the door woke me - Granach had ordered the first morning paper to be brought in with the theater review of "Deluge". Half an hour later, Hermann Svet called for someone to go out and buy the next paper immediately. Then Itkin came in beaming with a third newspaper. My room was full of comrades and the floor was covered with newspapers. Highly enthusiastic "opinions" were being read out: "The German press compared [her] to the greatest German actress"... But I didn't even have the strength to be happy anymore. And so I experienced my first great, long-awaited success.



סאַשאַ פּרוּדקין
„ביר“ אין „מבול“

Sasha Prudkin, the "Bir" [ביר] in "Deluge"

My partner, Sasha Prudkin, had contributed much to my great success in מבול ["Deluge"]. The "Habima" at that time had some beautiful "tates" [fathers], "mekhutanim" [relatives of the bride and groom] and "batlonem" [loafers] ^[3], but no one for the role of the lover. Sasha Prudkin was chosen because he was the most suitable type - in addition to his artistic career, Sasha already had a doctorate and had chosen surgery as his specialty. In the love scene with me - that is, between "Lisi" and him, "Bir" - his voice

sounded a little too sharp and dry, and his touch was neither tender nor warm. But this suited the type of career man, an egoist, as "Bir" is described.

Sasha Prudkin was a serious artist, he was smart and very disciplined. Now he is engaged at the Moscow Art Theater.

After my premiere in Berlin, I felt like after a long illness. Little by little, I began to regain my strength, and with this new strength, my desire to play again - to play and sing without stopping - began to grow. Something like a hidden source of strength was about to burst forth. I could hardly wait for the second performance of "Deluge". What infinite happiness an actor experiences when he fully lives the role and atmosphere of his play! I actually lived my second performance and didn't act it! I floated as if on the waves of the flowing Mississippi. My voice and guitar vibrated spontaneously as I disappeared behind the scenes in the "foaming" waltz with "Bir". There was dead silence in the hall and we stood still, startled. Suddenly the applause broke out like thunder. We couldn't continue the act until we had gone to the front several times and bowed (which is against all the laws of art theater).

I don't remember how many times the curtain went up after the performance, but when I was already in the dressing room, without my costume, the manager came in, threw me my coat, and pushed me back on stage.

After the performance Granach sat with me in a special room in a large restaurant and told me in a soft voice (which he never used during his acting) that I could have a great career on the German stage, that he would make me the greatest German actress and that the whole world would be mine...

I didn't get drunk on his speech or on my successes.

At that time, however, I felt deep in my heart that my world consisted only of the theater, and that personal successes could and would never

tear me out of this world of mine.

Suddenly Warsaw was covered in a thick fog, so thick that I could hardly see the silhouette of a person. And even before we finished our tour in Germany, Poland disappeared from my eyes and heart.

Our friendship with Alexander Granach began when he told me his life story. At that time, Alexander Granach was famous all over Germany. He had always been a good Jewish man, but now the „Habima“ had awakened his hidden longing for Judaism. Alexander Granach was a child of the

common people, his Galician shtetl was called Horodenko, and his home was- poverty. At the age of fourteen, he was already a specialist baker, and he had the characteristic crooked legs of someone who had spent his life kneading dough.

But no one would ever have guessed that his dough, which he kneaded with such spirit, had so many wonderful dreams kneaded into it!

At the age of fourteen, Granach knew that his world was the theater. At that time, a Jewish troupe with director Gimpl had come to Horodenko.

After their performance, Granach jumped down from the gallery to the director's door, but stopped abruptly because he had lost his courage.

Alexander, the bold, daring boy, was ashamed, and with a sense of modesty unknown to him, he knocked on the door. Mr. Gimpl – the "sensitive spirit" and bearer of Jewish art – measured him from head to toe and asked him:

"What is your current work?" And Granach replied: "I'm a baker".

"Well, go back to your dough and keep making bagels..."

Granach scrutinized him with his gypsy eyes and walked away. But he didn't go back to his dough, he went to Berlin and to Reinhardt. And from Reinhardt he went to the hospital, where his twisted legs were operated on. While he lay in bandages for a year, he had surrounded himself with books. His doctors and nurses were also his teachers and friends in the new world, and from the hospital, which was also his first school, he came across [the works of] Heine and Goethe, and through them to the great "Volks-Bühne" in Berlin.

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Granach finished his story and shouted in his thundering voice, "A fine walk, hey!" I grew very fond of his gentleness, but could not shake the fear of his ferocity. Granach was a very wild young man, a good friend. But when he went over the top – he was really good, but wild – he would chew up a glass with his healthy teeth and spit it out to the last shard without a bleeding wound. I saw this art as a child, from the pickpockets on our yards, and I was very enthusiastic about it then. But now, watching an artist – a great artist – do it, I felt terrible.

As a friend of Granach's, you never knew what he was going to surprise you with. Granach had become very attached to "Habima", he began to love us, he came to us every free minute, he was as enthusiastic as all the artists and spectators about the sacred atmosphere in which "Habima" was raised.

But that didn't stop him from doing such things:

On the occasion of an evening I gave for him, he appeared with a German woman who suddenly presented herself completely naked in front of us. I went up to him and said: "Show this lewd woman out!"

But he looked at me in astonishment and couldn't understand my excitement. He tried hard to explain to me that this was the inspiration, the elevation of the German art world and high society...

However, I did not understand at that time that the "pure race" was growing out of this very fornication...

This talented, popular and very famous German actor had many, many surprises in store for you. However, he also had wonderful qualities! His colleagues told me how he came to a meeting of his party and found worried comrades. They needed money for a big job that had to be done.

Granach didn't think twice, but poured out all the money from his pockets onto the table – except for a single mark.

Alexander Granach had such a generous hand and such a good heart.

[1] I translate here Bialik's commentary on “Habima” on page 7 of [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) : “The greatness of ‘Habima’ lies not only in its artistic endeavors and play, but in the creation of ‘Habima’ itself, in the creation of something out of nothing. In the strong faith that dominates the artists of the 'Habima'. Faith itself is true art and without faith there is no true art.”

[2] About A. Granach, please see the German version [Alexander Granach – Wikipedia](#) and see the interesting [ALEXANDER GRANACH | Trailer german deutsch \[HD\] – YouTube](#). I also highly recommend reading the touching story of the career of the later famous expressionist actor here [in German]: <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/freimann/content/pageview/953976>

[3] בטלנים= This word also has other meanings, such as “pious Jews who sits permanently in the synagogue”

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Chapter 30

Paris- New York

Paris was the last stop on our European tour, and the 1926-1927 season ended there. And it ended very sadly! The heat was very high, but the Jewish audience - very small. The wonderful coverage of the French press did not attract a French audience. The arriving tourists,



וולאדימיר גרֶסמאַן.

Vladimir Grosman [Grossman] ^[1]

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filled the revue theaters and cabarets. It was impossible to compete with Mistinguett and Maurice Chevalier. Back then, Paris danced in the streets. Ladies from all over the world shimmered in the most expensive evening gowns and real diamonds! How could one sit there all evening and listen to the lamentations of the destroyed temple, or even watch the dancing of the melancholy, ragged poor?



אַ גרופע „הבימה“־שוישפילער אויף אַפּרו אין אַ דאָרף אין
פראַנקרײך אין 1926.

A group of “Habima” actors on vacation in a village in France in 1926

There was no large Zionist organization here to create the atmosphere around the "Habima", nor was there the large Warsaw press. There was only one Jewish newspaper - "Parizer Haynt" - and its editor, Vladimir Grossman. He wrote and advertised in his paper, but from one premiere to the next, the theater became emptier and emptier, the audience more and more tired; and when it came to "my" premiere, the editor, Vladimir Grossman,

was tired himself and left before the curtain had even risen. So I lost a review of my "king's role" and also a meeting with one of the most interesting people of that time. Vladimir Grossman also lost something - several good years with me... If he had stayed in the theater, we would have celebrated our silver wedding anniversary today...

The season ended with the "Deluge" and the whole troupe was left without money and without further contracts - only with the hope of America. The opponents of Nahum Zemach felt that this was the most appropriate time to take the "power" over us away from him... And it was here, in Paris, that the split actually took place, which was then finalized in New York. The members of the troupe traveled separately, to different corners of France, for what was called a "vacation"! I went with a group to a small village near the Swiss border, I think it was "Saint-Sauveur". We stayed in the village until we received word from Paris that we could return right away and prepare for a second tour of Germany. And it wasn't until the end of 1927 that we left for New York.

All of our comrades, without exception, were traveling to America for the first time - to the vast, foreign "golden" land. But I had known America for many years, since my childhood. It was my uncle Zeydl who had introduced me to America - the very uncle for whom crossing the Atlantic was the same as crossing the Biała for a Białystoker...

I had heard endless stories from my uncle. I already knew that in America the heat was so extreme that men walked without suit jackets, with sleeves rolled up above the elbows, that the streets were narrow except for Broadway and Fifth Avenue, that trains ran overhead and underground, and that there were cars on all sides, so that a person felt like a small cog turned in a big machine.

My uncle also advised me to report on the sweatshops, even though he wasn't a worker himself. He loved the trade, the people, the talk, the fantasies, the attic and the yesterdays... Maybe that was the real reason why he kept running back and forth

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from America to his homeland. He was running after "mazl" [luck], but he couldn't catch it. But he felt with the instinct of a simple man that we had to flee from Russia, Poland and Europe. He also believed that there was gold in the depths of the American soil - you just had to dig for it. I still thought about all his stories. I also remembered that people slept on the roofs in the extreme heat, and I also learned that wonderful little song:

„Zumer baynakht oyf di dekher

Dan iz dokh di goldene tsayt,

Men krikht alemol aroyf hekher

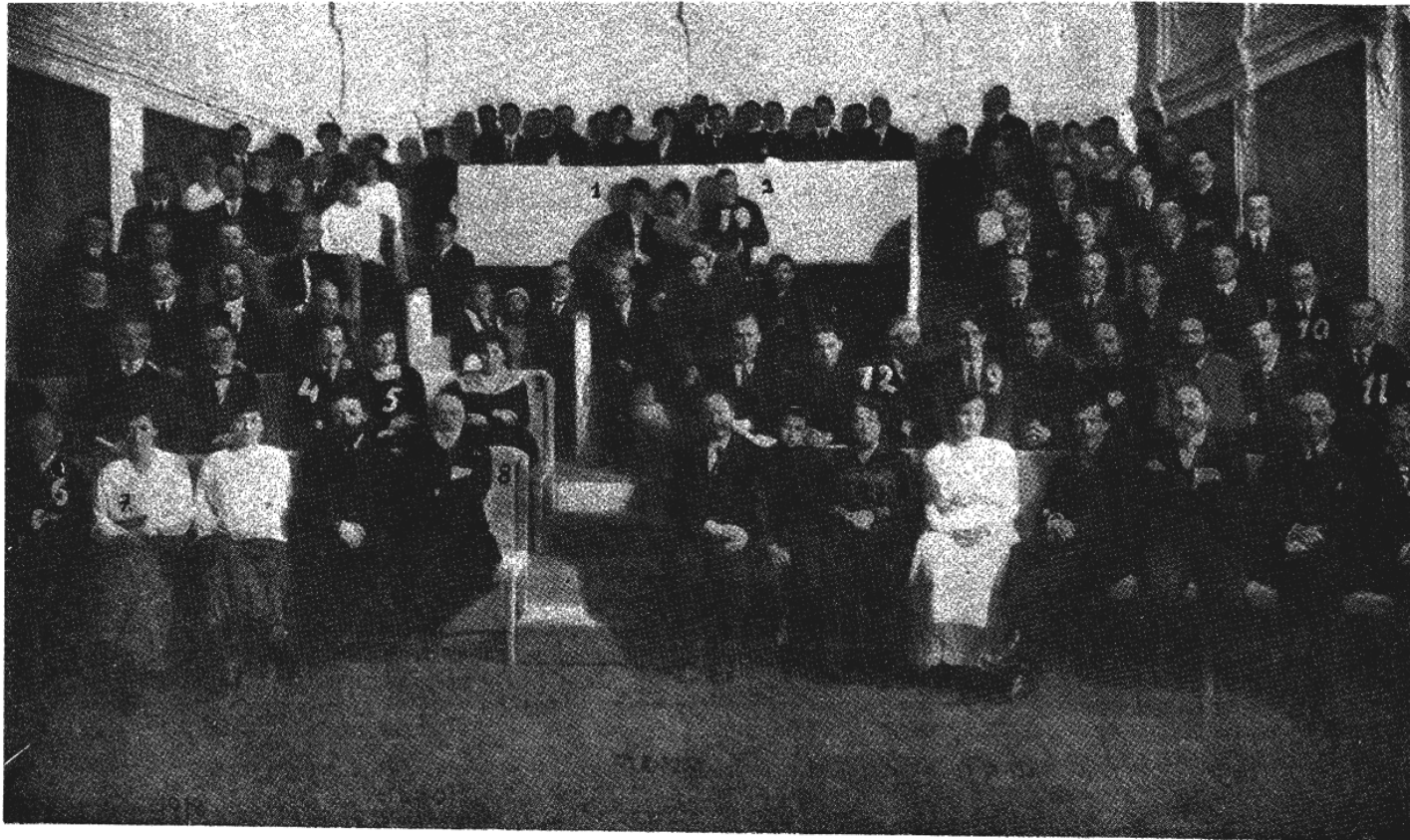
Und men vert dort fun tsores bafrayt...“ [2]



The later song my uncle brought was like this:

„Oy, feter, feter fun Amerike-Land
Shik mir dolarn nokhanand...”^[3]





ערשטע פרעמיערע פון „הבימה“ 8טן אקטאבער 1918

1. נאדיעזשדא מיכאילאוונא (די פרוי פון י. ב. וואכטאנגאוו). 2. מולקע שוויף. 3. די מוטער פון נ. צמח.
4-5. זיין ברודער שמעון און פרוי. 6-7 ש. ווענדראף און פרוי. 8. הרב מאזע. 9. חיים גרינבערג. 10. יולי
11. יאזעף יעזעוויטש. 12. פרופעסאר גלאגאלין.

[The audience at] the first premiere of “Habima” on October 8, 1918

1. Nadyezhda Mikhailovna (wife of Y.B. Vakhtangov), 2. Mulke Shvif, 3. Mother of N. Zemach, 4.-5. His brother Shimen and his wife, 6.-7. Sh. Vendrof and his wife, 8. Rabbi Maze, 9. Khayim [Chaim] Grinberg, 10. Yuli Engel XXXX [unreadable] (the later administrator of the “Habima”), 12. Professor Glagolin.

With this song and my guitar, everyone accompanied us to the "golden" land. But how many of us had experienced the process of winning the gold back then? ! First a boiling black mud flowed from hot cauldrons; then a little golden dirt began to flow; then the substance was purified by fire and flame into a golden liquid - mixed with earth, and only later did pure, dazzling, fiery gold emerge! America appeared to the emigrant in exactly the same way, and no differently.

We all knew about the famous "Ellis Island" that emigrants had to pass through to get to New York. But we weren't traveling as emigrants - we were traveling as the first national artistic theater! And all of Jewish America was waiting for us! Besides, the Moscow Art Theater had already told us about their tour of America, and they hadn't mentioned any memories of Ellis Island; neither did the Balyev troupe, nor the "Blue Bird" ^[4]. And, it seems to me, neither did the great Vilnius troupe that came to America before us. Yet we had the "good fortune" to spend the first 24 hours on Ellis Island. We were greeted by America with the dirt, with the stench of the "hekdesch" [public poor-person accommodation] called "Keshl-Gardn" [Castle Garden].

Why did it hit us and not the other troops? Why didn't it hit the great Vilnius troupe, but the "Habima"?

Maybe because they didn't have a Zionist organization, or maybe because they weren't a national theater that had attracted the attention of the entire non-Jewish theater world in one year. I think the real reason was that they had come as a people's theater for the people. We arrived in New York the night before Christmas. It was freezing cold, and the first thing I saw was a red, frozen little nose and a face streaked with tears - my little Genye!

A feverish warmth pulsed from her small, trembling body. I forgot that I came as an actress and didn't think about the press, about my career, about everything an artist has to do and think about...

The struggle between artist and human being, artist and woman, haunts me and I have been fighting this battle all my life.

My family surrounded me and brought me home - and that home was the famous Coney Island. My uncle had decided that he had to give me the first big "thrill", as he explained to me. That meant - the first big surprise, and he took me on the subway, just between 5-6 o'clock, when New York is spitting out thousands of people from the factories, the offices, the shops. At the first station I jumped out like an arrow from a bow, and

the others jumped out after me. It wasn't a thrill, it was a terrifying experience. But I can't believe how quickly I got used to my terrifying first experience and how quickly I began to realize that I could "Americanize" myself.

The cleanliness and brightness of my family's home took me back 10 years. I had already been weaned from my home environment, the domestic "uyut" [coziness], and had certainly long forgotten the kind of tenderness and motherliness I now received from my Aunt Teybele. I must say that my Aunt Teybele is not quite an aunt as we all know them, but my Aunt Teybele is really a "mama". Since my grandmother died, she, Teybele, had become what my grandmother was to me - with all her care, love and loyalty. And now bitter tears mixed with sweet joy.

My aunt wept: "I wish your mother had lived to see this!" And I cried because of the twelve pairs of shoes that were in my Genitshke's closet. I came from a country where people really go barefoot, and here...

She innocently tried to explain to me that here in America people work, and once you earn money you get what your heart desires, and that in America people would dress "tu metsh".

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I didn't understand what "tu metsh" ["to match"] meant, and she didn't hesitate to give me the first lesson:

"Everything must match; the shoes to the costume or dress, a hat to the shoes, gloves to the bag, and so on and so forth..."

She started with a lesson and went on to specific things: Nothing I was wearing "fit America". The first thing that shocked her was the big, round man's hat. I had brought it with me from Berlin. There at the station, as the train pulled up to take us to the ship, Alexander Granach had exclaimed: "Think of me!" And he had torn his hat from his head and thrown it through the window into the wagon. I liked that real felt hat, but "not for America"...

I rested, satisfied myself with the homey idyll and left for New York. The whole troupe was staying at the "Ansonia" Hotel right on Broadway. While I was in Coney Island, my comrades surrounded themselves with friends, journalists and wannabe journalists; it simply became a competition to see who could outdo each other in interviews. The main goal, of course, was to outdo Nahum Zemach. This effort was led by a few men who claimed Zemach's position. The campaign started right in Riga, and here in New York they just lost their heads. It's easy to get lost in New York; the pace of New York takes your breath away, the rhythm of New York throws you off balance.

These were the years of America's greatest prosperity. America's slogan was: "Hurry up!" Every single person in New York was hurrying to get ahead of everyone else. The "elevators" (the elevated trains) clattered day and night without stopping; the crowds rushing down and up the subways literally threw you from side to side; the thousands of people rushing to and from the theater almost swept you away.

All the English theaters in New York are located in one area: between 41st and 56th Streets - on the West Side to 8th Avenue and on the East Side to 5th Avenue and Broadway. In the subways, you would often see magnates in top hats going to the theater with their

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ladies in gold dresses because they would not get there in time by car.

A newcomer to New York is terrified. You feel the current pushing you further and further away, and the thought that you could be pushed out completely over time really drives you crazy. That's how I felt. Two phrases I heard in my first days in New York haunted me for years. One was, "America either makes you or breaks you" - America builds you up or breaks you down; and the second phrase my uncle told me to reassure me was, "Who has the name- has the game" - whoever has the name wins...expressing his deep conviction that I would make "the game".

The "Habima" began its guest performances in a not-so-great theater on Broadway. I, and I'm sure other comrades, dreamed that in a center where theater flourishes like this, we would surely stay for the whole season, and maybe a second, and start later in the provinces, as is customary. But the reality was terrible! Already after the second premiere, a cold wind began to blow at the box office, which quickly spread to the theater and from there to the backstage. Only eight weeks later, we were packing the crates for the provincial tour. It was called a "tour", but it was really just a few cities where Zionist organizations had agreed to buy a performance.

I didn't know at the time that this was actually called "benefits". It's outrageous! Instead of establishing associations to build up the theater and help it continue to exist, they made a business out of it. Twenty years have passed, but I still shudder when I think of the Boston performance. It was the Hadassah ^[5] that had bought the "Dybbuk" there. I think they were supposed to pay \$500. The plan was to go from there to Chicago. The hall was overcrowded, the parterre, as always, occupied by the "upper class"...After the show, a number of ladies in evening gowns and fully dressed gentlemen came behind the scenes and told Zemach

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that they would pay \$125 less because not everything was sold out and the expenses were high. Zemach, of course, would not accept, and so the deal began. The entire troupe sat on their luggage and crates. Zemach pleaded with the "committee" that we would miss our train and that we had to be in Chicago tomorrow. The Zionist ladies and gentlemen, however, cold-bloodedly waited with the "whole bon ton etiquette" [with decorum] until Zemach had signed the receipt (minus 125 dollars).

In this way we gradually began to get to know the Jews in America.

^[1] Chayelet's later husband

^[2] In the summer night on the roofs
Is the golden time,
You climb higher and higher
And are free from woes...

^[3] Oy, uncle, uncle from America-land,
Send me dollars one by one...

^[4] The Blue Bird, which premiered 1908 at Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, was presented in New York in 1910.

^[5] Women's Zionist Organisation of America

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Chapter 31

In the Golden Era of Jewish Theater in America

Here and now, as everywhere and always, I was drawn to my old relatives and friends, and simply to the people. You can't really get an idea of people unless you see their homes and see them in their homes. So I began to make short visits, and it seemed to me that it was from the American homes that my love for New York began. I'm talking about the homes of the petty bourgeois, of the workers, of the teachers, of the office workers, of the writers, of the theater people. In all these small homes lies the great expanse, the open-mindedness of America. Perhaps the Americans themselves did not even feel it, because everything one has become accustomed to seems self-evident. But for a person who lived on a "ploshtshad" - an area of four by four - and had as neighbors on one side a drunkard who used to beat his wife because she wouldn't let him near her twelve-year-old daughter, and on the other side a married couple - workers who insulted each other with the dirtiest words - it was far from self-evident and not at all easy.

And this went on year after year. I don't even want to talk about the other inconveniences - in comparison, the American homes really convinced me. For a long time I was amazed at the brightness of such a home!

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They didn't look at the clock here at all – "es brent"!... ^[1] . And then this warmth! The cleanliness! Well, and what about the American kitchens? There were electric appliances, all the big and small machines, the big and small knives. These little things, the very little things without which life was so difficult and dark...

One of the first homes I visited was that of my fellow Białystoker, Mair Shvarts [Maier Schwartz]. Mair was the son of the Shvarts [family] "with the machines". He had his workshop on Lipowa Street, opposite the "tserkve" [Russian church], next to the Lis [family] "with the shoes". I was very young, and yet I remember how the dirty young man had a love affair with the beautiful Rachele Slapak. She actually reminded me now of how I had once accompanied her from Povetshizne [Street] to the "tserkve" and confided to her the secret of my great dreams... Mair Shvarts was now a theater prompter in America. And he was actually the first person to introduce me to what was going on behind the scenes at Second Avenue. From him I learned that they had a strong "union" - so strong that even the greatest, most world-famous artist was not allowed to enter the union until he had passed a test, and that he had to be tested not only by a college of great actors, but actually by the "khoristkes" [female chorus singers] themselves. And he told me who the "khoristkes" were. But if they voted "no," all was lost! Then you were no longer an actor, you had no "talent" - and the world [which said otherwise] was a liar.

Now that I had an idea of the Jewish theaters, I began to get to know the theater itself and the actors.

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski had already told us about Maurice Schwartz and his art theater, and he did so with great enthusiasm. It was something you could really get excited about! This was the heyday of art theater. When the curtain opened, Baruch Aronson's decorations would light up, Yosef Achron's music would play, and Jewish actors would step out into the light before you! Although she didn't even have a leading role, Tzili [Cecilia] Adler radiated; - what sense of humor, what eyes, how much talent expressed in each of her movements!



„מבול“ — דריטער אַקט

פון רעכטס: בענאָ שניידער, וויניאַר, ד. איטקינ, ס. פרודקינ, ח. גראַבער,

רייקי בן-ארי; אויבן: ד. פרידלאַנד.

“Deluge” - third act.

From right: Benno Schneider, Vinyar, D. Itkin, S. Prudkin, Ch. Grober

Raikin Ben-Ari; above: D. Fridland

After that, all of a sudden, the whole auditorium broke out in rapturous applause. There was no one on stage yet, just a voice from backstage could be heard, and then a Jewish woman came out - a Jewish woman who deals in geese. She spoke - she spoke in a simple way, and it seemed to me that the whole stage was one big market, with geese squawking, clattering, and the buyers and sellers shouting and fighting under the shechita knife... This scene was played by the great old Nina Abramovitsh. My God, how immediate, how talented - how great!

Then I saw Isidor Keshir - the lion! Izidor Keshir had slow, heavy movements and an inner temperament; when he walked on the stage, you had the impression that he was not going forward, but somewhere in the depths, and his voice had such a vibrato, as if it came to you from somewhere in the deepest depths. His speech was always accompanied by a kind of bass growl... like a lion's.

Izidor Keshir reached deep into my heart.

Another vigorous, talented character actress with the figure and head of a "grande dame" was Khane [Chana] Apel. What freedom on stage, what ease in the transition from seriousness to humor!

This was the ensemble of the Art Theater.

But there were five theaters on Second Avenue back then. Little Molly Picon - in the big "2nd Avenue Theater" - played to audiences of thousands. She was the only operetta actress at the time. Molly was not the type of operetta actress you were used to seeing. She wasn't feminine, she didn't have the elegance of a woman, she didn't have the "sex appeal" - she didn't have anything that Clara Young or the famous Russian Potoptshina had. But Molly shone with her own "I". She played "Di Mamele" [The Mama], which was actually written for her by my friend Mair Shvarts. Never since then have I seen her in a role that suited her so wonderfully, the "Mamele" was really written for her. Mair Shvarts brought out all the qualities that Molly had: naivety, goodness, wisdom, a kind of responsibility that a child is so touched by.

There are actors here who think

that operetta is not art - and there are just as many spectators [who think that way]. Neither Stanislavski nor Vakhtangov ever said such a thing. Any branch of art is art if it is performed with talent, and little Molly had not only great talent, but also intelligence and education.

Samuel Goldenburg played at the National Theater. He was a true type of lover, a hero. He had a princely figure, a beautiful head and a pair of eyes that only had to look at a woman and he could be sure to win... He also had a soft, musical voice, and he was the darling of the audience in that time.

Jewish America in those years didn't just have the five theaters on the "Avenue". There were eleven theaters [scattered] throughout New York, in Brooklyn, Bronxville and the Bronx. There was a Max Gable Theater in the Bowery - in the middle of the density of poverty and decay. But in that theater, Jennie Goldstein was the actress in "shund" [trashy] plays. I'll never forget how we - a large group of our best actors - sat in the theater and cried. Our "men" cried too. I will also never forget the trance Jennie was in when we walked in on her at intermission: "It's a crazy thrill for me that your actors have come to see me. You know I play 'shund', 'shund'! But I [know how to] sell it..."

Jennie Goldstein spoke as honestly as she acted. It's lucky for actors when they find themselves [in their roles]. One doesn't make up that one has to play the beloved when one was born more of a [type of] "mother"; one doesn't go down the road of great tragedy when one has the quality of "light drama". You play and you use all your own resources. That's how our great American actors grew up.

The greatest comedian in America at the time was Ludwig Satz.

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I had already seen the great Russian comedian Mikhail Chekhov; I had already admired the German comedian Pallenberg, but I was filled with a kind of joy when I heard Satz!...It seemed to me that the secret of his success was not only his great talent, not only his extraordinary humor, not only his musicality, his versatility - not only that! But with him there was such an intimacy, such a warmth, that filled you with the greatest joy that theater can give you.

I didn't go to all those theaters out of curiosity, but because I wanted to find out what I lacked [as an actress] by watching the other actors. And the first thing I found out was that we lacked fantastic technique! And you can only improve your technique by acting. By doing different plays and different roles. But theater is not just about the actor - however great he may be. Theater is made up of the actor and the audience. An audience that understands and reacts to every word. Actors in New York used to perform every night - on Shabbat and even twice a day on Sundays. So acting became part of their blood. The theater became their home. The boards were really burning under their feet!

^[1] This is one of the typical abbreviated Yiddish sentences. "Es brent"= literally, "it's burning", or, as a metaphor, "it's very urgent, to be in a hurry". If I understand Chayele correctly, she was pleasantly surprised that in Jewish homes in America, unlike elsewhere, people didn't look at their watches all the time because they were always in a hurry to get things done on time.

204 [blank]

Chapter 32

The Curtain Falls...

We lacked much of what the American actors had- but what they didn't have was a theater [troupe]! Even the Maurice Schwartz "art theater" was not what Stanislavski had developed and others, including myself, followed. Maurice Schwartz's theater was a business venture of an actor who also had great administrative skills. Actors were hired for one season. That year, Jacob Ben-Ami had also organized a group of artists who performed literary plays - but it was by no means a theater [troupe] with the grand idea of developing and educating a cultural audience - to combat and prevent the "shund" into which so many talented actors had sunk.

But we did have a theater [troupe]. We had a trained ensemble; an education that we had received from Vakhtangov and Stanislavski.

Our strength was that "Habima" had integrity, abundance and a great idea.

However, not all actors are good at watching and listening to another actor. Most of us only see and hear ourselves. I will never forget the magnificent banquet that the great New York actors gave in our honor.

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And I will never forget the speech that one of the second-ranking "Habima" actors gave there...because he had told them [the hosts] that they had to come to us to study.....

If I had had even one percent of his courage at the time, I would have jumped up and apologized to the older comrades of the Jewish theater in America. It just lifted me out of my seat, but I didn't have the courage to speak up at the time. It was precisely this arrogance that led to the tragic split in the "Habima".

Many of us believed that the "Habima" was- where they were. The youngest believed this most strongly - the group that supported N. Zemach and also went with him.

At the end of our season in New York - four months after we started playing there - the "Habima" collective officially split into two groups. One consisted mainly of the older, already recognized actors, and the other - of a small group of younger and weaker actors, with the exception of maybe two or three. Nahum Zemach decided to start a second "Habima" with the latter group. My God! What madness! The history of the young theater had been going on for two decades. N. Zemach had harbored this dream since his earliest youth; he had already experienced the pain of

the first great failure at the Congress of Vienna and the hardships of the first years in Moscow. At that time N. Zemach did not build "Habima" as a manager would do for his business, but it was created with the idea of becoming a temple of art.

The enthusiasm with which Vakhtangov began his work with us was only due to the great idea that N. Zemach had described to him with such pathos and conviction. Vakhtangov was not interested in a group that only wanted to learn the art of theater... because there were dozens of such groups in Moscow at that time, and Vakhtangov was already the only great teacher to whom everyone was attracted! But he put his heart and soul into working with us! His idea was to train not only the individual actor, but the whole theater.

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He taught us not only the art of theater, but also how to build a theater. Everything that is part of the construction and the stage must be made with our own strength and with our own hands. He insisted that we, the whole group, should sew the first stage curtain ourselves. How many nights passed in the pursuit of this holy work! How many dreams were sewn into each stitch! How many songs were sung into each fold! We have truly woven ourselves into the fabric of this curtain!

How much suffering we have endured as we opened the curtain for ten, eight, or even just six people in the hall. How much joy the curtain brought us when it opened with the greatest spectacle in Moscow - the "Dybbuk"! It took special demonic, black powers to destroy such a holy building! And how terrible it is to see such a building fall!...Everything in you cries out for help, but you are so tragically helpless against the catastrophe.

At that time I received an invitation to two meetings: The first was with N. Zemach and his group, and the second - already for the next day - from the second group. It was clear that the struggle was over and that there was no way to change the situation; and yet I wanted to believe it so much! And the restlessness forced me to do something. I felt that the comrades who encouraged Zemach to leave his own theater were committing the greatest crime; I felt that much of what N. Zemach used to say to those who wanted to leave the "Habima" in the early years, we now had to say to him ourselves, for his own reminder.

I felt it was my duty to tell N. Zemach that even if I stayed in New York, I would not go with him under any circumstances.

I will never forget Zemach's outward calm and his feverish eyes that spoke more than he could say; I remember how they flashed when I told him that you can only build one great thing in a short life. I remember that N. Zemach did not utter a word for almost an hour while I was there. I left with the feeling that if only one more of the first,

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old comrades had spoken to him as I had, it would have been possible to break the stubbornness that dominated him. But no one came, because no one wanted to...

I went to the second meeting to find myself and to hear the echo of truth and faith in my own heart. I had not the slightest feeling of prejudice, and the feeling of hatred is completely foreign to me! Waiting at the entrance was my comrade David Itkin, who approached me and asked: "Chayelev, are you going with them?" I knew that his decision depended on mine, but I answered honestly that I didn't know yet. I walked freely into the room filled with dynamite!

Accusations and insults shot at me like hailstones: How dare I come to them after being with Zemach yesterday! They wouldn't talk about anything in my presence...phrases flew that I was "spying"...I had come to spy and to blab to Zemach everything I heard here. They demanded that I leave the meeting...

The only one who stood up was Hanna Rowina. She said that she was ashamed of those who spoke to me like that... that I was one of their best actresses... that they needed me. She said she didn't even know why she was playing - and I didn't. It was the first time in our ten years of cooperation that Hanna Rowina had shown such generosity: if these words had been uttered in a peaceful atmosphere, it would have sealed my fate and I would have left with them. But her speech was not heard, not even in the hearts of those who shortly afterwards betrayed the "Habima" in various ways...

Her words sank somewhere! And I felt such hatred, such distrust of me and so many intrigues! I walked around that hot day filled with a bitter cold! A coldness of emptiness! I lost my faith!



נחום צמח אין דער ראל פון „יהודי הנצח“ פון ד. פינסקי.
Nahum Zemach in the role of the prophet in “Eternal Jew” by D. Pinski

In the lower deck of the third class, in burnt and stuffy corridors, I said goodbye to my two dearest, departing comrades - Hanna Rowina and Aharon Meskin. With me was my friend and comrade D. Itkin, a friend of one of the actresses - Y. Landau, and Mordechai Danzis - a good friend from "Habima". After midnight we walked through the streets of the East Side, each of us lost in his own thoughts. It was already dawn when we entered Y.L.'s room. I kicked off my shoes and snuggled into the corner of the sofa. We sat there from two in the a.m. until nine in the morning. In the early morning hours, millions of New Yorkers would rush to factories, offices, schools and banks - I walked slowly, without a "where to" and without a "what for"...

The seven hours I sat at Y.L. remained like a symbol of a "shiva" I sat after my first, young, creative ten years.

The pace of New York wakes you up, the rhythm of New York fills the air with a kind of vibration that stimulates your imagination. It seems to me that nowhere in the world is man as creative as in New York; New York discovers hidden powers in you and reveals infinite possibilities. It didn't take me long to choose my friends and find my teachers, and I began to prepare for my way alone.

END

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Attachment
[not part of the original book]



חיהלע גראבער מיט איר פאטער, מוטער און זשעניטשקען, גאראדניאני, 1913

Chayele Grober with her father, mother and Zhenitshke, Gorodnyani, 1913

[source [Mayn veg aleyh : Grober, Chayele : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)]



To Chayele:
You are the only
person in the
whole world
who brings out
the best within
me, & not only
love you for
what you are
but I love you
for what I
want to be when
I am, with
you.
With all my love
Geney

P. S.

Chayele dear,
I am very
sorry I am
not gifted to
write a book,
but these few
words come
from my
heart, and
I would like
to have it in
your book.

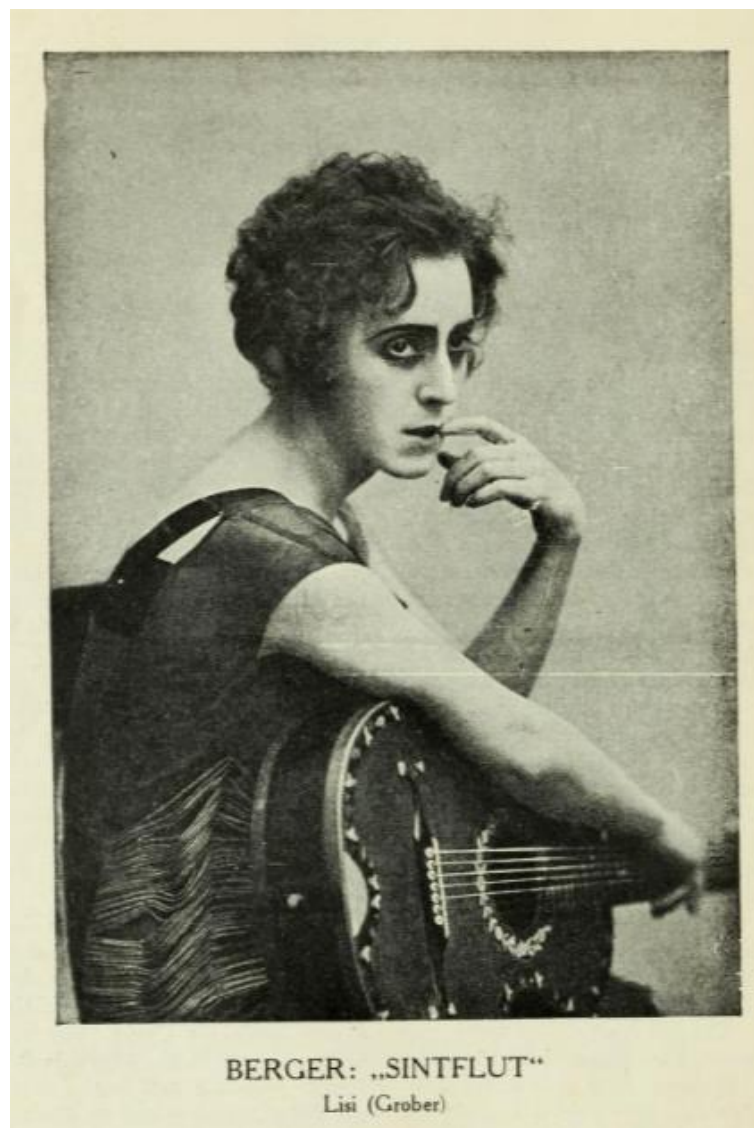
די קוזינע פון ח. ג. זשעניטשקע לעוויט און אירער א בריוו צו חיהלען

The cousin of Ch. Grober, Zhenitshke Levit, and her letter to Chayele, source: [Mayn veg aleyn | Yiddish Book Center](https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/mayn-veg-aleyn), page 80



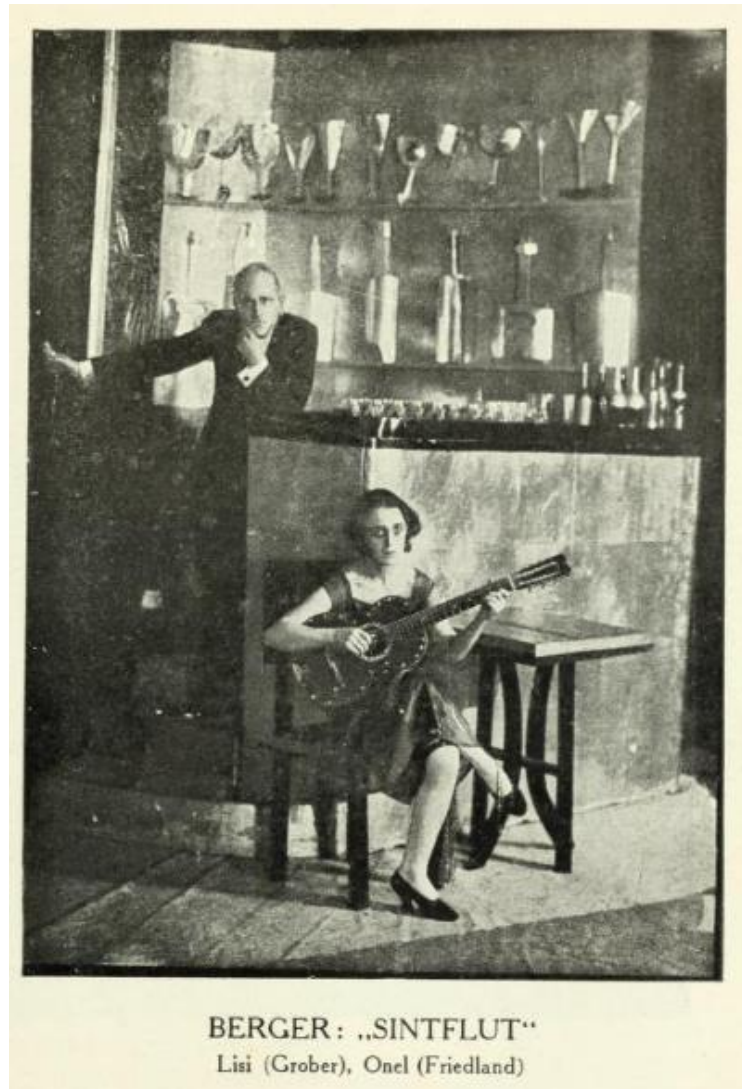
ח.ג. מיט עלינקע בורשטיין — קראַקע, 1936

Chayele Grober with Elinke Burshteyn [her step-brother] - Krakow, 1936, source [Mayn veg aleyh | Yiddish Book Center](#), page 68



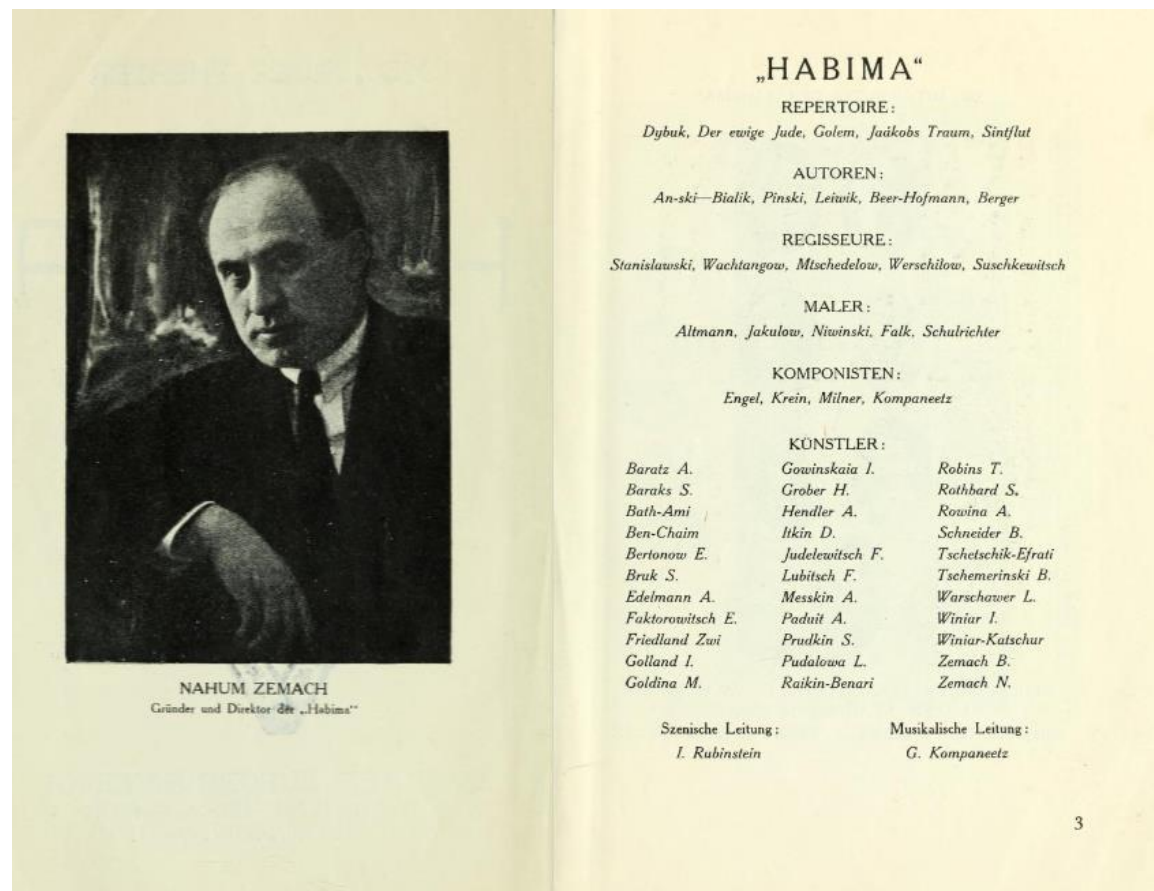
Chayele Grober [Lisi] in "Deluge"

Source: [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#), published 1920, [page 58]

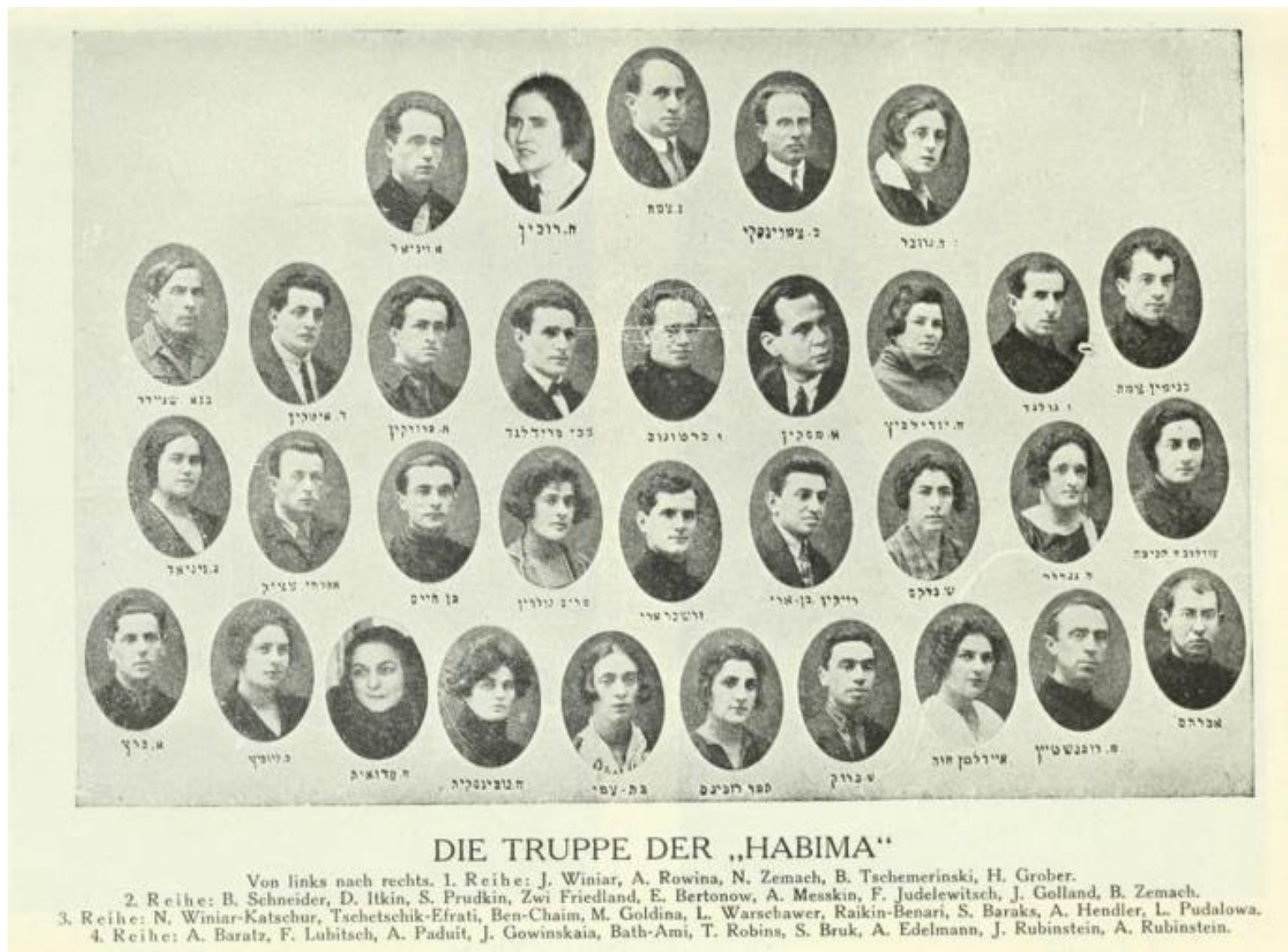


Chayele Grober [Lisi] in "Deluge"

Source: [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#), published 1920, [page 61]



The repertoire of "Habima" during the European and American tour and a list of all participants, source page 3 of [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zernach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) [published 1920]



The “Habima” troupe [source: page 5 of [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)]

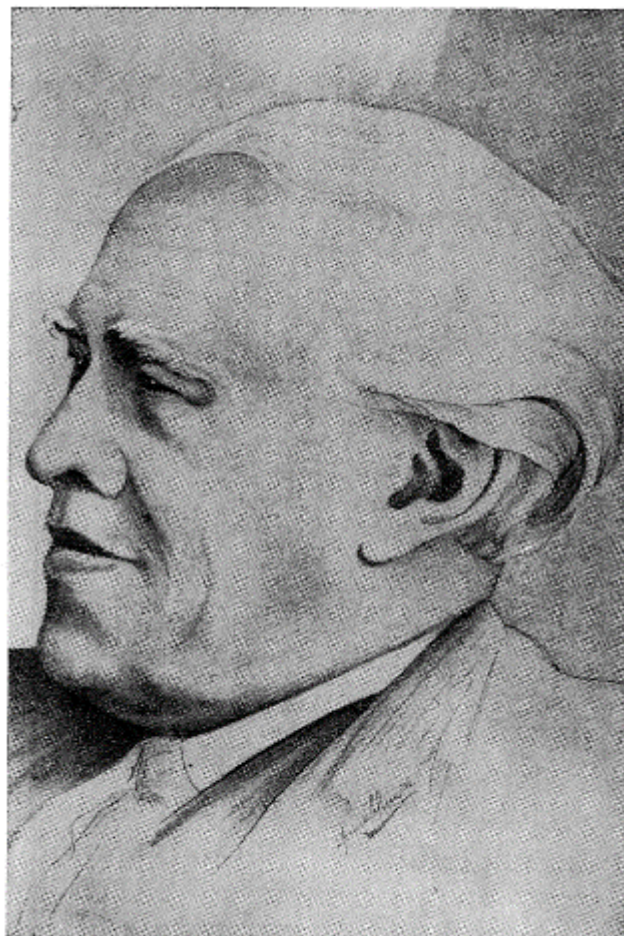


Chana [Hanna] Rowina as Lea in “Dybbuk”, source: [Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) , page 21



עֲוֵגֶנְי בַּגְרַטֶּוֹנוֹוִיטֵשׁ וַחַטָּאֲנוֹף
EVGENY BAGRATEONOWITCH VACHTANGOFF

Source: [Habimah | Yiddish Book Center](#), page 47



ק. ס. סטאַניסלאָבסקי
דיִרעקטאָר פֿון מאַסקווער קונסט טעאַטער
K. S. STANISLAVSKY
Founder and Director of the Moscow Art Theatre

Source: [Habimah | Yiddish Book Center](#), page 33



נחום צמח
דער גרינדער פון דער האבימה
NOCHUM ZEMACH
Founder of the Habimah

Source: [Habimah | Yiddish Book Center](#), page 20



דער אָנפאַנג
שטייען: א. ווינאָר, ח. ראָווינאָ, נ. פערסיץ, ל. סטאַראָבינעץ, מ. עליאס, נ. קאַהן.
זיצן: מ. הלוי, ש. אביבית, ד. ורדי, נ. צמח, מ. גנסיץ, ח. גרובער.

THE FIRST HABIMA GROUP

Source: [Habimah | Yiddish Book Center](#) page 17 [Chayele G. sits on the front left]

Newspaper Article:

Source of my quotation and translation: “Dos Naye Lebn“, December 9, 1930, [אוסף העיתונות | 9 דצמבר 1930 | עמוד 4 | PDI | ביאליסטוק \(דאס נייע לעבן\) | FSI | הספרייה הלאומית \(nli.org.il\)](#)

ChayeLe Grober in Bialystok

Yesterday our beloved daughter of the city, the popular artist and singer of folk songs, Mrs. ChayeLe Grober, was in Bialystok. She played in "Habima" for a long time and spent the last few years in America, where she gained a reputation in the world of artists, specializing in the interpretation of folk songs, which she performs and sings in her own unique way.

The American press has written enthusiastically about her performances. She has been compared to the famous Iza Kremer, whom she is said to surpass with her artistic intuition.

She has spent the last six months in Europe, where she met the well-known Jewish journalist Vladimir Grossman in Paris, and the two got married.

Here in Europe, ChayeLe has already given 35 concerts, in Gdansk, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania - in all the major cities. She was admired everywhere and had to repeat her concerts several times.

She is now on a tour of Poland, first through Warsaw and Vilnius, and later through a number of cities.

The young couple made their first visit to Poland in our city, where they visited [ChayeLe's] father, Mr. Shmuel Grober, and spent a day with the family.

Today they will travel to Warsaw. It is not yet known when the concert in Bialystok will take place.

*Excerpts from Chayele Grober's second Book,
"My Way Alone"*

[Mayn veg aleyn | Yiddish Book Center](#), Translation of pages 188-195

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The Influence of K.S. Stanislavski on the Development of World Theater

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski became famous throughout the world with his theory - the "system". But this is not his only great achievement. Stanislavski created the great Moscow Art Theater. He built this theater like a symphony orchestra, that is, he trained and developed an ensemble. It has become a collective in which everyone speaks the same language, lives in the same atmosphere, carries the same idea of raising the cultural and artistic level of acting and educating and developing a conscious theatergoer. And that is its great achievement!

From the first tour of the Moscow Art Theater [M.K.T.] in America, the development of studios began, where one could learn the "system". And in these studios (in many of them) great actors were trained. A great role in the achievements was played by actors who came from Russia either with the Moscow Art Theater or with "Habima" and stayed in the States. The first were the famous actors Boleslavsky and Uspenskayo, then came Bulgakov and Mikhail Tshechov [Chekhov]. They became the pillars of the M.K.T., later the "Habima" actors followed.

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The first of this group was Benno Shneyder. Fortunately for him, a theater group, "Artef", was being formed in New York at that time. Benno Shneyder became the director of this group, and his performances attracted the attention of the English press. In a short time he became so popular that actors from English theaters (and in fact famous actors) began to seek him out for coaching. This led him to Hollywood. There, in the great center of cinema, he became the dialog director of the great studios of "M.G.M." and "20th Century". Benjamin Zemach (the brother of Nachum Zemach, the founder of "Habima") also opened a studio there. Next came Ben-Ari, who later also opened a studio in Hollywood. Our actor David Itkin also stayed in America. He became a teacher at the Goodman Theater in Chicago and later at the St. Paul [De Paul?] University.

All these actors, who were direct students of the great master K.S. Stanislavski and Vakhtangov, have already trained hundreds of actors and teachers for theater and television.

It is interesting that people who know nothing about the "system" and schools - simple spectators - express their enthusiasm about how "natural" the acting on television is. It is precisely this naturalness and the inserted pauses, silent glances, short gestures and deep sighs that create an atmosphere that has such a strong effect on the viewer - he absorbs it immediately. All this was achieved thanks to the "system" of the great Russian master.

The Moscow Art Theater was never a commercial theater. Until the Revolution it was patrons - millionaires like the Morozovs and the Putilovs - who subsidized the Art Theater.

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After the revolution, the M.K.T. was supported by the government; neither the management nor the actors had to worry about deficits. In America, there are actors who earn millions (and many of them have no talent, they were just given popularity), and thousands of actors are unemployed, especially those who are "freelance", i.e. not associated with a theater.

It's the same with musicians, painters, dancers - any kind of art. They all have to sell tickets. All of these artists have to travel the world looking for a theatergoer to come to the box office and buy a ticket. Under such a system, no theater can be created with the great idea of elevating the audience and raising the level of the entire theater field.

But Stanislavski has another great merit: he abolished the "star system" in his theater. Of course, great actors came out of this group. But they did not become "stars". In every play there are other great artists in the leading roles. But the same great artists can also be seen in other plays, in small episodic roles. And they are great there too!

This principle has helped to create a friendly relationship among the group of actors and a peaceful atmosphere behind the scenes. It is well known that in M.K.T. there are no intrigues and no open jealousy.

In Hollywood, actors are divided into groups and classes according to their material value. Actors who receive a fee of a million or more belong to the first class; those who earn only hundreds of thousands belong to the second class, and so on down to the bottom...

They are all socially separated from each other. In America there is the expression, "he is worth" - according to his capital. This expression is not used for people without capital - he is worth nothing.

As a matter of principle, Stanislavski did not accept actors who had previously performed in theaters. He believed that it was easier to educate and train someone who had no theater experience than an actor who had already acted.

Russia had a lot of talented, great actors.

There were permanent theaters in the big cities of Russia, but many troupes traveled around the country. All these artists were called "provincial artists". The way they acted was contrary to Stanislavski's new school. It was called "false pathos". Their way of acting: drama required a crying, trembling voice, comedy - many tricks (feats); love scenes were played sweetly, softly, and since love belongs to the heart, the actor actually held his hand on his chest.

The actor would make strong declarations of love while kneeling. The old theater still had many such principles. However, in these theaters there were really great artists. These actors became "stars". True talent is unmediated. Great talents are blessed with intuition that guides them unconsciously. The main principle of Stanislavski's theater was conscious analysis. The actor must not only follow his intuition. He not only has to feel, but also understand why he acts one way or another. According to Stanislavski's theory, there are two forms of theatrical art: the old form, called "teater fun forshteln" ["theater of representation"], and the other, his form, called "teater fun iberlebn" ["theater of experiencing"].

Points of the Stanislavski "System"

K. S. Stanislavski was born on January 18, 1863 and died in 1937. In the same year Stanislavsky was born, the greatest Russian actor Shchepkin died, whose principles of acting Stanislavsky later used as the basis of his own theory. Stanislavsky was born a "Moskvitsh" [Muscovite] ^[1]. His father was a wealthy factory owner, and young Konstantin was surrounded by governesses, maids, and coachmen. This is important to know because his ancestry opposed to him and his theater after the revolution.

Stanislavski did not join a theater, he started theater – the artistic theater. He discovered the hidden paths that lead to our emotions and through which we can express our emotions. Stanislavski went down in the history of theater as a master of world theater. What were his great achievements that elevated him to the status of "master"?

Stanislavski founded the Moscow Art Theater. However, he did not become the "premier" of his theater or the greatest actor. His students - Katshalov, Moskvina, Chekhov - became famous actors of his Art Theater. Stanislavski was a very good director, but the co-founder of the Art Theater, Nemirovich-Danchenko was no less a director than Stanislavski. In the same century that Stanislavski began his path to the theater,

the great director Gordon Craig was starting out in England. Stanislavski even invited him to direct the Art Theater. At the same time, the famous Max Reinhardt was starting out in Germany. Today the name Gordon Craig sounds like a distant echo...

It is very difficult to find a small, thin booklet about Gordon Craig with pictures of his set decorations in bookshops today, although he was the first to banish painted walls and forests from the stage and to hang cloth curtains instead. He was the first to put platforms on the stage. Max Reinhardt was the first with his fantastic, grandiose spectacles. Later, they remained only the great directors of their time, but Stanislavski made history in the theater.

The big secret lies in one word - "system" - Stanislavski's system.

When Stanislavski came to the stage, the theater of "representation" existed both in Russia and all over Europe. The actor showed - represented. In drama schools the actor was taught to speak beautifully, to walk beautifully, to move beautifully - to be graceful! When the actor learned a role and performed it in front of an audience, all his attention was devoted to making his voice sound good and looking straight at the audience. One thing was on his mind - to enchant the audience. In those days, actors were divided into roles: There was the lover, the character actor, the comedian.

1. The lover was the person who enchanted the "women". For the girls, the lover was the ideal to aspire to.

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It was not just one abandoned girl who owed her fate to this lover;

2. the comedian. He had to know a lot of tricks;
3. the character actor. All he needed was a beard.

The following incident has been preserved as a joke in our Jewish theater: An actor ran into the theater a few minutes before the curtain opened. Running into the dressing room, he asked: "What's playing today?" The stage manager replied: "We don't know yet, but put on a beard."

The women's roles were divided as well as the men's. The lover and the prima donna were the "stars". They were the chosen ones, all the other actors served the star. Theater [groups] in those years did not build themselves, did not create themselves, but assembled themselves. The director - the entrepreneur - put together his troupe for a play or for a season. This system still exists today (with the exception of art theaters, ensemble theaters, or collective theaters). Stanislavski was the first to train a group of actors and build a kind of theater where the actor is not hired, but becomes a member of the family that he serves throughout his life. Stanislavski was also the first to abolish the "star" in the theater. He introduced the idea of a different actor playing the lead role in each play. And the actor who played the leading role the day before could play the

second or third role today. But these principles are only points of his "system". Stanislavski developed the "system" as a lesson that now serves actors all over the world, over the course of decades, based on observing and analyzing the lives of children and famous artists who were gifted by nature itself.

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Stanislavski began acting in the same way as all actors of his time - to represent. But he soon realized that this did not give him any satisfaction. On the contrary, he was tired and exhausted after a performance. In those years other remarkable actors began to appear. In Russia, the great Machalov appeared (not to be confused with Kachalov, who came a few decades later). In France the wonderful Rashel appeared, in Italy "Duse" struck like lightning. Each of them impressed with their individuality. Rashel inspired with her immediacy, temperament and elegance; Duse surprised with her naturalness, her intimate actions - with the atmosphere she created around her. But the question that haunted Stanislavski was: how does she do it? What means does she use?

The great Italian actor Salvini revealed the great secret to Stanislavski: before a very dramatic, strong monologue, in which all actors tend to use a "lion's voice" and large, sweeping movements, Salvini paused for a long time, freed himself completely, took a deep breath and, leaning on his breath, began to speak in a hushed voice. In this state, tears flowed freely and calmly from his eyes, and at that moment he shook his audience. Stanislavski then realized that concentration, release and pauses are the most important elements in the art of acting, and from that moment on Stanislavski began to create his "system".

^[1] He came from one of the richest families in Russia and his real surname was "Aleksyev". He later adopted the name "Stanislavski" because he did not want his family to know about his artistic activities.