Tsu Der Groyser Velt - To The Great World

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Author: Chayele Grober

English Translation from Yiddish: Beate Schützmann-Krebs

Project Coordinator: Susan Kingsley Pasquariel

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CHAYELE GROBER

"TZU DER GROISER VELT"

("HACIA EL GRAN MUNDO")

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Translator's Foreword

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

Magically drawn to the world of art and music, Chayele hides a secret: she longs to be on stage.

In a veritable whirlwind of events, images, and emotions, Chayele captivates the reader and takes us on a journey through a life marked by political and cultural upheaval - full of suspense, suffering, and hardship, yet recounted with candor, joy and humor. In ways both miraculous and inevitable, her odyssey leads Chayele to where she truly belongs: on the international world stage. 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, whose influence still resonates today: Stanislavski and his beloved disciple, Vakhtangov.

Above all, this book is a unique love letter to Jewish Białystok - to its language, its people, its streets and courtyards, its songs and silences, its dreams and dramas. Chayele Grober brings to life a vanished world with tenderness, clarity, and fierce devotion. Through her eyes, we glimpse the soul of a city that shaped generations of Jewish artists, thinkers, and dreamers.

To the Great World is a remarkable personal account of the incomparable history of the Jewish *Habima* Theater - founded by Nahum Zemach in Białystok - and told first-hand by one of its founding members: Chayele Grober.

For those interested in other contemporary Białystok, Krynki, Lyubtsh and Ciechanowiec biographies, I recommend my translations of
"My Childhood Years in the Pyaskes" by Leybl Hindes
"Memoirs of a Woman from Białystok" by Rachel Kositza
"Memoirs and Writings of a Białystoker" by Jacob Jerusalimski
"Krynki in Ruins“ by Abraham Soyfer
"Destruction of Białystok“ by Srolke Kot
"As It Happened Yesterday" by Yosl Cohen
"A Shtetl in Poland" by Isaac Bloom
"Life And Death In The Bialystoker Ghetto", by D. Klementinowski
"Pages of Memoirs - Amongst Family and Strangers“, by Meir Pisiuk
"Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz, the Idealist, Nationalist and Man of the People", by David Klementinowski.

My translations of the mentioned books can be downloaded for free at jewishgen.org/Yizkor/translations/ and 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

Introduction

When an artist has worked in one field for a lifetime and suddenly takes up writing a book, people start asking all sorts of questions: "When? " "How?" Someone - an older, 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, bedridden due to an illness whose cause has yet to be discovered. I believe I was ill at that time because of our great *khurbn.* [1]

At that time, my English professor, Betty Meier, became - and remained - my closest friend. I began telling her episodes from my childhood. She made me write them down, and she became the inspiration for my first English manuscript (unpublished).

In 1945, after the earth of my ancestors had been burned down along with the last traces of their physical form - I felt an immediate urge to pass on what I remembered; to immortalize the names of those who had blessed me with love and friendship; to pass on

what I had 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 side by side. *Mama* Rachel was a nobl, honest and good soul.

The support I received from my compatriots in Buenos Aires in publishing this book is thanks to the initiative of their chairman, Yitzchak Munaker. My Argentine compatriots were fortunate to have an educated and artistically inclined man at the helm - a young, witty activist. I am deeply pleased that this book is connected to those who understand what it means to relate to an artist and his work with the respect it deserves.

Chayele G.

Translator's note:

[1] khurbn= destruction, the Holocaust.

Chapter 1

Town and Roots

Long, long before the third *khurbn* there was a city - Białystok.

Although its guberniya 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 *fareynikte* - 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,

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 [1], 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 *Peysekh* [Passover].

After that, *Peysekh* was put away 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 resumed.

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 [2] .

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

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* [boss] of the horses and coachmen. A hot-tempered master, yet generous and warm-hearted. People feared him, but they loved him nonetheless.

It is said that his wife, Toybe-Rive Getselikhes, was as quiet as a dove and as kind as an angel - and ran the entire court like a kingdom. People came and went constantly - not just the hired help, but women and children too - on weekdays and holidays alike. Of seven children, only two remained:

the only son, Zeydl, and the only daughter, Bobel. They were pampered and cherished like the two eyes in one's head.

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 offered their *mazl-tov* wishes to the *khosn-kale* - the bride and groom - Bobele Rozman and Mulye Grober.

In this case, as in all cases,

branches of every shape and shade 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 Street, next to the new *Green Bes-Hamedresh* [house of study], in Elimeylekh's house, the young woman Bobele founded her own kingdom with the nineteen-year-old boy Mulye Grober. It was there that their first two sons were born - and where they were lost. 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 "Serebdovitsh'es" and the "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 *b'tzurat isha* - 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 *shusterke's* breast. So my grandmother came running and took me home, and from that day on I was under her care.

Translator's notes:

[1] The Khanaykes (or Chanajki) district was among the poorest areas of Białystok. Nevertheless, it drew the attention of several contemporary witnesses, who wrote about its unique character and vibrant life. Notably, Jakub Jerusalimski and Rachel Kositza described this fascinating neighborhood in their autobiographies. My English translations of these biographies are available as free PDF downloads:jewishgen.org/Yizkor/translations/ and Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu (jewishbialystok.pl)

[2] The Liman is a coastal lagoon located in the Odessa region, between the districts of Ovidiopol and Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi, along the northwestern shore of the Black Sea. Its mouth is separated from the sea by a broad sandbar.

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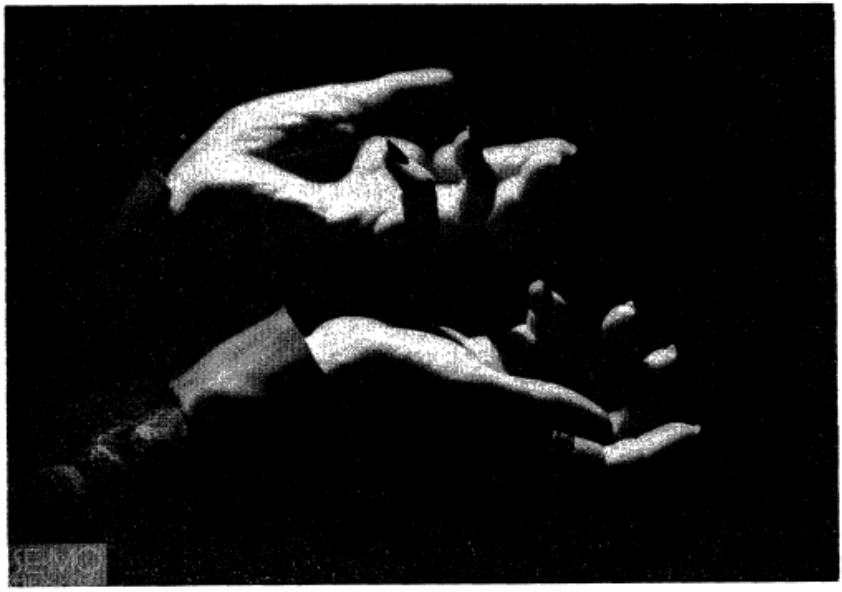

העגט פון חיהלע גראָבער

The hands of Chayele Grober

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Chapter 2

My Home

For as long as my memory reaches back, we lived in a three-story house. Our apartment was on the first floor, with spacious rooms and a small office for my father. By that time in my childhood, he was already running his own business. Mother used to tell us that my father worked as a

bookkeeper for a man named *Yofe* before he started his own business. Father was a good bookkeeper, an honest *mentsh,* 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 running his own business. So he became - and remained - a cloth commission agent.

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* – a cantor. But my mother did not want to become a *khazn's* wife, and so his career ended with one performance during the *yomim-neroim* [Days of Awe] in the old Green Bes-Hamedresh. Anyhow, this remained his lasting privilege for the rest of 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 kept the house. My mother ran the household 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* – the religious functionaries of the new Green Bes-Medresh - would appear to discuss the upcoming *yomim-neroim*.

They would remind us again and again "with what sweetness Mrs. Grober had performed the *Musaf* prayer" and "how deeply he - Mr. Grober - had moved the women with his *Neilah* prayer", all in order to gently express the hope that Mrs. Grober might once again fulfill the wish of the entire bes-medresh - and perhaps…sing a *Kol Nidre*...?!

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 wouldn't gargle, wouldn't drink *gogl-mogl* [a home remedy for sore throats], and wouldn't walk around wearing a scarf. Every morning, as he got dressed, he would sing something—a song or a prayer. And during the holidays, he did just the same.

Singing was as easy for my father as talking, and he would sing with the same naturalness as he would sit at the table and talk or tell 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 would come to visit us every Shabbat afternoon. My father would go to meet him at the appointed time, holding my hand at his side. Each time on that walk, as we went deeper into the forest, Father would begin to sing:

"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:

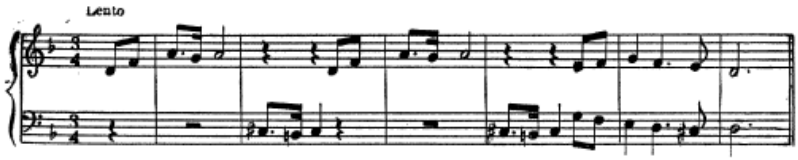
"O-o, beregis"...

And Lev always answered him:

"Beregis".

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

"I po dalshe dyerzhis" (**).



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Shabbat and the holidays had been celebrated in our home for generations. As the sun set, the flickering light of the Shabbat candles 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*" after prayer and his sung *Kiddush* echoed in my ears all week long - from one Shabbat to the next.

Everything followed tradition:

The guests, and the order in which they arrived, never changed from week to week. And the first to arrive was always Salomon Lev.

Salomon Lev was a tall, heavyset man with a head more bald than hairy. I always thought the few hairs he had were only there to prove he was a genuine blond. His face was round, with wide, dark brown eyes and a strong, broad nose. There was always a soft, discreet smile on his face - 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; in the back, from a dim little cell, rose the sounds of his violin, on which Lev played between visits to customers. I think he played the fiddle only because singing in the store with his bass-baritone would have seemed too bold. Lev’s bass-baritone was as soft as butter and as sweet as honey. When he sang, his nose would widen even more, and his dark brown eyes grew juicy and moist - like 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 feterl* [the little uncle]. The *feterl* was considered the uncle of the whole

family, although he was actually only my father's uncle. Had the uncle ever been young? We knew him only as a short, thin, loving man with a long, thin white beard, small moist eyes, and a rough, thin voice. He spoke very little, if at all. But he always felt the urge to sing. At home, his children used to laugh when he sang, and his hot-blooded, black-haired Rochke would get annoyed. But on Friday evenings, he came to us—and that was 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 "great Friday nights". That was when an extraordinary guest would visit us - not just someone who came to us, but someone who came especially to Białystok, to the Jews of Białystok, to those Jews who not only loved to sing, but were true connoisseurs of song - and Jewish liturgy!

None of these guests would miss spending a Friday night with us. The great cantor Sirota and the superb musical artist Kvartin were frequent visitors.

The less famous cantors used to corresponded with my father before their arrival. Well-off citizens came to our home seeking 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 turned into a kind of ticket bureau...

That's how he earned a reputation that reached 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 defining traits of the people of Białystok are hospitality and musicality. In fact, the voices of Białystok people carry a special kind of optimism and deep warmth, which is why we wear an open, honest expression and a modest, sweet smile.

This is Białystok!

In Białystok, an evening at the theater or a concert was considered a true holiday. It wasn’t a rare event - nothing unusual - but it was still a celebration.

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.

That’s how people lived in our house - from merchants (when God helped and they didn’t go bankrupt...) and lived themselves out in music; lived themselves out and helped singers and actors to live.

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 Zabludow, 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 had produced a great violinist. Then, one special day in the middle of winter, our faces lit up with joy: Tsesler, the young violinist, was coming to visit us! Everything and everyone began to whirl as if caught 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 the other: “Make way, guests are coming!”

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That Friday, the candlesticks shone brighter than usual, eyes sparkled, faces lit up - everything was filled with joyful anticipation. With Shabbat came a short, broad-shouldered young man, entering with modest yet confident steps. He wore a long fur cape, a wide soft black hat, and carried a violin in a black case tucked under his arm. On Shabbat evening, after *havdole* [the ceremony marking the end of Shabbat], the guests began to stream in. They settled on the floor, at the buffet, at the tables - even the walls were lined with people. And from one corner, golden sounds began to rise- sounds that flowed into your limbs, merged with your blood, and stayed with you for the rest of your life!

I have often thought that this story of the boy from Zabludov planted the seed of "concert and audience" deep in my hidden self.

Author's notes:

(*) Oh, beware of you!

(**) And stay out of the way.

די באָבע טויבע־ריווע און דער זיידע געצל רָאזמאַן.

Grandma Toybe-Rive and Grandpa Getsl Rozman

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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 lay in bed, and this filled the house with a particular kind of silence; a silence in which, from the farthest room, you could hear the tik-tok of our long wall clock, hanging 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 behind 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. Every letter passed 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 on 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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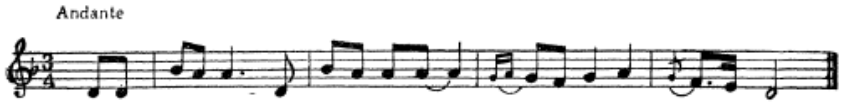
My grandmother used to comfort me by pointing out that my brother was older - which only made me cry harder, thinking I'd never catch up to him...

On those evenings, Grandmother would tell me stories - tales about robbers in the forest, lions and bears, gypsies and black cats - and she always ended them with a song:

"A*y, oyfn mitn veg,*
Vu ale forn,
Ligt a sheyner bleymele…"

[Alas, in the middle of the road,
Where all are travelling,
Lies a lovely little flower…]



And she finished with:
"A*y, dos meynt men s'folk Yisroel, kind mayns*!"
[Ah - that's what they mean by the people of Israel, my child!]

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 tinged with sadness. Her hands were white,

warm and always caressing. Her whole body was white as marble and carried the scent of almonds. Yes - light, love and virtue seemed to travel through the world she inhabited with every step 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 shop for the Sabbath on Thursday, and on that occasion, one never forgot to bring home a knotted cloth full of small change from the market - for the poor on Friday. And those of the poor who missed a Friday would receive their penny or kopeck the next week.

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

"Done! It's time to welcome the *malke shabes* - the Shabbat Queen!"

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

"First, my child, run to the Tzimsteins and bring whatever she gives you!"

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

"Now, my child, take this to Nachman, then bring this to Sorke Khane's, and from there run over with the pot to Lea'ke - she’s ill, poor thing - may God help her...And then 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 finished these errands, she would kiss me and constantly remind me that I would share a chair with her in *ganeydn* – in 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, 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 a headscarf on her shaking head melted a spoonful of lead and poured it into a bowl of cold water. Immediately, a goat with horns formed - just like the ones on the Serebrovitsh 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 imagining corpses rising from their graves and sliding toward little children. From then on, I started thinking about an "otherworld" - a world where my grandfather and my brothers were. I asked so many times to go with me to the *bes-oylem* to see that otherworld, but Grandma never wanted to. So I went there for the first time when my grandmother could no longer stop me. It was another winter day when I found myself in the cemetery. 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, 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 that week in sleepless nights. I myself guarded the final steps of her presence in this world - until eternity. If there is such a thing as a perfect person - absolutely pure, in body and in mind - 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 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 grew lonely. Her passing 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* in Zverinyets.

26 [blank]

Chapter 4

The First Theater - Uncle Kalman

I never understood why our beautiful pine forest - the Gorodyani and Yegnatki - was called *Zverinyets* [menagerie]. I only know that the biggest beast I ever saw there was a frog. The *datshes* we stayed in were across from the “park,” facing the forest. So we breathed pine-scented air all day long, and every evening we walked near the park and inhaled the thick dust kicked up by the *konke* - a two-horse tram - and by the cabs that sped back and forth with 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 evening 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 spacious 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* [chansonniers].

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

considered *sharlatantshiklekh* [seducers] - meaning that they were boisterous types with whom it was better not to make friends...

A hidden longing for an audience made me sing whenever I felt someone was listening. And that 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 perform. One of them gave me her dress and told me to show it to the man at the entrance - he would let me in without a ticket. I was thrilled. The excitement wasn't just about what I was going to do, but about how I was going to keep it a secret from my parents - and especially from 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 dark-haired, with a black paper dot stuck on her cheek. The dress I had brought for her was very short, full 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.

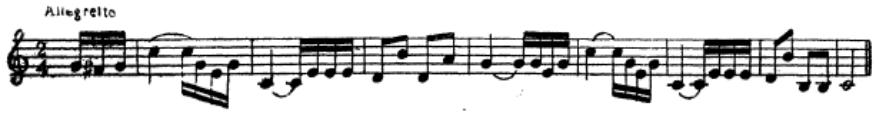
At the end, she blew kisses to the audience. Her face lit up, and her large black eyes sparkled in every direction.

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…"

[Oh, look this way,
Oh, look that way,

It has a taste and it has a meaning.
No, no, not there - oh, look this way,
It’s all for your delight…]



ד׳ עלטערן פון דער אויטאָרין — באָבל און מולִיע גראָבער.

The parents of the author: Bobel and Mulye Grober

She robbed me of my peace. I was ready to endure any punishment if I got caught. She became my god – the one I bowed to. It was she who revealed to me the great mystery of the world I had only dreamed of. She was the one who led me to my first theater.

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

He had been invited to a grand, wealthy salon to sing for the guests. It was during the time of his first great successes in Russia. He was listened to with enthusiasm, and immediately after the concert, the servant handed him an envelope with payment for his “work” - and a “good night”…

That was how “society” related to art and artists in those years. Fortunately, I was born long before movies and long before television. But that didn't help the fact that all my senses yearned for music, and all my dreams were tied to a world of art. It simply never occured to my parents to set me on that path.

My first teacher was a dry *melamed* [Jewish elementary school teacher]. I remember my first *rabbi* [teacher] only as if in a dream. He was a tall, thin Jew. I subconsciously perceived the atmosphere at the time as harsh. I can still smell the mix of dirty laundry and cooking. I can still see the small windows covered with ice. I spent one winter in the *cheder*. I don't remember whether I actually 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 her first husband either. My uncle Kalman was a handsome, wealthy Jew - a tall, slim man with a short, reddish beard, beautifully combed.

There was never a stain on his dark gray suit or 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 kind man and never raised his voice at me. He was the only one on my father's side who liked my mother. He constantly 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 large picture of his beloved neighbor, and my mother had to hide it for him. So for many years, the picture of a plump, black-haired Jewish woman with a large wig lay hidden in the locked closet. Uncle Kalman would often take the picture out, gaze at it, and smile...

Before my uncle began teaching me, he was in "employment". Somewhere in a village, with a "forest merchant", he taught children. He often fled from his *marshas*. She was an *akusherke* – a midwife - and earned quite well, but no one knew where she hid her money. She constantly quarreled with my kind uncle Kalman. People used to say *zi hot geshrign un er hot geshvign* - she would shout and he would stay silent. But she didn't want to divorce him either.

He always ran away and she did everything she could until he came back. Ever since his "romance" had begun, heaven and hell were stirred! His only sin was that he would eat

and work there, sip 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 rarely visited us – and I was their guest every Passover. She would entertain me, but she looked at me with her large evil eyes, and I was too afraid to touch anything.

She wasn't a vile or ugly woman, but either her lips spewed fire and brimstone at everyone and everything, or they remained closed and a slightly crooked - and then her eyes did the screaming. They had no children. My uncle had been able to study, wrote with precision and beauty, 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 had been the conductor of the choir of the great *Khor Shul* [a reform synagogue] and the vocal instructor at schools and high schools across Białystok. With his hat and pelerine coat, he looked more like a poet. The whole town respected him. He was the musical authority in Białystok. After Gevirts' school, you went on to middle school, high school, or 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 fled in panic, murmuring as if to themselves:

"This is partly the work of the *fareynikte* [United]!"

I wasn't afraid at all, but felt a joyful satisfaction that people were thinking of me at such a serious moment - holding me in their arms and stroking me. Every time I was caressed - especially by my mother - was etched deeply into my memory. Perhaps because such moments were rare, and also because I longed so much for tenderness.

My mother was very reserved. She spoke little 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 would remain silent and still; but after such incidents, they would talk for a long time, quietly, in the bedroom behind closed doors. And my mother would come out with reddened, tearful 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 *Hershaftn* [masteries] live!"…

My parents loved each other with such purity and grace! I always felt that their love for one another was stronger than their love for us children. But whenever something happened that involved imminent danger,

I was in seventh heaven!

Because in those moments, they truly didn't know what to do with me.

In my childhood there was the "danger" of the "United". They were the revolutionaries who fired at the *balebatim* - the owning and ruling class - for exploiting the people. They were the ones who planted a bomb at the "Tsar's Gate" just before the governor was to pass through. We "thanked God" that the bomb exploded only after the governor had

already passed - because "God knows what would have happened if he had been killed"...

To me, these were merely echoes from the wide world - though in truth, they came from Lipowa and Nikolayevske [Mikołajewska] Streets!

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 wandered deep into the woods to pick berries. Suddenly, we saw groups of young people coming from all directions - men in black shirts, girls in long black dresses. They spoke quietly but intensely, gathering around a tall, sturdy tree. And then I saw a man perched in the tree, with long hair and a pince-nez, and I heard his strong voice...

We ran home, terrified.

People were already searching for us from the balcony of our *datshe*. They let us inside and locked all the doors and windows. Then they spoke about the "United" and said that if the police found out, it would cause a "violent scene". From early childhood, we were steeped in fear - fear of revolutionaries and the revolution itself.

***

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 Mr. Berekh. 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* [1] with us.

Berekh studied Ivrit and Russian with me. To be honest, I never quite understood why Russian. He spoke with a truly dreadful accent, and we often had to pull ourselves together not to laugh. Years later I often wondered: Why didn't he introduce me to our Hebrew or Yiddish writers? What drew him to the Russian classics? Why should we translate Pushkin, of all people?

It was only much later, when I met one of his daughters, that I discovered the secret. His youngest daughter, Fira, told me that her father had once been a yeshiva student, but the *kloyz* [prayer hall] had worn on his nerves, and the closed four walls of the *bes-hamedresh* had grown too cramped for him...

Rumors of new schools, of religious freedom, of literature beyond the Torah reached him from all over the world... So he tore himself away from the small *shtetl*, went to Białystok, cast off his *kapote* [caftan], and began to learn Russian. In the end, he actually learned quite a lot - but he never truly spoke the language. So his Ivrit-Russian lessons were "fifty-fifty": Hebrew for me and Russian for his own pleasure.

However, I feel a deep sense of gratitude toward Berkh. He prepared me well for Hebrew, which I later learned with such ease at the *Habima*.

Chayele Grober as high school student.

Translator's notes:

[1] esn teg [eating days]: This term refers to a once widespread communal custom in Eastern Europe, in which yeshiva students were supported by being hosted for meals in private homes on designated days of the week. These arrangements typically rotated, with students dining in different households from day to day - a grassroots form of sustaining Jewish learning and honoring Torah study.

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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, had grown up in our house - almost from the day she was born. I don't remember my uncle Zeydl in connection with this house, because he only came home to visit, either before leaving for America or just after returning from there.

My aunt Teybele came from Vashlikove. This small *shtetele* is located seven *vyorst* [verst] beyond Białystok. People used to travel there by horse and cart, and the fare depended on whether your feet were inside or outside... That is, you paid five kopecks if your feet were inside the cart, and three kopecks if they dangled outside.

I speak 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 he would become a "well-behaved" man once he got married.

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That’s how they began planning his wedding. One day, I overheard that my grandmother was preparing to travel to Vashlikove to look at a bride for my uncle. She left, and everyone at home waited impatiently for her return and the news she would bring. She didn’t stay long, and when she came back, she said the following:

"...So I'm standing at Hertske Katsev's - the butcher - waiting for the matchmaker to arrive with the girl, when the door opens - and in walks a beautiful young woman. She asks for a piece of flank and a *khnokhn-beyn* [bone with skin and shank]. And I don't know why, but I feel drawn 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 *rabbi* of the shtetl, and her father was the chairman of the community '... And I say to him: 'That 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 into our home and I snuggled up to her. I can still picture my mother leading her into the office and saying: "I want you to know that my brother is a good and honest man - but a bon vivant!"

To that, Teybele replied: "I will marry *you*!"...

And indeed, my mother carried great responsibility for her throughout her life. My aunt became the closest person in our family; my mother trusted her completely. And after my grandmother passed away, she truly took her place. She even saved my life:

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, one early winter morning as I was getting dressed for school, I began coughing. My mother immediately called me to her bed and said: “Undress and get back into bed!” I didn’t understand why - after all, I felt no pain. But from that morning on, I remained in bed for six weeks, and for the only time in my life, I was at the brink of death.

They sat at my bedside day and night. In addition to my family, a *linistke* from *Linas Hatzedek* [a member of the charitable organisation that cared for the poor and sick] came every evening. Once, in the middle of the day, I called my mother to me and said: "Mama, don't be afraid, but I feel like I'm going to faint..."

בעטי מעיער

Betty Meier

געניטשקאַ און חיהלע.
Genitshka and Chayele

ח. ג. און איר ברודער עלינקע
מיט זיין פרוי רחלע אין תל־אביב.

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

My mother cried bitterly, and they rushed to fetch our family doctor Flatau. The next morning, cold and frosty, my aunt Teybele went to the cemetery to *raysn kvorim* [1] . When she returned, she placed a handful of grass from my grandmother's grave beneath my pillow. That night marked the crisis- and by the next day, I began to feel better.

My aunt Teybele and uncle Zeydl with the children.

But, *krisis-shmisis* [“crisis, pah!”], my aunt Teybele saved me from death...

After that, my best friend, Rachel Birger, slept in my brother's bed across from mine. She stayed there for four weeks, keeping 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 - everyone treated me like a delicate child.

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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 every finger and lay there, adorned like a little queen.

On the first day the doctor permitted me to go outside, they prepared kettles of bouillon 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 handed them out to the elderly.

- May they all have a bright Garden of Eden for the blessings they wished me...

After that, a grand ball was held in our home. All day and night, relatives and friends came and went. The house was filled with the scent of flowers. Moysh’ke Tsukrovitsh, Moysh’ke Bialostotski, Rachel Birger, and Isak Goldberg stayed until late into the night.

It was the last great day of celebration for me in Białystok.

After such an illness, continuing high school was out of the question. Instead, my parents took me to Otvotsk. They stayed with me for two days, then returned home, leaving me at Mr. Gurevitsh's pension. For the first time, I was truly alone.

When the first Friday evening came, I went down to the table and was suddenly overcome by a terrible loneliness. I saw before me our lit dining room, our set table; I saw the candles flickering in the silver candlesticks, and I heard Father's *Kiddush*... It tore at my heart so deeply 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 small romance there, with Shayke.

I sang Russian love songs for the guests.

After Purim, I returned home. It may sound like a fairy tale - and it felt like a dream - but the guests and musicians from Gurevtish's pension walked with me to the train station, singing. And when the train began to move, the musicians played.

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...

and all three were deep in negotiations with matchmakers. But the widow Toybe-Gitl herself was also "'available" again...

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

But big, fat women are naturally lazy. So they simply sat at Toybe-Gitl‘s all day, rocking on chairs.

As mentioned, the whole household was in matchmaking negotiations. 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, who 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‘s 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 was covered in ruffles that visually lifted her breasts even higher and shortened her neck further. She wore a boa made of small feathers. On her head sat a large hat, and on the back of the hat perched a bird with outstretched wings - giving the impression it had just landed to do something and was about to take off again…

On her hands, Libke wore *mitinkes* - fingerless gloves - and in one hand she held a small stick in a sheath that looked like an umbrella.

Libke used to leave the house for two reasons: First, so the *khosn* would see how indifferent she was to the whole affair - a signal

that she didn't even wait for him. Second, so the *khosn* should glimpse her, the *kale*, in all her splendor. When the groom arrived, Toybe-Gitl would usually apologize profusely for the bride's tardiness, and my aunt would come rushing down, breathless, to announce: “He’s here - the groom!” and deliver the first report…

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

Toybe-Gitl had no dowry to offer. But she had noble lineage!

She was descended from a long line of rabbis - and more importantly, she was the sister of Mrs. Nimtsovitsh. The Nimtsovitshes were very wealthy, and her sister, the *Nimtsovitshikhe*, played a prominent role in society. She traveled abroad every year and returned with the finest, most fashionable

clothing. Once, she brought back a plush costume adorned with tiny bells, because - as she said - “people on the street should know that a *Nimtsovitshikhe* is walking there!”

From then on she was known as "the *Nimtsovitshikhe* with the bells".

On the second floor lived Yeshaye *Lupe* (he got the nickname because he had a split lip) with his daughter Sore'ke *Krasavitse* [the Beauty]. Sore'ke was an unattractive old maid, but a real 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. He taught Russian and prepared students for the higher classes. He suffered from a lung disease and was often bedridden. In such cases, he was given a concoction of beer, egg yolk, and sour cream - meant to loosen his cough. When he spat, he did so in a strangely artistic way: lying down, he would spit upward and behind him, tracing the shape of a Hebrew "ר".

His wife was the daughter of a well-known water carrier, but she always walked around with an air of superiority. 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 whenever she crossed it, they would shout in unison:

“Madame Tru-lyu-lyu!”

She ran off, scolding, straight to my grandmother - who immediately began to pretend: “That girl is in for it! But where is she?”

But when I appeared, she only feigned a slap, and her eyes were laughing.

Downstairs, across from our apartment, lived the *Pratshkarnitse* [laundress]. She washed clothes late into the night and began ironing at dawn. The *Pratshkarnitse* was a widow, with daughters in her room - one young man had already gone to America. Despite her long hours in the laundry, she also made cigarettes. In winter, she would sit at the big table in our dining room until late at night, stuffing tobacco into tubes with astonishing speed.

Yet the income from both jobs was so meager that she often went without bread. She ate cooked food only when we brought it to her.

At home, we didn't just "grab a quick bite," as was common in many Jewish households. We ate at set times, and each day had its own carefully planned menu.

For example:

Sunday was a light lunch, since Shabbat had brought a rich *cholent*, along with *ziser kugl* [sweet pudding], *gefilte fish,* and *tsimes* [baked sweet root vegetables]. So on Sunday, we often had *lokshn* [noodles] with boiled potatoes in milk and butter, plus a piece of *milchik fish*.

On Monday, we cooked oaten grits with flank.

Tuesday brought roast with a dumpling filled with boiled eggs and black porridge.

Wednesday was reserved for the national dish - *lindzn mit klyutskelekh*: lentils with round potato dumplings.

Thursday was another light meal, in preparation for Friday, when we cooked meat and fish, chicken and geese, and all kinds of festive dishes.

We lived with our neighbors in a warm and friendly way - it felt more like family than mere proximity. This closeness

applied to those in our courtyard, but also to neighbors from our street. Of those, I remember the Serebrovitshes and the Tzimsteins best.

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Translator's notes:

[1] raysn kvorim: Weeping profusely at the grave of ancestors or wise scholars and asking them to intercede for the living in heaven.

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

Chapter 6

Friends of My Childhood Years

The Serebrovitshes and the Tzimsteins

The Serebrovitshes owned large houses that stretched from Popovshtshizne Street all the way back to the first of the Lipove [Lipowa] alleys. Goats were always running around the spacious yard. The old grandfather used to milk them - for his sick daughter-in-law, for Mrs. Serebrovitsh, and for her three high school daughters who were studying for honorary medals.

The grandmother, a modest and pious woman, managed the household goods. It was said that Grandpa looked after the health, and Grandma looked after the *kashres* [ritual purity]…

In the beginning, the children weren't allowed to attend grammar school on Shabbat. They weren't even permitted to read Russian books on Shabbat...

But over time, things "reformed" at home. The interior 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 no longer spoke to the mother. The children didn't speak to their father. Grandma quarreled with Grandpa. And the maid had become the *baleboste* – the mistress of the house.

The Tzimsteins' houses stretched on both 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 that house were on Friday evenings, when my grandmother would send me out to fetch 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 covered in brass and copper. Brass and copper in every shapes: a jug, a tray, a dish, a *medinitse* [large brass bowl], a pan, a *patelnye* [frying pan].

On the shelf sat a pestle and mortar, a teapot, a pair of candle holders, tiny candlesticks - all gleaming like the sun.

At the bottom of the wall stood a white tiled stove, where pots of fish, soup, and sweet root vegetables simmered - for the large family and for the poor. The lady cook portioned everything before it was sent out, and Mother Tzimstein, with her quick, practiced movements, always added a little more - another spoonful, another piece...

I would collect the blessings and good wishes, and always felt very important in my errands.

The youngest of the sons and daughters was Rachel. Rachel Tzimstein was my first friend. We grew up side by side - playing and learning together. Rachel was small in stature, lovely to look at, with graceful movements and a gentle nature. Like her mother, she was always careful, always worried - about later, about tomorrow, about something just beyond reach….

Rachel was still a young girl, still studying with us at the private high school, when the Tzimsteins' business began to falter. And then, one fine day, Rachel stopped coming to school.

חיהלע גראָבער.

Chayele Grober.

She became the bride of Leyzer Zbar out of fear - fear of becoming a poor, forgotten old maid. All her life, Rachel was haunted by anxiety. Something inside her lived in perpetual dread. She was always driven by a blind urge to prevent something - but what? She never knew the answer.

I spent most of my life with Rachel. Even the upheavals of World War I couldn't tear our friendship apart.

The Levinzons

My friends on the other side of Khanaykes were the Levinzons. Their white house stood on the corner of Kratshak's Alley. One entrance, from Khanaykes, led into their small *bakaley kreml* [grocery store]; another, from the alley, opened into the house - or rather, into a single room that served as dining room, guest room, kitchen, with a stove tucked into the corner. Just beside the entrance was a pipe embedded in the wall that supplied water to the entire neighborhood. To use it, you had to drop 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 Levinzons' second source of income. The two daughters managed this *gesheft* [business], combining it with their studies - alternately reading and turning on the tap, writing and turning on the tap...

The shopkeepers in the area envied the Levinzons for this business - but only in summer. In winter, they pitied them. The pipe would freeze, and the children had to apply hot compresses 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 Mrs. Levinzon pregnant, a baby at her breast, another child crawling across the floor, and two daughters - one in high school, the other in business school.

How she managed it all is hard to fathom. But I remember her walking with her beautiful head held high, her skin like ivory, and a quiet smile on her lips. I believe her pride came from her daughters, who looked more elegant in their uniforms than any girls from the wealthy homes

- and who were also the best students in their schools. All her labor, all her care, was devoted to one goal: that her children be educated and well brought up. And in this, Mrs. Levinzon succeeded brilliantly.

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My hometown of Białystok produced many prominent personalities. But even more memorable were those who never made it to the big time - yet are still worth remembering.

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’s possible that Libe, Keyle-Sore’s daughter, inherited the bakery from her mother. But even if she didn’t inherit the business, she certainly inherited the gift of baking in a way that would be remembered forever. Her bakery needed no

publicity, no flashy lights - not even a sign. Yet everyone found 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 gently. She spoke softly. It was not a place for grand gestures or quick movements, nor a room for loud voices. The store, the bakery, and the apartment - all together were no larger than the basement of a two-family house in Brooklyn.

I don't know if they were truly happy there. But there was kindness, dignity, a touch of wisdom, a hint of culture - and a world of peace.

The desire to make friends awakened in me early. It was a deep urge to find companionship and to remember it well. Even now, I constantly see faces before me - people I haven't seen since my earliest youth. My first friends were those

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

The first was the blind, lanky Jew who kept lifting his head to the sky, as if trying to pierce the clouds and reveal the sun to himself. I felt a deep affection for him - he sang heart-rending songs and was always smiling. In our house, the alms penny was never tossed down, but gently placed in his hand. I can still feel the trembling of his fingers and see his dull, sorrowful smile. How I regret not remembering his name - for he was always simply called "the Blind."

And then there was Keyle. Keyle was not a professional beggar. On her ordinary days, she was a quiet, modest girl - small in stature, with a beautifully sculpted face. She was one of three in the family: her old mother, her sister Peshke, and herself. Peshke was a graceful girl. Every day she passed our house on her way to and from the cigarette factory. Silent, with a sadness that seemed to live inside her, she always wore a long black dress and floated down the street with quick, hurried steps.

On festive days, all three would come to our house as guests and be warmly entertained. I often visited them in their single whitewashed room. There were no proper beds - just a bedstead built like a narrow, long box, covered with a board. At night, the board was removed and placed across two chairs to form a second “bed.”

The third sleeping place was simply the floor.

In summer, Keyle would become wild and confused - perhaps from the heat. She would burst into our yard, smash windows, scream and cry, and everyone feared her. But all winter long she was calm, affectionate, and gentle - and so we loved her.

And now I see Glike before my eyes. Glike was already a grown woman - intelligent, poor, but always finely dressed. She usually visited us once a month, and her stays were long.

On snowy winter days,

Glike would arrive at two in the afternoon and stay until late in the evening. She was served hot, fresh tea with a small snack and sat quietly in the dining room the entire time. My mother and Grandmother spent those hours comfortably

with her. Glike always supplied us with tea. You could buy Visotski's tea in every big and small shop - but in our house, we never bought tea anywhere. Glike was our only *podstavshtshitse* [supplier].

It was said she had been widowed young and had several children to raise. That's why she began earning her living through the work mentioned above. She once told my mother that I had met her early one morning on my way to school. I had stopped to ask how she was. When I heard that her daughter was very sick, I gave her my breakfast and the small change I usually carried. When she refused to accept it, I ran away. All through the winter, my family proudly told that story to every friend and relative who came to visit.

"One Man Orchestra"

Our Białystoker "One Man Orchestra" always appeared with the arrival of spring and vanished with the onset of rainy autumn days. I never knew his name - he was simply called "One Man Orchestra." He played several instruments at once, all by himself. In front of him hung a large hurdy-gurdy; behind him, strapped to his shoulder, was a big drum. Above the drum were two copper plates, connected to his foot by a long cord. And on his head, he wore a hat adorned with bells.

It took extraordinary rhythm and control to play music as artfully as he did. Everything moved so fast, so precisely, that it was impossible to stay still while he performed. 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 to ring the bells...

And we children – our feet lifted up to dance.

What 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 countless winter evenings with them in our quiet, warm, and spotless kitchen. The one I remember best was Zoshe. Maids usually stayed with us for many years, but Zoshe stayed the longest. She arrived before my grandmother passed away and remained long after.

Zoshe was an honest soul - worth her weight in gold and endlessly hardworking. But she had one small flaw: she was continually pregnant.

She wasn’t a beauty. Her face was slightly pockmarked, and one of her arms was shortened. Yet when she approached a man, he often looked at her with strangely wide eyes. Her lips would turn pale, and the hand that usually held a plate or cutlery would tremble. I noticed this often 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 kept his eyes on his plate and only looked up once Zoshe had left the room. Avrohemke had served in the Czar's army, returned home, and had no job in

sight. 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. I held my breath, afraid - thinking thieves had broken in. I felt a strange unease. Then I saw Zoshe, in her white nightgown, floating silently out of the office, through my room, into the kitchen, and back to her couch. From that night on, I often lay there with bated breath and pricked ears, listening for the strange sounds that came from Avrohemke's couch...

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The bigger Zoshe's belly got, the more she cried. My grandmother and mother would speak to her gently, their voices soft and low. But they would also give her a sermon - urging her to think about how miserable it was to carry a child, and even more so to raise one. And each time, Zoshe would

promise: this would be the last I never found out where she gave birth, or where she took the baby. But I remember seeing my grandmother pack a basket - carefully placing a pot of chicken soup, a jar of preserves, and some cakes - and taking it somewhere to Zoshe.

Grandmother never sent me on those errands.

After several weeks, Zoshe would return - still pale, still weak. For a while, they wouldn't let her do any heavy work. They watched over her. Then, quietly, she would begin again: working hard, saying little. And soon, she would grow plump once more.

Sara the Braye [1]

An entire generation grew up with the character of Sara the Braye. Everybody knew her. But for me, Sara the Braye was bound up with deep, dramatic experiences - her figure became deeply rooted in my creative imagination and artistic spirit. Sara the Braye is a character for a playwright, a figure for the theater. And indeed, because of that I am telling the story of Sara the Braye as I remember it from my parents and as I have come to carry it within myself.

There was once a wealthy family in Białystok. Their name no longer matters - now that everything and everyone, rich and poor alike, has vanished into smoke...

The family had taken in Sara, who was fluent in languages, for the education of their children. Sara became the French governess in their rich home. The eldest son of the family fell in love with her - the poor, but highly intelligent governess. Time went by. The business faltered. The family's wealth crumbled. 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,

withdrew the small savings she had accumulated over years of faithful service and sent her "cavalier" to Paris to study. After his departure, she began giving private French lessons in Białystok and regularly sent money to support the "genius" in his student life.

Years passed. Eventually, the joyful day arrived - the son of the aristocratic family, now a graduate, was to return home.

The family prepared thoroughly for his arrival - and of course, Sara, the most devoted member of the household, prepared more than anyone.

But Sara did not know that, in the time leading up to his return, the "good" parents and relatives had quietly planted a seed in the young man's mind: "There is something wrong with Sara," they told him. "She does things that aren't quite normal. Sometimes we're even a little afraid of her."

In other words, they had begun to convince him that Sara was losing her mind…

The day came when they went to greet the *frantsoyz* [the Frenchman] returning from the University of Paris. As the family prepared to leave the house, they looked at Sara with kindness, even *caressed her face*. But when the son arrived from the station, he saw his bride standing before him - her face smeared with soot...

Proudly he turned away.

The family gathered around him. And Sara, realizing what had happened to her, lost her mind. She became silent, melancholy. She wore a beautiful lace pelerine and a small round hat, always in black. She spoke only French. She never begged, 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 its people - were friendly and kind, carefree and cheerful. I didn't know our gentile neighbors. Apart from our Christian maid, the policeman, and the chief of police, I didn't know any Christians at all.

And the latter - well, he would bow respectfully to my grandmother and father, then laugh heartily after a *bronfn* [schnapps] with the Shabbat fish...

And then they bowed again,

discreetly squeezing a green "little paper" in their hands – slipped to them when my father said *oyfviderzen* - goodbye...

I came to know Russian high schools - with their blond *shikses* [Christian girls] - only later, when the first deep wrinkle had settled into my still childlike mind, and my still very childlike heart was seized by its first great experience.

For me, the years 1906 and 1907 sowed a deep sadness in my soul.

Translator's notes:

[1] Jakob Jerusalimski, nearly the same age as Chayele Grober, recounts a similar story in his *Memoirs and Writings of a Białystoker* [p. 74], though with different details. His version centers on a woman known as "Asara Dibraya" [Aramaic: עשרה דבריא, meaning "Ten Commandments"], whose real name was Sara Kaplan. Chayele, who knows the nickname from hearsay, pronounces it as "Sara di Braye," though she uses inconsistent spellings for the surname - none of which clearly fit the context.

The following passage, drawn from Jakob Jerusalimski's Yiddish memoirs, has been translated and framed by me as part of a broader effort to preserve and honor his voice.

The [real] name of "Asara Dibraya" was Sara Kaplan. She was the sister of the well-known Białystoker editor Pesach Kaplan, who, after her death, inherited her small wooden house on "Nayvelt" [Nowy Świat], not far from Bialostotshanske [Bialostoczanka].

Sara Kaplan was the victim of a love tragedy, whose plot would make fine material for a theatrical drama. In her youth, Sara was beautiful and educated. For a long time, she carried on a true love with a student, whom she helped generously with financial means and to whom she was deeply devoted.
She loved the student with all the passion of a young, Jewish-Russian, sentimental romantic girl. But after completing his studies and becoming a doctor, the student fell in love with another girl and married her. Sara, wanting to forget her beloved, decided to marry someone else. Yet under the wedding canopy, the full tragedy of a romantic girl marrying a man she did not love rose up before her.

Her love for the former fiancé flared up with renewed intensity, and, unable to bear it any longer, she lost her mind under the chuppah.
She was not completely insane, but, as they say in French, "déséquilibre" [unbalanced]. In Yiddish, they say: she lost her balance, her grip on herself.

She would walk through the streets of Białystok finely dressed - always in black or dark clothing, often with a black veil over her face. She held herself upright, stiff, proud, with a perpetually serious, contemplative, and agitated expression. And as she walked, she would speak to herself. That is why she came to be known by the nickname "Asara Dibraya."
She kept a little girl with her, whom she raised in her own manner. It was tragicomic to see her dressing the little ten-year-old girl in dark clothes with a veil over her face. But when her melancholy would release her -in her more normal moments - she became a philanthropic lady, attending celebrations and weddings to collect money for the poor and to perform many other acts of human kindness.

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 would call forth respect, compassion, and mercy.

Chapter 7

The Białystoker Pogrom

We spent the summer of 1906 in Milejczyce. As in all previous years, we began corresponding with Fishke the Katsev, Shimen Beynish, and Khayim Stolyar. And, as always, a contract was signed with Khayim Stolyar.

That year, we rented a new house in the yard for ourselves. Soon after Passover, my grandmother became very busy - deciding which preserves to take with us and which to keep locked in the sideboard.

Each day between Passover and Shavuot, a few hours were devoted to planning: when to leave, how to pack, and in which pillows to wrap 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, in truth, already Tuesday - so that, with luck, we would arrive safely in Milejczyce by Tuesday.

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

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 arrived far too early, we never had any time to spare.

Luggage had to be unloaded and weighed. Receipts were written, tucked into a “safe” place - then checked again and again to make sure they were still there.

Finally, the goodbyes began. We kissed each other and said: “*Bobenyu* [dear grandma], watch your steps as you come down from the *ploshtshadke* [platform]. Mulye, don’t miss dinner - it’s time! And above all, *lemanashem* [for God’s sake], write often!”

These tender moments were constantly and brutally interrupted by the whistle of the locomotive, the clanging bell, and the driver’s singing voice: “*Treti zvonok!* - Third call! Belsk, Kleshtsheli, Brisk!”

At that, my mother’s eyes would always grow moist.

My father would respond with a gentle smile - and I would be swept up in a summer-sweet joy.

My father made sure to reserve a seat for us by the window where, for minutes after departure, we could still see my mother, waving her snow-white handkerchief, even as the train was already pulling away.

All this took place at a quarter to two in the morning - and by a quarter past six that same morning, we had already arrived in Kleshtsheli.

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

wagoners. And then he sent us off, packed into the loaded wagon, toward the "*krakh*" ["big city"] of 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 [1]), drove over the first hill, and turned into a sandy road.

Then we drove into a fresh forest. Tall pines cast long shadows, the morning sun filtered through their branches, and the air was filled with the scent of *zubruvke* [bison grass] – it smelled like perfume.

Here, the *odlers* [2] 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 received 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*, and what was happening in the houses. He told us all the names of this year's *dathes* residents, 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‘d been bargained down by 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 lifted the mood.

A special tree - an "old man with a hunchback" - was the first sign that Milejczyce was near. The second, and final, sign was the eternally young *sosnele*, a little pine tree that never wanted to grow old.

That little pine somehow stayed in my memory as a symbol of eternal blossoming. At the *sosnele*, perched at the top of the mountain, people would stop the cart, adjust their seats, comb their hair, straighten their hats, smooth their lapels. The driver would leap onto his seat, crack his whip - and the horses would lurch forward.

It threw us backwards, so that we actually screamed - but it was more a scream of joy.

A few minutes later, we rolled onto the cobbled Kleshtsheler Street. Here our *odlers* jumped, the wheels rattled, the whip cracked, and all the dogs of the gentiles' huts barked.

Here and there, a barn door creaked open, and barefoot, dusty gentile boys and girls peeked out in amazement. But we were carried along like the wind - galloping toward Khayim Stolyar, the first Jewish house.

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That summer, as in all previous summers, letters flew (by two-horse post coach) to and from Visoko-Litovsk [Wysokie Litewskie]. Then, one Monday, a letter from my father arrived, warning us to remain calm if no letter came after the second Thursday. Rumors were in the air: a pogrom was predicted in Białystok on *griner donershtik* [Maundy Thursday].

A black cloud covered the blue sky over Milejczyce, dimming the light of the hot July sun. My mother - always silent in moments of crisis - said nothing. And so we all fell into a sorrowful silence. On Thursday morning, all the Białystokers gathered in our yard and in our house - our house was always the center.

That evening, the post arrived from Wysokie Litewskie with a final letter and a verbal message:The planned pogrom in Białystok had begun that morning.

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

My mother lay there fully dessed, eyes closed, and lips pursed. From time to time, a tear - like a pearl - slipped through her lowered lashes and rolled slowly down her cheeks, pale as wax. It was so heartbreaking - tightening the throat, stinging the nose... But we didn't dare cry, afraid to shatter the silence. It felt as if we had to listen, to wait for sounds that might reach us from afar. But the distance was miles - and now it seemed ten times farther.

On Shabbat, right after *havdole*, the mail horses were harnessed for a special errand to Wysokie Litewskie. 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 the streets in shame.

Shops were closed.

People moved like shadows down Kleshtsheler Street, their eyes fixed on Kleshtsheler Way. From the second corner of Kleshtsheler Street, someone had actually arrived from Warsaw via the Nurets railway station. He told how people's heads had been smashed at the Białystok station and how hooligans were rampaging there.

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We received word from the railway authorities: Jews traveling from Białystok to Warsaw had not arrived since that Thursday.

On Monday, it was decided to send two riders to Wysokie Litewskie, and my brother Max was one of them. It wasn't until late that evening that the two riders came flying home – sweating, their horses barely breathing. And they carried only one letter: My father's.

My mother could not read more than the address before she collapsed onto her bed. A bitter lament from the dozens gathered around us shook the house.

Later, she held the utterly shocking letter in her trembling hands. She read it aloud - her voice quivering, her sobs silent.

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

Jews are beating Christians!

And if struck by lightning, the whole crowd ignited. The provoked pogrom had been carefully prepared: the procession was well armed, and robbery and murder broke out simultaneously in every side street and corner of the city.

The first victims were the Jews who arrived by train and got off at the Białystok station. The police, under 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. Everyone from our courtyard - and those in the neighborhood who managed to reach us - went down into 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. When the baby began to cry, panic spread.

Everyone feared the sound would draw the murderers. In desperation, my aunt pressed down on the child until he nearly suffocated. Later, she couldn't understand how he had survived. Our neighbor, the *lamdn* [Jewish scholar], sat for all three days and nights on a small bench, bent over a religious book - just as one sits *shiva*."

My father had written the letter while the pogrom was in full swing - interrupted again and again, then continuing. Only very early on Sunday did he dare to walk to the nearest mailbox and send it. After that, letters and messages began to arrive from all directions. Sad news of the murdered and tortured... More and more names - some familiar, some not.

The forest of Milejczyce was draped in mourning. That year, the *datshes* emptied earlier than usual.

In Białystok, the spurs of policemen rang once more on the streets. During the first Shabbats, they no longer came to

drink *bronfn* with the Shabbat fish. But only for the first few Shabbats - after that, everything returned to "normal".

Yet the youngest generation remembered well: In 1906, *griner donershtik* [Maundy Thursday] had turned black - Leaving a bloody stain on the ruling nation, the Russian-Polish people.

Translator's notes:

[1] 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)

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

Chapter 8

My Shtetele Milejczyce

This first profound experience of the Białystok pogrom planted in my subconscious a yearning - for Yiddish and Judaism, for people and folklore. That's why Jewish Milejczyce remained my shtetl - forever! The village lay in the triangle between Białystok, Brisk, and Warsaw. Not even marked 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 gleamed above, rising between the buildings. Gardens and flowers grew across the

wide area surrounding the church. Benches lined 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 across the surrounding villages and drawing 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 entire *shul* rested on low, aging poles and leaned to one side, as if it might topple over at any moment. Perhaps that's 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, bringing their *khrabyes* [nobles] and peasants from the villages to the market. And every Thursday at sunset, they would carry their wild, drunken *balebatim* back home.

Besides the *shul*, Milejczyce had another very important center: the bathhouse. It stood behind Fishke's house, next to the river. The area around the bath was always wet - but the bath itself remained dry.

The bathhouse was a long, one-story building made of mouse-grey, crooked planks, with a hacked-out hole for an entrance. Inside the bathroom were two bathtubs and four buckets.

On Thursdays, the women bathed. On Fridays, the men went to the bathhouse...

The *bederke* [bath-keeper's wife], Dobe-Reyne, was a small, withered Jewish woman with a pale, melancholy face and dull eyes. She spoke so softly, she could barely 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. 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 another occasion, Dobe-Reyne said to my mother: "Bobele, listen -

Moyshe and I lived together for six years. We had no children, and his family started to pressure him to divorce me. I saw things were going badly and asked him to go to the rabbi... He agreed and left.

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

'Where are you from?

My husband said: 'From Milejczyce'.

'And what do you do for a living?'

'We run a bathhouse'.

'A bathhouse... Well then, listen, Moyshe: when the women come into the bath - look at them... look at them...'

Hey, Bobele, 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.

By that time my mother was already well known to the people of Milejczyce - and she, in turn, had made Milejczyce known. 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 returned full of enthusiasm, 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 my mother had invited. However, they were so enchanted by the extraordinary air of the Milejczyc pines that they spread the word throughout the winter, and more and more people traveled together each year.

Word of mouth continued, from one person to the next. Every year the number of *datshnikes* who gathered there grew, and in 1914 - our last summer in Milejczyce - there were already about five hundred guests.

By then, 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 -

and that was the rabbi of Milejczyce. This rabbi, they said, was a *gaon*, renowned throughout Poland. The people of Milejczyce boasted about him and invoked his noble lineage in all their dealings - especially in matters of marriage. Who would have dared to negotiate a dowry with a Milejczycer *mekhutn* [relative of the bride or groom], when he had such distinguished lineage as the Milejczycer rabbi!

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

No one ever forgot. The Jews greeted her with *Gut Morgn*, and Christians bowed 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 wasn't a rabbi, but a student of the old rabbi and a great chasid. It was in Khaye-Dobe's house that I first heard chasidic *nigunim* [melodies].

It was during *Simkhes-Toyre* [Simchat Torah].

The house was filled with chasidim. After a good meal and several drinks, the chasidim turned their heads away, closed their eyes, and gave themselves entirely to the 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. Though I understood little, that night I felt as if I had returned to earth after a long, wondrous 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 chasid! Who could have imagined that the mission of preserving and passing on this chasidic

ecstasy would be entrusted to that thin, pale girl - standing there on the bench?!

The Milejczycer Rabbi gave Milejczyce its noble lineage; the Milejczyce forest gave the village its good reputation. On one side of the shtetl, stretching the full length of Kleshtsheler Road, stood a healthy, hundred-year-old pine forest. The tall, straight trees were firmly rooted, crowned with long, slender, fresh green needles. Each branch tip

ended in a green, sticky cone that smelled of pine and soothed aching lungs.

Under the hot sun, the strong trees secreted large drops of yellow, sticky resin - drops that glistened in the sunlight like tears. This sap, which perfumed not only the forest but the entire region, was the secret behind the healing of the sick who were brought here in spring as bedridden patients and were walking again by autumn. The sap worked in their lungs all winter long, until they were returned to this little paradise.

Every morning my mother would walk slowly along a sandy path to maintain her "cure," just as a devout Jew kept his prayer times. Little Gutshe walked beside her, carrying a folded bench on which the “aunt” would rest several times during the short walk. Among the first trees stood the hut where David kept the hammocks. As soon as he saw one of the *datshnikes* arrive, he would promptly take out the hammock labeled with the guest‘s name and hang it in the "right" spot. This special place - two healthy, thick trees on the sunny side with a touch of shade - was chosen at the beginning of the summer upon arrival and remained there until departure, just like the designated bench in the bes-medresh - no comparison intended.

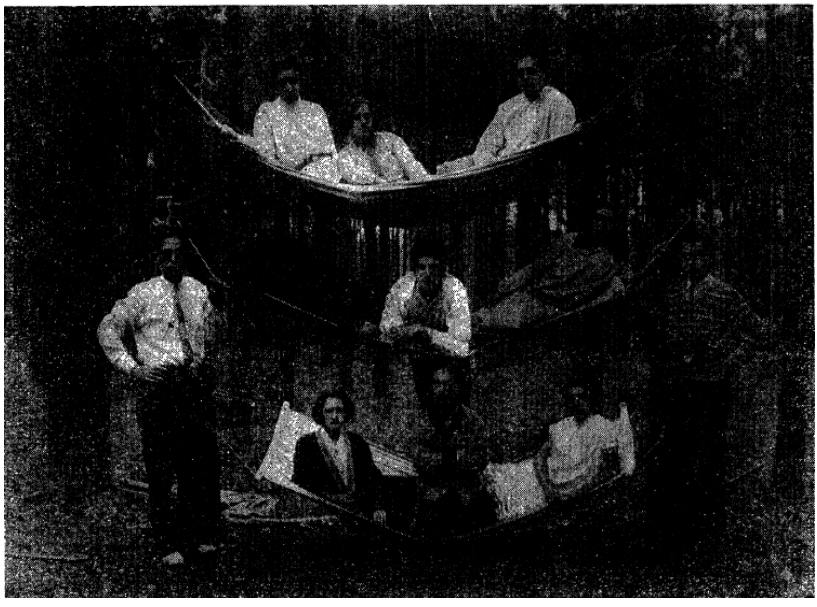
We were always the first *datshnikes*, and everyone who came after us would acknowledge that "this was Bobke's place".

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 the weekday coughs, but also with snoring, with the soft blowing and whistling of tired bodies stretched out on the green needles beneath the trees,

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, pierce a nose or ear, and interrupt the snoring. A sleepy hand would then stroke the offended spot, as if swatting away a fly. The children would quietly "laugh their heads off" and try again and again to swing a branch so that another cone might fall…

Deep in the old forest, as if in a crown, grew a young, fresh grove of delicate trees - thin and light, their transparent branches soaked in sunlight. When you entered its depths, you could see a net of the finest French silk lace – Chantilly - adorned with the softest feathers - Esprit.

Freshly trodden paths led here, carved by the gentle footsteps of virtuous couples seeking the peace of Shabbat.



In the Milejczyce Forest

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There was always a hot silence here - one that, on Shabbat afternoons, was filled with whispers and held breaths from barely moving lips. It stirred the air like a breeze, flowed into the limbs, touched the heart, and filled the whole being with a sweet fatigue that sank gently into the earth…

No matter how safe and protected one felt in the old forest, it was the small, young grove that held a magical pull for children. When we were already back home, my dreams on frosty winter days often returned to that 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 with them the first love of a virtuous Jewish woman, and the waves behind them swallowed up those early, burning passions...

And every winter, young, delicate hands stitched their deepest longings into burgundy velvet - for little Torah mantles and cloth ark curtains. Autumn winds scattered the magical experiences; winter frosts burned away the innocent, young, beautiful dreams. And in Milejczyce, every summer, there were weddings - decided far away, across oceans.

66 [blank]

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 something happened again - something that brought an extraordinary stillness into our home. A merchant, for whom my father had signed surety, went bankrupt. And then, as if struck by lightning, fortune reversed itself: my father won a lottery ticket. I never knew how much - because no one spoke about it. But that summer, my mother traveled to Reichenhall, a spa town in Germany, and she took me with her!

When we arrived in Berlin, we went to a boarding house. In the days that followed, we visited the grand department stores -Tietz and Wertheim - ate in elegant restaurants, drank coffee with whipped cream in spacious, refined cafés, toured museums, and saw “embalmed bodies.” In the evenings, I stood on a high balcony and, for the first time, saw so much light and so many people!

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* was strict and angry.

In addition to running the guesthouse, she managed a grocery store. Her husband drove around in a phaeton. Every afternoon at four o’clock, he would arrive at the

shop, where his wife brought him a pot of coffee with a knob of butter floating in it. She also handed him a roll so thick with fatty ham that he had to open his mouth as wide as his horse usually did.

I watched this ritual every day with the same amazement, unable to understand why such a large, coarse German - with his red, powerful neck - needed to gulp down so much solid food.

In Reichenhall, my mother took her daily cure, and I wandered about on my own. I liked walking along the wide streets and through the beautiful parks, lost in thought - though I can't remember what I was thinking. Once, the other guests from our boarding house took me along to the woods. There, I felt as if I were back in Milejczyce, and I sang loudly. Later, an elegant man with glasses approached my mother. He told her she should give me a musical education. His name was Erlich. When we returned home, there was much talk about it. And so, my *khshives* - my prestige - 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 great drama of my life. For months, whenever a friend came to visit my brother, he would 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 then did people remember that, back in my first school with Mr. Gevirts, my first singing teacher, Berman, had once 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 then that people began to believe that my wandering through the woods with a guitar in hand, and my singing to the sun and the moon,

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were the expression of something deeper - an inner urge... Their imagination had already carried them so far that once I finished high school, I was to be sent to the Warsaw Conservatory— but only so that, after I married, I could entertain the guests. The idea of theater as a profession? That was never even considered.

After my grandmother's death, I was suddenly "out of my childhood's shoes". Right after that summer, my uncle Kalman began visiting us three times a week to teach me me *loshn koydesh* [Hebrew]. There was no need to learn Yiddish; we already knew it. But Hebrew was, on the one hand, the holy tongue, and on the other, a language not every girl was expected to know…

And after all, it was considered a fine thing if a girl could sprinkle a few Hebrew words into her correspondence with her future bridegroom…

No one, however, thought to teach me anything about business. I don't know why - my parents were already modern people. But that's how it was. Maybe it was because I was frail. Or maybe it was simply because I was *kheynevdik* - graceful. Everything was done with the quiet assumption that one day I would make a good match.

But as young as I was, I couldn’t understand why we needed a better society than, say, the children of the quiet, honest shoemaker Libermann—his 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 Furyes' children: They ran a tavern! And yet all the children studied, were Zionists, and even went to Erets-Yisroel in their blooming youth to dry the swamps with their own hands.

I didn’t understand this “refined society,” and I didn’t accept it. My childhood friends remained my friends for life.

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Our new apartment was on Polevaya Street. The new neighbors were: the Tsukrovitshes across the street, the Lunskis a little farther away, and the Birgers on the old highway.

The Lunskis were called "Americans" because one of them had once been in America. But now they were all in Białystok – owners of large factories, grand houses, servants and - open doors. People went in and out. There were always all kinds of good things in their home, but somehow a coldness radiated from it. There was no sense of togetherness in the family. Somehow everyone seemed to live for themselves, in their own separate 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 dimness of the house created an atmosphere so warm, so intimate, that I was drawn to it like a magnet. The walls were draped in plush fabrics, the beds covered with clean blankets. On the table, the buffet and the end tables - clean lace tablecloths, photographs, dozens of little objects, each one dusted and polished daily. And every Friday, the house was thoroughly cleaned.

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

Who would know that the silver candlesticks gleaming on the table were pawned every Shabbat evening, and redeemed each Friday for the blessing of light? And even if we had known - who would have cared? There was so much light in poverty. It was so clean. It was warm!

The *gvirim* - the rich and distinguished in our town - were always preoccupied with dowries. Those with sons worried about where they would find a dowry, and the parents of daughters worried about how they would provide one…

Mr. Birger, the *podryatshik* [contractor], and his devoted wife did everything they could to raise, clothe, and educate their daughters. But before the girls were truly grown, they were already "taken away" from them.

Years later, when all the children were married and scattered across the world, and the Birgers were left alone - though in a house of their own - Mama Birger once told me with a smile: "Boys still knock on our door and ask if I've got another 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 must 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: myself, Rachel Birger, and Sonye Shmukler. There was another one - Peshke - but she was quiet, almost passive, and faded from my memory early on.

Sonye was a passionate soul. She was a brunette beauty, with big black eyes, and she sang so beautifully - oh, how she sang! She was also a happy girl. Her family lived on Lipowa Street, where they ran a restaurant. I remember their first one, tucked into a basement next to "Lis with the shoes and Shvarts with the machines".

The second restaurant was already more refined - on the second floor of a building across from the church.

Her parents were old, tired, quiet and good people. The doors were always open, and we would *balebateven* - manage the house, as if it were our own. I still have the taste

in my mouth of the fried chicks we used sneak from the icebox on Friday nights....a taste of paradise!...

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Sonye and I were true *shalunyes* - cheeky girls. We always walked home together from the high school. The furthest lived Rachel - she would walk from the highway through my street, and we would both pass by Sonye's house and call out to her. Those early mornings were cheerful 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 truly feel the gaze on my long braid - which always seemed to command great respect. I had the most pleasure ringing the bell at Gordon's gate - that meant I had tricked the *gvir*, the wealthy man!

I never had much desire to study, so every year before exams, a tutor was hired to push me from one class to the next. But my importance was no less than that of the "medalists" - and that was thanks to my ability to entertain both my teachers and the students. There was enough time for entertainment - half an hour during the big break - and we used to sing Russian love songs.

If a teacher was sick and couldn't come, we'd imitate him. And truly, no one escaped imitation. We had a historian as lanky as a noodle, a class lady as small and round as a dumpling, and a teacher with the voice of a frog. But the best entertainment came during the *zakon* (law) lessons**.** That's when we wrote love letters - an ongoing correspondence exchanged regularly with the boys from the high school across the street.

My first youthful 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 emerged from the young grove, singing with my guitar, and paused in the old large forest, where a sorrowful emptiness rustled through the trees.

“Where have all the *datshnikes* gone?”

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

carefree song in the Milejczyce woods; that summer I said goodbye forever to "my *shtetl* Milejczyce".

This time, our journey along the narrow roads to the station at 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 overwhelmed by civilians and military alike. 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 been called to serve in the army.

The school year began, but air raids often made it impossible to leave the house. So we decided to leave Białystok and move farther from the German border and out of danger. We went to the small *shtetl* of Mimkovitsi, to stay with one of my father’s merchants - Mrs. and Mr. Sadovski. They welcomed us warmly, and each day we gratefully shared the cholent from their stove. We stayed there only a few weeks and then returned home. But in the spring of 1915, the war flared up again, and the true destruction of our town began.

Chayele Grober in the Milejczyce Woods

A real evacuation of the civilian population had begun. This time, we left our home - and Białystok - forever. In those days, my family consisted of my parents, myself and little Genye [1] - my uncle's only daughter. My uncle was in America and my aunt Teybele, along with her two little boys, Getsele and Hershele, had joined our household. Since my grandmother had passed away, Aunt Teybele had taken charge of our household and shared partial custody of me. Saying goodbye to my aunt was heartbreaking! Not only were we leaving, but she also had to part with little Genye. The little girl had been with us since she was small, and now she too was being taken out of danger.

Though my mother tried to reassure Aunt Teybele through bitter tears that we would return soon, Teybele could not be consoled. Her heart told her 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 through the entire winter.

Translator's notes:

[1] Chayele 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

Chapter 11

I Want to Become a Nurse - To Kharkov

In 1915–1916, the entire city of Minsk had become one vast military camp. Every other house along the main street served as a Red Cross base. Convoys of wounded soldiers clogged the streets day and night. It's no wonder that cries for help echoed all around us - and I was swept up in them. An extraordinary restlessness had taken hold of me, and I decided I would become a nurse. Had I told my mother, I'm sure she would have resisted. She hadn't slept properly in weeks, tormented by worry over my brother. She would never 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 slipped into a Red Cross house. There I stood, face-to-face with a large, heavyset man in a military uniform, adorned with all kinds of medals. I was really scared - it felt as though I were standing before the Tsar himself...
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!"
I had failed. And so I walked home through the dark back streets, disappointed.

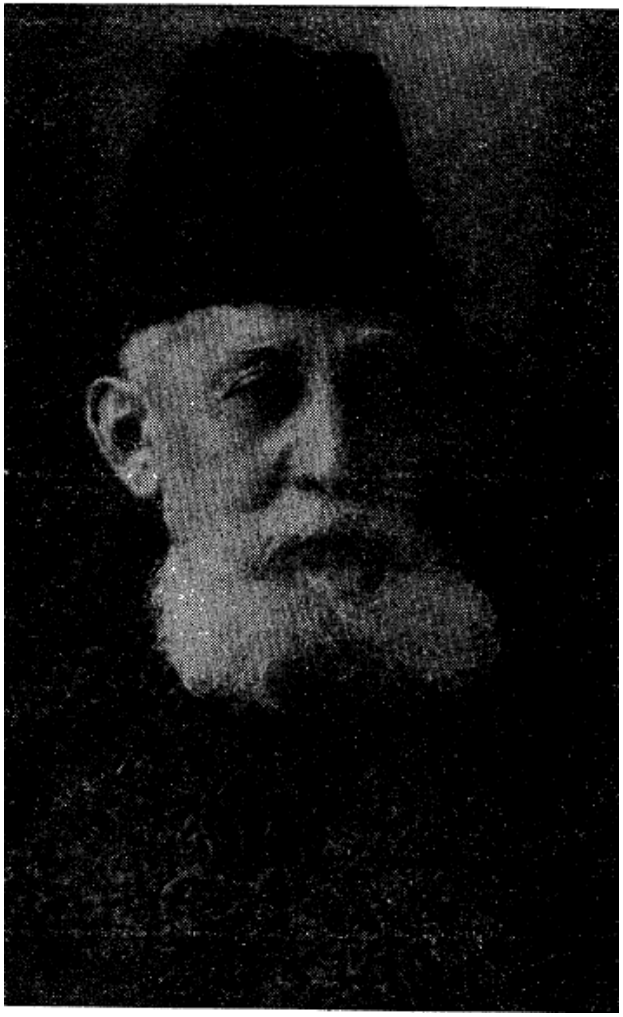
At home, too, it was dark and silent. Since the beginning of the war, my mother had grown quiet - what was there to talk about? My brother was in the army, my father was in Moscow, and Minsk was soaked in rain and sinking in mud. Each day brought more people - *byezhentses*, refugees - and more and more Białystokers. In one corner of our large room was the "salon," where the newly arrived would shed tears and pray to God to return them to their homes.

In Minsk, we shared our apartment with the Zabludovski family. My mother used to say, "Well, it's cramped, but at least we live with the Zabludovskis!" The Zabludovskis 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 had vanished in the war. With Sara, I was allowed 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 winter, as the German army approached Minsk, we fled once again—this time to Kharkov. In normal times, the journey from Minsk to Kharkov took 36 hours. Now, it took us twelve days. We traveled in wagons marked "8 horses or 40 people", though in truth, there were likely more of us. During the day, the train moved so slowly that we could jump off, walk alongside it for a while, and then hop back on. At night, the train would stop in a field or forest. We'd build a fire, boil water, cook a meal. Old and young sat around the flames, each lost in their own thoughts.
Usually, the silence was broken by a whistle or a song. The melody would spread, catching one voice after another. And through the singing, a sigh would rise - or a silent lament. Where had I felt this before? Oh, right.

Our old nanny used to tell us stories about people who had no land and no home - people who wandered endlessly, whose shelter was a field or a forest, and who built fires wherever they stopped. These people were called "gypsies." They sang songs - sad songs. And we sang even sadder ones.
We were just like those gypsies, with one difference: when a shtetl heard that gypsies were coming, they would hide

the horses and the children. But we didn't steal any horses or children.



Samuel Abramovitsh Shmerkovitsh

In Kharkov, we stayed at the boarding house of the Shmerkovitsh family. My father had already transferred his business to Moscow.

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Moscow had become the commercial center. We had no right to live there - only businessmen were permitted. So my mother, Genye, and I settled in Kharkov. The upheaval in our lives worsened my mother's already fragile health. The intense Ukrainian heat strained her heart and left her short of breath.
After long discussions, it was decided that my mother would go to Crimea - this time without me. Little Genye had already missed a year of school, and now she needed to return to high school.

On one of the hottest days in August, Genye and I accompanied my mother to the train station. We stood on the platform, my mother at the window of the train. Just as she had always stood on the trips to Milejczyce - tall, proud, and calm - her hands in light-colored gloves, waving a handkerchief at us. Her deep brown eyes seemed even larger, even calmer. A faint smile played at the corners of her closed mouth.
The little girl hugged me tightly. In silence, we returned 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 spend a few weeks with my mother. He gave us the dates when he would be passing through Kharkov and asked me to meet him at the station. Our hearts were filled with joy! 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 that could make you believe in the immortality of our spirit.

I was standing in the Milejczyce forest, beside the road that led from the shtetl into the woods. On the right stood 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 – wearing the same black scarf with black fringes. She was walking majestically down the sandy path. My mother passed me and entered the hut. I followed her and looked inside: Everything I saw was black! A long, black

table covered with the same black fringed fabric and two lit candles. On the floor lay two long black boxes…

I awoke with a start and ran straight to the door to check the time. As I opened the door, a telegram slipped to the floor at my feet. My heart froze. When I finally opened the telegram, I read:

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

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 he was, 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 we went to pray *Kol Nidre*. My father would 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 this time, he wasn't blessing me. He was looking at me for protection. I asked him to give me his seat on the train, and then I would go, as true as I'm standing here! But my father didn't agree, and he went off.

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

I telegraphed her on the way and found her dressed, 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. For the first time, I had found my true mother! But my joy soon faded. She returned to bed; she had only dressed so as not to frighten me. In truth, she was already too weak to leave it. I spent ten days with her - ten restless days and sleepless nights.

The day before *Rosh Hashanah*, she wrote postcards to my father and friends. That evening, I played the mandolin for her, 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 the 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 against my chest. The windows were open to the Black Sea. I stared into the depths of the blue-green water. Unconsciously, tears began to flow 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 embraced 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 across and stood in the middle of the cornice, looked at us, stood still for a moment, 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, 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 rushed to her and tried to insert the syringe - but the liquid flowed back.

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I put my left hand under my mother and felt her body grow heavier and heavier, until I heard a faint crack in her throat... Instinctively, I turned my hand over and looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to three.

Someone pulled my hand out from under her body; someone lifted me from my knees and led me downstairs, where I lay 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 she would spend the night, no matter how many times I told them I could pray, that I wanted to be with her for her 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 placed 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 jolting of the phaeton, but suddenly I woke up and saw: We were standing on a path, and on the right side was a hut - just like David’s hut in the Milejczyc Forest. I jumped out of the phaeton, ran to the booth, and looked inside.
Everything was black.
Two black boxes lay on the floor...
In which one was my mother?
I fainted.

The journey back to Kharkov took two days and nights, and the whole time one thought kept nagging at me: how was I going to break the sad news to Genye? The little girl loved her aunt more than anything - she was so deeply 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

bright eyes - those big, black eyes. I had been thinking for forty-eight hours about how to say it, and now it came out in a single second:
“Auntie is no more.” I started laughing and kept repeating, “Auntie is no more, no more!” The little girl became hysterical and cried wildly: “Chayele, Chayele!” But I kept laughing...
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 Alushta. I’m going to Kharkov.”

I had suddenly become an adult - independent, and the mother of a grown-up child. On the morning my father was to arrive from Moscow, I prepared the table very early, with a white tablecloth and the same little things my mother had once placed on the table 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 behind a kind of cool alienation.
The responsibility of being a mother to the little girl was like a heavy yoke on my slender shoulders.

Chapter 13

The Shmerkovitshes- Spring 1917

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

In addition to the boarding house, the family also owned a *typografye*, a printshop, where both Mr. and Mrs. 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 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 centers, and the greatest thing they achieved was

giving chocolates or flowers... But Roza Shmerkovitsh gave of herself—truly! Every day she brought home sorrow and tears.

One day, Roza came to me with a request: since the house was full of students, she asked if I could take in a Jewish poetess who was still in the hospital after an operation. Roza spoke of her with such deep emotion that I agreed. I will always remember how Roza - truly with her own hands - brought me a petite girl with long blonde curls and big, open, sky-blue eyes. This was the poetess Yudika [Yehudit Zik], who now lives in Canada.
Many years have passed since then, and Roza is no longer with us. But for me, and for Yudika, Roza remained a living, luminous figure.

Every Sunday, the family would host lunch with many guests, and the house would fill with cheerful noise. Lunch would last two or three hours, and then the doors to the large living room would be opened - where the grand piano stood - and the informal, yet 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 parents from small Ukrainian towns. From the day I returned from Crimea, I too came under her care - without quite understanding why - and her whole family took me in as if I were one of their own.

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

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

The year I spent in Kharkov was a year of mourning for the loss of my mother - a turning point in my life, and a turning point in Russian history. During that year, I became acquainted with loneliness, misery, and embarrassment. Our home in Białystok had been petit bourgeois, and going to work didn't fit into that world. I felt lost, if only because I didn't know what to do. At the time, I knew nothing about *dayges-parnose* - worrying about earning a living - but my father's silence before he left was connected to a second dream I had, one that filled me with anxiety and fear about the future.

My second dream was related to my home in 1914:
That year, after the outbreak of the war, a woman - a merchant from Brisk - came to stay with us. Her husband had once traveled to Białystok to buy goods, but after his death, she took over the business herself. In our home, it was customary for merchants to come straight to us: our apartment was spacious, the table wide, and the doors always open - just like at my grandmother's.
By then, all the rooms were already filled by *byezhentses* - refugees evacuated from the *shtetlekh* near the German border and the front lines. The woman from Brisk slept in the same room as I did.

Now, two years later, I saw that same room in a dream - and the woman across from me was half-naked, smiling at my father. From that night on, my fear grew. I could no longer sleep.

Konstantin Stanislavski once said: "Tragedy borders on comedy."

To illustrate this, he would draw a transverse line one side - the line of tragedy - and on the other side, he would begin the line of comedy, leading it toward the point where both lines converged. Just as Stanislavski's entire theory was grounded in lived experience and close observation of human nature, so too was this assertion. In my sleepless nights, my tragic line collided again and again with the comedy of life around me.

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At that time, the characteristic sleep of each of the Shmerkovitshes was very deeply imprinted in my memory. And the thought occurred to me: only lazy people sleep peacefully - energetic people relive the rhythm of their daily work in their sleep.

Mr. Shmerkovitsh, who spent his days in the print shop, slept to the rhythm of the machine: inhale - a snore, exhale - a puff, snore-puff, snore-puff, one-two, one-two...

Mrs. Shmerkovitsh, a firm and commanding one: inhale - a deep snore, exhale - a whistle - sostenuto...

The veterinarian, who spent his days with horses: a deep breath in, a horse-like whinny out...

The doctor, home 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 night's symphony 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 become the year of the greatest events in Russian history. There were many rumors in the air, but no one dared to speak of them...

One day, at the beginning of spring, Bertotshka brought me an address from the conservatory - a woman, a "fortune-teller."
"All the professors go to her," she said. "She foretells the revolution..."
I brushed off my sadness and went to see her. I can still smell the pungent scent of the many plants that filled the large room -

even the ceiling was covered.
A small, gray-haired figure with high shoulders and large, intelligent gray 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 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 already foreseen - and it came to pass.

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 my father was getting married only a few months after my mother’s death, I didn’t want to live anymore... Yasha came to me on the first train. We 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 never stopped him - not for a single minute - from coming whenever I needed 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 those “things taken for granted” caused him.

Now, in this time of 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, relaxed, and calmly asked me for advice: which of the two women he’d been proposed to (one of them was the woman from Brisk) should he marry? Allegedly, he was asking for my sake. He said he would do it for me... that I would need a home, and so on and so forth... I felt a spasm in my throat. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t cry, couldn’t even breathe. And I remained silent for a full twenty-four hours.
Then I invited my father to a café - away from the house, away from the people, away from little Genye. And there, at that small, quiet table, my father met a mature person for the first time - a person who was his equal.

And this person demanded that he honor her mother’s memory - that out of respect for more than twenty-five years of peaceful, happy life together, he should wait until the year of mourning was over.
My father was deeply unhappy about this lesson, but he didn’t dare get angry. When he left, he assured me he would wait - and my father’s word had always been sacred to us. But this time, my father broke his word. My dream came true - this time as well.

In that same spring of 1917, the dreams of millions came true. Russian soil was soaked in blood - the blood of Jews during the pogroms, the blood of freedom fighters, the

blood of workers and peasants, the blood of peaceful citizens - victims of war - blood, blood!
And the most bloodthirsty ruler was called the "*Vayse Foterl*", Tsar "*Batyushka-Byeli*" [1] . 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 shattered the fortresses, and the Russian earth echoed with the sound of breaking iron chains! Hands bound in chains for decades reached out to embrace Mother Earth! Those who had fought with their swords the day before now fell beneath them.
Factory magnates, who only yesterday rode in fine carriages, were now dragged through the streets in dung carts!

Young and old flooded the streets. Orchestras appeared out of nowhere. On every corner of the main boulevards, 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 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 afterward, a procession of workers dressed in gray and black appeared. In the middle of the crowd, they carried a footstool - and on it sat a figure: an old woman, eighty years old, slightly bent, but with her head held proudly high.

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

The crowd around me pushed me into the Sinyelnikov 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, labor, fraternity, and justice.
It was the voice of *Breshko-Breshkovskaya, the grandmother of the Russian Revolution!*

Now all barriers were broken, and all of Russia was open to Jews and Christians alike. Thousands upon thousands of Jews were moving deeper into the country. Suddenly, I realized that all my personal worries were dissolving. 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 truly great city. There was none of the peaceful rhythm I remembered from Berlin in 1910. Life in Moscow now pulsed with hysteria.
The chic of the women, the elegance of the men, the real brilliants glittering in shop windows, the sable, chinchilla, and ermine furs, the colors of carpets, embroidered velvets and silks, the carriages drawn by four or six horses in a row, decorated with pompoms - all of it dazzled the eyes.

Against that backdrop, the simple, separate building with the two small, modest signs bearing the inscription *"Moscow Art Theater"* stood out even more clearly.

The audience did not speak; they whispered with bated breath. According to the rules of this theater, no one dared to applaud until the final curtain had fallen. For nearly three hours, the entire audience “wandered with the artists” - they wandered in search of *The Blue Bird*, by Maurice Maeterlinck [2]. And for several minutes after the last curtain fell, no one could bring themselves to clap.
I remained a dreamer - until my friend Yasha whispered:

"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 frenzy spread - and prices soared! Ten thousand!... Twenty thousand!... Fifty thousand!... Five hundred thousand!...
And still - nothing! No sugar, no bread, no butter, no meat. Nothing reached the market. Everything passed from hand to hand until it returned to the first, and then the cycle began 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, then tomorrow I’ll announce that not a single puff of smoke may rise from any chimney until a tax has been paid!”
Thousands upon thousands would have paid any price - to *stop* the smoke! But the land burned hotter and higher, until everything vanished - along with the smoke.

Translator’s notes:

[1] both mean "White Dear Father"

[2] 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.

Chapter 14

Nahum Zemach –The founder and Spiritual Leader of Habima

When I was still in Kharkov, my friend from Białystok, Shimen Zemach, came to visit me and told me that his brother Nahum had sent him from Moscow to persuade me to come and join the group that was about to found a Hebrew theater.
Nahum Zemach still remembered the *moonlit nights* in the Białystok forest of Gorodnyani, when I used to stand on felled pine trees, guitar in hand, singing Russian love songs.

When I arrived in Moscow, he sent his sister to tell me he wanted to see me.

Nahum Zemach was born and raised in Rogozhitsa. He was the eldest in a family where most of the children did not remember their father.
His mother had hoped Nahum would become a rabbi, but he never received ordination - he had to begin earning a living to support the family.
Every day, he walked with long strides from the village to the shtetl to give Hebrew lessons.
Not long after,

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 vividly the first time he saw Nahum in Białystok - limping from the countless blisters on his feet. There are people who walk with a kind of "hop" - before their foot touches the ground, it‘s already in the air. It seems to me that these people don't really feel the earth beneath them. Others sway from side to side - as if they’re neither here nor there.
Nahum Zemach was someone who always walked with a sure step, placing his full weight directly onto the ground.

All his life, there was something of a village man about him - in the way he walked, the way he spoke, and the way he carried himself: earthiness, simplicity, and unrefined nature.

His slightly tilted head as he walked emphasized his complete trust in *mame-erd* [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 *) .

In Moscow, I was surprised to find Nahum - elegantly dressed - in a large, beautiful room of the spacious apartment his family had moved into. He welcomed me with joyful warmth.

There, in his study, he told me about the studio that had already opened, about Stanislavski and Vakhtangov, who were directing there. He spoke of his dream: to build a Hebrew theater, to stage the Bible, to go to Erets-Yisroel – the land we came from.
As he spoke, he paced up and down the room with his hands clasped behind his back, and before me stood the same village man of old.

Then, suddenly, he stopped and began talking about his two brothers, who were running large businesses.

Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov
(1883-1922)

It was only thanks to them that the family had settled in 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 once not allowed to stay more than 24 hours - here in Moscow we want to build a Hebrew theater.
And that, Grober, is worth living for!”

That stirred and excited me - it awakened my national consciousness.
Nahum possessed an extraordinary power of persuasion. This strength was the key 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 a national theater. And when his comrades (especially his earliest and closest) would join forces, pounding on the table and making demands, Zemach would suddenly stand up: ashen-faced, lips pale, hands trembling.

His voice would grow deep and hoarse, his body would sway from side to side, and his feverish, glowing eyes would quite literally hypnotize us.
When he finished speaking, we would join him again in the greatest ecstasy, soaring on his wings to the highest heights. On those nights, he would rise before us like a true prophet, and we could see the gates of Jerusalem opening - our prophet leading us into the new temple.

And there, at the peak of ecstasy, Nahum Zemach would cry out:
"Prepare, prepare, *Habima* in Jerusalem" [1].
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?!

Not long ago, Nahum's brother Benyamin told me that an old friend of Nahum's - still living in the small *shtetl* - had once said of him: *"The eagle without wings."*
What an apt comparison that small-town friend made! Perhaps that's where Nahum Zemach's own expression came from: *"You're cutting off my wings!"*
Anyway, it was in Białystok that his wings began to grow, and he organized the first group: *Habima*.

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 do know that Nahum Zemach brought the group to the Vienna Congress, where they performed for the first time. I also know that Zemach was responsible for the group, so when he returned to Białystok, he gave the comrades who had stayed behind money for travel expenses from his teaching income, and they returned home individually.

I met Nahum Zemach in my early youth, when the idea of "theater" was still buried in my subconscious.
We met one moonlit night in Gorodnyani, when I was giving one of my improvised concerts - standing atop a mountain of felled pine trees, guitar in hand.

In later years, when I knew Zemach well, I realized that the fact he remembered me so vividly had little to do with my own merits.
It was because Zemach was already consumed by his great idea - and every suggestion, every impression, was burned into his memory.

The first attempt to create a Hebrew theater was made during the time of the pogroms, and the second in 1916, still under the reign of Tsar Nicholas II.
The idea was only realized after the revolution.
As soon as the Red Army entered the Kremlin, all of Moscow turned into a whirlwind of upheaval. New laws were passed daily.
The walls of buildings were plastered with symbols of the "old" and the "new": - a fat man with a monocle - the bourgeoisie; - a withered, poorly dressed man with outstretched hands - the proletariat; - the round-bellied policeman and the proletarian bound in chains; - the salon lady with opera glasses and the disheveled maid - all shouting:
"Down with the bourgeoisie! Power to the proletariat!"
Private enterprises were immediately confiscated, and later, private property.
Trade was forbidden.

Those who evaded the law were severely punished.
Russia was once again drenched in blood — on one side by the liberators, the "Reds," and on the other by the fighting "Whites."
Moscow looked like an enormous ruin. Shops were sealed, restaurants shuttered, and all the once-glittering shop windows stood empty.

Here and there, a small, frightened mouse would pause in the window of a former clothing store, peering out with sharp little eyes, as if to say: *"Guys, I just need crumbs!"* And the human would bow his head in shame: *"We're close friends now, my dear hungry little mouse."*

There's a saying: "A hungry stomach makes you sing!"
Now the saying proved true. The hungrier Moscow became, the more it craved theater and music.
Theater studios sprang up like mushrooms. Habima became one among many - but the Hebrew language echoed like the voice of a prophet crying out from the desert.

Word spread quickly through Moscow: the small studio at *6 Nizhnye Kislovke* [Kislovski Alley No. 6] was drawing the city's greatest actors and artists.
And they felt irresistibly drawn - not so much for flawless acting, but for the overwhelming ecstasy that reigned there.

The language of the Bible attracted the greatest artists of the time - Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, Fyodor Shalyapin [Feodor Chaliapin], and Maxim Gorky.

But while Habima was drawing increasing attention from the non-Jewish artistic world, the Jewish section [*Yevsektsiya*] declared Hebrew a counterrevolutionary movement.
At its head stood the small, withered, embittered Litvakov.
He waged a relentless campaign against Habima, demanding that we be liquidated, dissolved.
Nahum Zemach organized a public discussion in a large theater, where leading artists spoke about the great artistic value of the small Hebrew theater.
Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Education and Art, defended us.
But the bitter *yidele*, the great "idealist" – Litvakov – could not be swayed.

Only a few years later, he himself was liquidated.
During the bitter struggle, Nahum Zemach once again moved everyone with his tremendous energy

and idealism, and his popularity grew even more. As his popularity grew, so did his ambition - and his self-esteem. Had there been someone else in the group to match him, perhaps the tragic split might never have occurred.
But there were no great spiritual leaders. Not then, not later.

I believe the greatest tragedy of this great man was that he had not a single friend - not one true friend who would fight for him objectively, and solely for the sake of the idea. Every one of his opponents was driven by personal interests.

And in America, where the split took place, the old story of a "theater like all theaters" had already begun.
A part of *Habima* went to Europe. Zemach remained 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 truth, his efforts failed. Both branches of *Habima,* on either side of the Atlantic, were left with nothing but broken fragments of once-mighty wings.

Nahum Zemach's head bowed lower and lower under the weight of failed attempts.
The theater he had built for the Land of Israel - he could not lead it there himself.

Years later, he arrived in the land of his dreams, and there the chapter of *"banim gadalti veromamti vehem pash'u bi"* ["I raised and exalted children, and they rebelled against me"] came to an end.

Miserable and sorrowful, he wandered the streets of Tel Aviv, where *his* theater was performing.
Alone, he drove across the country to which he had given his most beautiful gift.
Nahum returned to New York a broken man.

To us, he was now only a shadow of himself - the Zemach from a poor little *shtetl*, with deep, sorrowful eyes and worn-out feet.
The one who walked the wide streets of New York, silently dragging his sick body and broken spirit toward eternal rest.

Author's Note:

*) בירת-ארבע = the place from which the prophet comes (in the drama by David Pinski, *Eternal Jew*)

Translator's note:

[1] 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.

Nahum Zemach

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 while.
The door of a second room opened, and Nahum Zemach entered together with Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov. All I remember from my first meeting with Vakhtangov is a pair of large, open, blue-green eyes – eyes that smiled, slipped into slight irony, and then suddenly turned serious and sharp.

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

beating their chests in deep emotion, falling to their knees in great love.

But instead, I heard Vakhtangov speak.
He spoke calmly and quietly, softly and simply, seated at the table.
He spoke about the deep reverence in which theater is held by all peoples, and about the great truth revealed by Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, the founder of the Moscow Art Theater.

He said that theater - and actors - must edify the audience.
He spoke of the immense responsibility of the actor, who must help 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, he said, requires seclusion.
At the end of his speech, he urged everyone to listen closely to the call of their own being, their own spirit - and to test themselves:

Are you ready to make the sacrifices that theater demands?
He said that theater is hard work, and often brings with it a difficult life.
And he concluded by saying:
Theater is the finest and most important branch of art…

I couldn't sleep that night.
An unfamiliar feeling had been awakened in me - a gnawing longing.
Hot tears soaked my pillow until a sweet calm settled over me, 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 one and only theater: *Habima*.

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Joy makes life colorful.
Tears enrich the spirit.
I thank God for every tear I've shed in my life.
My cup, which had not yet been full, was now overflowing.

Our uncle David Shatya had passed on my mother's final words to my father:
"Take care of my Chayele!"
Her only husband - the man 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 so many Moscow merchants of that time.
It has remained an eternal mystery to me why, at the hight of his so-called

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

It was one of those bitterly cold days.
While Moscow was wrapped in a high collar of heavy bearskin, I rushed into 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 stepped into 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, even more sharply, 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 slipped into my coat.
I walked past the kitchen, where my father's wife was standing, and met the frightened eyes of fourteen-year-old Elinke - her son.
I passed her brother-in-law, a guest from the provinces.

No one said a word. No one stopped me.
And I left the apartment.
Slowly - even more slowly - I descended the stairs.
No one called me back.
My legs carried me to the last flight - then gave way, and I collapsed into the deep snow.

It was my friend Yasha who found me.
He helped me to my feet and took me to a café.
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, offering 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 a blessing, in such a condition, for a young girl to have inherited not beauty - but intelligence.

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

The house was shrouded in silence - the kind of silence in which only those with a clear conscience can sleep.
I entered my room and heard a trembling whisper:
“Chayele, I thought you had left me.”

My little Genye was terrified that I wouldn’t come back.
She was the only one who needed me now - and perhaps the only one who loved me so deeply.

I never discovered what was going on in my father's heart, but I believe we shared the same stubborn will - and neither of us gave in.
My father wanted to force me down his path: a wedding with a dowry and a trousseau, and a "decent" life.
But I kept moving forward, with steady steps, toward my goal: work, justice, and freedom through art.
I have stayed on this path to this day - and I will follow it to the end.

That 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, which, through its perfect cast, claimed its place in history and became immortal.

"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."

It didn't take long for the already "revolutionized" prince to don his khaki riding breeches, with a small sack on his back, and begin 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 differs from people to people, yet it is melodic for all peoples."

And Prince Volkonsky was a master in this field.
Soon, Volkonsky announced that an instructor from the famous Dalcroze School [1] was arriving from Switzerland to teach rhythm and plasticity [2] according to the Dalcroze system.

A few days later, we were already working on movement with this instructor at Habima.
I was placed in the special Dalcroze studio.
So during the day I worked on movement and music, and at night I worked in Habima.
At the rhythm school, I received music lessons from David Salomonovitsh Shor - a kind and well-loved figure in Moscow.

His music school was one of the finest.
He was active in Jewish life and became one of the first *Chasidim* [followers] of Habima.

At the same time, I took private singing lessons with Madame Zhukovskaya, a professor at the Moscow Philharmonic.
In addition, I had one weekly lesson with Mr. Stakhovitsh.
Stakhovitsh was a nobleman who taught manners.
“In different plays, you encounter different characters. You may have to play a king or a queen - and you must act as naturally royal as if you were born to it.”
For months, we spent the most pleasant hours with this Russian aristocrat.
I can’t help but note that Stakhovitsh, unlike Prince Volkonsky, could not carry a “sack of potatoes or cabbages” over his shoulder.
He was unable to adapt to the humiliation that had befallen the Russian nobility - and he hanged himself in his room.

If one wishes to convey the essence of Stakhovitsh’s teaching, it’s best to say that he never taught *what* or *how* to do something — but rather *what not to do*, and *how not to do it*.
For example:

Don't pick up a glass or spoon with just three or four fingers, letting the fifth finger stick out like a sickle.
Don't sit stiffly like a stick, and don't bend like a twig in the wind.
Don't strike a pose — just make yourself comfortable.
Don't fidget with your coat cuffs, your tie, or your trouser pockets when entering unfamiliar company…

Stakhovitsh would demonstrate all of this - calling it out with his great, booming laugh.

One particular scene is etched in my memory:
He described how, at a grand ball, he walked through the hall with a lady to whom he had confessed his love and asked for a rendezvous…
And while speaking, he quietly scanned the company, giving the impression that he was merely chatting about trivialities.
When he performed this for us, it had already become a scene of pure, high comedy.
And so, our *Habima* became a true academy of art.

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

Translator's notes:

[1] Dalcroze eurhythmics - Wikipedia and Rhythmische Erziehung – Wikipedia , see also Jaques-Dalcroze_Eurythmics.pdf (rhuthmos.eu)

[2] Chayele later uses the terms ***plasticity*** and ***plastic movement*** more frequently.

In the context of theatrical performance, ***plasticity*** can refer to physical, emotional, and creative adaptability. Actors must shape their body movements to suit the role and character - requiring flexibility, suppleness, and physical transformation to achieve expressive clarity. They must also convey emotions convincingly, shifting between inner states and embodying diverse roles with authenticity.

Directors and set designers contribute to the visual and spatial composition of a performance, relying on imaginative flexibility to realize the desired aesthetic. Overall, *plasticity* is a key theatrical concept that highlights the versatility and responsiveness of both performers and creative teams.

Plastic movement in theater refers to the way actors use their bodies to express emotions, characters, and narrative. It concerns how the body acts and reacts in space, and how these movements shape the audience's perception.
Plastic movement often implies three-dimensional, vivid, and expressive gestures. Actors may actively shape and transform the space around them to enhance their performance and deepen audience engagement.
In connection with the *Dalcroze* system, plastic movement involves fluid, metamorphic patterns that engage the entire body, intertwined with rhythmic and musical elements. Symbolically - or even painterly - it can represent inner emotional processes through physical form.

The actor's body becomes a finely tuned, flexible, and malleable instrument of expression and spatial presence. Depending on the theatrical tradition or historical moment, the nature of plastic movement can vary widely. Yet the movement patterns may often be understood as *sculptural* in quality.
It's important to note that the term's meaning can shift depending on the specific theatrical practice or theory - especially in the transition from realistic to more symbolic or abstract modes of representation.

Chapter 16

Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov

Sharp and dazzling as lightning, the name *Vakhtangov* flashed across the theatrical horizon - and, like lightning, vanished just as swiftly, leaving an indelible mark on the history of 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 nervous excitement. His father owned a large tobacco factory and ruled with equal authority over both the business and the household. In an atmosphere of constant fear and obedience, little "Zhenye" grew up both humble and self-centered.

From an early age, he showed a love for musical sounds and had a keen ear for melody. Even in his first school, it was clear that 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 one day he would take over the factory. But young Zhenye made his way

to university. Due to his father's harsh and domineering nature, the ambitious young Yevgeny - despite being the son of a wealthy factory owner - endured hardship and even hunger during his first years of study.

Y.B. Vakhtangov in 1889.

He became an *eserovet* – a social revolutionary.
In 1906, Vakhtangov began working in the theater – both as a director and as an actor.
When the young student Yevgeny returned home for his first vacation, he immediately organized the workers from his father's factory and staged a performance with them.

When his father saw posters with his son's name plastered across the city, he went wild with emotion.
He shouted that it was a disgrace - an insult to his name, to the entire family, and above all, to the aristocratic business world:
"His son has allied himself with the workers in his own factory!"
He had hoped that Zhenye would one day become a *balebos* - a respectable master of the house and business.
And now… what a shame. What a disappointment!

But, what is destined, will be.
Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov was born to become a genius of the Russian theater. He left home for university - and then left 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 been a presence in Russian theater since the turn of the century, and his name was known far beyond Russia's borders.

Vakhtangov writes in his memoirs - or rather, in his notes - that when Suller received his first invitation to stage a play in Paris, he invited his student to join him as an assistant. Vakhtangov also noted the dismal impression the French actors' play left on him.

He remarked: "None of them acted - they just declaimed their parts, and it sounded terrible".
Vakhtangov spoke of Suller very often- at work and in private - always with deep reverence.
I have the impression that Vakhtangov, the e d u c a t o r, was a devoted disciple of his great teacher - Sullerzhitsky.

Vakhtangov was introduced to Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski even before he completed his studies with Suller - by Suller himself. Vakhtangov‘s association with the Moscow Art Theater lasted only a few years,

before he joined the group of artists who broke away to establish 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 ensembles. He possessed a pronounced thirst for knowledge; the eternal search for new forms was woven into his very nature.
When we read his notes, we have to keep in mind that there are hardly any rules or theories to be found. It’s as if he believed such formal structures belonged only to 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 until the final day his spirit remained awake upon this earth, he never ceased to emphasize:

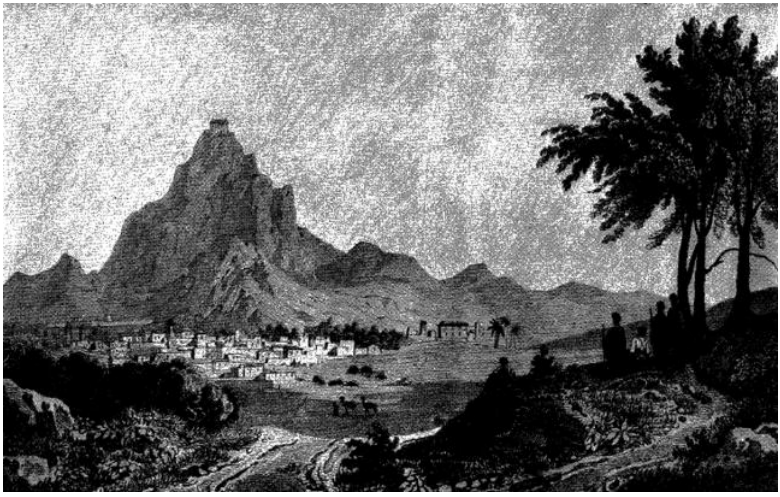
“Through art we must educate a better man; an artist must be an example of a pure, honest, good spirit. An artist must learn - and transmit to others - the willingness to help, brotherhood, and love.”

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. The power of imagination worked in his fantasy - it sparkled, and images were created with the lightness of a spring breeze.

For years we floated with him in a fantastic sphere. It was astonishing how deeply this man depended on atmosphere and mood. There were days when the muse didn't kiss him and he couldn't do anything. Vakhtangov accepted such non-creative days with the carefree ease of a child! Those evenings were spent telling stories and singing songs - just for us. And on those evenings, Vakhtangov was so young - younger than the youngest among 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 feelings, 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 that Vakhtangov staged with us was called *Neshef Bereshit* [Evening of Genesis] – a poetic reference to the biblical phrase "In the beginning God created…"
The program consisted of four one-act plays:

1. *Di Eltere Shvester* [The Elder Sister] by Sholem Ash
2. *Di Zun* [The Sun] by Y. Katsenelson
3. *S'Brent* [It Burns] by Y.L. Peretz
4. *Pega Ra* [A Stroke of Misfortune] by Y.D. Berkovitz

Most of the actors in *Neshef Bereshit* were more or less known to Jewish audiences and Jewish writers. Their names appeared on posters and in programs, and many of them were even mentioned in the non-Jewish press.

But quite a few ended their careers right at the start.
I will mention only those who, from the very beginning, took up positions that remain empty - unoccupied places in the Habima to this day.

There was a student from the Białystok 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.

R. Starobinyets

We had beautiful, graceful girls - musical and well-educated - but none possessed the kind of harmony that lived in Rashel.
It seemed to me that all the gods had gathered and unanimously agreed 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 *Hachamah - The Sun* - she portrayed a young, flirtatious woman, and youth blossomed from every lock of her black hair.
Her black cherry eyes radiated 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 Sholem Ash, she played a girl who had been left on the shelf.
And her character alone conveyed the deepest expression of misery and sorrow.
Her head was still and carefully coiffed, her eyes extinguished - turned inward.
Her mouth remained closed, and the shawl draped over her shoulders made her seem cut off from the entire world around her.

She had to play a *mise-en-scène* [a staged dramatic moment] in which a groom comes to look at her younger sister.
Everyone goes to him - and she remains alone on stage.
She bends down and peers through the keyhole, just to catch a glimpse of the young man.

With that single movement, the audience already felt a pressure in their throats.
Then, with her back to the audience, she slowly begins to rise.
And when she turns to face them, large tears roll down her pale face - just as the curtain falls.
We imagined that only the great French Rashel could play like that.
Our Rashel not only delighted the audience - when Stanislavski saw her perform, he was so enchanted that he asked Zemach whether he had a contract with this actress. If not, he said, he would take her into the Art Theater himself.

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

So simple was he 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 reflect on what I am about to say to you, and you will answer clearly and distinctly, all the way 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 wish to serve it and make it the main, the most important thing in your life - your life here on earth, the life that is given to us only once? Or is there something else for which you believe it is necessary to live, something that makes life worth living, something that justifies your existence - and which relegates the stage to second place, becoming something superfluous - just a wonderful decoration of your days, for which you gladly sacrifice your main thing?
If you answered the first question in the affirmative, if the art of theater is the main thing for you, then consider this: Are you truly sacrificing as much for this most important thing as is needed to justify its place in your life? Because the most important thing always demands much; the most important thing always demands sacrifice. Compared to the most important thing, everything else is superfluous.

Remove the essential, and all that once enriched it - comfort, love, books, friends, the world itself - loses meaning. And der mentsh, *the human being, feels superfluous too.*

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 something as great and joyful as the theater and the creativity of the stage?
Look: God has given you so much! You just accept it, freely, effortless. You have stage presence. You have a fine 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 hard, you can – because you have the ability - become a truly 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 gifted 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 to give to others, then I am obliged to work very hard - every hour that lies before me.
Do not sin against God! Do not ruin your life! Make a sacrifice for the greater cause - instead of your personal interests, which may seem important to you only in this moment. Remember: you can regain everything you've lost - but you cannot regain 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, and without any 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 witness how carelessly and gullibly God's gift has been trampled - how something

wonderful has been dried up and destroyed, something that could have brought so much joy to people.

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

He who loves you,
Y. Vakhtangov

(From the book "Vakhtangov- Notes, Letters, Articles").

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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) appeared 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 truth, it was simply tasteless. Shoshana, however, came to us from Odessa, and before joining Habima, she had already attended drama school. She was elegant and colorful.

It was Khayim Nakhman Bialik who recommended her to *Habima* after hearing her read in Odessa. With such a recommendation, and with the very enthusiastic acceptance by N. Zemach, Shoshana already felt like the future prima

donna. Had the theater's repertoire been secular, I believe she would have easily claimed one of the leading roles. But *Habima* was searching for a path to the *Tanakh* [Hebrew Bible], and Shoshana wanted to force that path upon herself. It was neither the *Tanakh* nor Greek tragedy that she had prepared for during her travels in Paris years earlier.

She was a light comedy actress- and for *Habima,* her departure was a great loss: as an actress, as a commanding personality, as a cultural figure, and as one of its finest 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 by the influence of her surroundings, Miriam developed many masculine traits. Her height and broad shoulders towered over a typical woman's figure; her voice was deep and strong; her stride was wide and confident; even her movements were strikingly masculine.

I don't know whether Miriam actually sat over the *Gemara* with the rabbis, but we all knew that she studied - not only the *Tanakh*, but also a page of *Gemara*. She even learned it with the traditional melody marks.

When I arrived at *Habima*, my knowledge of Hebrew was still quite poor, and Miriam became my teacher.
Incidentally, she had been a professional educator before joining the theater.
The lessons with Miriam Elias were not dry lessons, but the material was woven with melody: a Gemara *nign*, a "*may ko mashme lon*" [Talmudic phrase meaning "What does it teach us?], or a *Shir Hashirim* [The Song of Songs].

She lived constantly in the atmosphere of her rabbinic home. Russian culture and the great city of Moscow had no influence on her; she remained deeply Jewish and unmistakably provincial.

There are many anecdotes about her, but the two most characteristic are these:

When Miriam was forty years old and someone asked her 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 that left *Habima* so early. All her theatrical and concert rehearsals failed. *Habima* was the only theater where she could express herself.

These were the ones who participated in our theater during the Moscow period. But there was another group of actors who traveled together through the European tour and arrived in America - and it was only here that they remained. I would like to record their names.

One of the young *Habima* actors who remained in America was Benno Schneider. With his departure, *Habima* lost its finest director. In New York, Benno founded the Yiddish theater "ARTEF" [*Arbeter Teater Farband* - Workers Theater Association], and his productions with that

company drew the attention of all Broadway actors and directors.
After several years of work with the theater, he was invited to join "M.G.M." [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] in Hollywood. His private studio there - where he worked alongside his wife Bat-Ami (also a young *Habima* actress), came to be regarded as one of the finest in Hollywood.

Another young actor who stayed in America was Benyamin Zemach.
Benyamin Zemach was the youngest of the large Zemach family, and the youngest man in *Habima*. His talent moved in two directions at once: drama and dance. So he worked both inside and outside of *Habima*.
The *idealist comrades* were not particularly pleased that he seemed to be wasting time on his dance work, but the hard-working Benyamin never missed a single lesson, a single rehearsal - and certainly not a single performance.

And the great contribution he made to his role as "Satan" in *Jacob's Dream* was extraordinary. He built the entire role on plasticity. His movements were strong and exaggerated, and he created an unforgettable character.

Benyamin worked systematically for years, until we were ready for our big tour. And it was then that Benyamin the dancer was revealed - Benyamin the concert artist. He had brought with him from Russia a fully developed program of dance, with which he began to multiply the group's already considerable prestige many times over.

Many smaller towns, unable to host the full *Habima* ensemble, received the concert group instead - and in these performances, Benyamin's contribution was the most significant.

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. Concerts by his group were scheduled in the most beautiful halls and the largest theaters.

After performing in New York for several years, he eventually 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 choreographed 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, each winter he travels for several weeks, 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 began building a theater of his own - driven by a deep and persistent urge to unite drama with dance. And this work has been just as fruitful as every other endeavor he has pursued on the theatrical stage.

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Ben-Ari, a character actor with the *Habima* Theater, later founded a Hebrew studio and Jewish ensemble in New York. He went on to become assistant to the renowned German director Erwin Piscator and eventually held a prominent 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. He bowed - a little stiffly - and announced theatrically, in good Yiddish-Russian:

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is David Itkin. I am a student at the Philharmonic - there, just behind your studio. Rumors have reached us about the wonderful Hebrew language, so I‘ve 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, threw one leg over the other, placed his right elbow on his left knee, rested his hand on his forehead, and began to speak - freely and easily.
He wanted theater - our theater - but he spoke 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. He had a straight nose with very sensitive, movable nostrils, and lips always slightly parted - ready for a kiss. His especially large, open eyes looked at everything and everyone with a lovely smile.

His eyes always carried this smiling expression, even when he had to read or speak about 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 never missed 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.

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* as they say - a true 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 so infatuated could speak about two women at the same time - until it became clear that Izotshka and Belotshka were his two little daughters.

This is characteristic of Itkin: to speak about everything and everyone with pathos and enthusiasm.

***

Itkin assimilated into the first group faster than any of the other newcomers. In no time, he had settled in and affirmed his place as a sincere and devoted *khaver* - a comrade loyal to Habima as a whole, but especially to his fellow actors.

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 the role was small or large. And every role was equally important to him. The most important thing for him in the theater was not to build a career, but simply to play, to perform, to live, and to express himself.
He played one of the old men in *Yehudi HaNitzchi* [Eternal Jew], one of the angels in *Khalom Yaakov* [Jacob's Dream], the father "Sender" in *Dybbuk*, and Stretshon [Streaton], the bartender, in *Mabul* [The Flood].

Itkin, like all those who remained in America, was a true follower of the great teacher, Nahum Zemach. But he did not wish to build further upon Zemach’s legacy.

So he stayed in America and chose Chicago as his artistic home.
It has now been eighteen years since he began his new path to the American theater, and for sixteen of those years, he has served as director of the Goodman Theatre - the finest theater in Chicago. In those sixteen years, Itkin has trained 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 heads a drama department at Saint Paul University.
There, he has already trained his two daughters to become teachers. Despite his many commitments, he still finds the energy to teach a number of classes at various universities across the country. He works tirelessly, and his creativity knows no bounds.

Chapter 19

"Neshef Bereshit"

Although we worked with Vakhtangov for five years, he staged only two productions with us - *Neshef Bereshit,* and the great play *Dybbuk* by Sh. An-sky, which became famous and brought *Habima* international recognition.

The first piece was performed realistically [1] . On this basis, the students had to learn to "play"- that is, according to Stanislavski's system, to learn to live on 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, 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

at night, but as soon as the sun went down, people rushed home. Every morning brought rumors of robberies and murders that had taken place the night before. Bandits would attack trains at full speed. One of my close friends, traveling from Smolensk to Moscow, died this way. The train driver entered his compartment and found him robbed and shot.

Several times, on the way back from Vakhtangov‘s to our studio, we ran into doorways to shield ourselves from the bullets whistling overhead. From the frozen soil of "White" Russia, the power of the strong working class began to rise in full force. Thousands upon thousands of shops, factories and workshops were organized; the Russian peasant - once the greatest slave - became conscious, and gradually, he began to liberate himself.

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

Six days and nights passed. Then came a silence so deep, we could hear the first sounds of the anthem of a liberated people. People rushed 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, kissed each other with tears of joy - because we were alive. We all linked arms with Zemach and began to dance a *Hora*. 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 out everyone 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 remain forever… only a dream!

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As strong as our belief in fate may be, we must admit that chance plays an important role in our lives. I came to Hebrew theater by chance -through an encounter with Zemach. It’s difficult to pinpoint when the urge for art awakens in us. I believe it’s inherent 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 actually on my way to the Moscow Conservatory.

I auditioned before Vakhtangov in the Habima group, performing *Tsu Der Shkhite* (*On the Slaughter*) by Khayim Nahman Bialik - but I didn't pass.
And Rashel Starobinyets immediately cried out: "Yevgeny Bagrationovich, let Grober sing 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 - in her ever-dramatic prima donna pose - said that one must pass the exam...
But Vakhtangov calmly listened to them all and simply said:
"I like her."
And I was accepted into Habima.

I was still a stranger to dramatic theater and unsure whether I was truly capable of it. So I wasn't exactly thrilled when I was accepted. I had been preparing for the Conservatory and worked in the studio mostly to see how things would unfold.

Nahum Zemach ignited in me the will to build. Vakhtangov awakened and nurtured the urge to create.
In our first program of one-act plays, I had a small role - Shrintse , the maid in *The Elder Sister* by Sholem 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. He stood beside me backstage - already an experienced actor - noticed my condition, and gently pushed me onto the stage. I only stayed on stage for a few minutes and said just a few words.

I fumbled with the ties of my apron and simply couldn't manage to fasten them... The audience laughed. The press wrote: "The maid is the only splash of color in the performance." And Vakhtangov gave me his photograph 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 guiding principle of our group was collectivity [2], which meant equality. But this spirit lasted only through the first few years. As soon as we began working on D. Pinski's *Eternal Jew*, individualism began to emerge, and - and with it came envy, resentment, and intrigue.

In the peaceful, quiet, purely creative atmosphere that Vakhtangov had cultivated, hysterical outbursts could be heard, muffled sounds of fists pounding on the table... Within the walls of the small studio, - once seen by outsiders as an ideal - things grew increasingly difficult! We had started the setup with the slogan:
"One for all, and all for one."
But now we were becoming strangers to each other, each of us a world apart.

The desire to seek other paths began to grow within me. I was not gifted with a revolutionary spirit, and my weapons were not physical strength.
I lost faith that talent and recognition alone would be enough to grow and earn a rightful place in the *Habima* collective.

Translator's notes:

[1] I understand this to refer to the style of Russian realism and naturalism, in which reality on stage was portrayed with utmost fidelity. In other words, the aim was to create an illusionistic reproduction of real life, complete with all its props - there were even real waterfalls. Stanislavski went so far as to arrange the backstage anterooms realistically, so that actors could immerse themselves in the appropriate atmosphere before stepping on stage.

In this tradition, the emphasis lay not only on external action, but above all on the inner workings of the characters' "psychic life." Facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and vivid physicality were essential for a natural, believable portrayal of the characters' psychological depth - in short, for "bringing them to life" on stage.

In later years, especially under the influence of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Vakhtangov, this strict realism gave way to a more expressionist style. Symbolism, abstraction, and allusion began to replace literal representation, and the actors' movement patterns, musical rhythms, and formal structures evolved accordingly.

[2] 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 was taken by the Germans, and then it came under Polish control. During all those years, I had no contact with my family or friends.
Then, suddenly, smugglers from Białystok began arriving in Moscow. The roads were still officially closed, but people were smuggling goods across the border, and things were beginning to stir…

I felt myself drawn "home." There was no one to stop me. My mother was no longer alive, and my father wasn't particularly worried about me. Work in the studio had come to a halt - Vakhtangov was in the hospital, undergoing surgery.

The spring sun broke through the ice and revealed the trees. Birdsong returned, and the young people grew restless. "Let's go," they said - and I was already on the train to Minsk-Mazowiecki.
In Baranovichi, hundreds of people were held in quarantine. That meant living in a barrack with hundreds of others, sleeping on wooden planks, eating *kadokhes* - next to nothing - and warming ourselves 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 it, he came all the way over and hastened my release from quarantine.

I arrived in Białystok the day before Purim. I tossed aside 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 warm for their mom.
I stepped into the bedroom to see if the bedclothes were still there, or if they were sleeping on bare boards, and I saw: clean bedclothes, freshly ironed blankets, and a fresh slice of *lokshn* [noodle pancake] peeking out from beneath a spotless tablecloth.

There was the scent of home cooking, of grandma's *challah*, the aroma of *gefilte fish* and stew, of *Shabes* and holidays - and also the faint waxy fragrance of *yortsayt* candles...
My big city, Białystok, seemed somehow shrunken. The grand buildings looked as if they had caved in, the cobbled streets were damaged, and the large stores resembled 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 *balebatish* appearance... There was a feeling of neglect.
Many of the girls had been stamped as "tsuker-pushke" [1]. The intelligentsia had become somewhat Germanized, and many had also become "Polishized." 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 with that, he took my suitcase and headed for the door. There, with the Birgers, I felt the homeliness and warmth of my 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.

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So now, they poured all their love into me. At *Mama* Birger's, I cried, talked, warmed up - and began to long for Moscow, for *Habima*. My childhood friend Moyshke welcomed me as if I were his bride. The more I spoke about the theater and my plans to return to Moscow, the more he sighed and wept. I can't bear to see tears - it's one of my greatest weaknesses. So I promised him 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 Suwałki and Dvinsk. I didn't think about it for long - I simply set off. I took the train to Suwałki, but I got stuck there. There were rumor 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 seen - the Grasovitshes 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. She 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 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 for now - I need to introduce myself to your parents first!"
Ten minutes later, we opened the Shapiro's door. A plump woman with a headscarf and a wide apron around her hips rushed toward me, threw her arms around my neck, and began speaking nervously through her tears:
"We're so happy you're here! And what do you mean, staying at a hotel? The whole town knows you're arrived. Do you think – *kholile*! - that there's no room for you? There's plenty of room for everyone, look – "

(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 whichever one you like…"

That welcome made me feel at home, and I said I'd like to sleep in Chane-Rivke's room. We had already walked through the streets together, talked, and begun to truly know one another.

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 while his wife arranged everything for me.
Only then did we enter a dark but spacious dining room and gather around a large table. Over the simmering samovar, we began to ask, to question, to talk.

I felt at home again.
And my visit to the Shapiros brought me new friends, good memories, and a story that deserves to be written down - a true folk tale.

As we sat around the table, enjoying our cozy conversation, an old, short, bearded Jew arrived - a distant relative from a nearby shtetl. When he saw me - another guest - he paused, visibly embarrassed. Mrs. Shapiro assured him that I would be sleeping at Chane-Rivke and that there was a spot for him on the sofa in the dining room.

We went to bed early - the next day would begin at dawn, with all the preparations needed for Shabbat.
And on Friday, very early in the morning, I was 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 she had brought it up, insisting she didn't understand where it had gone. Suddenly, the door to the living room opened.
Mrs. Shapiro tiptoed around the table and approached the bed where Chaye-Soreke was sleeping:
"Chaye-Soreke, you didn't see the pot of oil, did you?"
"O...O...what pot, what cooking oil, oy!..."
Her mother: "sh-sh-sh-shush!"
Then she came to our bed, leaned over me, and whispered to Chane-Rivke:
"Chane-Rivke, you haven't seen the oil pot anywhere, have you?"
Chane-Rivke: "What pot, what oil, what is this early morning commotion?"
Her mother: "Sh-sh-sh... don't shout like that!

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

The mother left the room. I drifted back to sleep. When I woke up, I no longer saw the sisters in their beds. From the dining room, I heard the clinking of spoons in glasses and the scrape of knives cutting hard cheese.

I called out, “Good morning,” and asked, “What 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 just then, the spoon dropped from 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 – a spring so deep, that it never can be exhausted.

Translator’s note:

[1] Jacob Jerusalimski offers a poignant explanation of the term *tsuker-pushke* in his memoirs (p. 155). During World War I, as food shortages intensified and the German authorities banned the import of provisions from surrounding towns — often confiscating what little arrived — a new form of trade emerged. Young women began forming “acquaintances” with German majors and lieutenants, who in turn granted them written permission to bring food across the border. What began as survival soon evolved into a brisk and morally complex economy. These women, later labeled *tsuker-pushkes* — “sugar boxes” — became symbols of both resourcefulness and societal judgment in a time of desperation.

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Chapter 21

Through Gunpowder and Blood

I stayed in Suwałki for nearly a week, until I was informed that a group of passengers was being assembled and that the driver had agreed to smuggle us across the border.
I - a woman - and seven men set out together.
We traveled along the highway from early morning until afternoon, and then turned into a dense, partly swampy forest.
My fellow passengers were:
Two Chasids - one carried a prayer shawl and tefillin; the other clutched a small suitcase he refused to let out of his hands;
two Christians - one was deaf and dumb (the other explained to us)... ;
a middle-aged Jew, a watchmaker from Dvinsk;
a young man, already in khaki uniform (he had been a commissar in Białystok during the time of the "Reds");
and another man, like me, from Białystok - the beautiful young Shternfeld, whom our high school girls had feared… and chased after.

We rode all day, until the sun began to set and the distant rumble of cannon fire from the front reached our ears.
The driver tied the horses to the trees and began searching for a way to smuggle us into Russia.

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The Chasid turned westward to pray, just as he would in the bes-medresh. We waited quietly, while the two Christians grew nervous and restless.

A short while later, the wagoner returned, visibly shaken, with terrifying news: Dead horses lay in the forest, and he couldn't risk his life - he had a wife and children, and he had to return home.
"What do you mean? What about us? Just take off and go on foot…!"
The *goy* who had just spoken didn't hesitate. He jumped onto the wagon seat, whipped the horse into motion, and off we went - down a narrow, broken path, deep into the thick 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* - as the old wagoners called their horses - into the deep night. Our horse grew exhausted, stopping more and more often.The sound of the cannons grew louder and louder, the acrid scent of gunpowder and blood filled our nostrils. The black night gave way to dawn, growing brighter with each passing moment.

And when the first streaks of light appeared in the sky, the Chasids asked the horse and cart to stop. One Chasid, calm and composed, wrapped himself in his prayer shawl, donned his tefillin, and stood to pray. His faith - his prayers offered in the face of death - filled us with a quiet, mystical confidence that a miracle might yet come. And so, we entrusted our fate to our little horse…

Suddenly we heard a cry: "Stop!"

Fear gripped us. We turned and saw a soldier in Russian uniform standing among the dense trees. I ran towards him - with great surprise and joy. He raised his rifle at me and shouted: "You're under arrest!" I was more surprised than afraid.

Anikshti - that was the name of the Lithuanian shtetl he took us to. That night, we slept in the rabbi's house, under the watchful eye 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 strolled through the *shtetl* together, talking about Moscow and the *Habima*. Only later did I realize: this had been my first interrogation.

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The next day we were taken to the other shtetl, 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. Inside, we were led into a large room lit by a kerosene lamp. A fire crackled in the stove, and a group of soldiers sat around it, warming themselves.
We gladly accepted the invitation to share the baked potatoes with them, and a cheerful conversation unfolded between us. There, I formed a friendship that would follow me all the way to Moscow.

The investigation lasted two days. On the third day, my new friend - a Red Army guard - brought me grim news: we were being sent to prison in *Dvinsk*, and it was serious - so serious that he took me for a walk and quietly urged 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 so, already under close guard, I walked - determinedly - toward 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, just to allow one person at a time 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 for the first time, I found a ray of light in the darkest moments of my life…

The second night, I shared a cell with a woman - a doctor from the Dvinsk Red Cross. In her weak voice, she told me how her husband, also a doctor, had been unexpectedly summoned to the commissariat and never returned.
Then she too was taken from her home and held here. Two children were left at home,

one boy 10, and another 12 years old. We talked while sitting on the hard floor and leaning against the cold wall.

Night fell, and the darkness began to blur our vision. The silence around us smelled of death. The clock in the marketplace struck twelve just as I heard a car stop at the gate...
At that very moment, I saw the small, delicate figure of the woman leap 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 voices from the second room, where nearly a hundred prisoners were held - their names were being called out.
Then I heard the car drive away, and saw the woman's faint shadow collapse powerlessly to the ground…
A moment later, she broke into a silent, stifled cry. The first gray light of dawn fell across her pale, exhausted face as she whispered:
"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, reading the children's notes hidden in the lid of the thermos. And for three nights, we listened with bated breath and frozen blood to the arrival and departure of the "automobile of death".

The days dragged on, filled with endless interrogations. Then, one early morning, I heard names being called from my group. And then - I heard mine.
My limbs froze. I felt as if I were dying. My eyes could still see, 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 bundle of papers in my hands, my steps led me slowly toward the prison gate. On the other side, a group of young women awaited me. They kissed me, handed me flowers and packets of food.
I was still in a trance.

My first clear thought was:

This is what Stanislavski meant by his theory of *life and truth*. I had experienced the feeling of death so naturally, so intensely, that returning to life felt almost impossible.

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 she could on my behalf.
I was released along with only five other men. The two Christians - the Germans - never saw the light of day again. One of the five remained in Dvinsk; the others came under my wing.
The girls gave me train tickets and food for the journey, and I traveled with “my men” to Moscow.

I stepped off the train and went straight to *Habima*. There, I met my friend Moyshe Halevi, who stood with a bundle of papers under his arm - signed by Stanislavski, Lunacharsky, and others - ready to board the next train to Dvinsk to rescue me.
I owe this, too, to the conscientious Red Army guard who had telegraphed *Habima* to say I was in captivity.

I arrived from "abroad" wearing a pair of high lace-up shoes - white leather with black varnish - and a very elegant garnet-red costume trimmed with mink, sewn by the best tailor, Metelits.
My beautiful hat I had bought in the French "salon" of Madame Gotlib, who always greeted us with *Bon Jour*, sent us off with *Revoir*, and sold hats because *c'est chic* and *c'est Camelot*.
She also brought big, long, heavy earrings set with sapphires and real diamonds - truly antique.

By the way, in that rig-out, I met the head of the Dvinsk prison for the first time. I had my guitar in my hand and sang a love song - and the prisoners listened.

Even today, I can't explain why I behaved that way. Perhaps it was to prove that I was truly an actress. Or perhaps… it was a kind of carelessness. In fact, I stumbled into the studio with this story, and the entire drama

of the past few weeks suddenly transformed into a kind of comedy.
I don’t even remember how long I wore the shoes and the hat… They definitely didn’t fit - not in Moscow’s ruins.

My father, my aunt and the children – his son Elinke and my cousin Genitshke – left for Białystok after a short time. For the first time, I was truly alone. As a member of the Artists' Union, I was granted a large room. But after the fullness and warmth of my father's house, it felt 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, holding little Genye’s ration cards. When the soup ran out, I - along with the rest of the group - switched to *payok*: black bread, baked in the studio’s kitchen.

The winters of 1919, 1920, and 1921 were brutal. Frost and hunger filled the streets, while emptiness and despair settled over the studio. All our artistic triumphs failed to bring an audience to the box office - no one understood Hebrew. And it was precisely during this time that the Jewish Chamber Theatre began staging its grand, magnificent spectacles - entirely in Yiddish.

There, they laughed heartily at Sholem Aleichem, and the audience left the theater in high spirits. But here - they wept

over the destruction of the Temple and searched hopelessly for the Messiah…

That's how it was when *The Eternal Jew* by D. Pinsky was staged — the first production directed by Mtshidyelov.
There were already two programs in the repertoire: an evening of one-act plays, and *The Eternal Jew*.
But there was no audience.

The group's frustration led to endless 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 fewer than six people were in the auditorium, he would announce:

"For technical reasons, the performance will be postponed."
And so, two long winters passed with nothing but "technical problems…"

David Itkin

During this time we were already working on Shloyme Ansky's *Dybbuk*. However, the work progressed slowly and with difficulty. There were two reasons for this: First, we didn't have enough people for such a large production, and second, Yevgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov's illness was worsening.
That's why it took us three years to complete the *Dybbuk*.
I played only small parts in it. In the first act, I portrayed the Jewish woman who rushes to the *orn-koydesh* [Holy Ark], to plead for mercy for her daughter ...

But that brief episode became a major role. The press focused on it, and the audience remembered it - it seemed to me - forever.

In the second act, I played the old woman who hadn't danced in "forty years"...
I played her earnestly, but I hadn't truly created anything. It wasn't until I saw an artist in the Vilnius troupe - her name was Pola Walter - that I understood how little I had brought to 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 at the sound of her voice! For me, that was the most powerful moment of her performance.

I saw the Vilnius troupe in Białystok before our *Dybbuk* was finished - but we were already nearing the end of rehearsals. This was my second visit to Białystok.

Translator's notes:

[1] According to Stanislavski, the actor must live the role - experience it, feel it from within. Only through one's own life experience can an "emotional memory" be formed, whose feelings may then be recalled on stage. It is this process that lends the performance its credibility and ensures its truth.

[2] 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 greater detail.
The author of *Dybbuk*, Sh. An-sky, had originally proposed the play to the Moscow Art Theater, where Konstantin Stanislavski received it with enthusiasm. They had already begun assigning roles at this theater.

But when Nahum Zemach approached Stanislavski and explained that *Habima* wished to stage the play - and began describing the "non-Jew" about our world of Chasidism and legends - Stanislavski, with his deep artistic intuition, felt that this play belonged to the Jewish people...
Later, after watching a rehearsal of the first act, he remarked: "In our theater, it was decided that the Chasidim would wear short, worn-out little jackets…"

Across the world, different people asked the same question: "How did Vakhtangov - a Christian - understand and bring to life such a deeply rooted Jewish legend?"

This is also one of the reasons I choose to linger in this chapter. I have already written about the fact that Vakhtangov was Armenian.
And the fate of his people bears a striking resemblance to our own Jewish fate. The Armenians, a people of ancient cultural heritage, lived under Turkish dominion and endured persecution.

The Turkish sultans systematically massacred the Armenian population. 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. It was with this innate warmth that Vakhtangov came to *Habima*. The first stage of our work - immediately after reading and accepting the *Dybbu*k - consisted of storytelling, folk dramatizations, and the singing of Chasidic *nigunim*. Whole nights passed immersed in the world of the old Jewish Chasidic *shtetl*.

Vakhtangov felt at home in our atmosphere, and he grew to like our Chasidic *nigunim;* he truly loved them - immersed himself in their spirit, and already sang our *nigunim* beautifully. It is a fact: the nuances of the *nigunim*, as well as the intonation of the speech, were shaped by Vakhtangov himself.

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:

First, we search for the idea the author wanted to convey through the piece.
Then we look for the central action of each act.
After that, we examine the meaning of every single part of the act - and also what lies between the lines: hidden thoughts, unspoken intentions.
From there, we begin to explore the specific task of each actor - not just their role in the play, but their inner life, up to the moment they arrive at the situation of the character.
Only then does the work begin with each actor individually, followed by the two who share a dialogue. And so the work expands and deepens, until it encompasses the entire act.

Vakhtangov never gave any actor an intonation; instead, he always worked with one actor and let him search and explain to himself until the true meaning of the interpretation was found.

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

there emerged a tendency to destroy everything associated with "yesterday" and to create a new "today". The old had to be forgotten, and life had to begin anew. The same slogan applied to the theater. Yet at this very moment, 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 "machine" 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* 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 - spoke constantly of round, plastic [sculptural] lines, long pauses, deep sighs, soft voices, refined perception - in short, of "gracious life". He was faithful to the life of those people and to the rhythm of those times.

But Vakhtangov, emerging from 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! Already in the first rehearsals in "Red Moscow," he introduced the idea of a "new rhythm" and a "new form".

Instead of the subjective sigh of an individual, one heard the collective lament of a people; instead of calm, plastic 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.

Vakhtangov divided the legend of Sh. An-sky

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into two worlds: The poor world and the rich world.

He then created a whole range of figures symbolizing the poor world, and all the figures of the rich world were elevated by the new form into symbols. Next, he devised 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.

Translator's notes:

[1] The *Dybbuk*, written in 1914 by S. An-sky [Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport], is a landmark of Jewish theater and mysticism. Rooted in An-sky's ethnographic expeditions across the Pale of Settlement, the play draws deeply from Eastern European Jewish folklore, Chasidic tradition, and Kabbalistic cosmology. It tells the story of Leah, a young bride possessed by the soul of her beloved Khonen, who dies after invoking forbidden mystical forces to reclaim her. The *Dybbuk* - a dislocated soul that inhabits the body of the living - is a figure from Jewish demonology dating back to the 16th century, often associated with transgression, unresolved destiny, and spiritual imbalance.

The play's spiritual core is shaped by Kabbalah, particularly the tension between divine justice and human longing. Themes of broken vows, soul migration, and ritual exorcism reflect mystical beliefs about the permeability between worlds. Originally subtitled *Between Two Worlds*, The *Dybbuk* explores the liminal space between life and death, body and spirit, tradition and modernity. Though steeped in Jewish specificity, the play has transcended its origins, becoming a global symbol of haunted love, spiritual yearning, and theatrical power.

[2] In her second book, *Mayn Veg aleyn* (*My Way Alone*), Chayele Grober devotes a chapter -beginning on page 192- 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."

Chapter 23

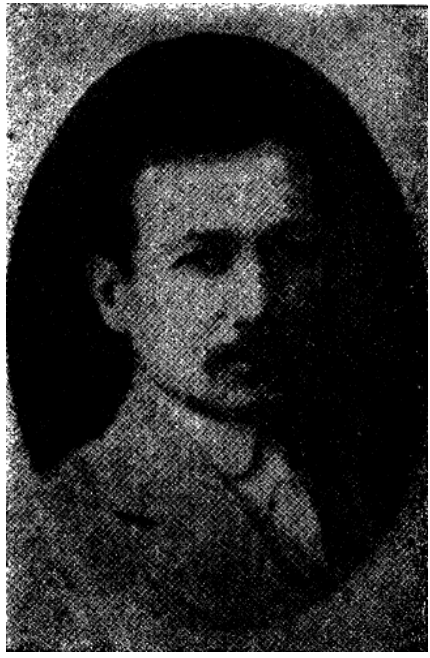
Yuli Engel- M. P. Gnessin

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 part of a 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 performers on major concert stages.

At that time, however, our Jewish folk song was still considered a creation of and for ordinary people. These songs were sung by maids in kitchens, by street singers in courtyards, and by workers in the factories.
In 1906, 1907 and 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 included Joseph Achron, who later became famous for his "Hebrew Melody", as well as Milner, Klein, Saminsky, and Yuli Engel.
Yuli Engel collected songs, arranged them and inspired professional singers to perform them for wider audiences.
In 1919, when *Habima* accepted *The Dybbuk*, Nahum Zemach invited the Jewish composer [Engel] to write the music for the great folk legend. And it was a fortunate coincidence, because Engel had traveled extensively with Sh. An-sky, who himself collected legends.
Engel had many episodes

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



Yuli Dimitryevitsh Engel

Engel and An-sky stayed in a small *shtetl* for Shabbat. On Friday morning, Engel went for a walk through the *shtetl*. As he was going, he heard a Jewish song drifting from an open window. He approached, looked inside, and saw a maid in the kitchen chopping fish and singing a beautiful folk song. He paid her some compliments and said 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 brought the news to An-sky, and that evening they both went there. Girls and boys sat in the kitchen, by 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 sharply: "Don't think that a maid doesn't know what songs to sing for St. Petersburger 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 long hours poring over the Gemara. He had a fine head of curly black hair, black eyes that burned constantly with a pure Chasidic fire - of faith and creative spirit. He looked like an Oriental Jew, although he had been raised and educated in a thoroughly Russian environment and had been trained by the greatest Russian composers.

Mrs. Engel was a very talented pianist, a wonderful personality, kind-natured, fine and noble-minded. They lived in perfect harmony with their two daughters.
Mrs. Engel had the air of a villager, and she and her husband made you feel more like you were in a village house than in 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 a hidden feeling for Chasidism. At *Habima,* we organized special evenings dedicated to the folk legend and the Chasidic *nign*. Everyone brought to the "Chasidic table" whatever they could think of.

It is worth mentioning that the leitmotif in *The Dybbuk* is the *Shir-Hashirim*, and this was the great contribution brought by Miriam Elias – one that 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 would be transformed into a young student - eager to absorb every bit of knowledge, and from none other than us. It is unforgettable how this person lit up, how his

childlike, burning eyes would glow with ecstasy. Although Engel was not of Chasidic descent, he felt the true Chasidic fire within him. Engel also possessed an innate theatrical talent, which he demonstrated strikingly in the way he orchestrated the music for *The Dybbuk*.

He personified each of the main characters with an instrument: the deeply tragic Khonen was portrayed by the soft, resonant tones of the cello; the light dance of the youngest girls was carried by the notes of the flute; and the pompous relatives of the bride and groom moved to the staccato notes of the double bass.

Many musicians had already begun to compile our folk songs. The weaker ones merely wrote down the melodies. Some of the more accomplished composers believed our folk tunes were too primitive for "sophisticated" listeners, and they modernized the songs so extensively that their folk character was lost - and the songs were destroyed.

Yuli Engel, however, was the one who always preserved the beautiful, pure melody and composed tasteful piano accompaniments or created truly Jewish orchestral versions, such as the one 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, glittering with real diamonds.
This is how our song was performed by the international singer Iza Kremer. It was a triumph for the unknown creators of these pearls, and for Iza Kremer it was a stroke of luck, for it was our folk song that made her so famous and beloved.

My friendship with Yuli Dmitriyevich Engel was rooted on our shared passion to elevate the recognition of our songs and the Chasidic *nigunim*. He expressed to our group his full belief in my future as a folk singer long before I was even prepared for the career. He did everything to encourage me: he worked with me privately, he convinced Mrs. Engel to accompany me (Mrs. Engel suffered from

anxiety before an audience), and he dedicated to me the first two compositions based on the poems of Kh. N. Bialik: *Minhag Chadash* [A New Custom] and *Achat Shtayim* [One - Two].

He invited my singing professor,

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 trusted his intuition more than the facts.
Many years passed before my dream came true! ....

Immediately after we finished working on *The Dybbuk*, Engel traveled to Erets-Yisroel.

Habima invited the renowned composer Alexander Krein, as well as Mikhail Fabianovich Gnessin, who had just returned from Palestine.
M. Gnessin brought with him his latest composition - sounds from *mizrekh* - the Orient. With it, he introduced a completely new sound: new both in the melody itself and in its ultramodern arrangement.
I was already prepared to accept the songs musically, but they felt foreign to me and did not resonate in my soul, as the folk songs and the Chasidic *nigunim* did. I never used those songs later.
But the ingenious hours spent 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 figures of our nations, the Russian is quiet - he is not conceited, he does

not boast, and does not display superiority. He takes his position for granted. And Gnessin's melodies reflected his entire being. His *mizrekh*-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 the 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, and his belief in me as a future concert performer were a great encouragement to me!

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Chapter 24

A Winter With Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski

Nahum Zemach made sure to involve every major figure of the theatrical world in the development of our group and of *Habima*.
Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, the founder of the Moscow Art Theater and the creator of his famous method, was a god to all young students in Moscow. Every new beginning of a theatrical movement was, in some way, connected to Stanislavski; his students or 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 toward 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 had wanted to be a singer. He told us:
"My voice is best in the bathroom!"
And his hearty laugh resonated with his bass-baritone.

Second, he was interested in this group because he disliked seeing 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 debates in opera circles. Singers claimed he would ruin their voices, insisting that a singer should focus solely on the sound, the *zvutshok*...

I was fortunate enough to witness 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 turned in profile - held in a plastic [sculptural] pose!
And Tatyana did not leap onto her toes during her aria, but sat quietly on a bench. How moving the singers were in their simplicity – and, by the way, how beautiful their voices sounded!...

After Stanislavski's experiment with the opera group, Vakhtangov resolved to do everything possible to persuade him to accept the invitation from the Vakhtangov Studio

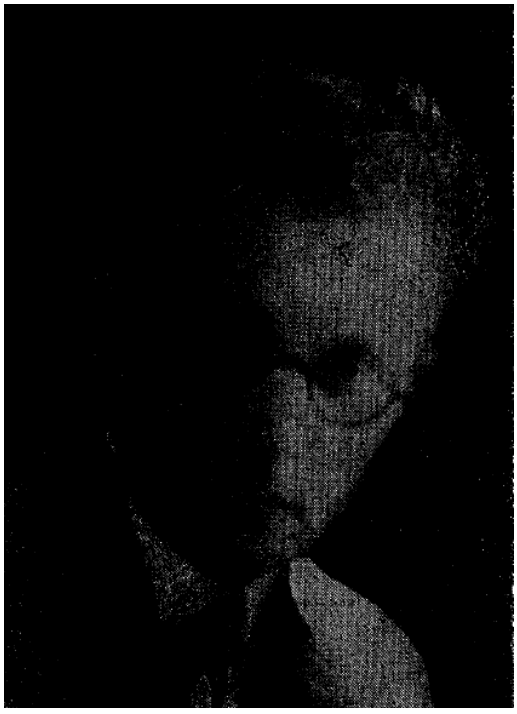
and *Habima*. One day, Vakhtangov shared with Zemach a sudden flash of inspiration: that the two groups - the Russian and the Hebrew - should unite for the lessons with Stanislavski. He succeeded in his plan. Stanislavski was inspired, and so began the magical Sundays in our foyer!

Every Sunday, at the appointed hour, the foyer of our little theater filled with restless young people, all waiting for the great master! And every Sunday, with the same reliability, the Russian *vanke* (coachman) galloped up and stopped with Stanislavski at Kislovski Alley, number 6.

No matter how many times I watched him during 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 - did he begin to move and speak freely, to work tirelessly, to explain and illustrate,

to justify every movement and gesture. Shakespeare's "Shylock" was chosen for the first experiment because this play – [*The Merchant of Venice*] - ultimately reflects the Jewish and Christian worlds with their conflicts.

Stanislavski stuttered slightly as he spoke in his bass-baritone:



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 formed - speaking of love in subdued breaths and soft voices.

Groups gathered, singing and whistling improvised melodies, and the air was filled with the sounds of song and whistle. Stanislavski, wrapped in the green tablecloth from

our long work table, paced back and forth as if walking along the bank of a canal**.**

We saw clearly how his gray hair shone with youthful gold; his extraordinarily tall, slender body moved with rhythm, and his beautiful, expressive hands performed the plastic [2] movements with the "toga", which took on ever-new shapes. An indescribable grace – like that of a princely "caballero". It usually took us hours and hours to return to real life, to step out of the "magic circle"!

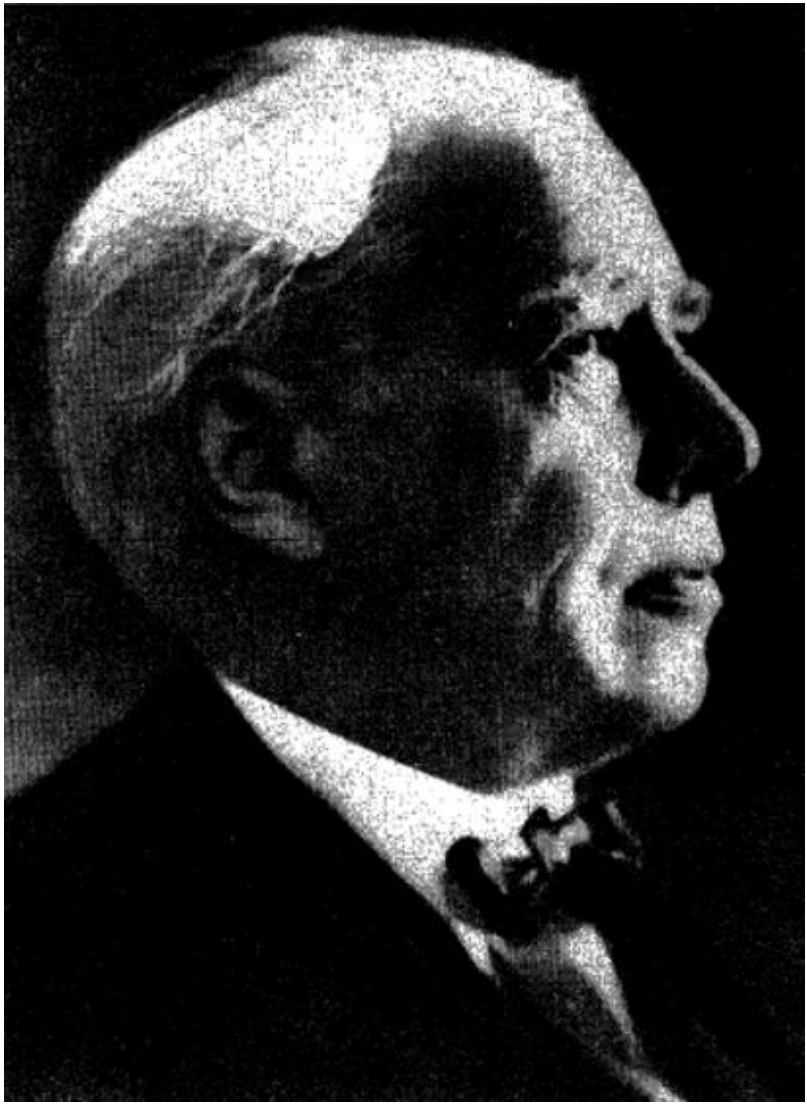
The extraordinary idea of a bilingual spectacle was never realized. That winter, however, we perfected our work with Stanislavski and completed our studies. In the two years that followed, we created three new productions: H. Leyvick's *Golem*, Beer-Hofmann's *Jacob's Dream*, and Berger's *Flood*.

The three plays had already been staged by our directors - also students of Stanislavski. But the work and the results were not the same.

Translator's notes:

[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] The term *"plastic movements"*, frequently used by Chayele, refers not merely to sculptural or stylized gestures, but to a broader reform in Russian theatrical art. These movements evolved to express "the inner truth" through rhythm, visual composition, musicality of speech and gesture, and the expressive use of hands, feet, and posture. I have rendered the phrase as *"sculptural movements"* to preserve its visual and choreographic resonance, while acknowledging its deeper roots in physical dramaturgy.



Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski

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Chapter 25

The Last Days of Yevgeny Bagrationovish Vakhtangov

The Dybbuk 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 revealed his full potential during rehearsals. He was sensitive to 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; it was well past 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 - would pass in conversation about the play and its external aspects, and only then would rehearsal 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. After each stop, we created a new scenic image. One and the same image would

take on new forms in astonishing ways. Vakhtangov's imagination flashed! And the images changed as quickly and effortlessly as a juggler's balls.
A simple room in gray and blue, soft light, and the silence of night surrounding it—this was what most stimulated his imagination. Such rehearsals often lasted until sunrise, even in the depths of winter.

We often accompanied him home, especially at dawn in the spring. He lived half an hour away from us. He was always cheerful and full of humor on our walks. He was very fond of Mikhail Chekhov and often imitated him. They had similar characters and often played the same role - in other words, one was the double of the other. And when he imitated Chekhov in a role he himself was performing, he would say: "I imitate him well - but he performs it with real brilliance!"

Vakhtangov was extraordinarily sincere. He used to create a stage image, interrupt us, and exclaim: "I created this?! Talentless!!"
And then he'd start again.

Sometimes he would provoke a student just to see how they'd react. For example, here's what happened once:
At the dress rehearsal of a one-act play, where I was assigned as assistant director (and Stanislavski was sseated beside him in the box), the auditorium was growing dark - but the curtain still hadn't gone up. About a minute passed, and Vakhtangov called from the auditorium:
"Grober, what's going on?"
I was standing behind the curtain, unable to turn on the light that was supposed to be on the table. I was shaking like a leaf, but I didn't answer - I simply operated the curtain, calmly. Immediately after the act, he came down [from the box] and gave me a kiss - because I hadn't answered.

There was such greatness in his humility, in his purity, in his love for the individual - and in his vision of collectivism.

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He was most embarrassed when the topic of his salary came up. A student of Vakhtangov received far more than dramatic education. We are proud to say that we were educated by this great man. What Vakhtangov gave his students was education in the deepest sense. A lesson from Vakhtangov was a sermon! He honesty, truthfulness, understanding between people, beauty, and love!

For Vakhtangov, art and humanity were inseparable. 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 simply floated into a world of immortal creation. His final 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 growing softer and softer, weaker and weaker, until we heard his final whisper:

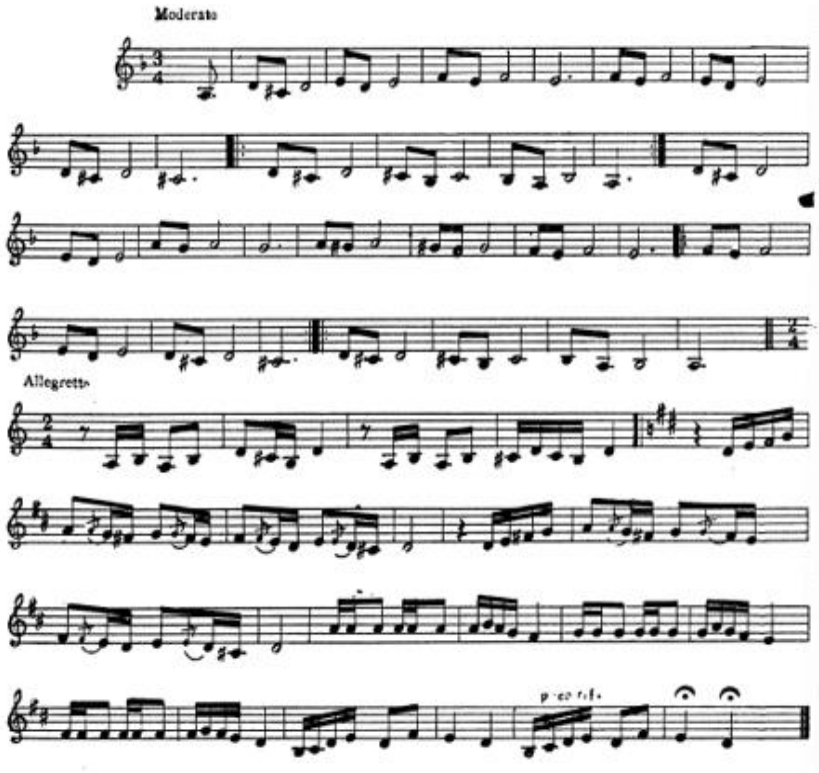
"B-l-a-ck sh-a-d-o-ws..."

The beating of his heart ceased.
The sound faded...
A muffled sigh filled the air...

His body lay in his studio for eight and forty hours. Thousands passed by, leaving behind their final tears. Thousands of people walked miles to accompany him to his eternal rest. Hundreds of artists, young and old, breathed for the last time the air in which his great spirit still hovered. The grief of the Russian theater world was personified in the great master

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski.

His old gray head bowed over the grave of his pupil, and great tears fell onto the freshly dug-out earth -
the earth that now lay heaped upon the young genius of the new Russian theater.



Vakhtangov Nigunim.

Chayele Grober

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Chapter 26

My Great Premiere

With Vakhtangov's death, my hope of performing a musical comedy - one I had dreamed of so deeply, and in which he had believed so strongly - died as well.
The young *Habima*, which was based on two pillars - Zemach and Vakhtangov - was now left with only Zemach - the national leader.

Zemach's vision was that *Habima* should perform only plays with Jewish content: Bible, history, legends, customs. He refused to consider a secular repertoire. But there were few purely Jewish plays. And so the *Habima* was left with the big problem: repertoire. I tend to believe that Zemach's principle was not subjective, but purely ideological. In any case, it ran counter to the artistic development of the theater and also to the young actors who had not been born as biblical heroes.
However, Zemach had begun to search for heroes - or rather, heroines - since he counted himself among the heroes.
And this marked the beginning of the split within *Habima* that would later unfold in New York.

The main foundation on which our studio had begun to take shape was collectivism, fraternity, and a pure, peaceful atmosphere.

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Vakhtangov preached this from his first to his last day. In our case, however, collectivism found its only expression in

the way we cut the clay-black bread into equal pieces and evenly distributed the pennies from the sparsely filled till. But the young people who set out on the theatrical path were not seeking bread. Artists can satisfy their hunger and thirst only through creativity - and they can be creative only within an artistic atmosphere. And this atmosphere had died with its creator...

There was nothing left of what our great and unique teacher had preached. Struggles broke out between Zemach and his colleagues. Zemach, however, always spoke in the name of a great idea - one he placed above all else, even when his own interests were at stake. Of all my comrades, not one remained who would rise above personal ambition.

The great difference between Zemach and the others was this: Zemach sought to strengthen the position he had earned through years of toil, suffering, and struggle - while each of his opponents aimed to usurp Nahum's place.
The difference between the two currents was as great as the difference between Nahum Zemach and his opponents.

I can't recall a single moment during my years in Moscow when one comrade stood up for another. And yet, this is one of the core principles of collectivism.
It was replaced by "starism" - the pursuit of becoming a star oneself.
And in a theater of stars, talent alone wasn't enough.
It wasn't enough to be praised by the press, by the public, by great teachers. You needed elbows. You needed selfishness. You needed tenacity. And if you were born without these qualities, and inherited a touch of inferiority complex, you had to start looking for other ways.
It was a long and painful process for me.

Habima was my first and only theater. Here I made my first artistic discoveries; here my love for the stage first

blossomed; here I conceived my first role in Berger's *The Flood*; here I gave birth to my first "Lisi." [1]
To earn that role, I endured an entire winter of pain—ulcers brought on by the strain of my sensitive nature upon my delicate body.

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This softened the stubbornness somewhat, and the first available play was seized in haste. Everyone was already immersed in preparations for *The Golem* by H. Leyvik and *Jacob's Dream* by Richard B. Hofman.
The entire theater was gearing up for its first major tour through Europe - and possibly America. *The Flood* became Zemach's great compromise: it was the first production drawn from a European repertoire.

After *the dybbukim* and the *tzadikem* [2], "Lisi" was the first woman from the underworld; none of us had any experience in this - least of all me. Aside from the fact that two directors were working with the *Flood* ensemble, which consisted of seven men and one woman - one focused on the roles, the other on the staging - I had no idea how to inhabit such a role.
There was little time before the performance. Season was ending, 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 cast into the underworld by the force of her pure, honest love - all my former feminine instincts began to transform into real, physical desires. And when I had nearly completed my work on the role, I was seized by an extraordinary restlessness.

It drove me from the house back to the studio, and from there through the streets and boulevards. I wandered, 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 *f a r g e y n* - a dissolving, a merging, a becoming.

It was not connected with a lasting romance; it was not born of dreams or suffering - it began with a quiet warmth, with echoes like distant thunder.
Then, a flash passed through my eyes. I trembled. The whole world around me - and within me - was thrown into storm. It seemed to last an eternity. And what remained was a joyful song in my young blood, and a fine, enduring vibration in all my limbs…
A new world- until then unknown - opened before me.
I couldn't think of nothing - and nothing disturbed me anymore.

Work was interrupted during the hot summer weeks. And so, perhaps for the only time in my life, I was simply *a woman*.

The first call back to our work in the studio sobered me. Suddenly, I realized the “great misfortune” that had befallen me!
At that very moment - when I had reached the end of my long journey, at this very moment, when I was approaching the finish line, when the premiere was imminent - my first major premiere, in a role that demanded youth, physical grace, and agility - I began to feel such a heaviness in my legs, and a deep depression of spirit.

My temples throbbed like hammers, and a thought pierced my mind: "Get free. Get free as soon as possible - before it's too late".
But it was not easy. It was forbidden by the government. And that is why, even today, I carry a deep sense of gratitude toward my friend, Dr. S.

A new source of energy opened up within me, and I threw myself feverishly into my work. The days were filled with worry. Outside of rehearsals, I had to secure additional material resources for “my” production, as it was called. It had been assigned to me, and now I had to take responsibility. The modest support we received from the government was reserved for the main play…

God helped me: my warm-hearted friend Koldovsky had, at that time, returned to Moscow as part of the Joint [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee]. Koldovsky had become a devoted follower of Habima and a passionate admirer of “the great talent found in small roles.”

At the Joint office, sitting at his desk, he listened to my difficult situation. He was the only one who understood that my entire world was at stake in this performance. And he - Koldovsky - gave me the money for the production of *The Flood*. He told me then that it was his personal gift, not the Joint’s.

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

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,” who had betrayed her so deeply.
Vakhtangov often said:
"Be free! Perceive every event with open senses - this will arouse various sensations that will be useful to you!"
I truly benefited from such an event.

The director who produced *The Flood* 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 those restless, feverish nights, I entered the courtyard of our studio in a daze - and heard my dialogue with “Bir” sounding as if it came from another world.
This rudely awakened me and I felt a sharp pain - like a spear had piercing 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 felt the depth of my pain in Lisi’s monologue and decided to perform it accompanied by my guitar. Zemach was shocked when I presented him with my surprise - after all, the guitar had always been associated with “gypsy” songs - but the tears that the scene brought to Zemach and his comrades silenced all objections.

In the new season, the three new plays were already performed in a large theater. *The Flood* 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

that had flooded *Strastnaya Ploshtshad* [Pushkinskaya Square in central Moscow]!
And that scalpers were getting fantastic prices for a ticket - my teeth were chattering, my hands were shaking – it was hard to put on makeup.

I remember nothing of my first performance. I don't even know how I got through the scene. But I sang the waltz as I always had in the woods of Milejczyce - and that can only happen when something is innate, when it lives in us and stays with us all our lives.
I only came to when I heard thunderous applause that lasted for several minutes. That scene from *The Flood* went on to echo through all the cities and countries where we performed. The greatest surprise came when my sister-in-law Tanya told me that Max, my brother, had cried. It is said: "If there is nothing to look at, there may at least be something to listen to... "

This was my first discovery - 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 tracks were 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 where we had thrown our luggage, we sang and played our last notes on Russian soil.
From there, we departed for the big, free world.

Translator's Notes:

[1] Summary of *The Flood*: Bir, a stockbroker, feigns love for Lisi and promises to marry her. But he abandons her, and this betrayal draws Lisi into the "underworld" — the shadowy realm of prostitution. She encounters Bir again, now as a sex worker in a bar.
Meanwhile, a violent storm is brewing — a flood is imminent — and the people in the bar find themselves trapped. The play explores a recurring human phenomenon: when danger looms, people are suddenly willing to repent and purify their thoughts. But once the threat subsides, they return to their old habits and resume the pursuit of vanity and distraction.

[2] For those unfamiliar: the former are possessing spirits, the latter righteous men. But in the theater, they had become types—almost theatrical archetypes.

Chapter 27

Triumphal Procession of the Habima

Our European tour began in Riga.

At the Latvian border, where we arrived in the middle of the night, a tall, black-haired young man named Aronshteyn entered and introduced himself as our manager. Our new European manager found the "famous" troupe - the "sensation" - huddled together on hard benches, wrapped in thin, worn coats.
Twisted heels, tattered soles, and woolen socks peeked out from beneath the covers. Above and below the benches, where suitcases, pillows, and bundles were usually tossed, everything was surprisingly neat and tidy…

He introduced himself and delivered this *mesedzh* [message] from our "entrepreneur":
"You are not to leave the hotel or meet anyone from the press until you've been 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. In any case, we entered the large store like a herd. An elegant man in a white starched shirt and tails came rushing toward us, greeted us in German, and "placed himself at our service."

I went ahead and

said rashly in Russian, "First, undress us - and then, 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 *The 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 *farkoyfer* - respectable salesmen in starched vests and black tails.
They behaved very "correctly" and seriously, 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 vanished, and we were surrounded by warm, simple people. Hebrew was spoken in an Ashkenazi dialect [1] and we gasped with laughter.

Our reputation as a hungry troupe had preceded us, and the banquet tables were piled high with 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, every innkeeper in Riga knew: 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. 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 arrived in America a year later, customs officials suspected her of smuggling it into New York…

In Latvia we performed not only in Riga, but also in Dvinsk [Daugavpils]. There, we played in the only *zheleznodorozhnes* [railway] theater, which was actually located at the railway station.

Chayele Grober in the role of “Lisi” in “The Flood” by M.H. Berger.

All eighteen women had to do their makeup in a single room - standing up, no less. But I quickly found my way around and climbed onto a “shelf” near the ceiling. In a life of travel, quick orientation is a fantastic quality…

Once 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 as they had been at the premiere in Riga.

Zemach played the “Tzadik” in the third act, and as always, he took his dramatic pause between the spoken word *Dybbuk* and the shouted *Tze!*—“Get lost!” But just as he cried out *Tze*, a passing train blew its whistle: *Khu-Khu!*

Luckily, all the actors had their backs to the audience during that scene, because everyone burst into laughter - 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 had raised a youth well prepared to receive and evaluate our theater. In addition, Talmud students from the Telzher [Telšia] Yeshiva - whether officially or unofficially - came to see and hear the first great Hebrew theater.

Besides the evening performances, we also gave daytime shows for the youth. Contact with an audience that understands you creates harmony between actor and spectator. The auditorium and the stage become one - and that gives real satisfaction.

So our performances in Lithuania have stayed with me ever since. Kaunas didn't yet have its own theater or opera house, and there wasn't much to see in town. Friends hosted us in their homes, and the bank manager invited us to a "five o'clock" - at nine in the evening ...

So the best way to spend time was with the young people, in the theater.

Latvia and Lithuania were the two small countries meant to prepare us for the great, Jewish Poland. Zemach felt a great responsibility - not only for *Habima*, but also for the Jewish audience. Such a significant encounter had

to be prepared with great care, and he was right.

We had performed and tested the plays in Latvia and Lithuania. We even developed ways to convey humor to audiences who didn’t understand Hebrew - especially important for *The Flood*, which contains a great deal of comedy.

People had grown accustomed to "Zionism" , though they didn’t much care for it. Even our Hebraists had little sympathy for the idea of "Zionism".

Well! And despite everything, many in our group still saw *Habima* as a theater in a foreign tongue—*lehavdl*, to distinguish, like French, German, or Italian. There were those among us who hadn’t passed through the Russian theaters, but had gone to Hebrew theater instead. They refused to speak Yiddish on principle, even though their parents were part of our Jewish people. They had learned Hebrew - but they didn't truly know it. During those months in the small countries, they learned a little more, got a little more used to it, and understood a little more.

From Lithuania we went to Warsaw. Mighty Warsaw!

The city with the largest Jewish community, the finest Jewish press, the greatest scholars! Poland - the land of Yitskhok Leyb Peretz, of Chasidism, of folk legends. Poland - the land of the greatest Jewish theaters, of the finest actors.

And here we were, with our Hebrew theater - a theater that had grown up in Moscow, under non-Jewish leadership 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 had not been Zionist, and in Moscow, Zionism was considered a "counterrevolution". The Zionists worked in Red Moscow just as the socialists had in Tsarist Russia. The *Habima* defined its line as “national-artistic”.

Here, in Warsaw, the powerful Zionist organization and its great leaders revealed themselves to me. Not only did they fill the theater, but we were surrounded by hundreds of friends, Chasidim [followers], supporters - and persecutors.

Here, in Warsaw, cultural life and the theater were now flourishing, even as anti-Semitism was growing.

On Nowolipie and Nowolipki Streets, hooligans cut off the beards of Jews and tore at their temple curls - but on Obozhne [Oboźna] Street,

the "Esther-Rachel Kaminski Theater" thrived, with the popular Sigmunt Turkov and Ida Kaminski. In "Simon's Passage" [Pasaż Simonsa], the cabaret theater "Ezazl" flourished, with the charming, elegant Ola Lilith.

And in "Novoshtsi," *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 Shvif from 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 grand "Ritz" hotel, the sidewalks were packed with people, young and old. Babies were lifted from their cradles so they too could witness 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. Back in Riga, right after our arrival, a letter from my father had been waiting for me - his first letter. My father admitted that he had never truly appreciated or understood me - and most importantly, he thanked me for immortalizing his name...

Now they were living alone in Białystok; my stepbrother Elinke was already studying in Berlin. My parents' happiness was now unprecedented.

The week in Białystok felt like a holiday; but Łódź turned out to be no minor celebration.

In Łódź, I met Rachel again - Rachel and Lazar Zbar. We had shared 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 successful merchant.

Rachel ran her home in Moscow just like her mother Tzimstein had in Białystok. When we, the *Habimanikes* [members of *Habima*], were living on *payok* [rationing], a cart with flour,

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sugar and rice would arrive at 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 summer house for herself - 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 home - my second home.

In the summer of 1920, we, a group of *Habimanikes* , spent the summer in Klyazma – beyond Moscow. Rachel Zbar had rented a *datshe* for us, since she was living there too. 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 back then, but I played it far more often than I would in later years.

Klyazma was like a rebirth of Milejczyce for me. A pine forest, sunshine, and carefree days 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 might lead a little dancing bear...

That summer marked a year since my father had traveled to Białystok with my aunt, my step-brother Elinke, and little

Gutshe. Our town was under German occupation, and it was impossible to send 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). Civil war raged constantly in that part of Russia. Voronezh passed from the Reds to the Whites, and then from the Whites back to the Reds. I was never very close to my brother, and we didn’t write to each other often.

One summer night in Klyazma, while I was sleeping beside Rachel, I had another dream— and began to cry in my sleep.

From right: Hermann Svet, Chayele Grober, Chana Rovina [Hanna Rowina] and Alexander Granach (Leipzig 1926).

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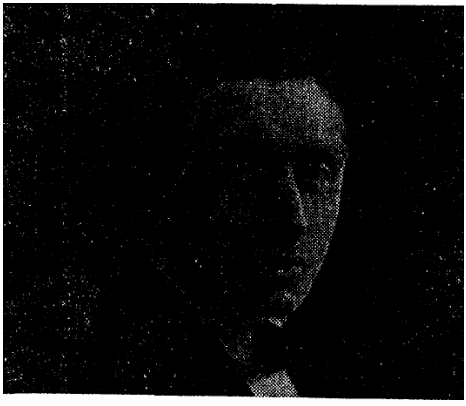
Rachel woke me up, startled. "What happened?"

I sat up in bed, tearfully, and 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 called out, ‘What’s wrong with you, Max?’ He pointed to his stomach and said, ‘I’ve been shot here.’”

Rachel tried to calm me down, but I went into town early the next morning. I searched for his last postcard with an address, and although they couldn’t promise it would arrive, I sent a telegram: ‘Please let me know where and what happened to Max Grober.’

A few days later, I received a letter from a woman I didn’t know. She wrote: "Max is better. We were very surprised to receive your telegram the very morning after the night of Max's operation."

From her reply, it was clear: my dream had taken place at the exact time of the operation. I don’t dream very often - but always when something very important happens.



Max Grober- Chayele’s brother

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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- a love that had already begun at school desks. It had begun at that “age” - or rather, that *youth* - when one falls in love with love itself. 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 chrysanthemums gleamed in the flower beds; the rose blossoms were still closed. Only a few violets and blades of 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 garden’s alleys.

Moyshke was an intimate, simple, dear boy. His declaration of love was a deep sigh, a full look - and after that, I entered a period of guarding my innocence and making plans for a life befitting the only daughter of decent parents.
His delicacy and integrity won my mother’s friendship, and although no *takhles* [definite plans] had yet been discussed,

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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 shaped him into a hero - and our love into a legend. I ran to him right after the war. But in those years, my eyes had also opened - to people, to the world - and the dream shattered at our first meeting.
I met someone truly fine and honest, but so far removed from me… He felt like a distant relative, someone once connected to my childhood.

I was not disappointed - but surprised, deeply 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 faded, 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, declaring: “I am bound by duty to my only sister’s only daughter, and I’ve come to marry you off!”
I felt like a fish caught in a net. We got married. But between us, however, we agreed: it was a sham wedding. A few days after the wedding, I sold my few pieces of furniture and my piano - and a novelist might have described 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 near the border, they hid during the day from the moralizing eye of the town. After midnight, a sledge glided up to the entrance of the house. The young couple jumped aboard and vanished into the dense forest. There, in the woods, 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 leaped onto a second sledge and slipped past the guard - who stood with their backs to them like wooden soldiers - onto Russian soil..."

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A small wheelbarrow dragged my modest dowry from the Moscow train station, and I walked behind it like a corpse. Suddenly, I was overcome with sadness - at the whole mess I had tangled myself into.
There was no *ploshtshad* (living place) in Moscow, so we had to share my room. I "secured" myself with a fringed curtain that we hung across the full 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 annoyance remain. In Moscow it's easy to get married, easy to get divorced - but impossible to separate. Because there is no *ploshtshad* – no place to live.
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 captivated by the great idea of theater. It had become the only meaning of our lives. Zemach wanted his colleagues from the first group in Moscow to sign a pledge: "No one can marry until *Habima* is in Jerusalem."
But he didn't sign himself, and neither did I.

***

During those first months abroad, we were drunk on our artistic success. After receiving recognition from 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 experienced her first great romance.

Bernard was the only son of wealthy parents. Raised in Russia, educated in Poland, he had earned his doctorate from the Sorbonne.

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Although he came from the assimilated youth, he was carried away by [the Zionist leader] Jabotinsky's fiery call! And our encounter solidified the ideal of 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 entire Y. family treated me like a "prima donna" - though I never felt like one myself.

His parents and his sister, B.G., lived in spacious apartments within a long courtyard of houses on Warsaw's main street. In their grand salons, illuminated by crystal candelabras and hanging lamps, countless banquets and both official and unofficial receptions were held. Special dance rehearsals of the "foxtrot" and "shimmy" were arranged in those elegant saloons, where I learned the latest hits of 1925-1926.

The whole of Poland echoed with "Valencia" and "Czy Pani mieszka sama, czy razem z nim" [Do You Live Alone, Madame] . 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.

In Paris, the grand plans for my future with B. became the sensation of our guest performances there. That winter and spring, the sleighs and cabs carried me as if on wings through the streets of Warsaw - across the Praga Bridge, down Ujazdowski Avenue, into vast pine forests, through moonlit nights and sunlit days.
For every day we performed in the provincial towns, just as many telegrams flew, and the telephones rang - often as soon as we got up.

In Łódź, in the home 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 laid, we were done with Poland - and set off for Berlin.

Chapter 29

On the Great European Stage

Still in Moscow, Zemach insistently pointed out the most important destinations for us: Jewish Warsaw - from the national point of view - and theatrical Berlin, from the artistic point of view. And if we climbed those two high peaks, we could reach the highest summit of all: 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 rose, we could feel the great anticipation in the auditorium.

Berlin had not only heard about the young theater from the press - Zemach had already been there and prepared the ground. The great poet, Khayim Nakhman Bialik, had already spoken of us in terms of *"nisim-venifloes*" [miracles and wonders] [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 production to Berlin. In less than a year, a legend had already been woven around *Habima*.
The Dybbuk was on its triumphal march, striking fear into the hearts of actors performing leading roles in other plays.

We were ready to believe that

Vakhtangov couldn't fail at all, but what about the other, weaker pieces?!

The Flood was performed last, just as it had been in every country we toured. Here in Berlin, I waited six weeks for my turn. My anticipation grew more and more tense, and more and more the thought kept returning: my play was a European one - surely no one could be surprised by it...

It happened that one night before the premiere of *The Flood,* Alexander Granach invited me to see "the Bergner" perform. The childlike figure and "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 truly 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.

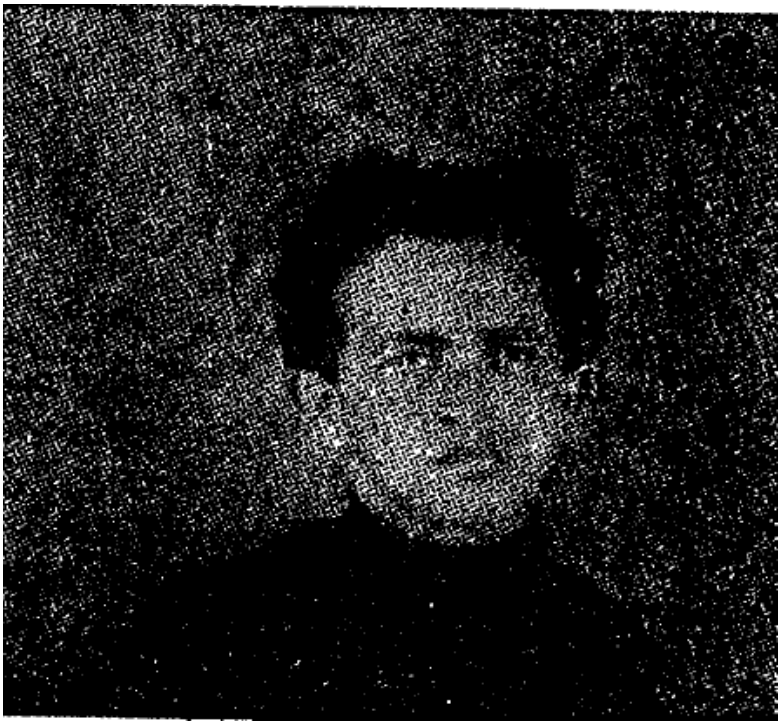
That was the effect Bergner had on me, and it cast a kind of fear over me - one that didn't leave until I stepped onto the stage for my premiere. On stage, I felt my insecurity from the very first line. Everything I said sounded wrong. Even the applause after the dialogue felt wrong to me.

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 at the boarding house on *Fasanenplatz*, I lay in bed in the dark, still fully dressed, soaking the pillows with my tears.
I simply couldn't get up, even though so many of my comrades knocked and begged me to let them in.
The gray day barely lit the room when I finally opened the door to my comrade, Benyamin Zemach. Already tearstained, I said:

"I have failed. I can't climb to the heights that *Habima* has reached - my talent doesn't go beyond the cabaret"... And I went on like that...
With a warm smile on his lips, Benyamin said something - and I fell into a deep sleep, completely exhausted.

A loud knock on the door woke me: Granach had ordered the first morning paper to be delivered, with the theater review of *The Flood.*
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 reviews 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.



Sasha Prudkin, the "Bir" in "The Flood“

The *Habima* at that time had some beautiful *tates* [fathers], *mekhutonim* [in-laws], and *batlonim* [idlers], 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 held 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 – just 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 as if recovering from a long illness. Little by little, I began to regain my strength, and with this new strength, a growing desire to play again - to play and sing without stopping. It was as if a hidden source of energy were about to burst forth. I could hardly wait for the second performance of *The Flood*.

What infinite happiness an actor feels when they fully live the role and atmosphere of their play! I didn't act my second performance—I lived 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.
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, out of 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 spoke to me in a soft voice (which he never used during his acting). He told me 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 success.

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 away from this world of mine.

Suddenly, Warsaw was covered in a thick fog - so dense I could barely make out the silhouette of a person. And even before we finished our tour in Germany, Poland had already vanished 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 throughout Germany. He had always been a good Jewish man, but now *Habima* had awakened hidden longing for Judaism within him. 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, with 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 fourteen, Granach already knew that his world was the theater. At that time, a Jewish troupe led by director Gimpl came to Horodenko. After the performance, Granach

jumped down from the gallery and ran to the director‘s door - but stopped abruptly, having lost his courage.
Alexander, the bold, daring boy, was suddenly ashamed. 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:
"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 surrounded himself with books. His doctors and nurses became his teachers and friends in this new world.
From the hospital - his first school - he discovered Heine and Goethe, and through them, found his way to the great *Volksbühne* in Berlin.

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 had seen this art as a child, from the *kuntsnmakher* [pickpockets] on our yards, and I had been 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 hosted for him, he appeared with a German woman who suddenly presented herself completely naked before us.
I went up to him and said:
"Show this lewd woman out!“
But he looked at me in astonishment, unable to understand my outrage. He tried hard to explain that this was inspiration - the elevation of the German art world and high society…

However, I didn’t understand at that time that the "pure race" was being born 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 once came to a party meeting and found his comrades worried. They needed money for a big job that had to be done. Granach didn‘t think twice - he emptied his pockets onto the table, leaving only a single mark.
Alexander Granach had such a generous hand, and such a good heart.

Translator’s Note:

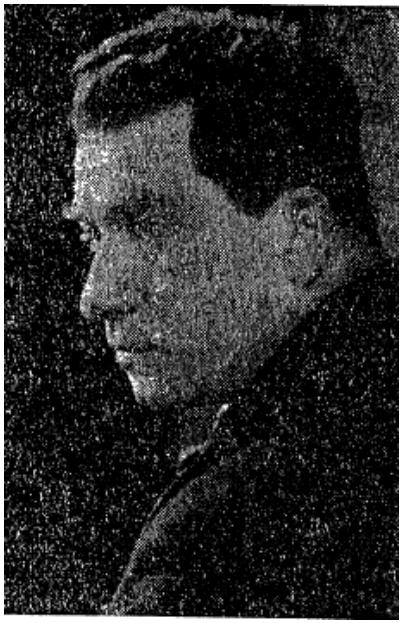
[1] I translate here Bialik's commentary on *Habima* from page 7 of Moskaer Theater Habima, Gründer und Direktor Nahum Zemach : Free

Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive : “The greatness of *Habima* lies not only in its artistic striving and performance, but in the very creation of *Habima* itself - in the act of drawing something out of nothing. In the strong faith that governs the artists of *Habima*. Faith itself is true art, and without faith, there is no true art.”

Chapter 30

Paris - New York

Paris was the last stop on our European tour, and the 1926-1927 season ended there - very sadly! The heat was intense, but the Jewish audience - very small. Despite the glowing coverage in the French press, it failed to draw a French audience.



Vladimir Grossman

The arriving tourists 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 in real diamonds!

So how could anyone sit through an evening of lamentations over the destroyed Temple - or watch the sorrowful dancing of the ragged poor?

A group of *Habima* actors on vacation in a village in France in 1926.

There was no large Zionist organization here to create an atmosphere around *Habima*, nor was there the powerful Warsaw press. There was only one major Yiddish newspaper - "Parizer Haynt" - and its editor, Vladimir Grossman. He wrote and advertised in his paper, but from

one premiere to the next, the theater grew emptier and emptier, the audience more and more weary. 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.
But Vladimir Grossman lost something too: several good years with me...

If he had stayed in the theater that night, we would have celebrated our silver wedding anniversary today...

The season ended with *The Flood*, and the whole troupe was left without money, without further contracts - only with the hope of America.
The opponents of Nahum Zemach figured out this was the perfect moment to to remove him from power over us...
And it was here, in Paris, that the split actually accured - later finalized in New York.
The troupe scattered to various corners of France on what was called a "vacation"!

I, along with a small group, went off to a village near the Swiss border - I think it was "Saint-Sauveur". We remained in the village until word came from Paris that we could return at once and begin preparations for a second tour of Germany.

It wasn't until the end of 1927 that we finally departed 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 no more than crossing the Biała for a Białystoker...

I had heard endless stories from my uncle. I already knew that in America the heat was so intense that men walked without 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 cars surrounded you on all sides, so that a person felt like a small cog spinning inside a vast machine.

My uncle also urged 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 he kept running back and forth

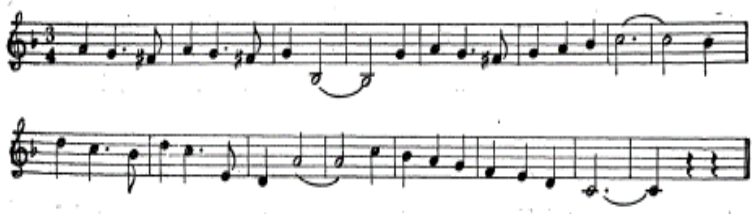
between America and his homeland. He was always chasing *mazl* - luck - but he could never quite catch it.
Yet with the instinct of a simple man, he sensed that we had to flee - from Russia, Poland, from Europe.
He also believed there was gold buried deep in American soil - you just had to dig for it.

I kept thinking about all his stories. I also remembered how people slept on rooftops in the sweltering heat. And I remembered that wonderful little song I had learned:

Zumer baynakht oyf di dekher
Dan iz dokh di goldene tsayt,
Men krikht alemol aroyf hekher
Und men vert dort fun tsores bafrayt…

[Summer nights upon the roofs,
That is the golden time, indeed.

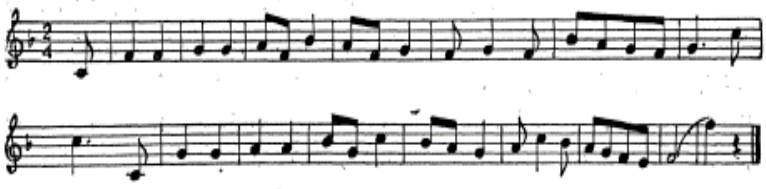
One always climbs up to the heights,
And there from troubles one is freed.]

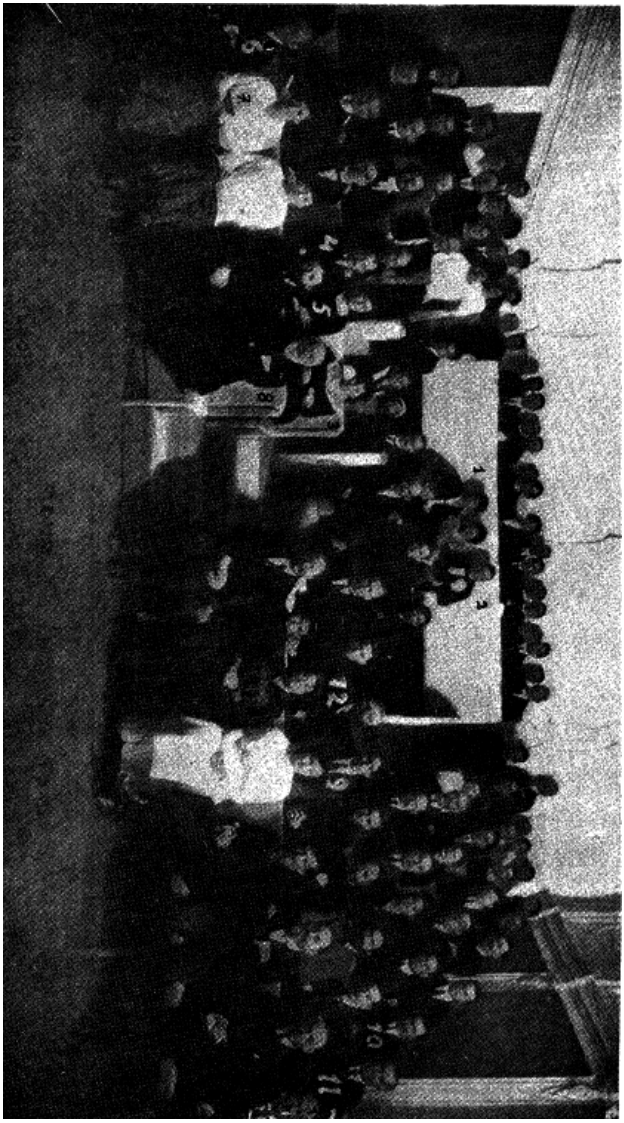


A later song my uncle shared went like this:

Oy, feter, feter fun Amerike-Land
Shik mir dolarn nokhanand…

[Oh uncle, uncle from America's shore,
Send me some dollars, maybe more…]





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 Grinberg, 10. Yuli Engel, 11. [unreadable] (the later administrator of *Habima*), 12. Professor Glagolin.

With this song and my guitar, everyone accompanied us to the "golden" land. But who among us had yet seen the process of how one actually gets the gold?! First a boiling black sludge flows from the steaming cauldrons; then begins to trickle a bit of gilded grime; then the substance was refined by fire and flame into a golden fluid - mixed with earth, and only later does it emerge: pure, dazzling, fiery gold! That's how - and only how - America reveals itself to the immigrant.

We all knew about the famous *Ellis Island*, the gateway every emigrant had to pass through to reach New York. But we weren't traveling as emigrants - we were arriving 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 of Ellis Island at all. Nor had the Balyev troupe, nor the *Blue Bird* troupe.
And, as far as I recall, neither had 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.
America greeted us with dirt, with the stench of the *hekdesh* - a public poor-person accommodation - called *kesl-gardn* [Castle Garden].

Why did it hit *us* and not the other troups? Why didn't it hit the great Vilnius ensemble - but *Habima*?

Perhaps it was because they - *Habima* - lacked a Zionist organization. Or perhaps because they weren't a national theater that, within a single year, had captured the attention of the entire non-Jewish theater world.

But I believe the real reason was this: they came 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!

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A feverish warmth pulsed from her small, trembling body. I forgot that I came as an actress – forgot te press, my career, everything an artist is supposed to do and think about…

The struggle between artist and human being, artist and woman, has haunted me - and I've been fighting that 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 my first big "thrill", as he explained it to me. That meant - the first big surprise. He took me on the subway, just between five and six o'clock, when New York spits out thousands of people from the factories, the offices, the shops.
At the first station, I shot 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 still can't believe how quickly I got used to that terrifying first moment - and how quickly I began to realize that I could *Americanize* myself.

The cleanliness and brightness of my family's home took me back ten years. I had long since been weaned from my home environment - from that domestic *uyut* [coziness] - and had certainly forgotten the kind of tenderness and motherliness I now received from my Aunt Teybele.

I must say: Aunt Teybele is not quite an aunt as we usually think of them - Aunt Teybele is really a *mama*.
Since my grandmother died, Teybele had become what my grandmother once 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 in my Genitshke’s closet.
I came from a country where people truly go barefoot - and here…

She tried, innocently, to explain to me that in America, people work - and once you earn money, you get what your heart desires.
And in America, she said, people dress *tu metsh*.

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 began with a principle 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 in to take us to the ship, Alexander Granach had cried out: "Think of me!" And he tore the hat from his head, throwing it through the window into the wagon. I loved that real felt hat - but it was "not for America"...

I rested, content in the homey idyll - and then 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 would-be journalists. It quickly turned into a competition - each one trying to outdo the other in interviews.
The main goal, of course, was to outshine Nahum Zemach. This effort was led by a few men who laid claim to Zemach's position. The campaign had begun back in Riga, and here in New York, they simply lost their heads.

It's easy to lose yourself 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 rushing to get ahead of everyone else. The *elevators* (the elevated trains) clattered day and night without pause; the crowds surging up and down the subways literally tossed you from side to side; the thousands streaming to and from the theaters could almost sweep you away.

All the English-language theaters in New York were clustered in one area: between 41st and 56th Streets - from 8th Avenue on the West Side to 5th Avenue and Broadway on the East.
In the subways, you'd often see magnates in top hats heading to the theater with their

ladies in gold dresses - because by car, they wouldn't make it in time.

A newcomer to New York is terrified. You feel the current pushing you further and further away - and the thought that,

over time, you might be swept out completely can drive you mad. 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" - it builds you up or breaks you down.
The second was my uncle's attempt to reassure me: "Who has the name - has the game." Whoever has the name, wins...
It expressed his deep conviction that I would make it - that I would make the game.

Habima began its guest performances in a not-so-great theater on Broadway. I - and I'm sure my comrades too - dreamed that in a center where theater flourishes like this, we'd surely stay for the whole season, maybe even a second, and only later move on to the provinces, as was customary.
But the reality was terrible! Already after the second premiere, a cold wind began to blow at the box office – and it quickly spread to the theater, and from there to the backstage. Just eight weeks later, we were packing the crates for the provincial tour. It was called a "tour", but in truth, it was only a handful of cities where Zionist organizations had agreed to buy a performance.

I didn't know at the time that this was actually called a "benefits". *Himlshrayend*- Outrageous! Instead of establishing associations to support the theater – to help it grow and survive - they turned it into a business. Twenty years have passed, but I still shudder when I think of the Boston performance.

It was the *Hadassah* - the Women's Zionist Organisation of America - that had purchased *The Dybbuk* for that evening. I believe they were supposed to pay $500. The plan was to go on from there to Chicago.

The hall was overcrowded. The parterre, as always, occupied by the "upper class"...

After the performance, a number of ladies in evening gowns and fully dressed gentlemen came backstage and informed Zemach

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that they would pay $125 less - because not everything had sold out and expenses had been high. Zemach, of course, refused to accept this.
And so the “deal” began. The entire troupe sat on their luggage and crates.
Zemach pleaded with the "committee," explaining that we would miss our train and had to be in Chicago the next day. But the Zionist ladies and gentlemen waited cold-bloodedly, observing all the *bon ton* etiquette, until *Zemach* finally signed the receipt - minus $125.

That’s how, little by little, we started “getting acquainted” with American Jewry.

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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 truly understand 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 - workers, teachers, office clerks, writers, theater folk. In all these modest dwellings lies something immense: the open-mindedness of America. Perhaps Americans themselves didn't even sense it, because whatever one grows used to soon feels self-evident. But for someone who had lived on a *ploshtshad* - a space barely four by four - with neighbors on one side: a drunkard who beat his wife because she wouldn't let him near her twelve-year-old daughter, and on the other: a married couple – workers - who hurled the filthiest insults at each other…it was far from self-evident. And far from easy.
And this went on, year after year. I don't even want to speak of the other inconveniences.

Compared to that, the American homes truly won me over. For a long time, I was simply amazed by the brightness of such a home.

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Here, no one looked at the clock– *es brent*! [Hurry, hurry – it's all on fire]. 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 had once felt so difficult, so dark…

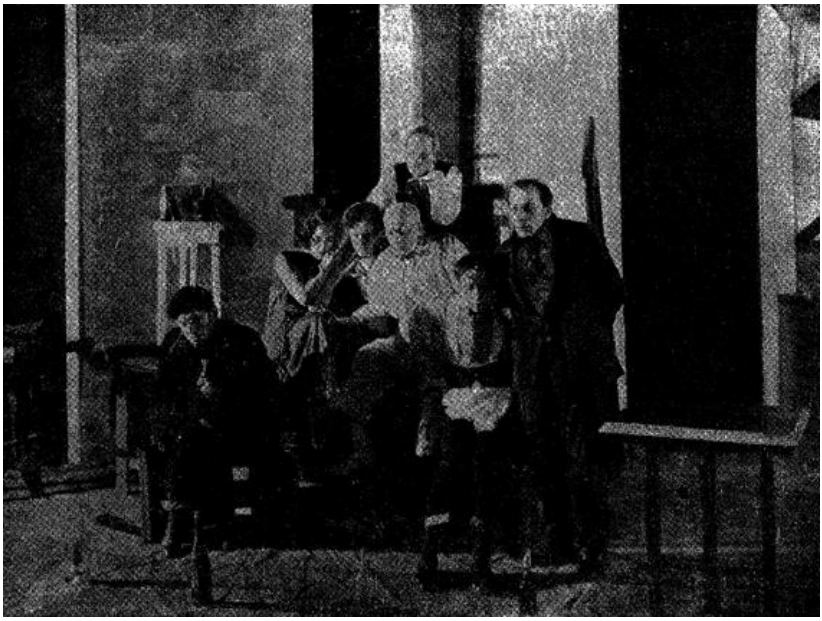
One of the first homes I visited was that of my fellow Białystoker, Meir Shvarts [Maurice Schwartz]. Meir was the son of "Shvarts - the Black - the one with the machines". He had his workshop on Lipowa Street, accross

from the *tserkve* [Russian church], next to the Lis family - "the ones with the shoes".
I was very young, and yet I remember how the grimy 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...

Meir 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 until he had passed a test. And he had to be tested not only by a college of great actors, but also by the *khoristkes* - the female chorus singers - themselves. And Meir told me who the *khoristkes* were…
However, if they voted "no," all was over!
You were no longer an actor, had no "talent" - and the world, which claimed otherwise, was simply lying.

Now that I had a sense of the Jewish theaters, I began to discover the theater itself - and its actors.

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski had already spoken to us about Maurice Schwartz and his Art Theater - and he did so with great enthusiasm. It was something you could truly get excited about! This was the heyday of art theater. When the curtain rose, Baruch Aronson's set designs would glow, Yosef Achron's music would swell, and Jewish actors would step out into the light before you! Even without a leading role, Tzili [Cecilia] Adler radiated— what humor, what eyes, how much talent expressed in each of her movements!



"The Flood" - third act.
From right: Benno Schneider, Vinyar, D. Itkin, S. Prudkin, Ch. Grober
Raikin Ben-Ari; above: D. Fridland

All at once, the whole hall burst into rapturous applause. No one was on stage yet - only a voice could be heard from backstage. And suddenly *she* appeared: a *yidene* - a Jewess who dealt in geese. She spoke - simply, plainly - and it seemed to me that the entire stage had transformed into a bustling goose market: squawking, clattering, shouting over the buyers and sellers, jostling beneath the *shechita* knife... This was performed by the great, venerable Nina Abramovitsh.
My God - how immediate, how gifted - how great!

After that, I saw Isidor Keshir - the lion! Izidor Keshir had slow, heavy movements and an inner temperament. When he walked accross the stage, you had the impression that he wasn't moving forward, but rather into some deep place. His voice had such a vibrato, as if it came to us from the deepest depths, from somewhere far below. His speech was always accompanied by a kind of bass growl... like a lion's. Izidor Keshir reached deep into my heart.

Another vigorous, gifted character actress, with the figure and head of a "grande dame", was Chana Apel. What freedom on stage! What ease in shifting from gravity to humor!

This was the ensemble of the Art Theater.

Back then, there were five theaters on Second Avenue. Little Molly Picon, performing in the grand 2nd Avenue Theater, played to audiences of thousands. She was the only operetta actress at the time.
But Molly wasn't the kind of operetta star people were used to. She wasn't feminine in the conventional sense, she didn't have the elegance of a lady, she lacked the "sex appeal" - none of what Clara Young or the famous Russian Potoptshina had.
But Molly shone with her own " I."
She played *Di Mamele* [The Mama] - a role written especially for her by my friend Meir Shvarts [Maurice Schwartz]. Never since have I seen her in a part that suited her so perfectly. *Mamele* was truly hers.

Meir Shvarts brought out all the qualities Molly had: naivety, goodness, wisdom, and a kind of responsibility that touches a child's heart.

There are actors who believe that operetta isn't real art - and there are spectators who think the same. But neither Stanislavski nor Vakhtangov ever said that. Any branch of art is art when performed with talent.
And little Molly had not only great talent, but also intelligence and education.

Samuel Goldenburg performed 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 glance at a woman - and he could be sure to win her... 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, right in the heart 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 were moved to tears. Our "men" cried too. And I'll never forget the trance Jennie was in when we walked in on her during intermission:
"It's a crazy thrill for me that your actors have come to see me. You know I play *shund* - *shund*! But - I sell it..."

Just as honestly as Jennie Goldstein spoke, she acted.
It is a blessing for actors who are able to find themselves. One doesn't imagine having to play a lover when one was born a mother; one doesn't force paths of great tragedy when one has the natural gift for light drama. One simply acts - and makes use of all one's innate tools. That's how our great American actors came to be.

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 lay not only in his great talent, not only in his extraordinary humor, not only in his musicality and versatility - not only that! With him, there was an intimacy, a warmth, that filled you with the deepest joy theater can give.

I walked through all the theaters - not out of curiosity, but because by watching other actors, you can discover what you yourself are missing. And the first thing I discovered was this: we lacked powerful technique! And technique only develops through acting – through playing a range of pieces and roles. But theater is not just about the actor, no matter how great he may be. Theater is made up of the actor *and* the audience - an audience that understands and responds to every word.

In New York, actors used to perform every night – and even twice a day on Shabbat and Sundays. So acting became part of their blood. The theater became their home. The boards were truly burning beneath their feet!

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Chapter 32

The Curtain Falls...

We lacked much of what the American actors had - but what *they* didn't have was: - a theater! Even the Maurice Schwartz "Art Theater" was not what Stanislavski had developed, and others - including myself - followed. Schwartz's theater was a business venture, led by an actor with strong administrative skills. Actors were hired for one season.

The same year, Jacob Ben-Ami also organized a group of artists who performed literary plays - but it was by no means a theater [troupe] with the grand idea of cultivating 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. We had a trained ensemble, an education 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 told those who had invited us that they had to come to *us* to learn…
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 lifted me right out of my seat - but I didn't have the courage to speak up. It was precisely this arrogance that led to the tragic split within *Habima*.

Many of us believed that *Habima* was wherever they were. The youngest believed this most strongly - the group that supported N. Zemach and went with him.

At the end of our season in New York - four months after we had begun performing there - the *Habima* collective officially split into two groups. One consisted mainly of the older, already recognized actors; the other, of a small group of younger and weaker actors - with perhaps two or three exceptions.
Nahum Zemach decided to start a second *Habima* with the latter group. My God! What madness!

The history of the young theater had already spanned two decades. Zemach had carried this dream since his earliest youth. He had already endured the pain of the first great failure at the Congress of Vienna, and the hardships of the early years in Moscow.

Back then, Zemach did not build *Habima* as a manager builds a business - it was created with the idea of becoming a *temple of art*.

The enthusiasm with which Vakhtangov began working with us was entirely due to the great idea that N. Zemach had described to him - with such pathos and conviction. Vakhtangov had no interest in just another group that wanted to learn the art of theater - there were dozens of such groups in Moscow at the time, and Vakhtangov was already the one great teacher to whom everyone was drawn! But he put his heart and soul into working with *us*.

His vision was not merely to train the individual actor - but to shape the entire theater.

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He taught us not only the art of theater, but also how to *build* a theater.
Everything connected to the construction and the stage had to be made with our own strength and our own hands. He insisted that we - the entire group - sew the first stage curtain ourselves.
How many nights passed in pursuit of this sacred work! How many dreams were stitched into every seam! How many songs were sung into every fold! We truly wove ourselves into the fabric of that curtain.
How much suffering we endured as we opened the curtain for ten, eight, or even just six people in the hall. And how much joy that curtain gave us when it rose for the greatest spectacle in Moscow - *The Dybbuk*!

It took special, demonic, black forces to destroy such a sacred creation. And how terrible it is to witness such a building fall! Everything in you cries out for help - but you are so tragically helpless in the face of catastrophe.

At that time, I received invitations to two meetings: the first was with *N. Zemach* and his group, and the second - already scheduled for the next day - from the other group.
It was clear that the struggle was over, and that there was no way to change the situation. And yet - I wanted so badly to believe otherwise! The restlessness inside me forced me to act.
I felt that the comrades who encouraged *Zemach* to leave his own theater were committing the greatest crime. I felt that much of what *Zemach* himself used to say to those who wanted to leave *Habima* in its early years - we now had to say to *him*, as a reminder.

I felt it was my duty to tell *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 words ever could. I remember how they flashed when I told him that one can only build one great thing in a short life.
I remember that *Zemach* did not utter a single word for nearly an hour while I sat there.
I left with the feeling that if just one more of the original,

older comrades had spoken to him as I had, it might have been possible to break through the stubbornness that held him. But no one came -because no one wanted to.

I went to the second meeting to find myself - 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: "Chayele, are you going with them?" I knew his decision depended on mine. But I answered honestly: "I don't know yet."

I walked freely into the room – a room filled with dynamite!

Accusations and insults shot at me like hailstones:
How dare I come to them after being with Zemach yesterday! They refused to speak about anything in my presence....
Phrases flew - that I was "spying," that I had come to eavesdrop and report everything back to Zemach. 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 that way - that I was one of their best actresses, that they needed me. She said she didn't even know why she was still performing - now that *I* wasn't performing anymore.

It was the first time in our ten years of working together that Hanna Rowina had shown such generosity. Had those words been spoken in a peaceful atmosphere, they would have sealed my fate - and I would have gone with them. But her speech was not heard. Not even in the hearts of those who would soon betray *Habima* in various ways. Her words sank somewhere.
And I felt such hatred - such distrust of me - and so many intrigues!

I wandered through that hot day filled with a bitter cold - a coldness of emptiness.

I lost my faith.

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Nahum Zemach in the role of the prophet in “Eternal Jew” by D. Pinski.

In the lower deck of third class, in burnt and stuffy corridors, I said goodbye to my two dearest, departing comrades - Hanna Rowina and Aharon Meskin. With me were my friend and comrade David Itkin, a friend of one of the actresses - Y. Landau - and Mordechai Dantsis, a good friend from *Habima*.
After midnight, we wandered through the streets of the East Side, each of us lost in our own thoughts. It was already dawn when we entered Y.L.'s room. I kicked off my shoes and curled up in the corner of the sofa. We sat there from two in the morning until nine.

In those early hours, millions of New Yorkers rushed to factories, offices, schools, and banks - but I walked slowly, without a "where to" and without a "what for."

The seven hours I spent at Y.L.'s remained like a symbol - a kind of *shiva* I sat for my first, young, creative ten years.

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The pace of New York wakes you up.
The rhythm of New York fills the air with a kind of vibration that stirs your imagination. It seems to me that nowhere in the world is a human being as creative as in New York; New York uncovers hidden powers within you and reveals endless possibilities.
It didn't take me long to choose my friends and find my teachers.

And so I began to prepare - for my own path, alone.

END

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