

# Zikhroynes un Shriftn fun A Byalistoker- Memoirs And Writings Of A Bialystoker First Part

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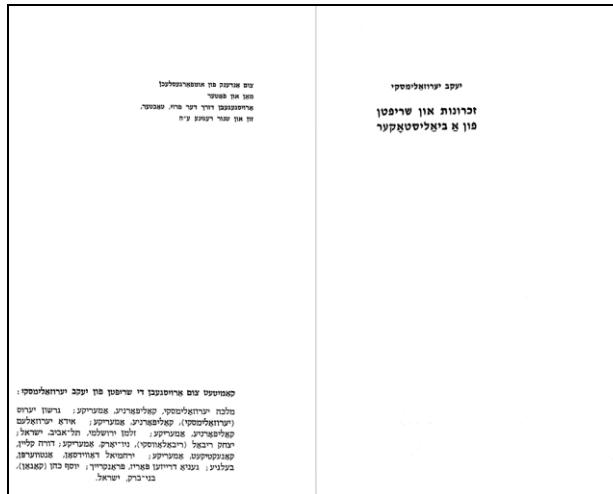
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Jacob Jerusalimski



NATIONAL YIDDISH BOOK CENTER  
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## ZIKHROYNES UN SHRIFTN FUN A BYALISTOKER



Author: Jacob Jerusalimski

# Memoirs And Writings Of A Białystoker

In memory of the unforgettable  
man and father  
published by his wife, daughter,  
son and daughter-in-law, Regine, peace should be upon her

## Committee for the publication of the writings of Jacob Jerusalimski:

Malke Jerusalimski, California, America; Gershon Yerus (Jeruzalimski), California, America; Ida Jerusalem, California, America; Zalman Jerushalmi, Tel-Aviv, Israel; Itzchak [Isak?] Ribal (Ribalovski), New York, America; Dora Klein, Connecticut, America; Jerachmiel Davidson, Antwerp, Belgium; Genia Dreyzen, Paris, France; Yosef Cohen (Kagan), Bnei Berak, Israel

JACOB JERUSALIMSKI

MEMOIRS AND WRITINGS OF A BIALYSTOKER

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יעקב ירושלמייסקי / זכרונות און שרייפטן פון א ביאלייסטאקסער

הוצאת ספרים ע"ש י. ל. פרץ, תל אביב

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יעקב ירושלמייסקי

זכרון און שרייפטן  
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## Translator's Foreword

Jacob Jerusalimski, "the little one", as he calls himself, was born in 1900 and grew up in "Chanajki", a poor district of Białystok. In moving words and in comprehensive and meticulous detail, he describes the Białystok of his childhood and youth and suddenly everything comes alive again!

This memoir is a journey through time, guiding the reader along shopping streets, meeting prominent, engaging and quirky characters from old Białystok, and wandering through the "Breml" next to the city clock, to watch events in the famous "City Gardens".

The author's account of everyday Jewish life in Białystok include his memories and observations during the turmoil of the First World War. This is when his intact world, with its idealistic view of humanity, is shaken to its core and deep cracks appear. Surprisingly however, the author also experiences some romantic moments during this difficult time and even describes a flowering of Jewish culture and the Yiddish language. Readers are provided with deep insight into the world of ideas at the time, as expressed in a burgeoning art, literature and theatre scene, and the establishment of idealistic Jewish relief organizations.

Then, in 1918, Polish independence brings not only new challenges, but also old anti-Semitism and great disillusionment for the Jewish population.

Reading Jacob's memoirs, one gets to know Białystok at the beginning of the 20th century through the eyes of an intelligent, sensitive and inquisitive Jewish boy, and one marvels at his almost photographic memory. Later, as an adult, the author recalls, with great pain, the disturbing and terrible years of the Białystoker Khurbn, and he appeals to the reader to respectfully honor the last will of the Bialystoker martyrs:

*"REMEMBER US!"*

As always, I would like to thank my friend Dr. Susan Kingsley Pasquariella for her great support! Thanks also to Dr. Tomasz Wiśniewski, Dr. Mirosław Reczko and Joanna Czaban.

For those interested in other contemporary Białystok, Kryni 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

"To the Great World" by Chayele Grober

"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.

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

Beate Schützmann-Krebs

#### ***Translator's notes:***

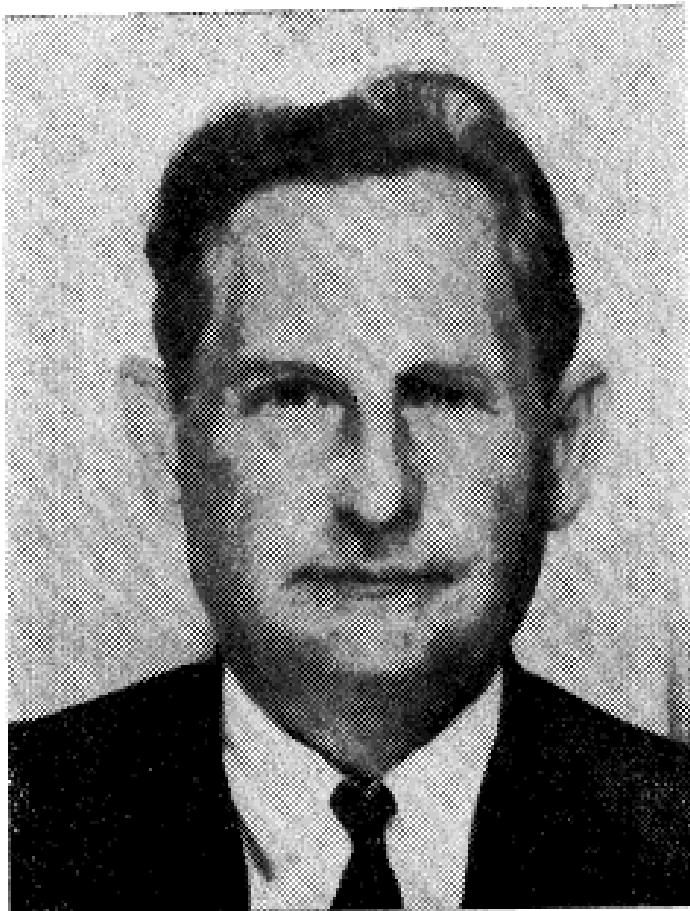
***Contents in [ ] are mine. Contents in ( ) are by the author.***

***My translation*** was done to the best of my ability. However, I often had to translate somewhat freely and split up excessively long sentences to make them easier to understand. If I have made mistakes despite my best efforts, I ask for your forgiveness..

***The transliteration of Yiddish and Hebrew words*** mostly follows the YIVO standard or the Yiddish-Ashkenazi pronunciation.

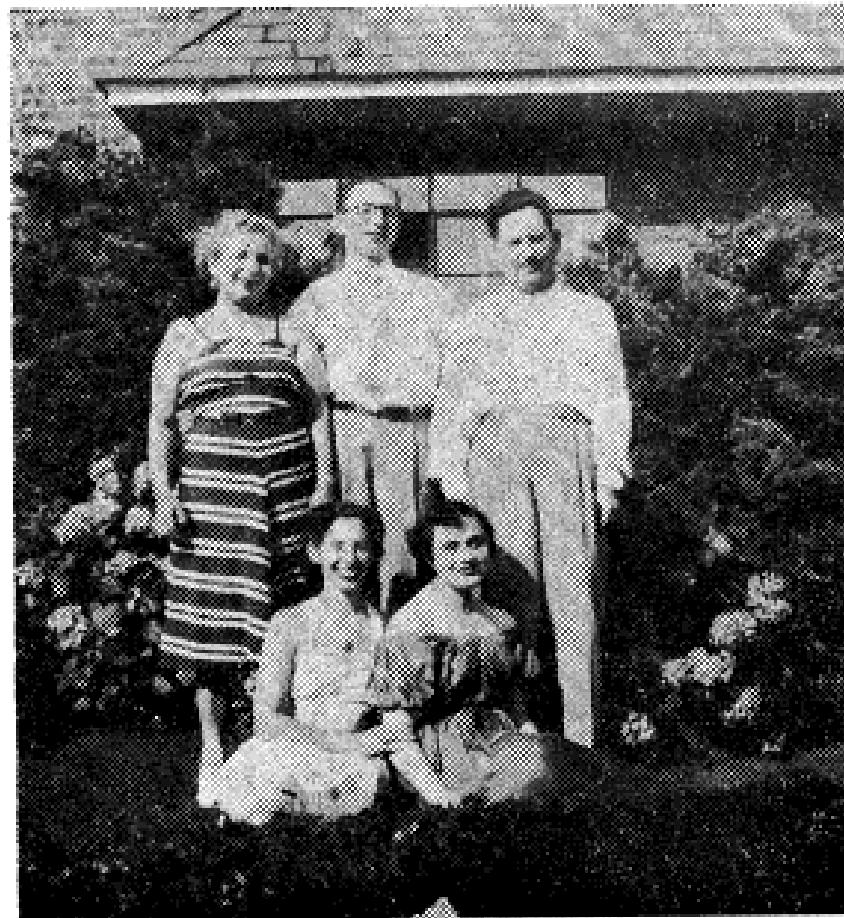
***Quotations in Russian, Ukrainian or Polish***, which in the original are written in Hebrew letters, are mostly romanised by me according to the YIVO standard, i.e. the pronunciation is reproduced approximately.

***Photos not included in the book*** are used with the kind permission of Dr Tomasz Wiśniewski and Dr Mirosław Reczko. The latter, together with his team, translated into Polish, graphically edited and republished David Sohn's "Byalistok: Bilder Album". The link leads to the original in Yiddish and English: [Białystok \(1951\) - NYPL Digital Collections](#)



דער מחבר אוון עלטער פון 68 יאָר

The author at 68 years



דער מחבר פֿאַט זַיְן פֿאַמְּלִיכַת

(source: Page 6 of the original book)

The author with his family

## Table of Contents

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 7 | <b>Jacob Jerusalimski- a Biography of a Writer from Bialystok</b> |
|---|---|

### First Part

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 11  | <b>Bialystok- Sunny Pictures from my Youth, Bloody Pieces from my Heart</b> |
| 18  | <b>The New Modern "Talmetoyre", Named after Zeev Visotski</b>               |
| 28  | <b>The Old Jewish Cemetery and the Neighboring Quarters of Poverty</b>      |
| 36  | <b>The "Remeslenoye" [Artisans' School]: Combining Work with Education</b>  |
| 51  | <b>A Walk through the Streets of Bialystok on Shabbat Afternoon</b>         |
| 57  | <b>Romantic Evenings in the Bialystok City Garden</b>                       |
| 64  | <b>Types of Bialystok's Crazies and Eccentrics</b>                          |
| 86  | <b>The Way to "Roskosh" [Rozkosz] Park</b>                                  |
| 91  | <b>Tsertl's Forest</b>  |
| 97  | <b>Roskosh [Rozkosz] Park</b>   |
| 105 | <b>Neighbors of Gonyondzski's Yard</b>                                      |
| 119 | <b>The Death of a Bialystok Teacher</b>                                     |

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 125 | <b>Białystok in the First World War</b>  |
| 140 | <b>The Invasion of the Germans</b>   |
| 149 | <b>The New German Order</b>  |
| 153 | <b>The New Rich and the New Poor under German Occupation</b>                       |
| 159 | <b>Hunger and the Hunt for Work</b>  |
| 165 | <b>Electricity, Love and Art in Supraśl</b>  |
| 170 | <b>The Romantic Years in the First World War</b>                                   |
| 177 | <b>My Brother David Takes up a War Occupation</b>                                  |
| 182 | <b>The Flourishing of Yiddish in Białystok under the German Occupation</b>         |
| 189 | <b>The Wonderful Help of "Lines-Khoylim" [Linas-Cholim] for the Białystok Sick</b> |
| 191 | <b>What the Białystok Youth Dreamed of</b>   |
| 194 | <b>The First Symptoms of the German Revolution</b>                                 |
| 198 | <b>The Collapse of German Militarism</b>   |
| 200 | <b>Białystok under Polish Rule</b>   |
| 205 | <b>Types of "Breml" Storekeepers</b>   |
| 215 | <b>Literature, Theater, Art and Romanticism in Białystok</b>                       |

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 219       | <b>"Lines-Khoylim" and "Lines-Hatsedek" - Medical Aid and Jewish Culture</b>           |
| 225 [226] | <b>Art and Romanticism</b>   |
| 230       | <b>Jewish Theater</b>  |
| 234       | <b>The Omens of the Approaching Storm</b>  |
| 236       | <b>The Eulogy on Bialystok</b>   |
| 236       | <b>The Burning to Death of More than a Thousand Jews in the Shul on June 27, 1941.</b> |
| 240       | <b>"Veynen Vintn" [Crying Winds]</b>   |

### **Second Part [not translated yet]**

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 241 | The Spider                                    |
| 246 | Diamond Cutter                                |
| 249 | The Will                                      |
| 254 | A Cossack's Mercy                             |
| 260 | Grandmother's Joys                            |
| 266 | The Death of Leyzer Bal-Tshuve [the Penitent] |
| 274 | Three Anniversary Candles                     |
| 281 | The Bouquet of Jasmine and Roses              |

|     |   |
|-----|---|
|     |   |
| 286 | She Became a Social Activist                                  |
| 298 | Late Again  |
| 310 | The Error   |
| 318 | Brush Strokes of the Białystok Ball                           |
| 322 | Three Białystok Girls   |
| 329 | Past  |
| 331 | On a Rainy Evening  |
| 333 | The Eternal Struggle between Jewish Critics and Jewish Actors |
| 335 | The Former Theater and Press in Białystok                     |
| 337 | Regarding the Discussion between Varshavski, Shefner, Reykh   |
| 339 | November 11 in Paris  |
| 341 | Beauties from France and from my Provincial Town              |

## **Jacob Jerusalimski- a Biography of a Writer from Białystok**

Jacob Jerusalimski is one of the branched Jerusalimski family in Białystok. (In the United States the name was changed to Jerusalem, and later, in Israel, to Yerushalmi). <sup>[1]</sup>

He was born in Russian-ruled Białystok in 1897 <sup>[2]</sup>, and was the second of three sons of his parents, Teme and Gershon. However, he was their only son who remained. When he was thirteen years old, his father, who was a teacher and principal at a Jewish school in Białystok, died. His father had a great influence on little Yankele and was his spiritual guide.

Yankele had a great thirst for knowledge and used to read with passion everything written in Yiddish or Russian. The tragic situation of the Jewish population under the Tsarist regime and later, after Poland became independent and Białystok came under Polish rule, weighed heavily on him. He felt a strong identification with his people and suffered together with them for the injustice done to them.

At the age of 17 he finished the Białystok "Remeslenoye" (Artisans' School) as a specialist in textiles, which was one of the main branches of Białystok industry. In 1919 he married Manja (Malka), one of 11 children in the distinguished family of Tsvi-Hirsh and Reyzl Kagan [Cohen] (née Levkovski). During the Polish-Russian War he lost all his fortune and tried his luck in the "shpagat" [cord] business.

In 1920 his son Gershon was born, and in 1921 his daughter Ida. Seeing no future for his family in Poland, he emigrated to Belgium in 1924. His wife and their two children joined him in 1925. The family settled in Antwerp, Belgium, where he (Jacob) learned the diamond trade.

8

He thus led quite a comfortable life until 1931, when the world crisis greatly affected the diamond industry in Belgium.

To get through the hard times, his wife took various jobs as a seamstress until the two of them worked their way up to a corset salon, which proved quite satisfying. Jacob, who contributed his experience in the textile trade, established a "tsudatn" (accessories) business in the corset industry, which developed very favorably until the day of the Nazi invasion of Belgium, in 1940.

In Antwerp Jacob took an active part in Jewish life, especially in the Zionist movement. He was elected secretary of the "Poale-Zion" in Belgium, at the time when Leon Kubovitski <sup>[3]</sup> was president and Dr. Pruzhanski vice-president. At the same time he was also secretary of

the Committee of Polish Jews. His abilities to observe events with a keen eye and to draw conclusions from them elevated him to the rank of journalist for the newspaper "The Belgian Day".

He additionally specialized in critiques of Jewish theater in Antwerp. Artists greatly respected his sharp reviews, for he was not ashamed to describe a play as he saw and felt it. His will to convey his impressions to others in words led him to become a belletrist; an author of short stories, sketches, and of episodes about Jewish life in Antwerp.

His works were well received by the Jewish press and were printed in various editions. With his keen eye and noticeable instinct for the future, he accurately analyzed the political situation in Europe when the Nazi regime began to show its true face.

In August 1939, a month before the Nazi invasion of Poland, he visited his hometown of Białystok as a journalist. During this brief visit, he saw "the handwriting on the wall" and tried to warn his relatives of the impending disaster. Unfortunately, his warning was not taken seriously. It was dismissed as mere fantasy. On his way back to Belgium from Poland, he spent 24 hours in Berlin and saw that the Nazi machinery was in full swing

9

and was preparing to storm. Upon his return to Belgium, he warned the Jewish population against the spread of Nazism throughout Europe. He became a member of the committee to boycott German goods. His foresight was unbelievable. He predicted the German invasion of Western Europe. He packed a suitcase with the most necessary things for each of his relatives in order to escape quickly. He also sent his son to the "Belgian Congo" (now Zaïre) in April 1940 on the last ship before the Nazi invasion of Belgium, and the son arrived in Léopoldville 5 days before the invasion (on May 10, 1940).

Jacob and his wife and daughter were temporarily housed in a place in "Marsey" [Marseilles ?], where they obtained the American visa. (Preparations for obtaining an emigrant visa to the United States had already been made by Jacob in Antwerp before the outbreak of the war).

They departed via Spain and Portugal, arriving by ship in New York in September 1941. According to the suggestion of the American consulate in Marsey [Marseille?], they shortened their family name to Jerusalem; but in all his writings Jacob continued to use the name Jerusalimski.

In New York, Jacob returned to the diamond trade. At the same time, he was active in Jewish national organizations, but especially for Eretz Israel [Palestine]. He began writing short stories again and earned his first \$10 in America with the publication of his story "Three Yahrzeit Candles" in "The American". Encouraged by this beginning, more work followed. Shortly after the end of the war, he began to write a memoir about his former hometown of Białystok, which he had printed in the "Białystoker Stimme", the periodical of the Białystoker "landsstayt".

He began to publish his memoirs in 1949, which were delayed until 1969; the title was: "Białystok - sunny pictures of my youth".

Together with his friends, Messrs. Ribalovski (the present secretary of "Białystoker Heym" in New York), Kaganovski, Falan, Goldberg and others, whose names escape us at the moment, they founded the "Club of Białystoker Friends" in New York.

10

After his children emigrated to Los Angeles, he also moved there in 1962 to be closer to his family.

In early 1970, he began to suffer from health problems. It dragged on for longer years. He had some serious heart attacks and was close to death several times; the doctors managed to save him, but his health continued to deteriorate.

In April 1979, he got pneumonia and then additionally a heart attack. He left us forever on May 24, 1979 (27 Iyyar 5739). He found his final resting place at Mount Sinai Memorial Park in Forest-Lawn, California.

He is survived by his grieving wife, two children, daughter-in-law Regine and granddaughter Naomi-Roze. Honor his memory, which this book seeks to perpetuate.

**The family,**  
Los Angeles, 1981

<sup>[1]</sup> I also found the name written as Jeruslinsky.

<sup>[2]</sup> The date of birth is corrected here to "1897", but there is evidence in the book that the author was born in 1900: due to an oversight in the birth records, Jacob was incorrectly registered in 1897 instead of 1900.

<sup>[3]</sup> Arye Leon Kubovi(tski), see <http://www.bloglistene.no/blog/blogger-com/yleksikon/>



דען מחבר און די מיטגרינדרערס פון קלוב פון ביאליסטוקער פרוינד אין ניו-יירק

The author and the co-founders of the Club of "Bialystok Friends" in New York

## First Part

### **Bialystok- Sunny Pictures from my Youth, Bloody Pieces from my Heart...**

Dear readers,

Please excuse my audacity to write autobiographical notes. My humble personality does not give me the right to do so, but I do it with one aim: to stand in the shadows and draw pictures in the background, snapshots, types and personalities related to the cultural and social life of that time of our f o r m e r much beloved Białystok, the city of Białystok.

This is my duty, my eulogy and my memorial to my murdered family members, friends, neighbors, schoolmates and society friends, as well as to the many female childhood friends who awakened the man in me, who penetrated deep into my heart and reigned there, who raised me like a prince and gave me my vision and my dreams day and night. They gave a sweet charm to the streets and alleys of our meeting places. There were, for example:

The main street "Nikolayevske" [Mikołajewska] and the commercial "Gumyener" [Gumienna Street], the "Folksgas", the "Surazer" [Suraska Street] and the "Markgas" [Rynek Główny], the quarter Pyaskes [Piaski] and in the scattered expanse "Boyare" [Bojary] and "Hinter der Turme" ["Behind the Prison", also called "Wasilkowa Street"].

There were the centers of poverty, "Khanaykes" with its "Shayes Gas"; in addition, the commercial street "Lipove" [Lipowa] and the place for entertainment and city walks:

"Gorodskoy Sad" [City Garden], the place of "svidanyes" [meetings], "Zverinyets" [today Branicki Park], "Tserlts Forest", "Park Rosko" [Park Rozkosz] in the "Griner Alee" [Green Alley].

And there were those forest corners,  
where I, under the influence of melancholic, night singing of folk songs -  
such as "Margaritkelekh", "Sheyn iz Reyzele dem Shoykhets", "Freytik oyf der Nakht", "A Brivele der Mamen" and "Dos Talit'l", mixed  
with the Russian heartfelt songs such as

"Otshi Tshornya" [Black Eyes], "Yamshtshik nye gony loshadyey" [Coachman, Don't Rush The Horses!], "Akh zatshem eta notsh" [Oh  
Why This Night] -

felt my first physical "tremors" from the touches and kisses of young girls, from the warmth of bodies and feverish blood, from the innocent romance and the nightly sighing of the longing for our quiet, virtuous, sentimental Białystok daughters, adorned with modesty, who asked for so little and could give so much happiness.

I dedicate my words to you, who came here or disappeared, and I bow to your souls floating above the dark sky of Białystok.

12

My words are a deep gratitude for the happy years I spent in your company; and my articles shall be a remembrance of your names and a silent, tear-stained Mitzvah, for your lives cut off early, torn up by the roots. Your lives that carried more spirit than generations of "German culture". And [so ] finally the life of a Białystoker Jew was more valuable than the existence of the entire German people...

Woe to a world that is blind to the beauty of the Jewish spirit and its morality, to Jewish family life and to the millennial heritage of "לֹא תַרְצָח" [Thou shalt not kill] and its virtuous "טהרת-המשפחה" [Purity of the Family], illuminated by Friday night candle flames of the eternal Jewish Shabbat, the Shabbat of

"המבדיל בין קודש לחול" [Who makes distinction between Sacred and Ordinary], the eternal Shabbat and holiday that we Jews carry in our feelings and our hearts and which distinguishes us so much from the great, ordinary, weekday, materialistic Christian world....

A Russian song resounds in my ears:

Where are you, happy days?  
Forgotten, vanished, flown away.  
Only much sorrow and many pains  
have bent my body...

\*

Białystok in 1907, in July.

A sunny Tamuz day. My father kisses me warmly and congratulates me.  
I turned seven today.

"Yankele, I have a surprise for you today for your birthday!"

And he doesn't even ask me, but takes me by the hand and leads me from Shayes Street, where we lived, to the end of "Mirke's Alley" where, across from "Leybl Rachel's Bes-Medresh" [study-house] and "Vyetshorke's Factory", I catch sight of a two-story building, with a large sign with gold letters:

"dvukla[n]soye narodnoye utshilishtshe"[Two-grade public school].

"Yankele, you will no longer go to the cheder," my father says to me, "I want to lead you on the path of education and give you more opportunities...there is Fridman's school. He will test you now. So don't embarrass your father..."

(When I received my student card from the Paris Polytechnic in 1925, I kissed it and cried, remembering my father's words).

So I find myself in a small room of Fridman's "utshilishtshe", which is decorated with two pictures of "Father Tsar", Nicholas Alexandrovich,

13

looking sternly down at me, and "Her Majesty", Marya Fyodorovna, the "sentimental German", as she was called before the First World War.

Fridman, the school's manager, a short, fat man with a fleshy, contourless face and small eyes, short-shorn hair and a green uniform with golden buttons, looks at me and, laughing mockingly, says to my father, with whom he is on good terms as a colleague and member of the committee of the Teachers' Association:

"Gregory Zelmanovitsh! Who have you brought with you? We will still need a nanny for him..."

My father smiles mysteriously, he does not answer, but straightens me up,  
"Jacob, natshinay [start]!"

My little young heart beats fast, the blood rushes to my young brain, my voice trembles, but for a moment I forget the sneering, round-faced Fridman and move over to the starry sky over Ukraine in Pushkin's "Ukrainian Nights" and my dreamy little voice recites:

"Silent are the Ukrainian nights. The stars twinkle, wide rivers chase each other between fields, forests and mountains on full moon nights. The slumbering waters glide through winding paths, kissing the banks and whispering mysteriously, spinning legends of water maidens who laugh seductively on full moon nights and lure couples in love to the depths of the gurgling, lulling to sleep river..."

I stop. I give myself a jolt and remember where I am. I meet the delighted gaze of the good-natured laughing Fridman, who pinches my cheek and says:  
"-ti prinyat...utshoni mush...[you are accepted...learned man!]"

And strangely enough, near Fridman's school, I came across *four symbols* of eternal conflict that I was to encounter throughout my life, these were:

The little dear "Rachel's Bes-Medresh", a lost one at the corner of Mirke's Gesl [Alley], where in the evening hours of the dawning night in the almost dark windows small flames of light rippled on the Gemore [Talmud] stands of the Jews, together with their half melancholy languishing melody. Opposite Fridman's school, surrounded by a high wooden fence, the red glowing sun multiplied in the hundreds of windows

14

of Vyetshorek's factory, which looked like a dark gigantic beast with hundreds of half-dead eyes. It devours the sleepy figures of the workers in the early morning and spits them out again into the dark blue sky of the evening.

The last image [symbol] of the neighborhood of Fridman's school, however, is the red-haired "Khazernik" ["The Piggish"], the Jew who does not eat kosher food], who every few days would slaughter pigs right next to the wall of Fridman's school in the yard of his fenced-in pigsty, and with a chopping stump would beat their heads with wild, unrestrained blows. And the pigs would scream in agony, drowning out the air with their dying rattle, filling our young hearts with something like an unconscious fear of the future...

Fridman's school, Vyeshorek's factory, Libe [Leibl?] Rachel's Bes-Medresh and, to change to the profane, the "Khazernik", pushed themselves into my eyes on my future path through life - as eternal symbols of the human, worldwide conflict: culture, work, religion and murder....

Fridman's school was one street away from "Shayes Gesl" [Shaye's Alley], where we lived, and "Shayes Gesl" was in the heart of the famous "Khanaykes," the alley bordered on both sides by Christian cemeteries, as if they were fitted into a frame.

On one side stood the "Shvyenti Rokh" [Basilica of St. Roch] on a hill that stretched on both sides of the Old and New Highway, and on the other side were the "mogilkes" [tombs] that rose from the "Kratshak's Street" to the "Moyshe-Ruvens [Moshe-Reuven] Alley".

Khanaykes [Chanajki] was the heart of poverty. Carriers, carters, cobblers, tailors, organ grinders (in Italian style, with a little monkey or a parrot pulling out "the lucky notes"), comedians who spread out a flowered mat in the middle of the street and in short striped pants did somersaults, swallowed fire and swords, in addition to hammering on the cymbalom [dulcimer] and collecting donations. There, on Shayes Gesl, I saw my first marionette theater, with little puppets on the top of a rectangular covered wagon, singing and playing, confessing their love and slapping each other, to the great amusement of the poor children, who clapped their hands in delight at their first street theater performance for children.

Khanaykes has professional beggars who earn their living by going from house to house begging for an entire week. There is also a small "quiet" alley with streetwalkers, "khasanim" ["grooms"] and thieves... And on the corner of this street there is an inn where "Sorokovke shnaps" [a vodka], hard-boiled eggs and pickles are sold.



ענקל דער קאטערינשטייך מיט זיין פאפונאי, וואס ציט ארויס  
א מול'דינען צעטעלע.

Yankel, the organ-grinder, with his parrot drawing one of his lucky tickets.



א ביאלייסטאקייד יאנט פון כאניקעס

A Bialystoker urchin from  
"Chanaykes."

Both photographs see <https://archive.org/details/nybc313696/page/76/mode/2up?q=%D7%90%D7%A2%D7%92%D7%A2%D7%A0%D7%A2%D7%A8>

And "Leyzer the Innkeeper", a pious Jew with a prayer cap, a pointed beard and forelocks, with a large "tales-kotn" [ritual bodice with tassels] that comes down to his knees and looks like a geographical map with its many grease stains, recites the first blessings before the prayer and walks around busily serving his upscale guests, the residents of the "Silent Alley"...

How did we come to the Shayes Gesl? My father was an idealistic teacher who liked the idea of "narodnitshestvo" (the "Go to the People" movement) and "mefitsey-haskole" ["Propagation of Enlightenment"], that is, spreading education among the Jews. My father, an educated and highly literate man, spoke four languages fluently: Russian, Hebrew, French and German.

(After his death I inherited a considerable library of French and Russian books, a source of famous works for me, which certainly influenced my sense of romance, aesthetics, morality and my thirst for beauty in all forms of life).

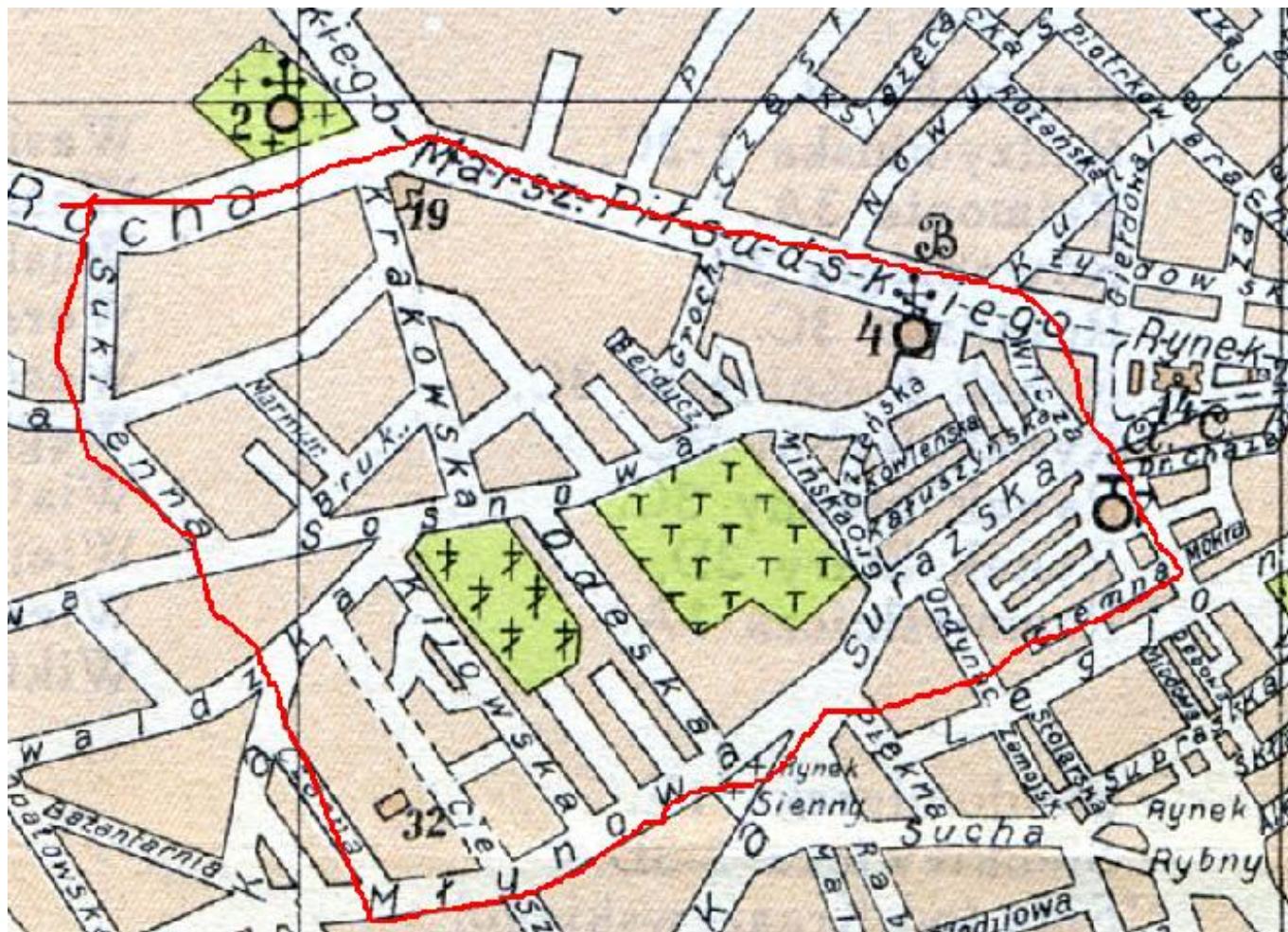
My father had chosen the poorest neighborhood, settled there and opened a school with the belief and hope of educating the poorest and most disadvantaged Jewish people.

The Shayes Gesl also had residents of high-class ancestry...

There were the two Kanel families, owners of a large textile factory and steam-powered looms, a weaving mill and a spinning mill. Four of their children were my comrades: Avigdor and Khayim (I think they are in Israel today), Ester and Glike. The first two were students at the Aleksandrov Gymnasium and the two girls, dressed in brown dresses with green belts stiffly embracing their young girl bodies, were students at the Commercial School.

It was Ester who stood out. She was a strong, athletic and perky girl who was always with us, playing croquet and "plant" and even "tshort" ["devil", name of a boys game with sticks], throwing the little pieces of wood into the mound no worse than we did; and even when a little piece of wood hit her in the foot, she gritted her teeth and jumped on one foot until she put an end to it with a skillful laugh...(One of the Kanels, Hershke, is now in New York).

The second of those of noble lineage was Shloymke the Feldsher (Shloymke Goldberg), whose occupation as a feldsher was not enough to support him, so he also ran a barber shop. He, a Jew with a goatee and a pince-nez, was always busy walking through the poor streets of Khanaykes with his little bag, often sneaking out of a poor patient's house and asking nothing for his rounds.



Excerpt of a Białystoker map from 1935 (with Khanaykes/Chanaikes/Chanajki in its center), courtesy of Dr. Tomek Wiśniewski [the red line is made by the translator]



Phot. Budecker, Berlin.

1161. Bialystok - Im alten Stadtteil Kainiki.

Khanaykes, photo card courtesy of Dr. Tomek Wiśniewski

Shloyme the Feldsher had a number of children, including my friends Rote and Dovtshik. Rote, the eldest girl, looked down on us as if we were young fools who had yet to show her any kind of "sex appeal". Dovtshik, a handsome boy with feminine features, was awkward, a bit jumpy, and could not join in our brawls with the louts of the Old Highway and the alleys that led around the tombs of the "Basilica of Saint Roch".

Other comrades of our "aristocratic group" of the Shayas Gesl were Pesach Farbshteyn, the son of Itshe Farbshteyn, a hot-tempered Jew who often spanked his children, but for that he was a devoted Jew who urged his children to Judaism and education.

Pesach, my friend, was a healthy, strong boy who talked fast and was always chewing. He had allowed us to climb the trees in his family's garden and pick the half-ripe apples; but his two sisters, Dabtshe and Shoshke, didn't think we were "chivalrous" enough to date. (They are all in New York).

Itshe Farbshteyn was the owner of houses and a grocery store. He had a small band of children, healthy, beautiful, strong, who were all busy in the store, selling Białystok cakes, strudel, matzo with poppy seeds, a pound of "montshe" [granulated sugar], or tapping a bucket of water outside for a kopeck.

I must complete the line of the privileged from the Shayas Gesl with the children of Gusinksi the Karetnik [the Coachman], Tsalke and Muntshik, who spoke Yiddish like the "goyim" with the Russian "r", a legacy of their mother, who, it was said, came from the distant Caucasus and had converted to Judaism.... (I heard that they are in Israel, and their sister, who married the Białystok Jew, Mr. Kaplan, is in New York).

Khanaykes had another kind of "privileged ones": The "toyre-yakhsonim" ["Torah Nobility"], the group of craftsmen from the "Poale Tsedek" ["Workers of Justice"], simple laborers who, after a hard day's work, would take a piece of brown bread with herring and "krupnik" (barley soup) with milk, to go to the "Khanaykever" Bes-Medresh. And there, in a corner of the "Bes-Sheyni" <sup>[1]</sup>, they would become "lomdim" [scholars of Jewish science]. Under the supervision of their Rebbe, Rabbi Moyshe, a Jew with a broad "takak" beard and silent, sad eyes, they would study a sheet of Gemore [Talmud]. And humming melodies carried through the Bes-Medresh, while the bearded artisans, chewing the tip of their beards, swayed to the beat of their dancing shadows on the walls, and a secret fear was felt, for it seemed, as if the souls

of invisible angels were hovering in the corners around the Holy Ark, [accompanied by] cherubim with the 10 Commandments...

And what part of the city did one feel the Shabbat more than in the poor Khanaykes, when on Friday evening the trembling flames of light shone from the wooden, whitewashed one-story cottages of Shloyme der Shtrikdreyer [the rope twister]. He was a Jew with a round, broad face framed by a broad, fan-shaped white beard, and he used to say the kiddush with a trembling, God-fearing nign [melody].

Shabbat in Khanaykes!

Or, [remember] when Shmuel Ma'as the tailor was preparing to eat the first piece of bread after the blessing, and he nodded his head to his wife Dobe:

"Now, come on...

the sakin (the knife), and now the melakh (the salt) ..."

because Dobe, a small, shriveled Jewish woman, was a little deaf...

In the small room, hung with white lace curtains and strewn with bright, clean sawdust in honor of Shabbat, the planed wooden table with its starched tablecloth beckoned to the serving platter of stuffed fish, each piece with red carrot slices placed like dots in the center.

On a summer Friday evening, after supper, the girls with combed hair and red and white ribbons in their plaits, and the boys with polished shoes and with really clean handkerchiefs in their hands, used to walk across the Shayes Gesl, cracking fruit stones and chewing beans and peas, which could be bought at the "Bobitske" on Popovtshizne next to Kormon's houses, or next to Veler der Katsev [the Butcher].

And turning from Shayes Gesl onto the New Highway, paved on both sides, under the dark shadows of two rows of trees, under the beckoning flames of the electric street lamps, the grown-up lads, the "cavaliers", and the girls, the "barishnyes" [ladies], supposedly would meet quite by chance, joking and laughing with beating hearts, and enjoying in all their fullness the sweet minutes of pleasure of Shabbat rest, in Shabbat clothes and with a really full stomach, at least once a week...

Indeed, Khanaykes, you have had a bad reputation because of your poverty and bad, fallen Jews. But your craftsmen, your scholars, your

tzadikim [righteous people], the cordial relation among neighbors, the rich imagination of the poor children, the hospitality and generosity in the narrow apartments! Strangers did not see all this, but we who lived there saw it very well!

Later, when we already lived in Gumiener Gas [Ul. Gumienna], I was even more convinced of this attitude towards Khanaykes.

<sup>[1]</sup> obviously the nickname of this Bes-Medresh with an allusion to the "second temple"

18

### **The New Modern "Talmetoyre", Named after Zeev Visotski [Wolf Wissotzky]**

The year 1905, when the modern "Talmetoyre" [Talmud Torah School, traditional free school for poor children] and "Remeslenoye" were built, was a year of great political, social and cultural achievements for Białystok. In the same year, the Białystok Girls' Commercial School was opened, as well as the Girls' Technical School in the yard of Yudl Kaletskin at Lipowa Street.

In the same year, the later famous Białystok cultural society "Idishe Kunst" was founded, which in 1916, during the German occupation, was led by the editor of "Dos Naye Leben" [The New Life], Pesach Kaplan. He acted as the director of the literary and musical part with the cooperation of his son, Yosef Kaplan.

But in the same year, in July 1905, our Białystok was also hit by the "Shabes-Nakhmu" [the Shabbat after the Ninth of Av] pogrom, with its Russian military punitive expedition on Surazer Gas [Suraska Street] because of the Jewish revolutionary activity; more than thirty Białystoker Jews were killed.

The stormy winds of the revolutionary epoch in Russia created a turning point regarding the petty-bourgeois attitude of the Jews, and the slogan spread:

"Craft brings happiness and blessings"

As a result, in 1905, on the initiative of Yudl Kaletski, a rich merchant, social activist and owner of houses in Lipowa Street, the new modern „Talmetoyre“ and the "Remeslenoye" [Artisans' School] were opened in the name of Zeev Visotski [Wolf Wissotzky], who was the main patron and supporter of these two institutions. He appointed his own son, Samuil Yulyanovitsh Kaletski, as the director of the

Remeslenoye.

Zeev Visotski is known all over Russia as the King of Tea, and even in the remotest corners of the gigantic Russia, from the warm Caucasus to the cold Siberia, from the richest halls of the Russian aristocracy to the straw huts of the lonely villages, people know the tea package made of silver paper with a golden inscription: "Shtai [Tea] V. Visotski".

And Białystok enjoys the favor of this tea magnate, because this Visotski is the close relative of Białystok's respected social activist Khayim Ber Zakheyem.

Years later, after the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, a joke was circulated throughout Russia to illustrate the power of the Jews. According to this joke, there were three most important things in Russia

19

that were in powerful Jewish hands: Visotski's tea, Brodsky's sugar, and Trotzky's work.

\*

The buildings of the modern "Talmetoyre" and the "Remeslenoye" were located in the large round square, which extended from the Khanaykes in the background and in the front to Lipowa Street, framed on the right by the Christian Hospital and on the left by Batser's Yard.

The "Talmetoyre" was called "modern" because in Białystok there was also an old "Talmetoyre" in an old-fashioned building, where the boys received an orthodox, conservative, religious education without secular education. The newly created "Zeev Visotski" Talmetoyre was the exact opposite: it was a large, new building with wide windows, full of light and air, and with a large yard where one could play.

One learned "Khumesh" [Pentateuch] and "Rashi" [the commentaries of] Rabbi Shloyme Yitskhok, "Tanakh", [toyre-neviim-ksuvim, the Bible], "Shulkhn-orekh" [collection of halakhic rules], grammar and texts in Hebrew, Russian and Yiddish literature and history ("סוצרא"). In addition, geography and mathematics, singing (with the famous conductor of the Białystok "Choir School", Berman) and even physical exercises (gymnastics), which was the height of modernity at that time.

The new "Talmetoyre" already had such modern teachers of Hebrew, "Khumesh" and "Tanakh" as the later famous writer and editor,

cultural activist and musician, Pesach Kaplan. I was fortunate to have him as my first Hebrew teacher and editor. There was a strange contrast between his outward appearance and his inner intellect.

Nature had disadvantaged him physically, but rewarded him richly spiritually, which is a common occurrence and has a philosophical justification. He was short and out of proportion, with short legs and an overlong upper body that swayed when he walked. But his head, with its energetic appearance, with its somewhat sunken cheeks and chin full of determination, with its deep, wise, piercing eyes, penetrated his interlocutor and subjected him to the effect of his deep, wise, analytical thinking.

He was frequently despotic, as is often the case with talented autodidacts and "self-made men" who work their way up to extraordinary abilities through their own energy.

His comments on the "Tanakh", with his somewhat hoarse but clear articulation and the richness of his language, were so biblically and historically interesting

20

and engaging that he kept the whole class in suspense. Later, when I read his book "Biblishe Gezangen" ["Biblical Songs"], on the occasion of my visit to Bialystok in July 1939, those unforgettable hours of his Tanakh lessons, which I experienced in my childhood years in the "Talmetoyre", flashed before my eyes again.

By the way, Pesach Kaplan's [Bialystok newspaper] "Unzer Leben" [Our Life] published my last story on European soil. It was the story "Diamond Cutter", about the life of Belgian diamond workers.

I can still see the figure of the director of the new "Talmetoyre," where I was a student for two years. Samson Yakovlevitsh Grosman was tall and powerfully built, with a clean-shaven, "goyish" face and black, thick, frizzy hair that fell in poetic curls over his ears, for he always walked without a hat.

With his splendid, accented, precise Russian, this proud, national and Russianized Jew, with his non-Jewish face and his good Jewish heart, fought with all his strength to educate the Jewish children (in this "modern Talmetoyre" whose name did not quite fit) to become beautiful, pure, nationally conscious Jews with self-respect and respect for one another.

And undoubtedly such famous educators as editor Kaplan and conductor Berman were very supportive of [director] Grosman.

Such a great figure as Pesach Kaplan still needs a biographer; and I must express my great appreciation to our editor David Sohn, the talented writer. He has the warm soul of a cultural activist and is a connoisseur and lover of Jewish literature. In his possession is a rich archive of correspondence of famous people, including many letters of Pesach Kaplan, which are very valuable material for the future biographer of Pesach Kaplan.

Conductor Berman was also popular and beloved among us. Knowing that he was our teacher, we took special pride and pleasure in looking at Berman: his proud, upright figure with his noble, white face, his wise eyes and his wonderfully beautiful, carved features, his silver hair and his pointed, finely trimmed little beard.

He always wore his double blue pelerine over his shoulders, which made him look like a professor at a music conservatory. And I still see before me the figure of the teacher Druskin,

21

a highly educated person, who later himself opened a High School in Białystok. Teacher Druskin also belonged to the "Russianized" intelligentsia, with his aristocratic appearance and beard, like that of a Montparnasse painter, and with his correct attitude he forced even the boys of Khanaykes, of "Mirke's Gesl" and "Koratshakes", to respect him.

There were two teachers, however, who had no luck with us and whose lives we made miserable.

One of them was the Hebrew teacher Rakovski, a man of medium height, red-haired, with a dry, cold face and evil eyes. We never saw a smile on his face, and he was a person of strict discipline. If a student was late and opened the door of the classroom where Rakovski was teaching, the whole class would hold its breath in anticipation of what would happen.

Rakovski approached the victim with slow steps, his face covered with yellow freckles that turned red like his hair. Without saying a word, he grabbed the student's satchel filled with books and threw it into a corner of the classroom, then began to shake the boy several times like a "lulev" [palm branch].

If the student did not comply and dared to protest, he even slapped him.

The second teacher, actually a very quiet one, but not popular with the students, was called Lusternik. He taught Russian history and geography and was known in Białystok as a good pedagogue, who [also] taught in Yafe's [Yaffe's] school.

Lusternik, a small man with a pink, chubby face, always thought he was big and important. He wore a green uniform with gold buttons, and his face was full of smug haughtiness.

It happened more than once that while teacher Lusternik was pointing to the geographical map where the archipelagos, the Arctic countries of the North Pole, Siberia or Alaska were located, a student sneaked up and smeared his golden buttons with ink. And since he had the habit of holding his hands backwards, he would smear ink on his fingers next to the backmost buttons. Then, when he wiped the sweat from his fat face, he covered it with ink, even his nose.

As soon as he turned his face to the class and the students saw his face covered with ink,

22

making him look like a tattooed Indian. The whole class burst out laughing. And the longer the students looked at the teacher's face, the more they laughed hysterically. Lusternik's face became red with rage, and he ran out of class, only to return ten minutes later, washed clean and accompanied by the director, Samson Yakovlevitsh Grosman.

Seeing the director, the children suddenly fell silent. In those days, Grosman, who made every word count with his splendid Russian, used to give a bitter lesson about education and good manners. He would end his harsh sermon with bitterness and the exclamation: "nie zabivaytye, tut nie talmud-tora!" (Remember, this is not a "Talmetoyre"!)...

Every early morning, Director Grosman used to inspect the classes. As soon as he came in, all the students stood up and then sat down again, and there was silence in the classroom. He looked at each student to see if they had been washed, looked at their necks and in their ears to make sure they weren't dirty either. He looked at the clothes to see if they were clean and if the buttons were sewn on.

And woe betide if a boy showed up with a dirty neck or dirty ears, or if his clothes were torn after a fight with someone during "peremene" (recess). Grosman would then purse his lips, roll his eyes upward, and, while the class remained silent, lead the student to the center of the classroom. Accentuating every word of his first-rate literary Russian, he would end the matter with his recurring speech, tinged with mockery and irony:

"nie zabivaytye, tut nie talmud-tora!"

I always felt that the proud, educated, Russianized Samson Yakovlevitsh Grosman suffered greatly from the fact that he was a teacher and director of an educational institution called "Talmetoyre".

The reason was that the name of the old "Talmetoyre" was synonymous with old-fashionedness and conservative piety. Moreover, it was in the hands of educators who were far from secular education.

As in the old "Talmetoyre", it was mostly children of craftsmen and the poor middle class who studied, and you could tell by their clothes and the food parcels in their satchels, by their elaborately patched trousers and their darned stockings with elaborately sewn

23

patches "in the right place" and above the knees, by their father's sewn-on fur capes and overcoats, or their older brother's outgrown and worn-out [clothes].

But poverty was also evident in the food packages that the dear, faithful mothers of Białystok gave their children to take to school to soothe their stomachs during the school break.

The brown paper bags (usually used to cover the lid of the Shabbat cholent, which was covered with potato peels) contained a piece of brown bread with a piece of smoked herring.

For the somewhat richer there was a piece of soft bread with homemade "klops" [Jewish meatballs] with garlic in the package, and for the even richer there was a black piece of peasant bread with "darer kishke" [a type of sausage] or a Białystoker pastry with a piece of halvah. This was considered a luxury, and the comrades begged to be allowed to taste a little bit.

On top of that, the richer ones usually got a few kopeks in addition, which they had already spent at the "vaybele" [little woman], that is, the Jewish woman with her buffet, which consisted of a simple wooden table set up in the schoolyard in the summer and in the hallway of the school in the winter, with good things on display for the little customers.

The "vaybele", which is besieged by flies during the school holidays, usually offers the following "delicacies":

Brown, shiny bagels from "Tanchum the Baker", buckwheat potato pancakes, "kitshmitsh and novent" (candies sprinkled with rice or poppy seeds), "fleyshelekh" (round, soft, colored jams), famous Ladrynska candies.

It is still a mystery to me how the "vaybele" managed to serve dozens of customers, because the school break lasted only ten minutes. And even then, there were those "Marxists" among the poor students who looked at "private property" with contempt and considered it a "mitsve" [commandment, good deed] to secretly steal an "irisl" [caramel] or a "kugel" from the "vaybele's" buffet.

Between the two large buildings of the "Talmetoyre" and the "Remeslenoye", connected by a large courtyard, the garden of the gentile hospital occupied a space. It was surrounded by a low fence.

So it happened that the schoolboys crawled on the fence and silently watched what was going on in the gentile hospital. And I will never forget how, in the garden, among the patients of the hospital, who were walking around in gray linen dresses and slippers, there was a beautiful young Christian girl. She had long, blond, loose hair and a bare chest (she was probably mentally abnormal).

24

And a few days later, I shuddered.

In the garden, this time empty of other patients, I saw the beautiful blonde Christian girl lying with her hair down on a simple wooden table used for dissecting corpses. She was dead, and a doctor was opening the skin of her brain with a sharp dissecting knife to examine it.

It was a summer day, and masses of flies were buzzing around the dead body. A gentile hospital employee, lazily trying to do at least a little of his duty, fanned a green twig over the corpse, but the flies quietly settled on the parts of the dead body where they found it comfortable.

The scene startled me for two reasons:

How could a city goy hospital allow itself to dissect a corpse in public, in the middle of the garden and with many small children sitting on the fence, and what a tremendous hygienic crime it was to dissect a corpse that flies could calmly bite and later spread epidemic diseases among the inhabitants.

I remembered this scene in connection with the fact that in Białystok, on Aleksandrowske [Aleksandrowska/ Warszawska Street] there was a Jewish hospital, which was exemplary for its medical equipment, treatment and sanitary cleanliness, and yet some Polish gentile city fathers published a "Pinkas Białystok" (I think in 1932), in which, in their Polish-Christian way, they praised to the skies the merits of the Polish-Christian cultural and community activists, but at the same time minimized the great cultural, social and industrial merits of the Jewish social activists of Białystok.

I remember my visit to Białystok, in July 1939. During a personal conversation with the [later] deceased great scholar and historian, Sh. Hershberg, z"l, whom I met in the dacha in "Tserl's Forest" with my father-in-law, Tsvi Hersh Cohen, may he rest in peace, Sh. Hershberg really motivated me with his writing of the "Pinkas Białystok": a rehabilitation and historical truth of the great merits of the Jewish population of Białystok.

He reminded me of a "Kanapinski" or "Kvapinski", head of the Białystok City Council, who was the initiator of the shameful "Pinkas Białystok", which had moved him, Sh. Hershberg, to create the true, historically correct "Pinkas Białystok".



PESACH KAPLAN

Znany białostocki pisarz i redaktor (pierwszy na prawo) z żoną, córkami, dzieciami i wnukami.

*The well-known Bialystoker writer and editor, Pesach Kaplan (first row, right), with his wife, daughters, sons-in-law and grandchild. The entire family perished in the Ghetto.*

Source: [Ksiega-album-pamieci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)



**KLASA SZKOŁY JOFFEGO W ROKU 1900**

Pośrodku od prawej siedzą nauczyciele: Kliaczko, Joffe, Žmudzki.

*A class of "Yaffe's School" in 1900. – Center row, seated right to left are the teachers Kliachko, Yaffe, Shmudsky.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://www.ksiazka-album-pamieci-gminy-zydowskiej-w-Bialymstoku-czesc-1.pdf)



#### PIEŁĘGNIARKI I LEKARZE SZPITALA

Szpital żydowski w Białymostku miał ponad sto lat. Został założony przez Sendera Błocha w roku 1840, na podwórku synagogi. Później bogacz Icchak Zabłudowski (teśc Błocha) podarował sporą działkę na Nowym Mieście (ul. Aleksandrowska-Warszawska), gdzie zbudowano duży, nowoczesny szpital, który służył ludności żydowskiej z Białegostoku i okolicznych miasteczek przez całe sto lat.

*The Nurses and Doctors of the Hospital. The Jewish Hospital in Bialystok, founded by Sender Bloch in 1840, was more than 100 years old.*

source: <http://virtualnie.lomza.pl/virtualnie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Ksi%C4%99ga-album-pami%C4%99ci-gminy-%C5%BCydowskiej-w-Bia%C5%82ymstoku-cz%C4%99%C5%9B%C4%87-1.pdf>

It was intended to show the huge contribution of Białystok Jews to the construction of the city as a whole.

\*

"Where do you get a horse and cart,  
to hunt for the child years..."

In 1909:

I was nine years old when I entered the third grade of the new "Talmetoyre" and spent two sweet, light-filled years there, learning the beauty and historical greatness of our Jewish people and experiencing through the "Khumesh" and "Tanakh" our rich, proud past. There I absorbed the beauty of the works of the first rising stars of Hebrew literature and poetry, and formed the aesthetic pride of a Jew with national consciousness.

The proud words of the Hanukkah song used to ring in my ears:

"Once you were a people,  
once you had a land..."

I used to exchange books every Friday in the library of the "Talmetoyre" and later, when I had already exhausted its stock, I had the privilege of receiving books from the personal library of our director Grosman.

On wintry Friday evenings after dinner, when it was warm in the living room from the heated tile stove and the copper kettles in the top tube of the oven sang, boiled and bubbled, my mother used to serve me nourishing tea with lemon, accompanied by mother's preserved raspberries as a snack, with the words, "May God grant you don't need them," for occasionally the raspberry juice was used to promote perspiration when someone was ill.

The flames of Friday night's candles are already yielding, but they are still struggling, not wanting to be extinguished. As if there were living souls in them, they filled the room with a sweet smoke of tallow candles, which to this day brings back memories of Friday nights, and sweet, sad feelings of lost childhood years in mother's house.

Father would go off to learn a Talmud lesson with the craftsmen in the "Poalei-Tsedek" [Workers of Justice] of the Khanaykevker Bes-Medresh, and mother, still in her clothes, would fall dead tired on the black, shiny, worn couch. I sat down

26

with my Hebrew books, supported my cheeks with both hands, and with the power of the imagination of the authors of the books merging with my own imagination, I rose to the ceiling of the room, opened the roof, and flew out into the high, wide, starry sky. I walked in the air to faraway lands, to the caliphs of Persia and the sheiks of Baghdad, to the princess Scheherazade from "One Thousand and One Nights," flew on the legendary air carpet, and admired the magical wonders after wiping my hand over Aladdin's magic lamp.

There I am among the childish heroes of Andersen's and Brothers Grimm's stories, there I am chasing through the big world in the perpetual night, together with a finger-sized boy who can hide in a matchbox. Or I stand next to the snow-white beauty "Snegurochka", whom the evil families and the envious, wicked princesses tried to kill with a poisoned apple. But during the funeral procession [the coffin] bumps into a tree, the poisoned apple falls out, fortunately for me, and "Snegurochka" [Snow Maiden] is alive. ....

I would fall asleep now and then, lay my small, young, blond head on a book, and in my sweet, childlike, innocent sleep I would end my travels through the forests and seas in the [Jewish Temple], the Bes- Hamikdash, in Jerusalem, then by the heroes of Bar Kokhba, and sing in my dream Goldfaden's "In Bes-Hamikdash in a vinkl kheyder zitst di almone Bas-Zion aleyn" [from "Raisins and Almonds"].

The song I heard so often from my worried, complaining mother when she was panting with worry, or on Shabbat after supper when she held her hands behind her back against the tiled stove. The warm little room would be filled with the smell of brown potato skins and sauerkraut in the pot that stood in a corner, covered by a pasta board with a stone on top. Mama would take my head in her lap, nestle it against her chest, and sing those Zion songs.

And I, with my eyes half-closed like a cat in the sun, listened to the light-filled, sweet-dreaming, fantasy-awakening national songs of Goldfaden, Elyakum Zunser, Ch.N. Bialik, Sh. Frug and other great [poets] and singers, lamenting and weeping over Jewish suffering and pain.

When I was eleven years old, I finished the "Talmetoyre" and began to study Russian literature in Fridman's school, while in the "Talmetoyre" I had studied Hebrew literature.

My father, my mother and brother David had come together to discuss how I should continue my studies.

My brother David was four years older than me and a student of the "Remeslenoye" [Artisans' School]. I, on the other hand, dreamed of the elegant uniforms of the Real School, the Commercial School or the "Aleksandov's" Gymnasium. My brother argued that I was not more noble than him and therefore I should go to the "Remeslenoye". My father was sadly silent, because he loved me very much and considered my abilities very high. However, he was aware of our sad financial situation.

My mother quietly wiped a tear from her beautiful round face with her apron. It was full of life and laughter, but also full of sadness and tears, which so often alternated on her face. Her brown, warm, motherly eyes looked at me, and in her imagination she probably saw her Yankele already walking in a beautifully fitting High School uniform, with the shiny gold buttons, the High School student hat with the Royal Eagle emblem.

But the sad reality prevailed. My parents hung their heads, and my brother raised his head in victory, but then a glimmer of hope appeared in my mother, and she said:

"But Gershon, you forgot that in Remeslenoye they don't accept boys younger than thirteen, and our Yankele is only eleven!"

Father thought for a while, understanding my mother's last plea to save my High School uniform, but then he replied:

"Teme, you forgot that Yankele was registered three years older due to an error in our late Shloymkele's birth certificate. On his birth certificate he is already fourteen years old".

My mother took me in her arms, leaned my head against her, and wet, motherly tears moistened my face. ....

She sighed softly, as if it were her fault that her child could not be led along the broad main road of "worldly education" with "distinguished children".

My next "alma mater" was the "Remeslenoye Utshilishtshe", or known by the short name "Remeslenoye" (Artisans' School).

I, an eleven year old boy, was stretched into a year of work and education, and my further way to wide endeavors, goals, and horizons of that cruel something called "life" was left to my own hands....



Budynek Szkoły Rzemieślniczej przy ul. Lipowej 39  
*The Building of the Artisans' School.*

source: <http://wirtualnie.lomza.pl/wirtualnie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Ksi%C4%99ga-album-pami%C4%99ci-gminy-%C5%BCydowskiej-w-Bia%C5%82ymstoku-cz%C4%99%C5%9B%C4%87-1.pdf>

## **The Old Jewish Cemetery and the Neighboring Quarters of Poverty**

The old Jewish cemetery in Białystok spread out in the middle of the poverty-stricken neighborhoods, admonishing its inhabitants with cold, silent certainty: Sooner or later you too will come to me...

At the back of the cemetery the front lanes of Khanaykes were crowded, on the left - the "Popovshtshizne" [Popowszczyzna, derived from the meaning of land belonging to a Russian orthodox priest], popularly called "Po Vitshizne". Probably the lane was so named because of the high, proud, half-domed Russian Orthodox church in Byzantine style.

It was surrounded by small whitewashed houses where the rich families of [Russian Orthodox] priests lived, and it occupied the whole corner formed by the commercial Lipowa Street and the beginning of Popovshtshizne.

Across the street was the well-known "cheap kitchen" ("dyeshevaya stolovanya"), where some charitable ladies from Białystok served cheap lunches to poor Jews for two kopeks. They consisted of a thin slice of meat that looked like the sole of a shoe. It was accompanied by barley porridge with beans or lentils and black bread, the smell of which wafted through the whole street.

In the same neighborhood lived my friend Kurlandski, a handsome, blond, romantically transfigured young man. He was an art painter and exhibited his work in Belgium in the 1930s, but he earned his living with "gems," that is, as a diamond cutter, like me. I wrote [on the side] and he painted. So we both had artistic ambitions and sighed with the prosaic world that did not appreciate our talents.

In the same area was the bookstore of Lifshits, whom I envied greatly, for was it a trifle that a Jew had such a treasure of books at his disposal?!

I devoured books with my eyes, looking at the spines, reading the interesting, fascinating names of the works and Russian authors. I also devoured them with my eyes at night, lying on my bed until two o'clock in the morning by the glow of a red-extinguishing kerosene lamp, which, unfortunately, struggled with the last drops of kerosene to keep the red-hot wick burning.

My mother used to admonish me sleepily from the next room, "Yankele, haven't you blinded your eyes enough? You won't be able to straighten your head tomorrow!"

But I would relentlessly twist the head of the wick one more time to rekindle the dying flame and answer:

"Right now, Mom, I'm about to quit!"

But I thought to myself, "Well, go on, be a capable person, and don't give up until you've actually reached the end of L.F. Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" or Maxim Gorky's "Oyfn Opgrunt".

Opposite the round, majestic church, next to Veler the Katsev [the Butcher], lived Doctor Fin, a short, fat man with a big, round head and thinning hair. He was our family doctor, but he was only called in at the last minute, when, God forbid, you were already dying... It was such a Białystok custom.

There was also a large courtyard with an inn where the small-town carters drove up in their "drongove" [broad, flat, horse-drawn] wagons, with passengers divided into two categories:

Either legs up or legs down. If you had your feet down, that was the poor class, because you had to let your legs hang over the top of the wagon. And if you traveled from Zabłudów or Choroszcz for about two hours, you arrived with numb, asleep legs and stitches in your sides, so that when you got off the wagon you had to dance around for half an hour to feel your legs again.

In this yard with the inn there was also an egg store, which belonged to a Jew named "Barakin".

His son, a Belgian doctor of medicine, used to visit me in Belgium, and I admired the contrast between his father, a simple Jew, and his son, a doctor, and I was proud of Białystok that from such simple, uneducated parents could come such recognized doctors.

To the right of the cemetery spread the Pyaskov [Piaski] district with its Pyaskov market, where there were many fairs and small, dark and poor shops with their doors always open.

Herring was sold here, as well as kerosene, wagon grease, cheese lime [casein], whip sticks, bran, chopped straw, sour milk, "svorekhts" [cottage cheese], black cumin bread, rye and mixed bread, Białystok pastries with onions and poppy seeds, and round "striezel" pastries sprinkled with granulated sugar. There were also shops with clay pots and copper jugs, wooden rolling pins and tin graters. In addition, wooden spoons,

for burning the "khomets" [sourdough] and brown varnished "soldier's spoons", which the Russian soldier, the "fonye zemlyak", carried around during the day and night, slipped under the shaft of his boots which were rubbed with wagon grease.

And around all these shops on Pyaskes [Piaski] there was a swarming and bustle of small, pot-bellied Jewish women with headscarves, walking barefoot, flaxen-haired peasant boys with haughty noses, female gentiles who had marched barefoot from the villages, with their shoes thrown over their shoulders, hardly daring to put them on, at least in the city.

To the left of the old Jewish cemetery ("Kladbisczanskaja") [Cemetery Street] stretched a series of narrow streets with small, low, sunken houses. Often a pane of paper was stuck in one of the windows, giving the impression of a beggar blind in one eye. These small, dirty streets, crossed by a gutter in the middle, had beautiful names that sounded holy to Jews:

Yerusalimske [Jerusalem] Street, Palestina Street, Zion Street....

Thus, as if to mock the Jews and their national dreams, the Tsarist regime made a bitter joke by changing the names of these narrow, poor side streets to Yerushalimskaya, Palenstinskaya, and Syonskaya.

Crossing the winding, dark, narrow Yerusalimske Street and arriving at the wide corner of several alleys, the two-story wooden building of the famous Khanaykever Bes-Medresh suddenly rose from the ground, dark brown in color, with wide windows. It radiated Jewishness, religious devotion, and an appreciation of the proud history of the Jewish past. It bore witness to the study of "Khumesh and Tanakh" [Pentateuch and Hebrew Bible], morality and the laws of justice and family life contained in the ancient folios of the "Gemore" [Gemara, part of the Talmud] and the "Shulkhn-Orekh" [compilation of the most important laws of the Halakha].

Like a source of light, like a brightly shining lighthouse in the sea of darkness, there stood the wooden carrier of Judaism, the Khaynayker Bes-Medresh, unwilling to yield even under severe financial conditions. It was located in the center of poverty, moral decay, slipping into the abyss of crime, theft and fornication, which was the consequence of economic hardship, desperate misery, an upbringing on the street and no education.

An atmosphere of underworld types with their overbearing sneers of foppish glory.

This was the revenge of poverty against satiation, of decay against arrogance.

The great merit of securing the existence of this Khanaykever Bes-Medresh in perpetuity, given the meager income of the synagogue's worshippers, must be attributed to some Jewish wealthy gentlemen ["balebatim"]. Among them was Reb Yakev Valye, the "Scribe of the Benkl" [bank house], a busy, lively Jew, the owner of a grocery store in Khanaykes. One of his children could always be seen sitting in the store doing his homework, engrossed in his tasks, his tongue twisting and sticking out.

However, the main role in supporting the Khanaykever Bes-Medresh was played by Ayzik the Shames [the synagogue caretaker], a stiff, serious Jew with bright, energetic eyes. Ayzik the Shames was a legendary figure of the Khanaykever Bes-Medresh.

Such a milieu, in which there were porters and carters, very often pious and honest but bitter and bitterly poor people, as well as fences, Jews with half-secret incomes, and common thieves of the lower class (of the type described by "Urke Nachalnik") [the literary figure of a yeshiva boy who became a prominent gangster and later a rescuer of Torah scrolls], could only be kept in check by such a Jew as Ayzik the Shames.

All he had to do was stop abruptly during the Torah reading and raise his eye or move his mighty eyebrow over his sharp, penetrating gaze, and he would instantly stop a major argument in the "polish" [ante-chamber of the study house] or end a brawl in the back of the tiled stove. His slow but powerful blow over the lectern in the midst of the reading of the Purim Megillah could stop the wild din of the rattles and ratchets of the uncontrolled, loudly shouting "voyle yungen" [naughty boys], who were not so much concerned with the "terrible Haman" but were happy to make noise and riot, panting and whistling in a "legal way", so that the Bes-Medresh actually trembled. But the number of Jews whom the Khanaykever Jews were ashamed of was not large. They were relegated to a corner of the Bes-Medresh, because the front part was occupied by the Jewish artisans and shopkeepers, the Jewish scholars and pious people, who made sure that the "unclean" did not "raise their heads" in "their" Khanaykes, but remained segregated in the dark holes of Khanaykes.

We lived in the same house as Ayzik the Shames and were neighbors. I was very attracted to his family. Ayzik the Shames had two children: a daughter, Esterke, a girl of 14-15, two years older than me. I dreamed of her round, full face, her fiery eyes, her hearty laugh full of life, that teased me.

She had full, passionate lips, a healthy, rosy village face with red cheeks as if they had just been patted.

In a small garden with countless green trees and tall grass, we met by chance and together we picked white-blue, innocent bird's milk twigs.

And when, by chance we both reached for the same branch and our hands touched like a warm blow, we laughed loudly, but our laughter sounded artificial, because the touch of her hand aroused in me a vague, sweet pleasure that seized my whole body, as if I had to cry and laugh at the same time at something that had awakened in my young body. This something - it has been known for ages and will be the eternal theme of novels, theater, art and life.

Her brother, Ben-Zionke, was the complete opposite of her. A slim, slender boy, with a milky, fanatically religious face, with looping temple curls, a thoughtful one, who reminded me of the sadly dreaming Bes-Medresh student from [Chaim Nachman] Bialik's "The Masmid" [The Diligent Learner].

The old cemetery was surrounded on all four sides by a low, wide stone wall that reached up to the windows of some houses that leaned close to the cemetery.

The children used to walk along the wide stone wall of the cemetery to the cheder. In the summer they walked there, too, but in the winter, on cold nights with a full moon and blue stars, they walked back along the cemetery wall, on the stiff frozen snow that crunched in the hard frost and even pulled at their ears under their earmuffs.

And with tied lanterns made of tin or paper, they took their revenge on the "Rebbe with the whip" by singing:

"The Rebbe went to Berlin,

There he bought a scratching machine,

atsma, atsmalya!"...

In the summer I was a frequent visitor to the cemetery. I would wander among the graves, reading the inscriptions and stopping with special respect at the ohels [Jewish monumental tombs] of the Rabbis and Sages. In my childhood imagination, they always reminded me of our ancestors in the land of Israel in the biblical cave near Hebron, and I used to put my ear to the wall [of the ohel] with palpitations and curiosity,

33

waiting to hear a distant, mysterious voice from that world, or a lament from Our Mother Rachel.

At Tishe-Bov [Tisha B'Av] we boys scattered around the cemetery, filling it with our children's voices as we searched for the green, nut-

like, stinging burrs and tore them from the low green bushes.

At Tishe-Bov we began a wild hunt for girls and young women, aiming at them and throwing the stinging burrs into their hair. We took a "sadistic" pleasure in watching them flee from us, struggling to get the burrs out of their hair, while laughing and squealing and hurling the worst curses at us with a good-natured laugh.

In the "yomim-neroim" [Days of Awe], when the harbingers of the joyous holidays of Sukkot and Shmini-Atseres [Shemini Atzeret], Hoyshayne-Raven [Hoshana Rabbah] and Simkhes-Toyre [Simchat Torah] were already in the air, with delicious feasts and new clothes, little girls used to walk through the cemetery with slaughtered chickens.

They had been sent by their mothers from Khanaykes to the slaughterhouse on the other side of the cemetery in the Piaski district to have a chicken slaughtered for the holiday. And so a little girl would stand, frightened, between the noise of the women and the hysterical, screaming chickens. The chickens cried out in rebellion against the kosher butcher and, blinking their eyes in confusion and wiping their snotty noses with their "sleeves," pushed under the butcher's nose to ask:

"Reb slaughterer, slaughter me first!"

The slaughterer, a bearded blond Jew with cold, calm eyes, would pluck a few feathers from the chicken's neck, mutter a sacred phrase, make a cut with his knife, and throw the slaughtered chicken at the girl's feet. And the little girl, trembling and splattered with blood, after some struggle with the dying chicken, would hang it on an iron hook and look with a trembling heart at its white, twisted eyes, which closed in the last twitch. Later, she would carry the chicken from the slaughterhouse in Piaski across the cemetery to Khanaykes.

In the autumn days of the month of Elul, when the cold sun, which only warmed like a stepmother, covered the cemetery with crooked rays of sunny shadows, the cemetery used to be strewn with dozens of Jews who lay stretched out on the graves of their loved ones, sobbing and wailing bitterly and heartbreakingly. It was a wailing and groaning mingled with

34

"takhanunem" [daily penitential Jewish prayers] "to the loving Father in heaven" or "to our dear Mother in this world" to intercede as their intercessor so that the Jewish sufferings would end and they would be enrolled for a good year and receive a good "kvitl" [a good slip of paper for the Book of Life].

The cemetery also served as a hiding place for stolen goods and as a conspiratorial place for revolutionary youth. And sometimes it

happened that the inhabitants of the cemetery, who had fallen asleep forever, were disturbed in their eternal rest by police raids, whistling squads, and revolver shots of the Russian police or the agents of the secret service. I can still clearly see before my eyes the types of the revolutionary youth of that time; in black shirts with collars closed up to the neck and black, braided silk belts around their waist.

The girls wore the same shirts and had their hair cut short (like the boys in "La Garçonne" by the French writer Viktor Margueritte). [And I can still see] those who, with smoking revolvers and squinting eyes, aimed at the tombstones of the cemetery and learned to shoot. And it was not uncommon for a Russian policeman, a police chief, or even a governor-general, to be found on a dark night at the corner of a dark street, shot by the bullet of a revolutionary who had practiced in "my" cemetery.

In the moonlit nights, when I climbed the stone wall of the cemetery to close the shutters of our house overlooking the tombstones, I paused for a very long time. I would look at the cemetery under the big sky-blue cloth curtain, where the eternally mysterious, smiling moon floated through the white clouds, as if accompanied by white angels.

The moon covered the cemetery with pale moonlight and the wan trees swayed in the wind like beggars in the light dance of [S.] An-sky's "The Dybbuk." In addition, the small tombstones of the children's graves nestled against the large ohels of the rabbis and sages, just as grandchildren nestle against their beloved grandfathers.

I was never afraid of the cemetery. And in the pale, silent, mysterious nights of the full moon, I felt that I had a common language with it and that we could speak quietly in our silent language, our language of thought, about how the transition from this world to the world of the dead is a quiet walk that we experience on our journey through life from the cradle to the grave.

35

At some point, however, the old cemetery lost its privilege. It was in danger of being forgotten because it had a great competitor in the form of the new and last Jewish cemetery. It was the ghetto cemetery of the entire Jewish population of Białystok.

Tens of thousands of Białystokers, now scattered all over the world, get up every morning and go to bed at night with hearts full of sorrow and sad eyes. [Their thoughts] turn to the new cemetery...

And many Białystokers will die of a "heart attack". The dry diagnosis of a cold doctor will justify this with arteriosclerosis or coronary thrombosis. For he does not know that the new cemetery in Białystok has caused yet another victim, that it has caused yet another Jewish

heart to burst after it could no longer bear the suppressed grief, pain and remorse.

For he, the brother from America, thought that perhaps he had a share in the tragic fate of his brothers and sisters lying there, in the decaying heap of rotting human flesh. And the holey eyes of skulls haunt him with the piercing reproach like skewers, reaching him right there, in his quiet home in America, right from this place, from the new Białystok cemetery....

I never want to set foot on the soil of Białystok again, because I cannot bear to see today's Białystok, which is a big, new cemetery.

And like a mad mother who holds her dead child close to her, caresses it, kisses it and sings it a lullaby, and does not want to admit that her child is dead, I want to caress the Białystok of my childhood imagination and my youthful dreams forever, forever, and sing my sad songs to it. And I do not want to believe that "my" Białystok has already died.

No, for me Białystok, the former Białystok, is not dead, it lives around me and in me...



Cmentarz w getcie na ulicy Żabiej w roku 1943

*The Ghetto cemetery on Szaba Street in 1943.*

source:[Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf) (wirtualnie.lomza.pl)



Na cmentarzu w getcie w roku 1948 w piątą rocznicę powstania i likwidacji getta białostockiego. Składanie kwiatów na masowym grobie. Nowe ogrodzenie zbudowane przy pomocy Białostockiego Komitetu Pomocowego w Ameryce.

*At the Ghetto cemetery, 1948. – Flowers are placed on the mass grave on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the uprising and liquidation of the Bialystoker Ghetto. The new fence in the background was erected with the aid of the Bialystoker Relief Committee in America.*

Source: [Ksiega-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)

### **The "Remeslenoye" [Artisans' School]: Combining Work with Education**

On gray, cold, snowy winter mornings, but also in summer, in bright sunshine, hundreds of Jewish boys went to the "source of work and education": To the "Remeslenoye."

Among them were the still hungry children of poor coachmen, carters, porters and whitewashers of Khanaykes, the children of the owners of grocery and iron stores, of the teachers, the ready-made clothing sellers and of the shoe shop owners on Suraza [Suraska] Street, around the synagogue courtyard and the market. But also the more privileged children of the dry-goods and haberdashery merchants, the owners of colonial goods, paper and glass stores on Lipowa, Gumienna, and Mikołajewska Street.

There were also boys from the provinces studying in the "Remeslenoye", healthy, strong lads with tanned faces, lively, shining eyes, who were raised in the surrounding lush Jewish towns and villages, in the chunky houses covered with green moss, in village huts with orchardists and gardeners, surrounded by miles of green, wild forests and green fields tilled by the peasants.

There were boys from Sokolka and from the aristocratic "High School" Lomzha, from the Jewish orchard tenders of Chartsh and from the grocery stores of Staroseltse, from Vashlikov with its sawmills and from the weaving town of Horodok, from Supraśl, the town of Shmuel Citrin (the "Jewish Krull"), from the tanning center of Krynki, and last but not least, "dembene" boys [boys like oaks] from far-off Białowieża.

From the famous Białowieża Forest with its ancient, hundred-year-old trees, with its light-footed deer and roe deer and with its heavy-bodied wild bison. This wild, ancient Białowieża Forest, where the mighty "Emperor of All Russia", Tsar Nicholas Romanov the II, would appear with his suave, royal escort, enlivening the eternally silent, empty royal highways, paved with small stones and two-headed eagles, where only the buzzing of bees could be heard in the echo of bird concerts among the tall oak trees.

Ah yes, the "provincial"... the provincials and their nicknames... How could a town be called without its "nickname"? Somehow the nickname became almost involuntarily associated with the shtetl, or rather its inhabitants. And here is a small selection: The Krinkers were "the thieves", the Zabłudówers were "the groat-cakes", the Vashlikovers were "the goats",

the Sokolkers were "the lords of the world", the people of Brisk were "the moons", the people of Lomzha were "the little challahs", the people of Grajewo were "the dartfishes", and last but not least, the Białystokers were "the cake-eaters".

And it was exactly this mixture of Jewish youth from Białystok and from the provinces who came to the "Remeslenoye", which was still known hundreds of miles away from Białystok, to acquire knowledge and a trade, and who later sent their graduates out into the world, across the vast expanse of Russia, to Western European countries, and even far across the sea, to the land of Columbus and to South American Argentina.

After I passed the exams and was accepted as a student, I, still half a child, had to divide my sunny children's day between studying and working. Remeslenoye had three departments:

Textile, Mechanics and Carpentry.

In the textile department, at the end of school, you got a diploma as a master of steam chairs and "master of patterns," because we learned to analyze the patterns of woven fabrics by drawing them up thread by thread to determine the pattern and the yarn material, whether it was wool, cotton, or worsted. Only then could we copy [a woven fabric].

The mechanical looms were called steam looms. They were started by electricity from dynamo machines [generators], which converted the power [mechanical energy] of steam boilers [into electrical energy]. We also learned dyeing, finishing, winding, "shern" [warping, the process of preparing warp yarn tapes for the subsequent weaving process] and "nupn" [an activity of correcting small processing defects in the finished woven fabric, for example, taking out the knots].

In the factory "Remeslenoye" there were about eight mechanical looms of different German companies, which were famous at that time: "Graseneyner", "Shvabishe" and "Sheyner" looms. The "Zhakard" [Jacquard] looms, which became famous at that time, were also "Graseneyner" steam looms. They made flowered woolen "Montanyak" blankets, the name of which may have come from the French word "montagnard", meaning "mountain dweller".

These flowered blankets made it to the remotest corners of vast Russia, and hundreds of Białystok "peddlers" traveled all over the world to spread the Białystok products of Jewish diligence, sweat, and energy.

A number of Białystok manufacturers specialized in the production of blankets, including such famous companies as: Preysman,

Triling, Gubinski, Citrin, Moreyn Brothers, Markus Brothers, Novik, Kanel, Komichau, and others.

The "Remeslenoye" also produced the famous Białystok suit fabrics,

38

such as "karelekh" (from a cheap woollen fabric made from torn scraps), which in later years, during my travels to other countries, I found in clothing stores on the "Grenadierstraße" in Berlin, on the "Rue de Rivoli" in Paris, on the "Diepestraat" in Antwerp and on the "Whitechapel Road" in London.

Białystok also specialized in the production of "kastor", a cheap suit fabric made of a mixture of cotton and wool. A large part of the Białystok factory owners made their living from "kastor", and there was a famous joke about a cloth merchant with very limited knowledge of Russian who wrote an urgent telegram [in Russian]:

"Nye mogu viderzhat visilayte kastorku". In Yiddish it means: "I can't hold out any longer, send kastorke". Only - in Russian "kastorke" means castor oil!

Białystok also produced a lot of "drap", a coarse, double-sided winter fabric for coats. The inner side was colorfully patterned and it was possible to avoid sewing an inner lining into the winter coats.

We, the students of "Remeslenoye", had the utmost difficulty in drawing up the patterns of the coarse, double, patterned "drap" fabric..

In the mechanical department they learned how to cut and file metals, repair machine parts, cast metals (with oxygen), draw plans of machine parts to cast them [later] in metal factories, draw and copy mechanical parts from the perspective of "facade", "profile", "distance", "prism" to the millimeter. In addition, they learned the differences between metals and the colors used in the factories to identify the various metals on drawings and plans.

And at the annual exhibitions, the exhibits of the mechanical department, for example, the manufactured machines, always attracted great attention. There were:

machines for building, filing and sawing, but also tools such as hammers, drills, metal rulers, linch pins and other useful items.

The carpentry department enabled a student to become a first-class qualified master furniture maker with great expertise in making plan drawings, applying modern systems for bending wood, gluing of strips of wood and assembling furniture to the finest modern taste and with high resilience. They learned the theory of atmospheric effects on different types of wood, and how to cross certain types of wood

in the wrong direction to prevent shrinkage of the wood material. Polishing with chemical paints and liquids was also taught to achieve a smooth and durable shine.

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39

I started in the textile department. My comrades were all "clumsy big fellows" between the ages of 14 and 18, and I looked like a little Lilliputian, like a dwarf in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale. The others taught me a harsh lesson, the lesson of the power of the strongest.

In general, my classmate Farush made my life difficult (he was from the family of "Farushes", from the sausage shop). Farush was a tall, yellowish-blond boy with freckled, rosy skin and about four years older than me. When he was in a bad mood because he had only gotten a "two" ["B"] in Russian, he would wait for me in a corner of the hallway like a silent inquisitor with a sadistic smile. He would approach me with slow steps, like a spider to a fly, and grab me by the head. As I could only reach up to his arm, he pressed my head down with his hand, as if with iron pincers, and held my twisted body like this for a long time, always with the same calm, poisonous, sarcastic smile.

I used to have a rising revolting hatred for the "oppressor". I kicked him with my feet, bit him with my teeth, scratched him with my fingernails, and offered all my weak, clumsy "tools" in my defense. But, of course, I came out of the unequal force as the injured one.

And according to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the "early childhood effect", the type of my schoolmate Farush is one of the reasons why I developed a hatred for oppression, dictators and despotic power.

This episode of brutality on the part of classmates, which is a frequent and tragic occurrence in educational institutions, served me as the subject of a story that I published in 1930 in the Warsaw "Weekly of Art and Literature" under the title "The Spider".

I had little interest in the practical work, the lessons of "tepen" [drawing up] and assembling patterns, disassembling and building steam chairs. I never kept pace with the practical classes. But I was one of the best in two subjects: Russian and painting.

The manager of the new "Talmetoyre", Samson Yakovlevitsh Grosman, was at the same time our Russian teacher in the "Remeslenoye". During the three years I was in this school, he went through almost all the classical Russian literature with us. This was

nothing new for me, as I had already "absorbed"

40

the works of the Russian classics when I was still in Fridman's school, and had also devoured the works of my beloved Russian writers late into the night during the long winter evenings in Białystok.

I will never forget how we learned "Taras Bulba". That same day my mother had dressed me in new trousers, very wide and long, "to grow into" (my mother was always looking for charms because of my small stature), and I ran to school full of joy, but, as usual, late.

So the students were learning "Taras Bulba", and when our teacher had just described the wide pants of the Ukrainian Kozak Taras Bulba with the words "they were as wide as the Black Sea", the door of our classroom opened, and I, the little one, stopped on the threshold with my new, bombastic wide pants. As soon as the teacher and the students saw my new pants, they burst out laughing, rattling the boards of the "skameykes" (school desks) and pointing with their fingers at my wide pants, which fell in folds. And I stood there blushing as if I had been stewed. If I had gotten hold of my mother at that moment, who knows what I would have done to her. .... From then on, for a while, they called me "Sharavari shirinoye tshornoye morye" ("Pants as wide as the Black Sea").

I loved writing essays in Russian, and when our teacher read them aloud, in the tense silence of our classroom, I felt for the first time the palpitations of a writer's heart, the sweet trembling of attaching myself to the reader and seducing him into my dream worlds.

Every morning in the Białystok winter, my mother would wake me up at seven o'clock and drag me out of my warm bed, for better or worse. She would fill a brown paper bag with a bit of black bread and a piece of "darer kishke" or a Białystok pastry with a piece of smoked herring. She dressed me in a few woolen jackets and a pair of galoshes, tied a torn scrap of an old headscarf around my neck, wrapped me in a long fur coat that reached down to my feet, pulled a torn black "Barashkov" cap over my head, put some ear flaps over my ears and a hood over my head.

Walking from Khanaykes to Lipowa Street in the frosty morning, I looked like a little "steam mill", because from far away you could see only a little dark ball of stuff

41

with steam coming out of its mouth (because that was the only uncovered part of my body).

So that's how I, the little creature, went to learn and work to integrate into society and become a decent human being.

\*

Childhood, sweet childhood,  
Forever you remain awake in my memory...  
(by Mordechay Gebirtig)

I describe the "Remeslenoye" for three reasons: To give a small idea of a vocational school of that time, to illustrate the threefold combination of work, education and Judaism, and to let [the reader] pass by a gallery of boys of that time from Białystok and the province - with their joys and sorrows.

It will be a satisfaction and a reward for me if as many former Białystokers from America and other parts of the world as possible recognize among my Białystok schoolmates their former friends, relatives or neighbors with whom they lived next door and breathed the Białystok air together. Furthermore, if my humble pen succeeds in illuminating the long, distant past of Białystok in the present tragic darkness, it will give shape to my love for Białystok and will bring the city out of oblivion after the black night of the Shoah.

It is for you that I am writing these sentences, for you Białystokers who have remained alive, like splinters of diamonds that have broken off from the sparkling brilliance of the Shabbats, holidays, Torah and education that were called: Białystok!

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At that time new winds were blowing in Russia, and the famous slogan applied: "Utsheny svyes, nyeutshehye tma" ("Education leads to light, ignorance to darkness").

The doors of the closed world of cheder and Bes-Medresh were opened wide, and the Jewish youth set out to nibble from the pot of Russian secular culture, which was still so unknown yet so enticing.

And in close cooperation between the Russian government and the Jewish russified intelligentsia, russification ran in great, mighty strides through the Jewish streets, sowing there the Russian language and the love of Russian literature.

Our "Remeslenoye" was also swept away by the current of Russification. And during the long, snowy winter nights in Białystok, I used to devour dozens of books of the [main] pillars of Russian literature, and I was so assimilated to Russian that when I got angry, I automatically cursed in Russian.

And even in ordinary conversation, after two Yiddish words, I had to use four Russian ones; so poor was my Yiddish vocabulary.

My two strongest competitors on the "Remeslenoye" in the Russian language were comrades Smazanovitsh and Shatski. (Smazanovitsh died, Shatski is in New York today).

Maytshik Smazanovitsh was a boy of poor parents, from a poor, narrow alley next to "Shayes Street" in Khanaykes, which was close to the fence of the sadly famous "Granovsky Garden". Maytshik's father came from somewhere in Russia, and Russian was spoken in their poor but intelligent household. In Khanaykes, the father was nicknamed "Klyenter", a corruption of "klarnet" [clarinet]. He was probably a klezmer musician and played on that instrument.

Maytshik Smazanovitsh also had a nickname on Shayes Street. We called him "Tshizhik" [little bird], because when he met a friend on the street, he would sing to him, "Tshizhik, Tshizhik gdye ti bil...na veselye vodku fil..." [Roughly: Tshizhik, Tshizhik, where have you been...for fun a lot of vodka...] and ended his song with the question:

"Well, what are you doing now, Tshizhik?"

"Tshizhik" Smazanovitsh spoke in a Russian with grammatical variety and a real Russian accent.

My second competitor, Shatski, was the brother of Doctor Shatski and the son of Manye, the Akusherke [midwife] of Gumiennner Street. He was a slim, stiff, quiet boy with eyes like fiery coals and an eagle's nose, a type of Cirkassia [Caucasian region], and spoke a beautiful, eloquent Russian. However, he was a bit lazy about studying, his head was already occupied with the girls of the "Profesyonal-Shule" (Women's Professional School) in Yudl Kletski's yard on Lipowa Street. He and other comrades from the "Remeslenoye" were already in contact with the girls and arranged to meet in the Green Alley in the Białystok Forest, which they filled in the summery, starry, light-blue nights with tender, mournful tones of "Otshi Tshornye" [Black Eyes] and "Margaritkelekh".

A whole group of students from the "Remeslenoye" had already formed, flirting with the "profesyonalkes".

There, before my eyes, I still see "Don Juan" Halpern, a medium-sized, dreamy, romantic fellow from Białowieża, who brought from the Białowieża forests Russian songs and something melancholic in his eyes. He wore a dark blue pelerine in the style of the French "Agent de Police", which was very fashionable at the time. His heart belonged to the "profesyonalke" Zlatke Kesler, a sentimental, graceful girl with romantic, always questioning eyes. (Zlatke is now in New York, married to Khayim Keshin, a young man from Białystok, who is the son of the famous Białystok tailor Knishinski).

The group also included the quiet Pokshive, also from Białowieża, a tall, blond lad with freckles, a brother of the then famous Białystok amateur wrestler, the heavyweight hero Pokshive, who was handsome and intelligent - a rarity in this profession.

Besides, Utkes belonged to the group of "ukhazhorn" [suitors], the best student in the subject "drawing" in the class, a slender, handsome, tall lad, with a bashful, feminine laugh. He was the son of a poor Białystok painter and glazier somewhere on Suraska Street. Utkes had a considerable talent for drawing and had great skill as a painter.

I always admired Utkes for three qualities:

His artistic talent, the beauty of his body (he looked like a Hollywood star), and his modesty.

But this flower, full of beauty and talent, grew up in great poverty.

The quiet Veynshteyn [Weinstein] also belonged to the group of "cavaliers." He had considerable skills in poetry and painting - one of the innumerable [bright] talents that are extinguished in the darkness of poverty. But Weinstein also had another talent - eating.... He was a boy with a terrible hunger. Every day at noon we would go down to the cellar of the "Remeslenoye" to be served our lunch in the dining room, which consisted of black bread, lentils, pearl grits and a slice of meat, brought from the famous Białystok "Cheap Kitchen" of Popovshtshizne, which was expanded in 1905 with the help of Dr. Sh. Citron. Weinstein then devoured his plate of lentils in a minute

(which was his favorite dish, and why we called him "Esau's competitor") [the biblical Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a dish of lentils]. And since I, the little one, didn't need much physical nourishment for my small body, I became his "delivery boy" and bosom

friend, bringing him joy with an [extra] plate of lentils or a slice of bread.

Among the types of "cavaliers" from the "Remeslenoye" were the Gelbart brothers, whom we also called "Poylishe", because they had come to Białystok from a Polish shtetl and spoke a Polish-Yiddish dialect that sounded strange and odd to our Białystok Lithuanian ears. We imitated them with their "yakh", "enk" and "ets".

Our drawing teacher was Abukov. He was of medium height, had a contented, always smiling, rosy, shaved face and a small beard of an artist. He spoke slowly, dragging out each word, measuring pictures in perspective from a distance with his pencil, squinting one eye to look for proportions in the length and width of an object.

One of the best students in "drawing" was, as I mentioned, Utkes, whom we nicknamed "Vid iz mayeva okna" [Picture through my window]. Utkes had once painted a landscape through a window, crowned his picture with that very title, and our gang who "made life miserable for others" had already found a fitting nickname for him.

Together with Yacob Gelbart, the "poylishn", I competed for second place. By the way, our teacher Abukov had given me the name "Dyevotshka" (Girl) because of my feminine face and quiet thoughtfulness.

We used to paint motifs from nature, copied or enlarged them, painted dead objects from imagination, but also living objects. We painted with a special Japanese ink (engravings), with watercolor paint, with special colored pencils and, finally, with oil paints for artists.

But we also painted types of people and landscapes. Winter landscapes and dreamy rivers in scattered forests. Once a year the "Remeslenoye" organized a public exhibition of the best drawings, and thousands of Jews used to come by and look at and admire our drawings. We were always very proud of our "Remeslenoye".

Yes, this was our "Remeslenoye"! Anyone who wanted to could end up with a lot of knowledge. But if someone did not want to learn, he was forgiven, knowing that he came from poor parents.

45

And the most important thing for him was to learn his trade so that he could support his poor parents, who were already waiting for their child's first earned rubles.

We had two masters of textile craftsmanship: Shifer and Grabovski. Shifer, a short, corpulent, round-bellied "Jewish Jekke," acted as our master of fabric patterns. He was a first-class expert, but he was terribly in love with Germany.

Later he worked in Germany as a textile engineer, speaking only German. He lived in Potshtove Street and was the neighbor of my elegant, aristocratic cousin, Khaytshe Shustitski. About me he used to say in German:

"Your cousin is quite a capable fellow, but he has no trade expertise".

And it was true, because craftsmanship was not for me at all.

The second master, Grabovski, was himself a former student of the "Remeslenoye". He was one of the first to graduate, and then actually became the master of the steam chair in the "Remeslenoye". In 1920, he became my partner in textile manufactured goods; together we bought old rags and tore, spun, wove and finished them at "Moysey" Preysman's, who died recently in New York. (This was five years before I left for Belgium and France).

Grabovski was a reserved, serious person, a bit rude like a certain Jewish type of craftsman, always in his work clothes, and felt lost among his colleagues, the Russified intelligentsia of teachers.

We, the students, also divided ourselves into "castes". It was a kind of Roman patrician and plebeian system (nobles and "lowly"), or in the style of Indian "paryas" [outcasts]. The type of parental descent played a role in relations between comrades, both in the "Remeslenoye" and even in family life in Białystok.

I remember once visiting my rich cousin, Yehudit Rozental, the wife of Gershon Rozental, the owner of "Apretur" [refining of fabrics, etc.]. Her little twelve-year-old girl stuck out her little belly, focused on me, examined my clothes, and, holding her finger in her mouth, asked me in Russian: "Vi bogati? (Are you rich?). (My cousin Rosental was the sister-in-law of the well-known social activist Zeydl Khabatski of the Białystok Branch 88).

I remember this in connection with the student Nyevyadomski,

a poorly dressed boy with badly patched shoes, a crumpled suit of cheap cloth, and a guilty face. Few befriended him, and he was usually isolated and alone. And the students - boys who knew no pity - called him "Baytele," because his father, a poor Jew in an old

caftan and Hasidic hat, blind in one eye and wearing a black blindfold, used to stand next to the big shul, across from the old Bes-Medresh, with a bag full of lottery tickets. The children would draw a lot from him for a kopek to win an "irisl" [caramel], a sweet, or money. That was how he made a living.

We also had merry comrades, and one of them was Kornyanski with his dimples. (He is in New York today). He was always laughing and cheerful, swaying as he walked, and when he said something funny, his eyes would narrow and moisten, and the dimples on his face would become even sweeter.

One guy who often made us laugh was the quiet Kaplanski (now in New York). A wild, good, always smiling comrade, but also an artist in the sense that part of his face was permanently smeared. Either with ink, soot, or black gunk from the machines. When Kaplanski entered the classroom, the teacher would wink at us, turn around and look at him, laughing good-naturedly. And it never happened that Kaplanski's nose or cheek was not covered with black oil stains (from the machines of the "mechanical department"), so that he looked like a completely greasy locomotive engineer.

And when the teacher and his pupils turned to him and burst out laughing, the good Kaplanski smiled good-naturedly, as if he had not been meant at all.

A very opposite type to all the other comrades was Podrobinik, a quiet and pious Jewish boy (now living in New York). He came from the Podrobinik family, one of whose girls was killed by a German aerial bomb during World War I, in 1914. This was at the corner of Aleksandrovskie Street).

Podrobinik's transfigured face with its slightly longer forelocks, bore something like the stamp of a yeshive [Talmud school]. In fact, he looked like a Talmud student who had accidentally fallen into a gang of merry pranksters.

A good career was made by our schoolmate Segal, with nickname "Kugelnickl". He was quite small, and to look more like a "man", he once came to our school with a round, rise, hard

47

„Kapelyushl“ [Fedora hat] on his head. Our "gang of jokers" immediately gave him the name "Kugelnikl". Later he married the daughter of a rich factory owner, became an important fabric manufacturer and laughed at us.

But I would also like to remember two village "dembes" [boys like oak trees], and they were the two tall, blond, freckled Babitsh

brothers. They had a grocery store on Starovoseyne Street, but they were also very talented in recitation and writing. One of them, Mordekhay ("Max"), later became a contributor to Pesach Kaplan's "Dos Naye life" and is now in New York. The two went to the higher classes and were close friends of my late brother.

One of the "Tzadikim Nistarim" [the so-called "Hidden Righteous"] of the "Remeslenoye" was the bookkeeper Goldstein, a warm, secular Jew. He was nearsighted, had a fatherly smile, and was as good as an angel. He lived in the courtyard of the "Remeslenoye", and he used to quietly and secretly, in the spirit of "בַּיוֹדָעִים וּבְלֹא יְדָעִים" [words spoken during the prayer of confession concerning sins committed knowingly, but also unknowingly], distribute free textbooks to the poorer students and was truly like a father to them.

At the entrance of "Remeslenoye" in Lipowa Street there was a rich, first-class canning and fruit company of H. Gutman. The shop window attracted everyone's attention. Here were the most beautiful fruits, which held me for a few minutes as if hypnotized. Only today, in rich, saturated America, I can understand the drama of poverty, when a boy from Białystok stopped for a long time just to look at the fruits, because he had such a craving for a fruit or a "tshaste" [cake] in the shop window.

Today I strongly doubt the hypothesis of psychology and jurisprudence that poverty and economic hardship are the mother of crime. According to this theory, 90% of my schoolmates would have become thieves or criminals.

The fact that this was not the case is probably due to the Jewish religious education and Jewish ethics of our Białystok homes, which were the counterbalance to the evil inclinations and instincts of the starved body. Over the years, I have become aware of the importance and depth of the Jewish religion, which may be an answer to the great epidemic of juvenile delinquency in the so-called Jewish homes of New York today.

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The whole "Remeslenoye" used to prepare feverishly for the annual Chanukkah ball, and the hearts of the "profesyonalkes" (girls from the vocational school) were already beating impatiently that they would soon be at the big ball and in the big halls of the "Remeslenoye". These were specially decorated for the occasion, so that the girls could "legally" flirt with the students of the "Remeslenoye", or have, "under the fan" <sup>[1]</sup>, a witty-galant conversation; they would blush at the compliments and at the end dance a breathtaking valzer, polka, or pa-d'espagn (in French: "Spanish steps", Pas d'Espagne) in the arms of their chosen cavalier.

All the teachers were there with their wives, they were cheerful, funny and so exuberant! In general, our strict teacher Samson Yakovlevitsh Grosman was unrecognizable, with a beaming face, running his fingers through his thick, poetic mop of hair and going from one student to another to have a little chat.

But when the couples were dancing rhythmically with happy, dreamy eyes, I was left out because I was too young and too small to dance. He, the teacher, always took pity on me, put his hand on my head (I could only reach his knuckles) and said to me with an ironic smile, as if to comfort me:

"Well, "utshoni muzh" [learned man], we are left, two useless dancers, and we can talk about Russian literature".

The Hanukkah Ball was also accompanied by a theatrical performance with a mixed program:

A comedy by Sholem-Aleykhem, plus declamations, recitations and "living pictures" illuminated by Bengal fires.

I still have the Hanukkah Ball of 1913 before my eyes. The great hall was brightly lit, with iridescent fires sparkling in the dazzling light that contrasted so sharply with the pitiful, dull illumination of the sooty kerosene lamps in our homes.

The theatrical performance begins. The director and main actor is, as always, the talented, black-haired, lively, and always bustling around Nokhem Glagovski (now in Australia). I knew Nokhem Glagovski well, because every Friday before the light blessing my brother sent me to his house to bring [a new booklet] of the then famous detective stories with Nat Pinkerton - not Carter and Sherlock Holmes.

One of Sholem-Aleykhem's comedies, the two-act "The Divorce," is reenacted there.

49

(Nokhem Glagovski also performed the one-act plays "Mazel Tov", "Expropriation", "A Doctor - A Merchant", etc.) ....

There is a commotion in the middle of the performance. The performance must be interrupted. There are whispers that the Russian police will not allow the performance in Yiddish. Supposedly there are negotiations with the Russian police chief, and finally we learn that he has been slipped a "מַכְה" [a ma'ke, probably a small amount of money was paid as a bribe], and the performance continues.

We set up a "living picture" for "Oyfn Pripetshik" [On the Hearth], in which the Rebbe teaches small children, and it is lit with fantastic colors of Bengal fire. Berman stands behind the scenes with our choir and we sing "Oyfn Pripetshik". The small, enthusiastic,

constantly moving girl Augustovski sings with a male alto, and I, the boy, squeal with a thin treble voice.

Then "Khane mit Di Zibn Zin" [Hannah and Her Seven Sons] is shown. Our hearts throb with enthusiasm as Hannah does not allow her last and youngest, seventh son to bow down before the Syrian ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, even under the pretext of picking up a ring, and is willing to die with her seven sons for the honor of the Jewish God.

A series of living pictures is shown, illustrating the love of work. On the stage there is a tailor, a shoemaker, a blacksmith... Jewish craftsmen <sup>[2]</sup>. Each carries his typical tool, is illuminated by glittering colored Bengal fires, and sings his special song in Hebrew. The tailor begins, "I am a tailor and seamstress", the cobbler, "I am a shoemaker", and we enjoy the group, which embodies the beauty and value of work.

Then our master of the mechanical department, Belenki, appears with a declamation. He is young, tall and powerfully built, with an iron, muscular body and the "gentile" face of a factory worker. He declares in a splendid "goy" Russian. Apukhtin's poem about the Hungarian countess sounds wonderful in his mouth. The latter, on her last visit to her son, condemned to death in prison, says that she believes she can obtain his pardon. When she leads him to the gallows with a white scarf around her, it is a sign that he has been pardoned. At the last moment, when they put the noose around his neck, he would know of his pardon.

When the Hungarian count appears at the place of execution and sees his mother in the white shawl, he is sure that he will be pardoned and goes cheerfully and brazenly to the gallows.

50

The Hungarian countess has achieved her goal. Her son will die a hero's death, and will not stain the noble count's tribe with fear and terror.

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Hanukkah has already arrived at my father's house! The street swings in the bluish darkness of the night. Frozen icicles sparkle from the double windows, filled with white absorbent cotton and taped with paper. The streets are covered with white frosty snow like white feather beds, and hundreds of Hanukkah candles glimmer and wave on the window frames.

There is a festive tension in the house. My father lights the candles and pauses each time after lighting a flame, lost in thought. I know

my father. Probably philosophical thoughts are running through his head as the lit candle sways with its flame, like a tiny living creature, as if the candle with its red, fiery little head wants to interact with him.

The house is filled with the aroma of fried potato pancakes, and my mother stands next to my father, cheeks glowing, looking at each candle he lights with reverent silence, as if it were a shrine.

I stand by the window, swaying to the beat of the fiery flames. For me, these are not simple flames, but the souls of the heroic figures of Yehuda HaMakabi [Judas Maccabeus] with his sons, in the heroic struggle for the Jewish land, for the people and for the "Beys-Hamigdesh", [the Holy Temple of Jerusalem]. My father sings "Haneirot Halalu" [These Candles] and my mother holds my head against her chest, with wet streams of tears running down her cheeks. She whispers a silent prayer:

"God in Heaven, God of Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, protect my child from evil and wickedness. O Great God, may the flame of love for you and for your people Israel burn in his heart like the Eternal Light"...

And it is as if I feel something like a fear of the future storms of life and great dangers. So I bury my head in my mother's headscarf and cry silently, not really knowing why.

[1] "unter di fekhers" : I think this is an ironic allusion to an old German saying, "behind/under the fan", based on historical facts. Behind the fan, for example, a fine lady in the Baroque period could not only coquettishly hide her face when she blushed, but she could also talk about certain things, unheard by the "chaperone". Supposedly, there was even a "secret fan language" in the 18th century. However, with reference to the text, it certainly means that certain formulations and allusions were used in the conversation in order to remain "harmless" and that the conversations also took place in the protected area, quasi "under the supervision of the teachers present".

[2] literally "amkho... sher un ayzn" : I think that this refers not only to the tailor, but to the Jewish craftsman as such.

## **A Walk through the Streets of Białystok on Shabbat Afternoon**

Białystok, Shabbat at noon. Silence lies over the streets. The blinds are lowered over the stores. A few scattered peasants, slowly and lazily driving their horse[wagons] from „Shoseyne“ to Lipowa Street, point out that today is "zhidovska subota" [Jewish Shabbat] and

there is no need to hurry.

They used to joke,

"Nyema zhidki, nyema ditki" [No Jews, no money...].

From time to time, Jewish girls pass by, running late. They wear colorful ribbons on their combed heads and carry cholent; both pots topped with potato peels and vessels covered with brown paper bags.

Some shops are open. There is the shop of the famous Macedonian on Lipowa, next to Osher Topolski's glass store and the Turkish bakery on the corner of Lipowa Street. Their customers are young people who don't give a damn about "being Jewish". The Macedonian opens the "buza" beer bottles with a crack, which still smoke and foam in their necks before they pour angrily into the glasses, as if complaining that they are being forced to desecrate Shabbat.

The Jewish customers feel a little uncomfortable. They cast a glance through the window at the individual Jews passing by and pretend to be heroic, because they very well sense an inner uncertainty that something is not quite right.

With feigned bravado, they eat a few pieces of halvah and would have preferred to sneak back outside. Also at the " Turk" there are quite a few customers for the then famous cookies and sweet and sour "Kislo-Slodkes" pastries made of brown flour and raisins.

Białystok Jews celebrate Shabbat in their homes, together with their families. The father performs the ceremonial Kiddush, while the members of the household stand silently in reverence. Then the "Białystok delicacies" are served:

- Radish with fat, " frozen petshai " (calf's feet) with garlic, a heavenly taste, the Lithuanian "stuffed fish", a little peppered and with a red carrot on top.
- The sweet multi-layered browned "Lokshen Kugel" [noodle casserole] or the square baked "Ulnik" (grated potato cake).
- Meatballs, roasted with bay leaves and English spices and long, brown, braided challah bread, from which a sweet tooth had already secretly pilfered the tasty decoration.
- The cholent with fried potatoes in the reddish-brown stew, the stuffed [goose] neck, on which was still pulled the white cobbler's thread with which the neck was sewn.



Lipowa Street, photo courtesy of Dr.Tomek Wiśniewski



Suraska Street, photo courtesy of Dr. Tomek Wiśniewski

The dark yellow turnip stew fills the house with the aroma of turnips and remains for a while on Shabbat in the upper tube of the oven, next to the boiling tea in the copper "bunke," [ copper jug with narrow neck] bubbling proudly, for it is all that is left after all the tasty delicacies.

It has been eaten. Time for the blessing, and it is promptly followed by Father's admonition directed to the boys, "Nu-o-o-nu...", so that they would not miss the blessing.

Then the family disperses. The boys go to the yard to play with "tombakes" [uniform buttons] made of brass and "nyupikes" (a variety of buttons). The mother usually goes to the neighbor's house to return the cast-iron pot, and at the same time get something off her chest.

Dad pulls the fringed curtain closed, groans a little, and sighs, growling, about the youth of today who presume to "throw the czar from his throne".

He is referring to his older son, who has been away from home for a few days. The clatter of father's pulled-down boot can be heard, the smell of sweaty socks is in the air and immediately, the parlor is filled with the sound of beeping and soft snoring. Father has fallen asleep!

Only the daughter remains in the room. She goes to the window, draws the curtain a little, and looks out at the sharp stones of the muddy street. She closes the curtain, goes to the closet, takes out her only Shabbat dress, red with plaids, or the white flowered linen dress. In the kitchen, she washes herself on a wooden stool next to the sink, in a white enamel bowl with fragrant soap from "Friedrich Puls".

She waxes her high shoes with the buttons, silently, so that her father would not hear her, and puts on a wreath of red coral, which she bought at the "Yan", the fair on Piaskes, and slips on a worn signet ring, which her brother had sent from America as a gift from New York. She looks at herself in a half-broken, wooden-framed mirror and is pleased with herself.

From the broken mirror shines out a combed, hot, fresh face, with rosy cheeks, like ripe morellos [cherries], and natural red lips that harmonize with the white, full neck. She, the poor Białystok girl, looks like a freshly bloomed flower. Well, who understands the secret of where the daughters of Białystok get their freshness, grace and fragrance - like ripe roses on the fence of a poor abandoned garden. She is ready for a walk.

Shabbat afternoon. My mother sits with moist eyes over the "Tsenerene" [Jewish devotional book for women].

But, after all, when has my mother not cried? She, a mother with moods, is like all Jewish, lamenting mothers. Either she laughed heartily and infectiously when she told a funny story (and when she told it, she was an artist). Then her face would breathe with life and youthful freshness. Or she cried silently.

My father would look at her ironically, tearing his eyes away from a novel by Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, and I, taking advantage of the opportunity, would sneak out for an afternoon walk on Shabbat.

Between afternoon and evening. Lipowa Street fills with youthful strollers, leisurely walking to Nikolayevske [Mikołajewska]. On Lipowa there is a new movie theater, the "Iluzion" in Kaletsin's house. There, for the first time in my life, I saw pictures of picturesque natural landscapes in remote corners of the world. Also the then famous comedians Durashkin and Glupishkin and the children's idol, the first world-famous comedian Max Linder, who was accompanied by a storm of children's laughter when he crawled out of the chimney like a black chimney sweep or rolled down all the stairs.

Opposite is the second cinema, which is a bit more modern, and fact it is called "Modern". It is for older, wealthier people, because a ticket costs several kopecks more.

And there is the Russian Church, where military parades are often held on Sundays, and where elegant Russian officers with splendid gloves drill soldiers. And Białystok High School students, especially Jewish ones, would silently "flirt" with them and accompany them with their charming smiles.

Such a Russian general in his red "Lampasn" trousers [tight fitting green military pants with a red stripe on the side] used to give orders with his bass voice thundering all over Lipowa:

"Smirno! Zdorova rebyata!" [Attention, greetings, guys!] And a thunder of rural bass voices of the soldiers would echo:

"Zdrvya zhelayu vashe visoko prevoskhadityelstvo." [Greetings to Your Majesty!]

And there's usually a smell of barracks and sauerkraut emanating from them, from their soldier's spoons, from their boot shafts.

I take my Shabbat walk alone. As always, I love solitude, and as always, my mind doesn't rest for a minute. It works, sees, perceives, picks up something, creates a photograph somewhere in a corner of the brain, stores it there in a drawer, only to retrieve everything from the memory archive 35 years later and refresh it while writing the memories.



Source: <http://wirtualnie.lomza.pl/wirtualnie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Ksi%C4%99ga-album-pami%C4%99ci-gminy-%C5%BCydowskiej-w-Bia%C5%82ymstoku-cz%C4%99%C5%9B%C4%87-1.pdf>



## UL. BAZARNA RÓG MIKŁAJEWSKIEJ

Na prawo w rogu stara apteka, na lewo – sklep z materiałami Sloana i papierniczy Kadela Barenbluma. Główne miejsce spacerów i spotkań wstydliwych, uroczych dziewcząt żydowskich w szabatowe wieczory.

*Bazarne Corner Nikolaewska – on the right the well-known pharmacy; on the left Sloan's Textile store and Barenblum's Paper House. This was also the main promenade for the youth of Bialystok.*

source, see <http://wirtualnie.lomza.pl/wirtualnie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Ksi%C4%99ga-album-pami%C4%99ci-gminy-%C5%BCydowskiej-w-Bia%C5%82ymstoku-cz%C4%99%C5%9B%C4%87-1.pdf>



#### UL. WASILKOWSKA (Mikołajewska)

Najszerza i najdłuższa ulica miasta z pięknymi wysokimi kamienicami. Tu znajdowały się żydowskie domy bankowe, tu mieszkali adwokaci i lekarze, tu znajdowały się eleganckie kafejki i restauracje: Mec, Sztejn, Bar Angielski i inne oraz najlepszy kinoteatr „Apollo”. Tu mieścił się również Bet Midrasz Pułkowy. Ul. Wasilkowska ciągnęła się do „rogatki” przy Kolei Poleskiej, na trasie do pobliskiego miasta Wasilkowa.

*Washlikower Street was the widest and longest street in the city, where the important buildings were located. This was the center of the financial district and here the doctors and lawyers made their residence.*

source, see <http://wirtualnie.lomza.pl/wirtualnie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Ksi%C4%99ga-album-pami%C4%99ci-gminy-%C5%BCydowskiej-w-Bia%C5%82ymstoku-cz%C4%99%C5%9B%C4%87-1.pdf>

I continue my Shabbat walk. There is Osher Topolski's glass store. Osher Topolski! The Jew with the big beard and the even bigger heart. The Jew who sneaks out of his glass store to join his guests in prison. There he does his "business of good deeds". Always busy and stressed, his wife's loving grumbling often accompanies him when he disappears.

But in the end, Osher Topolski carries the burden of the prison's large crowd of "Jewish criminals" on his shoulders: there is a citizen who did not clean the gutter on time, or a summons because one secretly kept his store open on Sunday. And other crimes of this kind. But Osher Topolski knows that pious Jews, kholile [God forbid], would rather die of hunger than eat something "treyfes" ["impure"]. So, he brings them kosher food.

However, a romantic memory connects me with Osher Topolski, and that is with his daughter Eva, "Khavel".

I often used to visit my friend, Yisroelke Faynsod (he was the son of Leybl Faynsod, who had the mirror store). I became friends with his sister, Sonya, and she introduced me to Eva Topolski. On winter evenings, when darkness crept into the house, I used to sit on the soft divan. To one side of me sat Sonya, silently dreaming in the darkness, leaning her head against my shoulder, and to the other side Eva propped her head against my chest. And Eva's bulging and well-developed body and full cheeks made my heart beat faster. While she nestled against me, she asked melancholically:

„Yakov Dorogoy, razskazivay nam skazku.“ (Yakob, my dear, tell us a story!).

I felt the warmth of the two girls' bodies and shyly pressed myself against the plump Khavel, and the warmth of her body made me feel so good!

I closed my eyes and dreamed myself into faraway worlds, and in my imagination of a magical world and fantastic stories, I began:

"In a faraway land beyond the wide seas, in a rich kingdom, there lived and dwelt a king and a queen. They had three princesses. The two older ones were proud, wicked and ugly as the black night, but the youngest was beautiful, sweet and good as an angel. The older, wicked princesses hated the younger and more beautiful one, and spun dark thoughts of hatred and revenge.“

I would forget the two dear heads that cuddled up to me and fly with my thoughts into the wide world.

But life is not only beautiful stories, but also tragic, and one dark night in Białystok a fire broke out in Osher Topolski's house! The sky was colored red by the flames crackling and shooting sparks, and in the fire Osher Topolski's child perished, he [or she] died a cruel death and burned in the hellish flames.

Yes, life is not just a nice story.

But now back to my Shabbat walk. I approach the elegant "Aquarium" restaurant, where in the shop window an aquarium is displayed, in which golden-scaled little fish swim around. And I feel sorry for the little fishes who were so longing for freedom. In the famous gastronomic store of Muravyov, which has the most magnificent delicacies, the shelves bent under the most expensive canned goods, wines and fruits. If someone wanted to make fun of a small spice shop in a side street of Białystok, which had a few pounds of sugar, a few herring and a barrel of kerosene, the shop was mockingly called "Muravyov's department store".

Above Muravyov's store there was the "Club Blogorodnovo sobranya", where elegant Russian officers met to drink alcohol and play cards or billiards, and it often happened that a romantic Białystok High School student, under the impression of the delicate poetic verses of Pushkin, Lermontov and Nadson, became a victim of the tender Russian language, the sounding spurs and the elegant uniforms of the Russian officers. The latter hated the bearded "zhidovsken" [Jewish] father, but enjoyed amusing themselves with the Jewish daughter in love.

I often heard the story of the noble daughter Z., who became the mistress of the governor general Bogayevsky.

On the corner of Market Street and Lipowa there were two Jewish pharmacies of Ayznshtat and Vilbushevitch, which were famous not only for their medicines, but also for their beautiful "dandy" pharmacists, known for their elegance and success with Białystok girls.

And here I am already in the dense mass of couples walking to Shabbat on Nikolayevske [Mikołajewska]. Careless acquaintances are made here.

The Russian language sounds a bit louder to prove that you belong to the higher class of intelligentsia by speaking Russian. After all, what distinguished person would speak "jargon"?

It is nothing to be proud of. And like a dense procession of demonstrators the company walks along Mikołajewska to the bridge to Nadretshne Street and the "Polkovoyen" Bes-Medresh. The Jewish crowd of young people dressed up for Shabbat spread a cheerful laughter and hum of voices, and the eyes of the men flash to the hot looks of the girls.

I pass by the "Apollo" theater and I am satisfied and proud of our elegant, lush Białystok cinema with palm trees in the entrance hall; not even in the largest city would it have to be ashamed! And I have no doubt at all that the son of the owner, "Vaynshteyn" [Weinstein], the son-in-law of the well-known editor Pesach Kaplan and later owner of the "Apollo", committed suicide years later. He was so distressed by the cruelty of the Polish authorities, who had revoked his concession of the "Apollo" because he was a Jew.

And I would like to remember two other famous Białystok Jews, Dr. Pines and Dr. Rubinshteyn. Dr. Pines, the ophthalmologist, was world famous, and people from the larger towns and the smallest villages flocked to his clinic.

When I was already living in Antwerp, I once met at my uncle's house Kalman Dimentshteyn, a diamond broker, a great Talmudist, a Jewish scholar. He was very modest and it turned out that he was the brother of the legendary Dr. Pines. I met Dr. Rubinshteyn by a strange coincidence when I suddenly became his assistant.

A woman in my family had a difficult delivery and suddenly, in the last push contraction, the baby was about to be born feet first. And not having an assistant at the last minute, my family "delegated" me to help sterilize the instruments and deliver a Jewish daughter.

So I witnessed the remarkable talent of our famous obstetrician, who turned the little creature (who was a girl) several times so that she would come head down into our sinful world. Yes, as you can see, man goes out with his head down at birth.

However, I cannot leave unmentioned the well-known store of electrotechnical articles of the German "Sherschmid", because of a completely different matter.

The "fellow believers" of the "Shershmid" brothers (short shaved Germans with red necks), together with the "Volksdeutsche" and German Nazis, killed their fellow citizens and neighbors of Białystok in flaming fire and a terrible fire catastrophe; sixty thousand Jews! If you leaf through the "Pinkas Białystok", you will be confronted with the German anti-Semitic [ugly] face. One hundred and fifty years ago, when they administered Białystok, they introduced the Prussian Jewish Regulations, which were in fact an Aryan Paragraph, or racial legislation.

Please forgive me, I accidentally jumped from the past to the present. But how many times will we have to face the bloody wind of the destruction of our city?

I continued my walk and now I am near the "Polkovoy" Bes-Medresh. How many times, after my father's death, I sneaked in there quietly and sadly to join a "minyen" [prayer quorum] and say "Kaddish"!

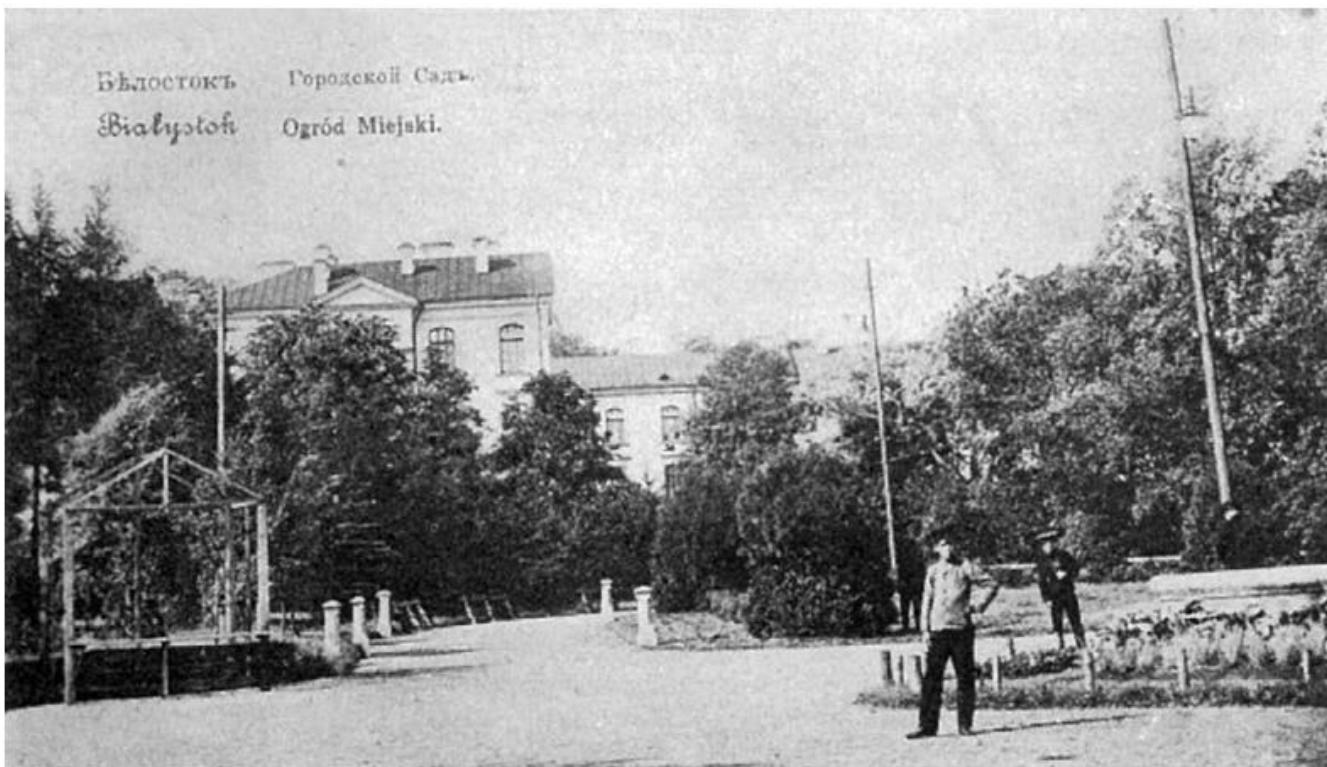
And the "Yisgadal v'Yiskadash" of the "Polkovoy" Bes-Medresh still rings in my ears, like a farewell Kaddish for all Białystok. And the echoes of the Kaddish come to me from thousands of miles away, in long, vibrating tones of silent prayer and stifled crying.

### **Romantic Evenings in the Białystok City Garden**

A writer is like a photographer, he photographs what his eye and brain perceive, whether it is the pious sounds of Jewish melodies from the old Bes-Medresh, or the night dreams of the lads sung with fresh blood. The writer may still "touch up" a little to give a clear picture, but it must be true, even if it is shocking to a pious, virtuous reader.

\*

The Białystok City Garden! How much longing, youthful dreams and sweet, romantic hours are woven into this name: Białystok City Garden!



### W OGRODZIE MIEJSKIM

Pierwszy bialostocki Ogród Miejski (Gorodskoj Sad) z czarownymi alejami, drzewami i kwieciem. Miejsce dawnych radosnych „gulianies” (spacerów) i wieczornych romantycznych „swidanies” (spotkań).

*In the city's gardens – the beautiful, spacious lanes where the city's young men and women “chanced” to meet.*

source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf) (wirtualnie.lomza.pl)



#### INNA CZĘŚĆ OGRODU MIEJSKIEGO

W tej części ogrodu grywano muzykę, dzieci tańczyły, a starsze pary beztrosko spędzały letnie wieczory.

W oddali widać budynki szkoły Joffego.

*Another section of the city's garden – where children romped about and music played and where older couples would spend a carefree hours in relaxation.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf) (wirtualnie.lomza.pl)

The first awakening of young men's feelings is accompanied by a desire to dress up and a thirsty search for the one who will become the future bride. It is characterized by the fact that the eyes begin to wander over the young, innocent, shamefully blushing faces, with rapture make out the female bodies developing to maturity.

Białystok girls in their first awakening of femininity and physical desire, still unconsciously and vaguely wrapped in night dreams, wake up and are aroused by the first kisses they receive in the quiet avenues of the sweet Białystok City Garden, planted with green, motherly trees.

The youth of Białystok matured to the sound of music in the "gulyanyes", to the soft tones of the "Vengerkas" [Hungarian Folk Dances] and "Mazurkas" [Polish Folk Dances], and tenderly sang Russian and Yiddish love songs in the Białystok City Garden, enveloped in the quiet corners of the evening darkness.

\*

Białystok City Garden is surrounded by four sides, four points and four contrasts.

In the background there is the important and busy industrial power plant, which supplies the whole of Białystok with electric light and power for thousands of motors that drive the Białystok textile factories and shower the world with Białystok "karelekh" [cheap woolen cloth], "kastorke" [cloth for suits] and "drap" [chunky winter cloth].

On the second side, to the left of the City Garden, there is the famous "Yafe's School", which strives for "Russification", where every morning 240 Jewish boys immerse themselves in the sounds of the Russian language and Russian verses by [Alexander Sergeyevich] Pushkin, [Mikhail Yurievich] Lermontov and the then famous poet [Semyon Yakovlevich] Nadson, who died young.

Opposite the entrance to the City Garden is the modern, semicircular "Hotel Ritz" with beautifully wallpapered rooms and the latest, most modern equipment: bathrooms with hot water, luxurious and elegant, like a hotel in a great spa. At the front, at the entrance, a doorman with golden buttons, like a general, opens the door and bows aristocratically.

On the right you can see the "Institut Blagorodnikh Dyevits", called "Insitut" for short. It is the Russian educational institution for the noble daughters of Russian military men, aristocrats and Russian "first guild" merchants. Every morning, as in a luxurious, elegant

prison, they go for their morning walk in the Institute's green, flowery garden, which is surrounded by a high fence. They [the daughters] look dreamily at the streets of Białystok outside, at the cheerfully beckoning City Garden, from which so often seductive sounds of sentimental music emanate.

\*

Białystok, Shabbat evening. The evening fights with the brightness of the day and is superior to it. Gray-blue streaks cover the sky and waving little stars jump out, like waving little fires in the restless night. The little stars are lighting themselves, more and more often and more brazenly. More and more of them are mysteriously dancing in the sky of Białystok on Shabbat evening.

Dark silhouettes of lamplighters move around with boxes filled with lamps. In Khanayker- and Suraska Street they put ladders to the gas lamps, climb up, clean the sooty lamp glasses, and already red flames are waving from the gas lamps in the bluish Shabbat twilight.

But the showy streets, Lipowa, Gumienna, Mikołajewska and "Daytshishe" [German or Niemiecka] Street are already equipped with electric street lamps, and they sway, looking down haughtily from their tall electric poles, shining dry and distant with their cold electric light.

\*

In the summer of 1913, large posters were hung on the fences of Białystok, bearing the signatures of the city's fathers: the head of the Russian government, police chief "rotmister" [captain] Pulan and the rabbi of the city of Białystok, Dr. Yosef Mohilever, a grandson of the famous Zionist leader, Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever.

Colorful posters inform the citizens of Białystok that in the evening in the "Gorodskoy Sad" [City Garden] there will be a "gulyanye" for the benefit of poor, needy students of the Białystok "Commercial School", with music by a first-class military orchestra, confetti and streamers, and a grand finale with fireworks. And the main thing: it's fun for the children - "dyeti bezplatno", children are free.

Hundreds of young boys and girls meander along Lipowa and Nyemetski [Niemiecka, German] Street. They monkey about and peel fruit pits. Dressed up for Shabbat, they walk happily and contentedly to the Shabbat evening paradise, Białystok City Garden.



Hotel Ritz, source [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf) (wirtualnie.lomza.pl)

At the entrance to the "Gorodskoy Sad" [City Garden] many people are standing close together, pushing impatiently, because they can already hear the sounds of music, a sign that "it has already begun".

The ticket seller in his booth is irritated and yells, and the Russian policeman with the red nose of a drunkard and a sabre dragging behind him "makes order" by giving strong blows to the right and left and wiping his large, drooping moustache. The "barishnyes" [young ladies] stand tensely, proudly, holding their barrels, quietly showing that they are already grown up and well-behaved. The boys pay for the ladies' tickets, acting important and proud, in the manner of a gentleman.

It's "free for children," and little girls, poorly dressed, wipe their dripping noses with their sleeves, step on others' feet, get caught on ladies' dresses, lift their little heads and beg, singing:

"Take me in...take me in..."

They cling to the dress of a young lady who can't bring herself to refuse, because six or seven years ago she did exactly the same thing.

So the young lady takes a girl by the hand and "innocently" walks past the ticket seller in the booth, who looks suspiciously at the beautifully dressed "mom" and the snotty "daughter". He realizes the trick they are playing on him, but he plays dumb and lets them pass.

And as soon as the poor girl from Khanaykes or Piaski is "inside" with her one little foot, she tears herself away like a whirlwind, jumps happily on one leg and disappears into the wide avenues, forgetting even to thank her temporary "mother".

\*

The park is noisy. Two languages compete: proud, singing, romantic Russian and Yiddish - pleasantly maternal, hearty and charming, interspersed with local expressions, idioms and jokes.

In the middle of the avenues hang the white electric globular lamps, which look festive with their big, bright, milky light. The avenues are densely strewn with colorful confetti and long streamers. Loud conversations and peals of ringing, youthful laughter can be heard. Hundreds of boys and girls march slowly in wide, scattered rows. Most of them are schoolchildren. Eyes meet, shy and bold, waving and lowered, ardent and sober, young, curious and old, extinguished.

The different colored eyes are partly young, carefree or thoughtful, partly calm and older. They are bold eyes, thirsty or hungry, cold and apathetic. The noblest of them belong to the "golden youth", the studious youth.

There walk the students of the Women's „komerts“ [Commercial] School. They wear dark dresses with green decorated belts that tighten their young maiden bodies and accentuate their figures. Next to them are the students of the Commercial School for men, dressed in smart suits with brass buttons, like Austrian Junkers. They come from the Commercial School on Aleksandrowske [Warsaw] Street, sponsored by the famous German textile manufacturer in Białystok, Moes.

The "komersantn" [male Commercial School's students] walk in blue uniforms with the "Kokarde" on their hats, an old insignia of "Mercury", the Greek god of merchants and thieves. The students of the Real school walk stiffly and proudly, with yellow decorated hats and "Kokardes", often together with their colleagues, Christian realists, because the number of Jews in the Real School is very small, given the "percentage rule", which is strict.

There are the Jewish merchant's sons of the Aleksandrov Gymnasium, who speak a Russian interspersed with Jewish expressions. Very few are the students of the "Gorodskoye" [Municipal School] on Mazur Street, a school known in Białystok for its Christian character and Christian prayers before the beginning of classes.

There is a mixture of students from High Schools and Middle Schools, from "Shtsheglov", "Meltreger", "Druskin", "Gurevitsh" and "Lakhankas". (The Lakhankas Gymnasium, located on the street "Behind the Prison", was turned into a German military hospital for the wounded during the First World War).

The students of Yafe's School walk elegantly. They tell jokes about their teachers Klyatshko, Lusternik and Tsipkin, especially about Zhmudskin, who is known as a Jewish anti-Semite...

And then there are the somewhat more modest pupils of the Gvirtz'es girls' school and the "amkho" [ordinary] Jewish children of the two-class elementary schools of Bibitski, Menakhovske, and Fridman.

A certain group of students differs greatly from the "pampered, white-handed" youth, and these are the students of the "Remeslenoye" [Artisans' School], who work in the textile, mechanical, and furniture workshops, and in whose language you will not find a single Russian word.

They speak in their native Yiddish, interspersed with a Hebrew quotation, with lively Jewish gestures, and from time to time you hear an extended Jewish folk song, still from their childhood, when their mother sang it while rocking the cradle.

\*

The sounds of the music echo far into the air. The musicians of the "Vladimirsk" and "Uglitsk" regiments are wearing dandy, shiny boots, trousers with white or red stripes, epaulettes and belts hanging from their shoulders. They look into the eyes of the conductor, who majestically waves his baton.

Aware of his importance, he greets them politely, bowing to the famous young ladies who pass by and with whom he often flirts during the intermissions.

The musicians' round, carved wooden pavilion is surrounded by a swarm of Jewish children who beat the music with their hands. At each break, they clamour, exclaiming their favorite musical pieces:

"Play 'Pa-despan' [Pas d'Espagne] or 'Padekoter' [Pas de Quatre]" and the handsome conductor with the thick, curly hair that our Jewish brothers often have responds good-naturedly:

"All right, children, it's all right, everything will be all right!"

From the fence of the City Garden, noise and shouts penetrate. A crowd has gathered, a policeman has grabbed a barefoot, ragged boy and is leading him by the ear. The boy had taken the "free admission" at its word and crawled over the fence without a ticket. The Jewish youth, in a Shabbat mood, take pity on the unfortunate fence climber. They deliberately create a crowd around the policeman, pushing him from all sides, and in the general commotion the "criminal" breaks free and disappears, accompanied by the whistling of the irritated policeman and the general laughter of the "audience".

The musicians indulge in the intoxicating, swaying tones of the "Padekoter", "Vengerka", "Espan", "Pa-despan", "Polka-koketka" and "Mazurka". The main avenues that run from the entrance to the small fence gate opposite the power station are lined with rows of strolling young people. They march past the music pavilion, on which hangs a board with a printed program of the concert, mostly a classical repertoire of light dances and waltzes.

A light dust hangs in the air and settles on the already dusty gray shoes.

Groups walk around.

63

There goes a group of quite a few schoolgirls, a mixture of female High School students, and behind them a group of male students from the Aleksandrov Gymnasium, dressed in dark blue, stiffly starched uniforms. The female students pretend to talk only to each other, but so loudly that the male students behind them can understand and interfere in their conversation. They approach from behind on their high heels, interjecting to get to know each other better and perhaps, if the occasion arises, to arrange a date.

The girls behave dismissively. They respond with a bratty, so fashionable feigned anger:

"Nakhal! [Impudent man]!"

And, they laughingly top it off with feigned haughtiness:

"We don't accept street acquaintances!"

But the High School students walking in a group do not remain silent with admiration, but on the contrary react with chutzpah, and continue their "attack" until it is crowned with success. And after half an hour they are already walking together, diligently trying to outdo each other with Pushkin's declarations, flirting a little, full of wit, a little cynical and with ambiguous allusions to love.

The sky is already dark blue. Night is falling. In a side avenue, on the other side of the quiet, whispering river, opposite Yafe's School, couples sit on benches under trees with hanging branches, far from the hustle and bustle of the avenues. This side of the river is quiet. Young couples embrace each other passionately and silent kisses sigh out, swallowed by the distant echo of the music, which with its lyrical tones so romantically adorns the open young hearts when they are first excited by fantasy and hot young blood.

\*

The "gulyanye" is in full swing. The ladies of the "charity society" fly around like night butterflies in bright summer dresses, selling lottery tickets promising "golden luck": A Japanese tea set, a dinner service of "Severer" [Sevres?] French crystal (both items probably came from Osher Topolski's glass shop), silver trays and wine cups.

All this is displayed on a table decorated with colorful ribbons and lit by colorful Chinese paper lanterns, and hearts beat with sweet excitement: Maybe their ticket number will be drawn and they will win? (I remember a curious incident when a cow was once raffled off at a "gulyanye," a real flesh-and-blood cow. And the story goes that the winner was the beautiful Naya Vilner, now the wife of our famous

compatriot, Dr. Khayim Shoshkes. And the Białystok pranksters joked that everyone saw how the beautiful, elegant Nadya proudly led the cow by the rope and half of Białystok followed her...

\*

It is almost 11 o'clock. The end of the "gulyanye" is approaching, but first comes the last attraction: fireworks! Various firecrackers and Bengal fire in the shape of a cross are attached to sticks. A dense crowd surrounds the square and in the general silence and expectation the fireworks are lit one after the other.

Brightly colored windmills rotate, spraying colorful fire upward. Like mills in a hurry, everything spins faster and faster, suddenly exploding into the air with a bang like colorful rockets. They sink into the blue, star-filled sky, where they explode with a final bang and are extinguished, swallowed by darkness.

The "gulyanye" in the City Garden is over. Visitors leave the park in groups, sometimes noisily, sometimes thoughtfully, and the park empties out.

Gradually, the white electric lights go out. A few couples remain, hiding in the corners of the park. There they sit in the darkness, tenderly embracing each other, unable to tear themselves away from this beautiful, romantic evening, the "gulyanye" in Białystok's City Garden.



#### RZECZKA BIAŁA

Rzeczka Biała przechodząca przez ogród miejski przecinała miasto przez całą szerokość. Od „Nowego” do Białostoczku. W oddali most, który znajduje się dziś w „Nowym”, na przedmieściach Białegostoku.

*The “Bialy” Lake which wound its way through the city's gardens. The lake cut through the entire width of the city. In the distance may be seen the bridge located in “Novi”, a suburb of Bialystok.*

source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://www.wirtualnie.lomza.pl/Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf) (wirtualnie.lomza.pl)

## Types of Białystok's Crazies and Eccentrics

Evening. The darkness of the night is spreading over Białystok. Naughty little stars, impatient guests, jump into the sky much too early, waving their fiery little eyes at Mama Earth, my Białystok.

There is a little commotion at home. Mama is wiping her nose with her apron. She is hot from closing the oven with the glowing coals and locking the door.

She wipes her flushed face, runs to the door again and again,

65

sticks her head out and listens for footsteps in the street, waiting with motherly concern for me to come home. She mumbles to the street, but when she talks to my father, words come out of her mouth:

"The father doesn't care that his child is lost, such a cold person. It's so late and he's not here yet!"

Quietly, at the window, my father drums a military march from his military service in Bessarabia and smiles good-naturedly. He understands a mother's heart.

Finally, she sees me coming home with my satchel on my shoulder, flushed and hurried from running so fast. Mama throws herself at me:

"Where do you get lost for whole days? At four o'clock your school ends and now it's already eight!- He just walks around at random, but everywhere he finds something. Where there are two, he must be the third. He is curious about everything. Probably he's been standing and gawking at some crazy guy in town again."

This time my mother is right, she got to the point. It is my mad passion to keep an eye out for "crazy people", confused drunks and other derelicts on the streets of Białystok.

\*

During the long winter nights in Białystok, when the city was covered with white, freshly fallen snow, I used to lie under a warm blanket and relive, as if in a fever, dozens of images and types that I had experienced during the day or that had passed me by.

I lived permanently, almost like a moon addict, dreaming while awake, wandering the streets of Białystok for hours in silence and thought. After school or on the festive Shabbath days, I automatically absorbed everyday life. Almost without realizing it, I absorbed the images, characters and scenes.

I followed and observed strange people, eccentric types, half-addled and maniacs, melancholics, official madmen, and the simply inexperienced, who were already slipping into the status of recognized, "madman of the city".

With my young mind and good child's heart, in my night

66

visions I used to feel pity for the unfortunate ones, thinking of the miserable wandering madmen who had no roof over their heads: Where were they now, in the cold, snowy winter night? With what did they warm their starving bodies?

What parts of their naked bodies were probably sticking out of their patched and torn clothes? There is something special about the naked human body, even when it is peeking out of worn beggar's clothes.

The creatures who have been rejected by God and man and who have lost their human appearance, who are victims of ignorance, hereditary diseases, alcoholism, and unrestrained human lust, are above all victims of the powerful ruler and tyrant of the world, the executioner and torturer, His Majesty, "Lord Hunger and Misery".

\*

Crazy people can be divided into categories and distinguished like writers: There are the "recognized" and the "non-recognized" who still have to "work their way up. There are those who have already reached "seniority" and are famous, and those who are still beginners but have already been eternalized.

There are the serious, dramatic and comic madmen, then those whose appearance evokes horror and portrays a tragic story or reveals a page full of human tragedy. There are madmen who make you laugh, entertain you, distract you and make you forget your own worries.

And the crazies whose condition indirectly drives you into a state of sweet selfishness because you're still okay: "Now look at that crazy guy - he's even worse off!"

How magnanimously beautiful and sublime, and how base and mean, a man can be when he finds comfort in the suffering of another. People who have learned to look into their own souls are often shaken by the destructive contrasts between the heavenly grandeur and the mean baseness that are so artfully united within us and in the same bundle of brain which we call "markh" and the same tangle of feelings we call "neshome" [spirit, soul].

And now, writer, with your super ability to wrap tangled thoughts into an endless chain without stopping, disappear and remain an observer and painter. Become a calm portraitist, suppress your own emotions and, with the power of the magic word, evoke images and figures whose limbs are already resting under the ruins of your hometown..

67

### **Bendet, the Tshayner Yat [Tearoom Lad]**

Bendet is a tall, broad-shouldered Jew with a red, bloodshot face framed by a blond beard. His tipsy dark blurry eyes peer into the air. He walks shakily on his legs, which are stuck in dried-out, hard leather boots smeared with wagon grease.

He holds on to the rope tied around his belt and shouts in a hoarse voice that echoes down Gumienna Street and ends with a "nign" [melody]- a mixture of a psalm, a human groan and tears- due to the "bitter drop" [schnapps].

"Bendet is a Tshayner yat... [blessed is the man]... a hardship for bourgeois people ... למנצח מזמור Shir [a psalm song for the cantor]"

Bendet bawls half-singing, with snatches of psalms. And his hearty, serious face seems so immensely sympathetic that he is the darling of the mercantile Gumienna Street, where the bourgeois, the factory owners, the grocers, and the simple stick-turners [with irregular income] are very happy about him.

Bendet is not a "madman". He is an eccentric, curious guy, a combination of a hard-working Jew who thinks a lot about the Torah and quotes biblical verses, but also one who loves his glass of liquor and his horse.

Bendet is a proud Jew. His face expresses seriousness and self-confidence as he stands on Gumienna Street, next to Shoshkes' tobacco shop or Ferder's fur shop, waiting for a crate of goods to be carried away.

Next to Bendet, on the corner of Gumienna, Bishkele, the newspaper vendor, is busy walking around. He is so small that one third of his body is taken up by a dusty pair of leather boots, and the remaining two thirds by Bishke. He works hard, yelling obsessively and raining newspapers into receiving hands. At the same time, he throws his body like a juggler, nimbly pulling out a "Haynt," a "Moment," or a "Togblat," and, in search of scraps, letting his hand crawl into the large leather bag that takes up Bishke's entire belly.

Tall Bedet looks at little Bishkele with contempt, and disdain is [even] reflected on his face as he looks at him with his calm, typical "Bendet'ish" philosophical seriousness.

Bendet was not always a simple carrier. He was once a wagoner, the owner of his own horse, and he and his horse were always together, like a couple in love. And when Bendet

68

would sip from his bottle, he would also give his mare a sip, and the horse would often be as drunk as its owner.

But when Bendet began to shout, singing his confused, psalm-like song aloud and leaning against the horse's head, the horse would usually close its eyes and turn its head away, as if to show its contempt for its master for not behaving as well as he should and making such a racket in the streets.

In a philosophical way, the horse also had a bit of Bendet in it, but as for Bendet's hoarse charivari, it behaved in a more dignified manner, as befitted a horse.

Bendet played politics with his horse and did not give it anything to eat, but accustomed it to his way of life, to get by on nothing but schnapps. Anyway, the horse did not have Bendet's indestructible health and could not stand it. He said goodbye to Bendet with his bottle and disappeared into the world of horses.

I just can't bring myself to say that Bendet's horse was anything like "croaked".

After the death of his beloved friend and breadwinner, Bendet began to pour huge amounts of alcohol into himself and wail with his "Bendetish" melody:

"*שרי האיש*" [blessed is the man], I made my carrion a man, taught him the craft of fasting, is "למנצח מזמור Shir haAish" [a psalm song to the cantor]...

She finished her song and left, בָּגָן עַדְן תְּהִיא מִנּוֹחַתָּה [she will rest in heaven]...Bendet is a Tshayner yat. It is a misery for the poor and a hardship for the bourgeois."

### **Blume, the Socialist**

To the group of only slightly crazy people, who were not yet very well known, belonged Blume. She was somewhat manic, dreamed of social justice and was a child of the Białystok revolutionary years 1905-1907.

Very often she visited the textile factory family Moreyn on Białystokshanke [Bialostoczanka Street]. Between the noise of the machines, the pounding of the steam looms and the heavy breath of the steam engine, Blume's voice could be heard, usually asking for a gift and demanding "justice" in the Moreyn's kitchen. What she got was very little. And when Blume looked at the alms on her hand, she always went out with the same "saying".

Her eyes began to flicker, her chest heaved,

69

and her squeaky voice spread out, drowning out the noise of the machines: "What, are you sick of not giving more? Do you really think all this is yours?"

And switching to Russian, she continued to shout:

"Eto nie moyo, i nie tvayo. eto ikhnye. Rabotshye narabotali." (This is not mine and not yours. It is theirs, the workers have made it for you).

When she went out on Bialostoczanka Street, she would rant heatedly, ending her tirade with half-mad eyes:  
"But I gave it to them!...I spared them nothing, those disgusting bourgeois people!"

And for a long time one could hear the angry voice of this unhappy soul, who did not know on whom to vent her anger, and who, exposed to the "revolutionary epidemic" that filled the air of Białystok, demanded "social justice"....

### **"Plush Velvet" and the "Kalkher [Whitewasher] of the City Clock Tower"**

Among the lunatics of Białystok one can also count the two maniacs "Plush Velvet" and the "Kalkher of the City Clock".

"Plush Velvet" was a madman who was attracted to girls in plush or velvet dresses. When he saw a woman in plush or velvet, he would run after her and just have to stroke her coat or dress. Of course, the girl would squeal in fright and run away, and he would not stop running after her until he could touch her.

The men were very amused and perhaps sexually aroused by this. Many admitted with a laugh:  
"This 'plush velvet' is not that crazy! You can count on him, he knows what he wants!"

The "Kalkher of the town clock" was a gaunt, thin man with sunken cheeks and feverish eyes. Every Monday and Thursday he would appear on the "Bremlekh" with a ladder and a bucket of lime, calmly and earnestly place a ladder against the town clock amidst the general throng of "Breml" merchants and passers-by, and set about whitewashing it.

Under the general laughter of the "Breml" [the area around the clock tower, where there were many Jewish stores in whitewashed cottages standing in rows, the Bremlekh] merchants, who were very happy about the free "attraction", the rushing police

70

could only with great difficulty keep the volunteer amateur from beautifying our popular town clock.

### **The Białystok "Messiah"**

I walk through the streets of Białystok. I am drawn to the "big shul" [Wielka Synagogue], where on festive Shabbat days the big electric light shines through the colorful windows and cheerfully illuminates the whole synagogue courtyard, which is filled with dressed-up Jewish youngsters and girls who quickly seize the opportunity to flirt before their father comes out of the shul and they have to be back home for father's kiddush.

Groups of people stand around. A group of Jews has formed, laughing and joking around a tall, pious Jew. He wears a beard that swings as he prays and gestures with his hands, gazes up at the sky with his eyes, and talks as fast as if he doesn't want to miss a minute:

"The Messiah is already here....Be aware, Jews! Be aware, Jews, that the Messiah is already here!"  
And as he passes by the people arround him, he speaks as softly as if he were announcing a great mystery to them:  
"I am the Messiah! But this must not yet be made known. Hush, sh...sh....! I am the Messiah!"....

The Jews around him make fun of him, cracking jokes and asking, "Reb Mikhel! When are you going to lead us to the Land of Israel?"  
Then the Jew, with his wandering eyes turned to heaven, bends to them once more and says quickly:

"Soon! The time is near! Soon the end of the days will be revealed! The right moment...the redemption..."

The children, dressed up for the holiday, push him, laugh, tear at his clothes and shout:  
"Messiah! Messiah!"...

A young man approaches the Messiah, takes him by the hand and says sternly:  
"Reb Mikhel, go home! They are already waiting for you at home with the Kiddush!"  
With his head raised, the Messiah disappears, his eyes gazing far into the sky, as if reading something in the dark blue clouds. One Jew says to another:

71

"What a heartbreak about that Jewish merchant! After all, the Mikhl Grodzenski has a furniture store, there, across from the old Bes-Medresh. But when his crazy impulse gets the better of him, he thinks he's the Messiah."

"Is that a miracle?" replies the other Jew, "when a people has been dreaming of the Messiah for two thousand years, everyone gets the idea that he is a bit of a Messiah...Everyone thinks in his own way that he is the Messiah...even the socialist and the Zionist!"  
And the Jew ends his speech with a sigh, "Who knows which one of us is clear, and which one is crazy?"

### **„Alyampas“**

One of the main "stars" of the Białystok madmen was the well-known "Alyampas". Small he was, with short, coarse feet, with a large, coarse, swollen belly and a round, big, puffy head, which grew in on his broad shoulders. His narrow, dull eyes gave the impression of a snarling, wild beast, and his voice resembled one of the oink of a pig. He had developed a system of "mooching".

He would lie down on the ground next to a shop (usually in the "Bremlekh") and begin to roar wildly. And while stamping his red, bare, swollen feet, he would repeat one word without stopping,:

"a kopek...a kopek....a kopek..."

"Alyampas" always arranged it so that he would lie on the threshold of the shop, so that no one could enter. And the lady shopkeeper, shouting and scolding, could not help giving him a kopek. As soon as he got his kopek, he looked at it carefully. His dull eyes shone with an expression of triumph, and, without a word, he stole away to another shop to do the same trick again.

There was something hulking, animal in his coarse, chunky red half-naked body. Only the dull, wild, cunning eyes showed signs of a stubborn will to live, like a primitive, coarse wild animal.

### **„Shmaye“**

A famous lunatic in Białystok was Shmaye. Everyone knew him. He was an unhappy, bitter madman, and children made his life a misery. But he did not owe them anything.

72

Shmaye was a mad beggar, a privileged one. He used to go to the rich houses of textile manufacturers and merchants, to trading houses and large stores.

His appearance was comical. He was small, with a long, wide suit coat that reached down to his knees, and his pockets were full of sugar and bread. One of his eyes was always closed, distrustful, as if he was looking at you with suspicion and could not clearly assess your intentions.

The children used to run after him, stooping in front of him and tugging at his wide, unbuttoned skirt tails from behind, shouting at him:

"Shmaye with the fiddle,  
play me a lidl [song]!"

He usually walked crossly and sullen, with one shoulder slumped forward, and would suddenly throw a stone from the pavement in the direction of the children, while growling with his half-closed eye:

"I want to split your heads...crooks!..."

Girls and women trembled before Shmaye, who had the fault to approach them and lift their clothes. Squealing, they fled from him, to the great amusement of the passers-by.

Shmaye was a madman and a songwriter. He had a penchant for cantorial prayers. When we lived on Gumienna Street in Ganyandzkin's yard, above Khashe Goldshteyn's cloth store, and our back door faced the "Rokhe the Shvartser" Alley, Shmaye used to go into the corridor with his "famous colleague, Sane", and give a concert of cantorial prayers.

He had a penchant for "yomim-neroimdike" [10 Days of Awe] prayers. I used to sneak quietly into the stairwell area and listen to Shmaye's concert. There was really a change in him. He was unrecognizable. His face lit up. His suspicious half-closed eye opened, and a naive smile appeared on his otherwise always malevolent lips.

He instructed Sane to sing the cantor's accompaniment. He himself devoted himself to the [songs] on Rosh Hashanah, "Kevakorat Ro'eh Edro" ... [רְאֵה נֶאֱדוּת הַמְּלָאֵךְ], as a shepherd guards his flock, excerpt from the haftarah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashannah, from Jeremiah, 31:10].

And Sane used to echo him:

"Kevakorat, kevakorat..."

Shmaye's hoarse voice rose to the high notes of the melodies of the Days of Awe.

73

And when it soared to very high notes, his voice sounded strangely wild and weird, like the howling of a miserable dog at midnight. Outside, a crowd of listeners was already gathering to open the closed door of the corridor to enjoy Shmaye's concert.

Usually Shmaye would interrupt his "singing", run out angrily and disappear. His "singing" made a strange impression on me. Something resonated in his hoarse prayers with his weeping, dog-like yowling - a kind of Jewish groaning, not just a bitter heart poured out because of his personal fate, but a kind of Jewish lament that united the mad son of his people Israel with the whole Jewish people.

Thus, although he was a madman, he was still a Jew whose entire madness disappeared in contact with Jewish prayer, as if this very madman felt the tragic fate of „madness“, poverty and a dog's life. Who can crawl into the soul of a madman? Especially, a mad Jew?

### **"Bobtshe with her Children"**

The well-known "Bobtshe with her children" was a strange type of a feeble-minded and mentally ill person. She was small in stature, in her early thirties, a round, plump, big-breasted woman with a good, childishly foolish, awkward smile, with a certain feminine charm, which in today's modern world would be called "sex appeal".

She was always out and about with her two children, running from shop to shop asking for alms. She was always good-natured and smiling, and her full, voluptuous lips expressed a kind of joie de vivre. Almost always barefoot, she held her children by the hands, who looked contented from their soiled faces. Bobtshe didn't even know who their father was. Often pregnant with another child, she was the object of jokes and ridicule by the grocers, who usually asked her with a laugh:

"Bobtshe, what is it? Are you pregnant again?"

74

Then Bobtshe would charmingly draw out each word, sharply accentuate each sentence, as is characteristic of a Białystoker, and answer quickly, good-naturedly, and unaffectedly:

"May cholera strike those Khanaykover scoundrels! They put me in a stable! May a disease take them away!"

The grocers would then laugh cackling and ask more:

"Well, Bobtshe, why did you let it happen? Why didn't you call for help?"

Bobtshe would always give a simple answer with the same good-natured smile, while looking into the distance, as if trying to understand her own words:

"Because the disaster knows it. Because I love it."

And, "the disaster knows it; I love it" was a popular saying in Białystok, and many did not even know that this naive, simple, honest answer, in which there is so much frank truth that rarely a woman dares to say, came from the crazy Bobtshe.

But Bobtshe was a passionate mother. She spent every penny she got, every piece of cake, every bit of cooked food on her children. And once, when two gypsy women were pressuring her to buy the children from them, she screamed for help so loudly that people ran together and the gypsy women barely escaped with their lives.

There was something of a quiet grace, motherliness, of Jewish spirit and naive, vague philosophy of life in this miserable, run-down woman and mother, who did not even understand her tragedy, but accepted everything with a good-natured smile. Her imbecility was like a serum to not have to comprehend the magnitude of her drama.

### **"Asara Dibraye" [The Ten Commandments]**

An exact opposite type of a tragic mental patient was the popular "Asara Dibraya". Her madness was actually based on a personal life drama that brought her to this state.

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

75

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

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

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

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

control over herself.

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

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

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

### **"Shoye-Toye" or "Byedni David s'Semyeystvos" [Poor David with his Family]**

Shoye-Toye was an urban figure in Białystok. On busy weekdays or Shabbat afternoons, Shoye-Toye used to stand leaning

76

against the corner of a wall on Vashlikover [Vasilkowska] or Gumyener [Gumienna] Street and hand out leaflets from the then "silent" movie theaters "Vyes Mir" on Vasilkowska Street or "Modern" on Lipowa Street. Later [he distributed leaflets] from the "Apollo" and the "Palace Theater" or from a festive Shabbat "gulyane" [event] of a popular Białystok City Garden immersed in green trees.

Tall he was, scrawny, with one side sunken in, a paralytic. His beetroot-colored, half-crooked face had an awry mouth and a pair of dull, empty, expressionless eyes, typical of paralyzed people. His paralyzed leg was leaning against the corner of the wall, and his half-paralyzed hand was carefully pulling out the playbill with its fingertips, carefully groping so as not to give out, kholile [God forbid], two playbills.

One had become so accustomed to the sight of Shoye-Toye that something was missing if one did not see his stooped figure leaning against the wall. Probably also because he was the messenger of news from the cinemas and places of accommodation, announcing that

today in "Roskosh" Park, in "Tserl's Forest" or in the City Garden there is a "gulyanye", where you can take your "barishnye" [lady] in for free, because today is "Damy Besplatno" [Ladies Free]...

Shoye-Toye was a Jew with many children, and when a Białystok Jew, a joker, once asked him cynically, "David, why do you make so many children?" David stammered, struggling to pronounce the words more clearly as his red cheeks blushed even more:

"What... should I do? Making... children is what I do for a living."

This was no joke, for his large number of children was indeed a means of earning an income. He had himself photographed with his wife and nearly half a dozen children: Shoye-Toye with his wife in the center and around them his children, with bright, spirited eyes, haughty little noses, and in a proud pose, as if they were royal children of the Tsar, standing around their famous father.

The sale of this family picture provided him with extra income. There was not a single Jewish house on Khanaykes, Piaskes, or Suraska Street where the litographic reproduction of the family photograph of Shoye-Toye with his family, covered with flyspeck, did not hang, pinned to the wall.

77

Apparently, the flies had little respect for Shoye-Toye and his family members and took care of their needs right next to the large Russian inscription "Byedni David s'Semyeystvos" (Poor David with his family).

I was very close to Shoye-Toye because we lived in a stone house together with Shoye-Toye's sister, "Sheyne the Molyerke" [the bricklayer's].

I was a frequent guest at all our neighbors' houses. There one had to read the agenda of the Russian court, such as a tax notice or a criminal record, because the gutter or the "privy" had not been cleaned, because one had "disturbed the order" ("narusheny poryadka"), or one had quarreled with the neighbor. One was also held responsible by society for having caused suffering to an animal ("pokrovityelstvo zhyvotnikh"), for having killed a cat or a dog.

If one had to write a Russian letter or a Yiddish letter with a non-Jewish address, one always turned to "Yankel the Teacher" [me].

I was "the little one" who couldn't even reach the table, and I was very popular with my neighbors. Love was mixed with respect. And, strangely enough... the whole "gallery" of neighbors, various types of rough, simple and uncouth people, without education and manners,

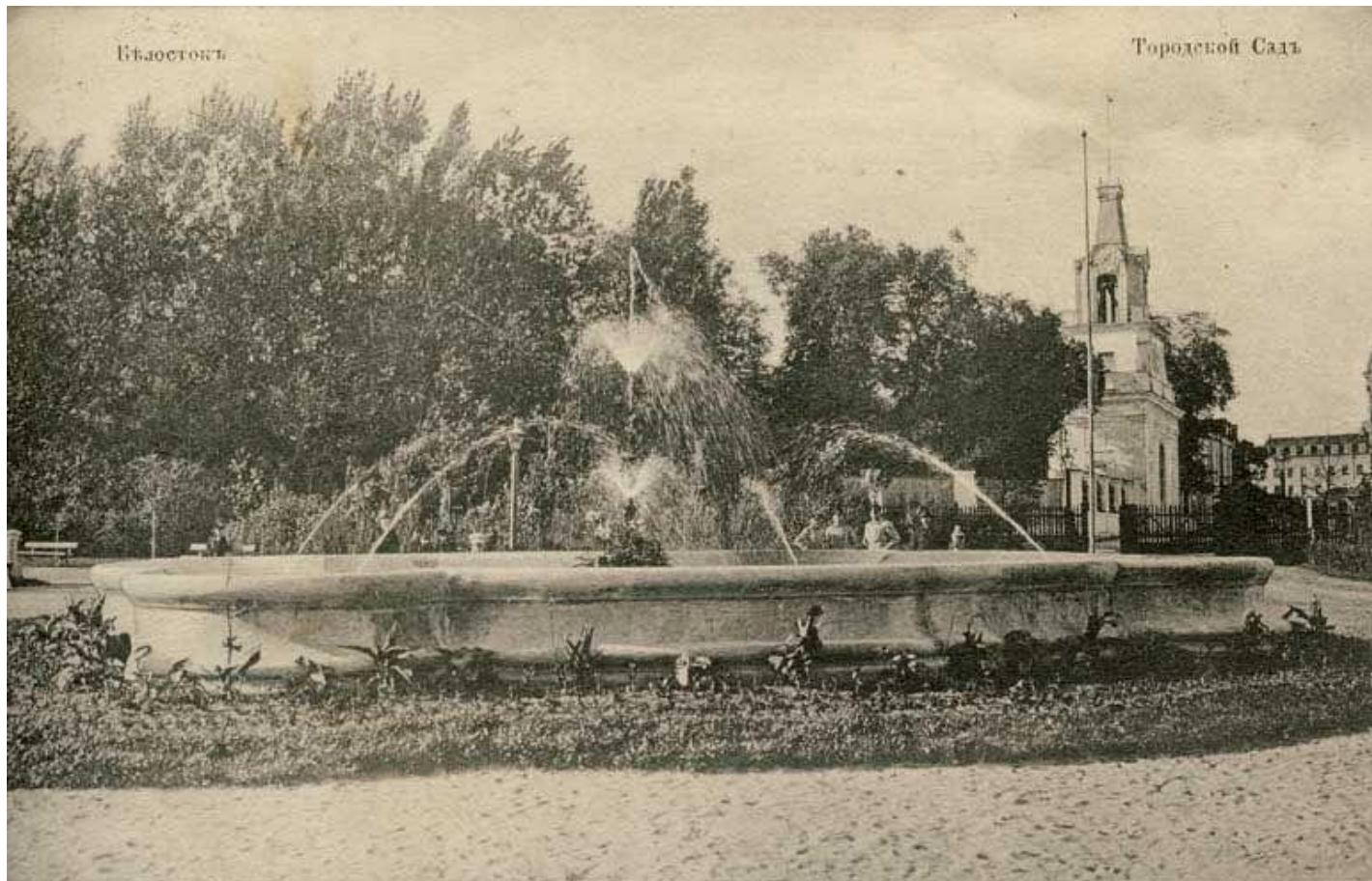
those cobblers, tailors, porters, packers, coachmen, adapted.

They spoke to me in a tone of exaggerated courtesy, with a stilted posture, a warm smile, and selected noble words. The very people who were accustomed to using coarse language in their colloquial speech, peppered with cynical expressions, avoided any coarse language when speaking to me.

By the way, among our neighbors we had the family of "Lyalke the Izvoztshik", whose mother and son are now in New York, the latter being a member of the "Białystok Friends Club". I remember how I always admired the tall, stocky figure of the burly Lyalke the Izvoztshik.

He had red cheeks, a brown face, a wrinkled neck, and a pair of coarse, powerful fists that marked the type of a bold, daring, and strong Jew who knew no submission. If necessary, he would deliver a powerful blow to the gentile's teeth if he dared to show "Esau's hands" or mock a "parkhati zhid" [mangy Jew].

He belonged to that race of Jews who, together with the Jewish workers, excelled in "samoobrone" (self-protection) when it came to sacrificially defending Jews in the dark "Shabes nakhmu" [the Shabbat Nachamu pogrom, the Shabbat after Tish'a B'av] and in the bloody Białystok pogrom.



Mieski Park, Old Białystok, photo courtesy of Dr. Tomek Wiśniewski



Famous City Gardens in Białystok around 1929 [with the Hotel Ritz], photo courtesy of Dr. Tomek Wiśniewski



BIALYSTOK. Bulwary im. M. Zyndram-Kościałkowskiego

photo courtesy of Dr.Tomek Wiśniewski



photo courtesy of Tomek Wiśniewski

But I also remember other neighbors who represented the specific types of poor Khanaykes.

Katshalski, the painter, a man of medium height, always smiling, with thick hair and a slightly graying forelock, and his wife, Maryashke, a beauty with a tall, slender, aristocratic figure, with shiny hair as black as pitch, which surrounded a constantly laughing face, which seemed to be "felt-turned," as if shaped by a sculptor. In a milieu of hopelessness, despondency, withered faces, and perpetual worry marked by poverty, she was a contrast like a blossoming flower among yellowed, trampled autumn leaves.

Shmuel Kamenetski, or Shmuel the Shoemaker, was a small, hunchbacked Jew with a short, round-shaven beard. He loved the khaynaykover bes-medresh, was in love with all the khazonim [cantors], and sang all the festive Shabbat prayers at work, to which he

would beat the time with a small hammer, tapping the shoe nails, which he held in his mouth.

The smell of softened leather and beet stew, which his wife cooked in a large milk pot before Shabbat for the entire week, constantly wafted through the house.

His wife Khaye, a small, skinny Jewess, dealt in chickens and offal and carried a basket of kosher-slaughtered poultry. Always smiling, she thanked the Creator of the World for the mercy he showed her.

But when Shmuel the Shoemaker flew into a rage at one of his two sons- both tall, handsome boys with biblical names, Yisroel and Yakev- the crooked, hunchbacked shoemaker did not even bother to get up from his little bench, but threw a shoe or a kopek at his son's face, screaming with bloodshot eyes:

"Obezhanie [Monkey!]...a disaster shall befall you!"

One of Shmuel the Shoemaker's sons, Yakev, later became my student, and I prepared him for the "Remeslenoye" [Artisans' School]. He grew up to be a handsome, intelligent, well-read fellow with good manners, and later became a clerk in the Białystok "Jewish Bank" on Kilinski Street, which was next to the editorial office [of the newspaper] "Dos Naye Lebn".

Closest to me, however, was Enye-Bashe, Hersh Fisher's daughter, a girl of thirteen, a year older than me. She gave me my first lesson in "innocent love" by pushing me against the wall and kissing my face. And when she burned me with her young, blossoming girlish body

79

she made me feel so wonderful that I didn't know what was happening to me, because my little heart was pounding and I was filled with a feeling of unknown pleasure and shame, as if I were doing something forbidden.

She was the first to open my eyes to the fact that there is a difference between boys and girls and an incomprehensible but so sweet happiness that lies hidden within her young, beautifully formed girlish limbs.

Shoye-Toye's sister, Sheyne di Molyerke, was a short, plump, red-cheeked woman with a noble face. Goodness and softness flowed from her every word. I was very fond of her. She was a "good neshome" [good soul] and always ready to do favors for her neighbors, not considering that she herself was in need.

I kept thinking about the contrast between Shoye-Toye and his sister. Anyway, I remember an episode which illustrated to me somewhat the type of Sheyne the Molyerke, but also gave me a terrible picture of the manners and scenes of the Khanaykes of that time. For it was a quarter that stood out from the other streets, full of unusual types that only the Khanaykes quarter knew, types that fit so well into the group of unusual types of Białystok at that time.

In the corner of Mirke's-Shayes Street there was a small alley with a name that did not fit at all into the customs of the alley. It was called "Tikhe Gas" (the Silent Alley). One half of this narrow alley looked like a painting by Marc Chagall, with small, crooked houses, curved roofs and dirty courtyards, full of narrowness, suffering and hardship.

The other half was a nest of streetwalkers, thieves, and fences.

On the corner of the "Quiet Street" there was a wooden house that served as a tavern, selling beer, hard-boiled eggs, pickled cucumbers, fried fish on "pulmislekh" [large plates] - and secretly under the counter also a glass of "Sorokovke" vodka from a [government] "Monopol" bottle, or a "forty" Russian liquor, for the sale of which one had to pay "special guild dues".

The innkeeper, "Leyzerke the Shenker [Innkeeper]", was famous throughout Khanaykes. He was a Jew with a pointed yarmelke [skullcap] and a goatee, with curly, frizzy forelocks over his ears, and a brown, dirty "tales-kotn" [a fringed undershirt] with "tsitses" [ritual fringes] dangling down to his boots, which were rubbed with shiny blue cod-liver oil.

80

Leyzer the Shenker [Innkeeper] was the owner as well as the waiter and servant of his "high class" guests: smart, garishly primped young people with boastfully twirled mustaches. Their heads were smeared with shiny black fixing pomade, and they wore silk shirts with colored rubber bracelets, black shoes with reflective lacquer, and gold signet rings on their hands.

These were the professional railroad gamblers, "aristocrats" of their "trade," who used to cheat at card games on the railroad. When they picked up a "yold" [yokel] or a "frayer" [punter], they "pestered" him and, to use the language of crooks, robbed him of his "mamtakem" [money].

Among these "shady" young men were also pickpockets and burglars [thieves] in houses with their helpers, who looked out for "black goods" watched during the theft, and then helped to hide the "goods" in a "maline" [hiding place].

And this whole gang of criminal types was grouped around a group of laughing "ladies," garishly made-up prostitutes with cynically perky movements and disheveled hair. They wore sheer, flowered dresses with wide-open, unbuttoned tops, and their exposed breasts wobbled in the large necklines. Their short dresses revealed their legs, bare above the knee.

Leyzerke would run into the courtyard to attend to his human needs. He would return impetuously, but with tiny steps, to the kitchen to

practice the ritual of "nail water" [the ritual practice of washing nails/hands] with the copper "kvort", [a container with two handles for ritual washing] overzealously wiping his hands in the long tail of his caftan, and quietly whispering the "Asher-yotser" [the blessing to be pronounced after accomplishing natural needs]. Then, with a pious mien, he would serve his guests and, with half-closed eyes, count with sweet pleasure the copper, dark-stained "ditkes" and "tsenerlekh" [three-kopeck coins and 10-unit silver money].

Leyzer the Shenker, exactly the same type as the pious Jew from "Yankel Shapshovitsh" [from Sholem Asch's "God of Vengeance"], was an "authority", an exceptional type, a local celebrity. In an incomprehensible way, his piety and strict religious habits were combined with the boisterous environment of thieves, fences, thugs armed with knives and prostitutes of the lowest kind.

Once it happened that the Jewish porters and packers of Leyzer got drunk and got into a fight. The two protagonists were the husband of Sheyne the Molyerke (Shoye-Toye's brother-in-law), who, depending on the season, worked sometimes as a bricklayer and sometimes as a porter, and another porter, his bloody rival.

In order to settle the dispute in a serious way, two "duellists" went to the yard of Mirke the Kremerke [storekeeper], in the street that was actually popularly known as "Mirke's Alley".

81

They closed the gate of the surrounding wall and immediately began a fight with steel, shining knives, a brawl to the death and life.

Sheyne the Molyerke also managed to get into the courtyard to help her husband, and with all her impetuosity she threw herself wildly at her husband's opponent, striking him on the temples with a stone.

The whole of Mirke and Shaye Streets came together, for it was the middle of the day. But no one dared to enter Mirke's yard to tear apart the two Jews who were competing for a morsel of bread and a shot of liquor to wash down their sorrows. Their constantly suppressed bitterness and their vulgar, degenerate environment could lead to severe beatings and bloodshed, which are so repugnant to the Jewish character.

Later, when the two wings of the gate were pushed open, the two Jewish porters were seen there with their heads covered with blood, and Sheyne di Molyerke, the good, noble, hearty Sheyne, was still standing there with a stone in her hand, hammering it on the bloody head of her husband's opponent.

It was then that I understood the intricacies of the human soul, and what suppressed feelings of need, suffering, and despair can do to a quiet person when they turn into burning, raging anger.

We often see this in outbursts of popular hatred, a spontaneous revolutionary convulsion of suppressed rage that turns the silent, dejected "Bontshe Shvayg" [a Jewish folk legend written by Yitskhok Leyb Peretz] into a wild, bloody beast.

### **Tanchum and the Songs**

Tanchum was the favorite of the "Bremlekh". He spent much time there. In the warm summer months, the grocers of the "Breml" would stand by the doors of their shops, "breathing in" the life of the streets and spending time with Tanchum, enjoying his singing and good-natured jokes.

The women, the splashed, pot-bellied grocers of the "Breml", would put their hands together under their aprons and keep an eye on the charming, amiable and cheerful man who was the half jester and half madman of the city.

Tanchum was slender, taller than average, with a noble face and canny, lively, yet dreamy eyes under his tangled, unkempt chestnut hair.

His elastic body, which swayed in his gait

82

as if he were a drug addict or an opium smoker, gave a special grace to his movements. He always spoke in a way that was partly joking, partly noble and almost feminine soft, for he had a light tenor and loved his "craft" of amusing his audience. He sang cantatas and folk songs or chatted with the "Breml" grocers, who were bored on weekdays without sales. They would sit by their doors and Tanchum would be a free attraction for them, driving away their evil thoughts of the Polish sequestrator and the taxes and the creditors with their promissory notes.

Tanchum walked around in the middle of the Breml like a popular actor sure of his success with the public. Nobody thought of him as a madman, but only as a town jester, a joke-maker, a kind of Białystoker "Hershele Ostropolyer", endowed with the strange ideas of a madman.

Even his tattered suit—a gift from a generous Jew—with the long trousers that clashed and wrinkled on top of the torn, waxed-polished shoes with holes in the sides, nestled tastefully and charmingly against him. If Tanchum had been dressed in an elegant suit and taught a few "salon manners," he would have looked like an elegant "heartbreaker" and movie star in Hollywood.

Tanchum was in love with his watch, a yellow, scuffed, copper watch with a big face that hung on a rusty nickel chain.

Every few minutes, he would proudly pull it out of the top pocket of his jacket and hold it anxiously to his ear. When he heard the "tick-tock," his face would smile happily, and he would wave mischievously and contentedly at the women, as if to say that his watch was already a [household] appliance, and he would proudly and carefully put the watch back in his pocket.

The women were delighted with their favorite, and when they began to ask him to serenade them, he would stand in the middle of the "Breml" so that all could hear him. He would raise his head and fix his eyes on the top of the city clock, lengthen a nign [melody] from a prayer to the "Yomim-Neroim" [Days of Awe] that he had heard in elementary school, or, while tapping his foot to it, sing one of the folk songs that the Białystok youth used to sing when they walked along the "Green Alley" in the Białystok city forest with its dense trees on summer evenings.

Tanchum would never ask for money, oh no! He was proud. If he was given something, he would shyly and quietly put it in his pocket, smile quietly and dreamily, and not even say thank you.

83

But Tanchum's main attraction was to tell how he had been freed from Polish military service. This was his "royal role" that made him famous. And it was based on real facts confirmed by the "prizivnikes" [conscripts]. Namely, they were present at the comic scene in the Polish "uzhond voyskovi" [recruitment office] at the "komisya poborova" [military commission]. And my acquaintance, who also had to register [for the draft] at that time and witnessed Tanchum's appearance before the military commission, also confirmed this.

And this is the story:

On a hot, summer day in July, Tanchum received a draft notice to join the military. Tanchum scratched his ear and said with a smile: "The hell I will serve him, that Polish crook!"

On the day Tanchum reported, hundreds of young people marched to "Old Shoyseyner Street", where in a large, whitewashed wooden building the Poles had designated the place for the registration of new recruits to the Polish Army.

In the large, rectangular barracks, about 50 young, half-naked people had lined up. They had taken off their shirts and wore only trousers. They were gentle peasant boys from the village, giggling, coughing, blowing their noses, and spitting on the ground, and Jewish youths from Białystok, with sunken chests and narrow shoulders. Among the latter was Tanchum.

By the large window, next to the table, sat the other members of the military commission. A short, gray colonel with the red face and red nose of a drunkard, with a drooping Pilsudski moustache, and a young lieutenant dressed like a dandy, with white-manicured nails and a bold, leering look.

His freshly shaved face with a cheeky, haughty nose expressed contempt. Also sitting [there] was a plainclothes clerk with quick, short-sighted eyes. With his eyes squinted behind his glasses, he held each form up to his nose and looked at it for a long time.

When it was Tanchum's turn, the colonel examined him carefully. He had been born in Białystok and could speak a broken Yiddish with "coarse reysh" [the letter "ר", r]. Tanchum seemed familiar to him, even though he was half-dressed. Tanchum was standing beside the table, and behind him, in a long line, were Jewish youths from Białystok, curiously awaiting the "spectacle" of Tanchum's enlistment, their faces beaming, forgetting their own worries.

84

The nearsighted clerk read Tanchum's name on the form, and the dandy lieutenant raised his head haughtily at Tanchum and asked: "What do they call you? What is your name?"

Tanchum moved a little closer to the table, bent his head to one side, stared at the ceiling with his eyes wide open, and began to sing:

"Friday evening,  
every Jew is a king,  
in every corner there is laughter  
in every corner there is merriment..."

A loud laugh came from the row of conscripts. The Polish lieutenant rose to his feet, a wild rage in him, and he was about to grab Tanchum by the throat. But then the old Polish colonel, who understood Yiddish and knew Yiddish songs, began to laugh with joy; his narrow eyes closed and his belly vibrated with laughter.

He gestured to the lieutenant, pointing to his head: "This draftee is a lunatic.

Presumably the colonel had recognized him and, now taking over the muster himself, asked Tanchum in a mixture of Polish and Yiddish with tears in his eyes from laughter:

"Tanchum, psha-krev [damn it], where were you born?

Tanchum, still standing in the same pose, raised his eyes to the ceiling, stretched, and let out a song:

"Who knocks in the night,  
Khone, the gas man,  
Nekhome, Foygele, open to me,  
I am your lover after all."

The Polish lieutenant, with bloodshot eyes, smiled a little crookedly. But when he saw his superior, the colonel, laughing half to death, he smiled sheepishly, not knowing what to do.

The whole line of conscripts, however, laughed in different ways, from a squeaky soprano to a thundering village chest tone. The colonel's eyes filled with tears, and he fell into a fit of laughter that tossed him back and forth in his chair, but he kept asking:

85

"Tanchum, cursed plague, what is your mother's name?"

Tanchum continued to stare, spreading his hands as if praying to God and singing:

"A Jew has a little wife,  
he has sorrow because of her.  
If she can't make a pudding,

she's good for nothing".

The colonel almost fell off his chair with laughter, and, waving to his assessors, continued his question:

"Tell me, Tanchum! Do you want to be a soldier in the Polish army?"

With his tender smile, Tanchum calmly looked at the colonel, felt that he had won the battle, and again answered with a song:

"Do you remember, do you remember, behind the gate,  
I told you a secret in your ear.  
Me without you and you without me,  
is like a doorknob without a door."

The colonel, recovering a little from his laughter and realizing that he had overdrawn the bow a bit, shouted with feigned malice while his laughter still choked his breath:

"Silence, you dog's blood! Throw him out!"

Then the lieutenant grabbed Tanchum's back with one hand and his neck with the other, led him to the wide-open door, and, to the general laughter of the draftees, threw Tanchum out into the yard. Tanchum rolled over twice and stayed there, butt up.

When he came to, he stood up, brushed the back of his pants with his hands, and smiled good-naturedly. He waved mischievously at the Jewish conscripts and muttered dreamily:

"But the hell I'll go to military service for that Polish crook!"

All of Białystok knew about this story at the military commission, and many came to the conclusion that Tanchum was not at all as crazy as they thought.

### **The Way to the "Roskosh" [Rozkosz] Park ["Pleasure Park"]**

A Shabbat afternoon. The summer sun spreads over Białystok, caressing and warming. Bundles of light rays break through the fringed, flowered curtains, illuminating thousands of dust motes that spin like flies around the sun's arrows.

My father sits hunched over a Russian novel, hands behind his ears, seeing and hearing nothing. My mother lies slumbering on the black leather sofa. But when I tiptoe to the door and grab the knob, her maternal ear hears it and she murmurs half asleep, "Yankele, where are you going? Don't be out too long. Be back for Havdalah."

I am already outside. I squint for a sunbath and warm up like a cat for a while. Oy! How sweet is freedom! I don't even want to go to any of my friends, just walk alone through the streets. Watching the life around me.

I notice unnoticed things and feel a sweet delight in the vibrancy of life. I see people and catch images with serious observation and youthful curiosity.

On Shabbat afternoon, the streets of Khanaykes are dozing. An old Jewish woman with two pairs of glasses on her nose sits by the window, bent over a pleading prayer. She sways her upper body, gazes indifferently into the distance, and moves her lips silently in a God-fearing and pious whisper. At the second window stands a little girl with a bundle of red ribbons entwined in her braids. Her face is red as a beet, with big doll's eyes and laughing cheeks. When she sees me, she cheekily sticks out the tip of her red tongue.

Two cheder boys stand by a fence, their pockets full of buttons. One, with a pockmarked face and tousled blond hair, is shaking his pants in glee. He pulls out a mountain of little buttons. The second boy, black-haired and thin, with peppery, shining eyes, puts the "tombak" (a brass soldier's button) into the wall and aims at the buttons. Both boys are heated, totally absorbed in what they are doing, as if they were trading capital.

In the house next door, the windows are wide open, and an old Jew with a fan-shaped, curly beard is rocking over a religious book, singing

a "nign" [melody], chewing on the tip of his beard, and chasing away the flies that circle stubbornly around a glass of tea with a red scarf.

I cross a field that leads from Khanaykes to Piaskes - pieces of empty fields. Here are mountains of dung and pits of light sand that the Jews dig to pour on the floor on Friday afternoons, because the so-called "shitn pilinyes" [pouring of sawdust] costs a fortune!

The field is dear to me. Here I used to burn the "khomets" [leaven] in a wooden soldier's spoon. I would put some bread and a goose feather on it and tie a piece of white linen from an old torn shirt around it. I liked to sit there for hours, watching the red, crackling fire and breathing in the smell of burnt leaven.

Leaving the field, I enter Piaskes. A drunken gentile staggers on wobbly legs, strokes his mustache, looks with blurred eyes at the Jewish children who run away from him and stop at a distance, frightened and curious. In a state of intoxication, saliva flows from his mouth and words come out of his lips:

"zhidi, zhidki, mosheniki" [Jews, Jewish pack, swindlers].

The head of a Jewish woman with disheveled hair sticks out of a window. She is shouting something to her daughter. She is carrying a copper pot of hot water, which she took from the teahouse in exchange for a receipt. She has stopped in the street to watch a "heaven and hell" game. Her mother shouts:

"Mirtshe! Zgrabne lyalike! Why are you dawdling so long? The hot tea will be cold by now as if it came from the ice cellar!"

Two girls in flowered linen aprons are dancing on one leg in the chalked boxes, a group of girls standing around them and clapping for the winner. Two full-grown fifteen-year-old girls, almost of bridal age, sit on a small wooden bridge and play "tsheykhes" [a kind of jackstones], reaching nimbly and tipping their hands in the air.

A boy and a girl, leaning against a gate, look lovingly into each other's eyes, crack fruit stones, look at each other with bright, laughing eyes, and burst out laughing, poking each other in the sides.

The market on Piaskes is empty, the stalls are closed. The tables are covered with a tarpaulin made of linen. An old dog trots across the silent market and suddenly stops next to a hidden cat, which hisses viciously with bloodshot eyes and sets its claws. I cross Piaskes, passing "Polyak's Pharmacy", next to "Rabbi's Street".

It is the only shop open. In the windows of the shop are white jars with labels with Latin words on them. I have respect and fear for the pharmacy and stop for a while. The door of the pharmacy opens, and a gang of dressed up, drunken goyim rushes out, carrying a young peasant boy with a bloody bandaged head.

A bride, a village goy with cheeks as red as apples, in a white wedding dress, comes running from behind, crying and wringing her hands. Apparently the goyim have been fighting to the knife at a village wedding.

I enter "Flaker's Gas" [Oficerska Street]. Girls with colored cheeks, blackened eyes, and short, light, bright, see-through dresses sit on the veranda and wave to the passing men. Three soldiers walk by, stop, lift their heads to the loudly laughing girls, exchange glances. One pulls out a leather wallet, opens it, counts the copper and silver coins, and scratches his close-cropped hair. He embraces his soldier friends and climbs up to the porch, where the "girls" rise from their straw chairs. They disappear into the house with its mysteriously drawn curtains and locked shutters.

I am not far from the forest, and the outlines of the tall trees, like a giant broom, are already clearly visible. You can hear an organ grinder playing, the chirping of children's voices, a humming of sounds. I am already at the merry-go-round. Wooden, colorful little horses and sledges are turning, going up and down.

Children with fluttering blonde and dark heads sit on the little horses, holding on to the nickel bars, their faces shining with happiness. A young peasant boy with wildly tousled hair, an unbuttoned shirt and a hairy chest, barefoot and in short, rolled-up trousers made of drillich, jumps from one child to the next to collect the kopeks.

The hurdy-gurdy squeaks the famous song "na tshto mnye mat' rodila" (Why did my mother bring me into the world?). A little blonde girl cries in a loud voice, rubs her teary eyes with her little fist, pulls her mother's hand toward the merry-go-round and tears herself away. The mother scolds the merry-go-round and shouts to her child:

"She's already wasted a fortune. She spent almost two kopecks on rides, and she wants more. These children today!"

An old man with a brown, gypsy-like face stands with a small box of "nevies-brivelekh" [divination slips]. A shabby parrot with a yellow nose [sic] gurgles on the box.

89

It is tied to the box with a rusty chain.

The parrot squawks torn pieces of words and pulls with its pointed beak several colored "divination slips", promising good luck and far journeys.

I am already at the soldiers' barracks. A group of soldiers with red, steaming faces from the sweat bath and cheerful, washed-out eyes are marching with brooms and towels under their arms, singing in chorus after a first solo, accompanied by whistling.

They sing the well-known soldier's song of the Russian doctrine "Dyevki v'lyes" [Girls in the Forest] with the following lyrics:

Girls in the forest,  
I go after them,  
Girls in the field,  
I go after them,  
Where the girls are  
There I am.

Three barefoot "shikslekh" [non-Jewish girls] walk by, carrying their high shoes by the laces thrown over their shoulders. The whole platoon of soldiers turns their heads to them, smiles at them cynically, makes humorous remarks, winks at them with their eyes. The blond "shikses" with the freckles on their cheeks blush up to their ears, giggle happily and shamefacedly. [Finally], they pant with laughter and hide their faces in their colorful aprons.

The scent of green trees. Shadows of the cool wind. Green-yellow leaves falling into the sand. Groups and pairs of walkers meet me at the edge of the forest that leads to "Roskosh" Park.

Dark gray streaks have stained the sky. Night has begun to fall. A round red aura has struggled before it sets, crawling once more with effort to the distant sky with its bloody red tinted horizon, creeping through the sparse trees of Tsertl's Forest. Powerless, it retreats, sinking lower and lower and then disappearing, leaving red fiery streaks like glowing iron in the bluish sky.

On the poles on both sides of the sandy road the electric lamps are lit. The municipal Białystok "konke" [horse-tram] creeps past to "Roskosh" Park with a ringing sound produced by the conductor's foot pressure.

The "konke" is pulled by two small, lean, sweaty horses, from which hot steam rises. The passengers:

School youth in student hats, men in hard "kapelyushn" [the hats were called "kugelniklekh" in Yiddish] and ladies in big yellow straw hats, in bright summer dresses with white umbrellas in their hands. They sit gracefully on the benches of the open "konke", next to the polished wooden poles.

Boys in silky black suits, caps with twisted visors and big, dusty shoes, have jumped up from behind in the middle of the ride and latched on to grab a free ride. They look nervously at the conductor from behind and wipe their noses with their sleeves.

Individual coachmen drive back from the forest, their scrawny mares crawling lazily and slowly, chewing hay that hangs from a sack around their necks.

From time to time, the coachmen in their shiny leather hats crack their whips in the air. They sit on the seat of the "rezinke", as the modern carriages with rubber tires are called, and when they meet a "konke" they cover it with curses and look at their passengers crossly.

In the distance you can see the chandeliers of the verandas of the weekend houses. Many electric lamps, like big, soft, milky balls, surrounded by a big wooden fence, whose four corners disappear in the large forest, tell me that I am already near the "Roskosh" Park. I slowly approach the park with my eyes wide open, as if hypnotized.

Countless lamps beckon to me. I stop. A mysterious force pulls me back into the city. In front of my eyes appears the good, tender and loving face of my mother. She is floating in the air in front of me and her lips are whispering:

"Yankele, don't forget to come to Havdalah!"

I try to chase the figure away, but the words now sound even closer and louder, as if they were screaming in my ear:  
"Yankele! Don't forget to come to Havdalah!"

I dreamily stop beside a tree. In my imagination I am walking home. My father's house floats before my eyes, on Shabbat evening. The darkness is getting thicker. Stars appear in the sky. My father opens the curtain and looks at the bluish horizon. My father, the intelligent one, is attached to Judaism, he guards the Jewish customs and never misses a Havdalah.

He lights a large candle of colored braided tallow, lifts my hand with the candle high up (a charm to grow higher). The little flame flickers and bends in all directions.

My mother looks at the small flame and her eyes become moist. She mumbles unintelligible words and moves her lips silently. My brother David looks thoughtfully at the flame and picks his nose, as is his habit.

Our gray cat sits, paws tucked under her, on the chair, and her half-closed, predatory eyes peer, unblinking, at the flame of the Havdalah candle.

My father stands stretched out like a soldier on sentry duty, a silver cup in his hand, his eyes half closed. His head is turned toward the ceiling and his melodious voice clearly captures every word: "

"הנה אל ישועתי, אבטח ולא אפחד..."

And I translate the words for myself with my poetic interpretation: "Here I stand before You, O Almighty God, and ask You for help! Nothing frightens me, for I believe in You and am safe with You."

I open my eyes. The image of my mother's house disappears. The countless fiery electric lamps attract me, call me. A mysterious world I don't understand beckons me from there. My young heart beats in anticipation of the new pleasures that the future enticing unknown will draw into the picture of the blue, starry night in the promising, brightly illuminated "Roskosh" Park.



### DOROŻKA W LESIE („Konka”)

Dorożka, która woziła nas z miasta do parku „Rozkosz”. Ulubiona białostocka dorożka, w której „arystokratyczne” miejsce z tyłu kosztowało dziesiątaka, a z przodu, z końskimi ogonami przed nosem, „co łaska”.

Znany błazen Sonie uwiecznił „Konkę” w jednym ze swoich ludowych utworów, żartując: „Biedne Żydki, co płacą ditki”. (jid. Di orime židkes wos coln ditkes). Białostoccy chłopcy z Chajnjek gwizdali na opłaty. Przyczepiali się z tyłu i jechali za darmo.

*The horse-car in the woods – The horse-drawn trolley which stretched from the city to Roshkash Park in the woods. Tickets were priced according to the passenger's proximity to the horses' tails.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://www.ksiegabialystok.com/ksiega-album-pamieci-gminy-zydowskiej-w-bialymstoku-czesc-1.pdf)

## Tsertl's Forest

Summer. Shabbat afternoon. A quiet warmth rolls over the city and drives people into the forest. The forest swings with its green treetops as if calling to itself. It, the forest, begins where "Zverinyets" [today Branicki Park] ends and the long, whitewashed rectangular buildings of the soldiers' barracks can be seen, from which the smell of Russian soldiers' "kapuste" [cabbage borsht] permeates, filling the area and tickling the nostrils.

From there you can hear Russian military songs with contrived soldier's majesty, interspersed with tones of nostalgia. Longing for Mother Russia, for the vast fields of the Russian countryside, for the Sunday dances and songs accompanied by the harmonica, longing for the village "shikse" with the colorful headscarf, for the native wooden hut and the unworked earth.

The soldiers' songs echo to the Jewish young men and girls who fill the forest on Shabbat afternoons, mingling with the Yiddish songs, with the traditional Yiddish sob and with the silent, tear-stained melodies, interspersed with a cantorial nign.

\*

92

The "Green Alley" of the forest is littered with couples and groups. Silent, melancholy tones of "Margeritkelekh" mingle with "Reyzele dem Shoykhets" [Reizele the Slaughterer's].

The tender nign "Oyfn Pripetshik" drowns in an imitation of [Fyodor] Shalyapin's bass song "Blokhe" [Song of the Flea].

A couple walks arm in arm, looking into each other's eyes and seeing no one, their heads nestled together. A cheder boy is running after a bush cricket. He desperately wants to catch the wildly fleeing creature and would love to stick a needle into its little tail.

An old couple is walking with shaky steps. He, carefully plucking his little gray beard and fanning himself with his shiny black jacket, and she, hobbling along her swollen legs and sighing.

A "cavalier" cracks white fruit kernels, expertly peels the seeds, and, like a gentleman, holds a small brown bag to the sweaty girl with the red cheeks, who limps a little on one foot, for her high leather shoes with twenty buttons are very tight.

Flies and bees buzz through the air, whizzing past the ears with their song as fast as airplanes. A young groom with a stiff bow tie puts his finger to his neck to let in some air and is drenched in sweat. His shoes are covered with white dust, and from time to time he wipes them with the back edge of his pants.

The bride beside him is a coarse, short-grown clumsy maid, fiercely constricted in a corset that pushes up a pair of broad, full breasts at the top that look as if they belonged to a longtime wet nurse.

The bride wipes her face with the wide sleeve of her fringed blouse and tosses green, soft, hairy gooseberries into her mouth for refreshment.

The winding "Green Alley" in the forest ends and leads to an open triangle where lively Shabbat trading takes place. This is also where Roskosh Park begins, with verandas scattered here and there among the green pines and birches.

Roskosh Park is enclosed by a high fence, which surrounds it like a paradise and hides it from the [glances of] Białystok's poor boys and young men, who seek "oylem-haze" [earthly] pleasures without paying and shrewdly want to enter over the fence.

The adjacent cottages are inhabited by Białystok merchants, who every year after Passover pack their, shabby, polished wooden beds for "the master and the madam," plus the maid's bed, a few eiderdown quilts for cold nights, the crockery and cutlery for "meaty and dairy," a pasta board, a rolling pin, and a few vessels.

All this is loaded onto a pole cart,

93

on which one still wisely packs a "quarter eighth" of birch wood to heat the hearth of clay.

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In the triangle of Tsertl's Forest, next to Roskosh Park, a lively Shabbat trade is flourishing. A young man in a pink revolutionary shirt, buttoned up to the neck, carries on his head a padded pillow on which he has placed glass bowls of lemon water with a few pieces of ice floating in them. Every few minutes he calls out mechanically:

"A cold drink...a cold drink!"

A short-grown Jew with a red bulbous nose, wearing an apron that was once white and has now taken on all the colors of the rainbow, stands next to an ice cream cart and shouts, his head raised like a rooster on a fence:

"Sakharnoye morozhenoye, sakharnoye morozhenoye!" [Sweet ice cream, sweet ice cream].

A little boy, with a shoe on one foot and a scarf tied around the other, is licking from a tin of pink ice cream. He is disheveled and sweaty but happy, and with his sleeve he wipes a liquid from his nose, which with all its strength sets out to trickle into the ice cream....

A Jewish woman, her headscarf wrapped around her, stands next to a table and conducts a lively trade with customers, who greedily let their eyes glide over the goods on display: A tied box of "kitshmitsh" (a kind of sweet dough with raisins), a tin of "landrin-tsukerkes" [hard "landrynska" candies made of syrup], brown and yellow "irislekh" [caramels], and gray, browned "ulniklekh" [buckwheat potato pancakes].

A young girl stands with a woven basket of peas, fruit seeds, and beans leaning against her legs.

A tall, thin young man with an Adam's apple and an uncovered chest is haggling with the girl over the measure of beans. She adds two more beans to the measure for him, and the young man is very pleased with the bargain, artfully tossing one bean in the air and catching it in his mouth.

A small, thin, withered Jew with a whitish opacity in his eye and a belt around his neck, to which a small board with a white tablecloth is attached, sells square candies sprinkled with rice and sings loudly and audibly to a special, well-known motif:

"Zolotoy sovar, zolotoy sovar kharoshi [Golden goods, golden fine goods]...tralya-lya-lya, tra-lya-lya lyam...".

A lame "goy" with a red scarf around his neck and a shabby black plush "kapelyush" on his head spins a barrel organ that fills the air with the Russian song:

"Na tshto mnye mat rodila" [Why did my mother bring me into the world?]

94

It ends with "A Brivele der Mamen" [A Letter to Mama]. The young men and girls, peeling fruit stones and sucking landrynska candies, pick up the "nign" and throw grateful glances and copper groschen at the organ grinder in his shabby "kapelyush". The "goy" holds it up, bowing and turning submissively, calling out with a flattering smile, "spasibo, bbrattsi rodnye" [Thank you, my dear friends] ...

In a corner, on a high mound, a Jewish woman with a yellow, ragged, freckled face stands next to a table with glass jars of juice and a large copper siphon of soda water sitting in a bucket of ice.

A little girl with a perky nose and blond braided pigtails, "sings" in a stretched voice:  
"Give me a glass of soda water with raspberry juice, raspberry juice!"  
But as the saleswoman carefully pours a scant spoonful of juice, the girl's mother growls:  
"Passable! If you're going to take a whole kopek for a splash of water, you could at least put a little more juice in it! There's a Jewess enriching herself on a poor child!"

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Night falls. The residents of the vacation homes, coming to their senses after their Shabbat afternoon nap, move to their verandas, stretch, rub their eyes and reddened cheeks, for sleep has not yet soothed them up.

The verandas fill up with guests. Families from the city come to visit, to breathe some fresh air and eat a free meal, especially after such a walk, when the stomach stirs and the appetite becomes that of a wolf.

On the table show up home baked oil-challah, cake and small honey cakes that surround the large copper samovar. The latter boils and bubbles and stands tall, majestic and proud, like a grandfather surrounded by his grandchildren, by jars and trays of preserves and sliced lemon. All of this is in line with the large glass bowls full of fruit.

I stop next to such a porch and feel a growl in my stomach. My young stomach makes itself felt and demands its portion. That's when I remember that my uncle Meylekh Darshin, my mother's brother, the powerful, distinguished man in our family, the rich cloth seller on commission, who sends telegrams day and night to deep Russia, to vast Siberia and near Łodz, has a vacation home not far from here. I am on my way there.

From a distance, I can see my uncle Meylekh sitting

95

comfortably in a wide, woven chair. He is wearing a silk caftan tied with a belt, from which the ends of a spic and span white shirt peek out.

The table is set with plates, glasses, small jars and genuine "frazhet" forks, spoons and knives.

There are earthenware bowls of sour cream, flowered plates of strawberries, black huckleberries, radishes and chives, a basket of pastries and a huge braided challah with reddish-brown kitke. And around the table, my corpulent aunt Yakhe rushes hysterically, ordering the maid around the kitchen in a commanding tone.

Bashfully, I come up to the veranda. My aunt Yakhe turns her head to me and, not stopping to set the table, she says in an energetic voice:

"Nu Yakov [well, Jacob]! What are you standing around for? Surely you are hungry, now sit down! What is Mama doing? Your father is still the same shlimazl [unhappy man]? I feel sorry for your mom, such a well turned out woman, she just has no mazl! Now come, sit down, sit down to eat!"

Uncle Meylekh turns his head from a Jewish religious book, takes off his glasses and adds:

"Nu, yo [well, ok]! How's Mom? Long time no see."

I don't get a chance to answer, because a crowd of Uncle Meylekh's grandchildren is streaming in from the back rooms. Aunt Yehudit Rozental's children, Roze, Dare and Nyomke, and Aunt Khaytshe Shustitski's children, Tsilye and Sashe (later the wife of Dr. Reygrodski's son).

They sit around the table. I am squeezed into a corner. After all, I am only the son of poor Aunt Teme, and they are the rich merchants and High School students with new uniforms and brass buttons. And they don't even say "zdrastvoytye" [hello] to me.

I choke down a bite. My pride rebels in me. They talk about "klasne urokn" [best lessons], "stikhovarenyes" [poems] and poetry.....

Nyomke can't remember who wrote about Peter the Great. I join the conversation. I remind him and begin to recite in Russian the famous poem "Kto On" [Who is He?], dedicated to the Russian Tsar Peter the Great:

"lyesos tshastim i dremutshim, po tropinkas i po mkham, yekhal vsadnik probirayas, k'svyetlim nyevskim beregam..."  
(Through a dense forest full of moss and wild paths, a horseman rides, making his way to the bright banks of the Neva) ...

I forget my embarrassment and fall into a kind of ecstasy, accentuating every Russian sentence, and at the end of my poem recitation there is a reverent silence.

96

When I finally finished, everyone applauded, and the tender gaze of my beautiful cousins did me so much good. Suddenly they see me, and my cousin Tsilye puts it this way:

"Ya sovyersheno nye znala, tshto Yakov tak kharasho vladyeyet ruskim yazikom". (I didn't know that Yakov spoke Russian so well).

But in Tsilya's innocent remark lay the whole tragedy of that epoch of Russification: what kind of person is one who does not know Russian? True, the ice was broken. I have become one of them, but I feel foreign. As always, I am too sensitive. I withdraw and hide in my solitude.

I say goodbye to my mother's brother, to my uncle Meylekh Darshin, the Hasid with the kaftan and the belt, and to his beautiful assimilated grandchildren, who are already dreaming of other worlds, far away from Judaism and Hasidism.

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Thirty-eight years later, in 1951, my mother's brother, my uncle, the pious Hasid in kaftan and belt, received his punishment. Thirty-three years after his death (he died in Yekaterinoslav, at the same time and in the same town where Dr. Yosef Khazanovitsh died).

My cousin Sashe Shustitski was one of the heroes of the episode in Tsertl's Forest in 1913. In 1939 she escaped to Sweden with her husband, the son of Dr. Reygrodksi. There she divorced him and moved to America.

When I once visited the "world ambassador" of the Białystok compatriots- who carries the concerns of the Białystok people from all over the world- my friend David Sohn, the editor and director of the Białystok Center, I was surprised to find my cousin Sashe in his office. She had come to inquire, a little faded, but still the beautiful, elegant, aristocratic Sashe with the manners of a salon lady of noble birth.

She greeted me in good Russian, later in bad German, later in even worse French, or even in tortured English. But never in Yiddish, which she knew very well because her parents didn't speak any other language. She always remained the same dogged assimilator who had grown up and taken root in the then Russianized environment.

However, "Mama Yiddish" is terribly vindictive. Sooner or later, she will take a cruel toll on those who run from her.

97

A few weeks ago I received a phone call from a friend who congratulated me with a sarcastic undertone:  
"Yakov! Mazl Tov! You have enriched your noble lineage...your cousin Sashe has married a Christian, a German Christian and aristocrat, a nobleman!"

And a few days later I received an official notification from Sashe personally that she had married a Christian of the German nobility, a respected member of the German aristocracy. She celebrated her wedding with a Christian German, with a son of the people who murdered my family and hers and many millions of our unfortunate Jewish people.

This is the terrible price that my uncle, the pious Hasid in the kaftan, paid for raising his grandchildren in false, empty pride to accept foreign cultures and foreign languages and to alienate them from their Jewish language, Jewish tradition and the Jewish people.

### **Park Roskosh [Rozkosz]**

Summer. A Shabbat afternoon in Tertl's Forest. Bluish shadows cover the sky as if with a gigantic curtain. The red, fiery blazing sun fades on the far, far horizon, still struggling as if not yet to set, sending its red, fiery projections into the windowpanes of the weekend homes, lighting them up as if they were on fire.

Early starlets leap out gleefully and impatiently, like the first guests at a wedding.

From afar, the bells of the lighted "konke" [horse-drawn carriage] ring out. Open on both sides, it carries passengers from the city, dressed in bright summer clothes, with happy, laughing faces and resounding voices. The horses' hooves clatter merrily and the sweaty, panting horses swish their tails as they carry new passengers to Roskosh Park.

Colorful posters signed by the omnipotent police chief, "Rotmeister" [Captain] Pulan, are pasted on the town's fences and kiosks, announcing the noble purpose of the "gulyanye," which is to support the needy students of the Commercial School. The "konkes" bring new passengers, filling Tserl's Forest with commotion and laughter.

On the verandas of the cottages begins a hustle and bustle. On one veranda, a group of Jews is standing and praying the "Mayrev" [evening prayer] in a beautiful manner. A Jew with an meticulously combed white "Franz Joseph beard", dressed in a silk caftan, sways with his eyes closed, swings his body on all sides and taps his chest in religious ecstasy.

On a second porch, a young man wearing a golden pince-nez and a short-shaven "komets" beard [the vowel sign that means an "o" in Yiddish ט], performs Havdolah, singing an ornate, cantorial melody.

A young student plays the guitar on the veranda surrounded by youth. Young men clap their hands to it and a young slender girl snaps her fingers and gracefully dances a tango to the beat, with turns and figures, writhing like a snake.

The entrance to Roskosh Park is brightly lit. Next to the ticket office stands a line of young people, wasting no time in making acquaintances with a romantic flirtation, interspersed with Russian.

The carved, brown, garishly lit gate to Roskosh Park is strictly guarded by the police.

A lout of sixteen years with a little hat of the "Gorodskoye" [Municipal School], flaxen hair and a haughty nose, tries to sneak in between the students with a mien of "holy innocence".

Noticing this, a policeman with a long mustache shoves him out, gives him a blow with the dull side of his saber, and growls at him, "sukin sin!" [son of a bitch].

The lout is "less than thrilled," trots away and tries his luck in the darkness, in a far corner of the fence. He takes a "forbidden ticket" and climbs over the fence.

Roskosh Park is filling up with people. In a large wooden "litanke" there is a restaurant counter. Officers in elegant uniforms with shining sabers and jingling spurs, and students in new uniforms, with all their buttons buttoned up and with their student hats boastfully tilted on the side, are joking cheekily with the young, beautiful waitresses in their white aprons.

They serve at the tables of the guests, serving portions of roast goose, boiled eggs, marinated herring with white sauce, tasty black and rye bread, and secretly pass over a bottle of "monopolke" made of white Russian vodka.

It becomes more and more cheerful. The voices are getting louder. The eyes are shining. Groups are forming: At one table are hysterical, drunken officers. At another table are quieter, more serious students. Next to the dense, wide-spreading trees, groups of the Białystok intelligentsia gather.

The sons and daughters of factory owners and merchants, whose religious upbringing does not allow them to get too close to the Christian officers' circles, keep themselves stately and strictly separate.

The corpulent figure of the middle-sized Yakov Markus, with his dignified, beautifully shaped, proud face of a magnate, catches the eye. His chubby body is squeezed into an elegantly sewn suit. Next to him stands his younger brother, the darkly handsome Misha, with the swarthy face, black hair and black, passionate eyes of an Oriental.

Two brothers- two contrasts. The Markus family is very well known in Białystok. When talking about themselves, its members proudly say "mi Markus" (we, the Markus'es).

Yakov Markus is a textile manufacturer with his own spinning and weaving mill and is also the commander of the Białystoker fire brigade. He is the favorite of the women of Białystok and is on friendly terms with the Russian authorities.

Next to them stands the slender notary Klobukov, with his eagle nose and lean, ascetic, cold, stiff face. In another group you can see the Plovski brothers and sisters, the children of the famous merchant Hilel Plovski [or Plavski]. They are tall figures, full of wit and enthusiasm, respected in the boisterous life of the "golden youth of Białystok".

There is the engineer Gonyondzki, who has inherited a large house on the busy commercial corner of Gumienna and Lipowa streets, where there is Khashke Goldshteyn's factory shop, Mlinazhevitsch's oil shop, Khazan's ladies' dress shop, and Voroshilsky's jewelry shop. Gonyondzki, with his beak-like nose and red cheeks, is surrounded by a group of merchants, "realistn and gymnazistn" [students from junior High Schools and High Schools] and their "ladies", schoolgirls and studying youth.

In a corner. Two famous Białystok wrestlers stand proudly leaning against a tree: Pokzhive, "the Byelovezher [Białowieża]," with a gigantic body and bulging chest, and an intelligent, noble face that does not match the massive, fleshy body at all.

The second is Ostrinski, a strong young man who often performs with Pokzhive in the circus on Soloveytshik [Nightingale] Lane in the "French Fights" [French style wrestling?]. Ostrinski is also a member of the Białystok fire brigade, and he takes particular pleasure in walking around in the fire brigade uniform, with the brightly polished hat that shines like gold.

When he [Gonyondzki?] passes by the Jewish youths, he looks at them with pride and feels safer among the Christians in the company of the two powerful Jewish men.

tops of the trees. Two foolish birds snap their little heads in the air and chirp a serenade of rapid trills for no particular reason. The illuminated Roskosh Park is filled with a hum of voices. The drunken voices of the alcoholic officers are swallowed up by the deafening noise of the military orchestra "Uglitski Pułk" [Uglicki regiment, an infantry unit of the Russian Empire, disbanded in 1918], which sits in full width next to the "okriter stsene" [open-air stage] and plays energetically and continuously waltzes, tangos and polkas.

The conductor, with his pretentious mustache and golden epaulets hanging wide over his shoulders, waves his baton with affected grace and greets the well-known ladies with a smile. Passing cavaliers toss confetti into the faces of the ladies, who laugh in feigned protest and thank the men with fiery glances.

A loud commotion can be heard. The whistling of the policemen indicates that they are looking for a nimble pickpocket of the "blate yatn" [criminal urchins], who apparently picked the pocket of a drunken officer while he was flirting with a lady. The thief is chased by the rampaging police and now runs like a squirrel in tight turns between bushes and trees.

In the "litanke" where the restaurant counter is located, angry shouts and excited voices can be heard. A group of students is surrounded by drunken officers. An officer with a red drunken face and glassy eyes is drawing his saber with difficulty to teach a lesson to a student who made an insulting remark about His Majesty the Tsar, mocking his military uniform and the honor of his royal people.

The other officers, with proud, condescending expressions, look at the students threateningly, but hold back their colleague to avoid a scandal. Suddenly, the famous Białystok police chief Reshute appears in his short varnished boots, elegantly saluting and speaking with affected erudition:

"Raskhodityes gospoda ofitseri... raskhodityes gaspoda studenti!"

[Disperse, gentlemen officers... disperse, gentlemen students!]. And to the audience standing around he shouts:

"Nu tshevo nye vidali..razaydis! [So what, we haven't seen anything, get lost!]

As the crowd disperses, Reshute looks victorious and proud, fully aware of his greatness.

The orchestra becomes silent. Loud applause rages. The guests rush to sit down on the long, wooden benches of the open-air stage. The men rise gallantly

silence grows. The tension is great. The performance on the open-air stage begins.

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Everything is still. Next to the open-air stage, a branch breaks from a tree under the weight of a hidden boy. One hears a silent "sha, sh..." [shush!...] from the audience. A police dog with black and white spots and drooping ears moves, growls and barks softly.

This is followed by a "sha, sha, sh..." from the audience waiting with anticipation. The well-worn brown plush curtain opens. A singer dressed as a clown appears, with a white-smeared face, a big mouth and wild eyes, singing in Russian the aria of "Payats" [Pagliacci, Clowns]. His tenor voice makes the air vibrate with choked tears as he reaches the phrase: "Laugh, Payats, at your broken love, laugh and cry...".

The sentimental female High School students sob silently, blowing their little noses into their unfolded handkerchiefs. Their boyfriends look lovingly into the eyes of their romantic ladies and laugh mockingly, but also sympathetically, while they jokingly dab the eyes of their sweethearts with their large men's handkerchiefs.

After a roar of applause and repeated bows from Payats, now "happy" with his success, a man with a black pointed beard and a monocle in his eye, dressed in an elegant black tuxedo, appears on stage with a black lacquered cane, which he holds playfully in his white curved fingers. He steps forward for a demonstration of his magical arts.

He catches playing cards in mid-air and gracefully pulls white eggs from his black sleeve. He lifts his shiny top hat to reveal a bald head with a few black hairs attached to his head with shiny gel. And to the general groans and sighs of surprise, beautiful white innocent doves fly out of the top hat, which flap their wings, fly across the stage and back again, landing on the shoulders and head of the magician.

Now comes the most interesting part of the program. A famous dance troupe touring Russia performs the famous "Shantekler" dance ["Chantecler" is an old French animal fable from 1910 about a rooster who believes that the sun can only rise through his wake-up call]. Here a group of women and men dressed up as chickens and roosters with colored feathers, tails and heads of chickens dance the "Shantekler" dance in a row one after another.

The French group "Kvi Pro Kvo" [Qui Pro Quo] ends their performance with the famous French "Can-Can", in which the dancing girls lift their dresses and brazenly reveal their round, soft bottoms in white, lace-trimmed panties. This leads to loud applause and shouts of "bravo" from the men, because what man - seeing a half-naked, graceful, blooming, lively, young, flexible female body in white underwear (and even its hindmost part) - wouldn't be happy to overlook the fact that the women gave a very rude performance.

The sentimental ladies of Białystok blush, shyly lower their eyes and look furtively at their male companions. Their looks seem to ask: "Does this mean that men really like this? Are they really not interested in an intelligent discussion about art, literature and social problems?

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A tall, thin man with disheveled long hair and a white, stiffly starched shirt appears. He hurries to the stage, clutching his hands in excitement at the thunderous applause. Joyfully the name of the couplets [a multi-strophic witty, ambiguous, political or satirical song with a distinctive refrain] is shouted, which are currently circulating in Białystok and are sung in the remotest wooden huts of Bojari, Nove, Skorupy and Khanaykes.

The singer is the favorite of the Jewish audience. Happily, he gives a little cough, covering his mouth with his fists, then bows cheerfully and jokingly to the audience and, waving his white, stripped glove, he sends air kisses and asks:

"Well, gospoda [men]! Now, rebyata [boys] of Khanaykes, which couplet shall I sing?"

A buzz of voices rises, snatches of words, applause, heckling, laughter and shouting:

"Sing 'Kot Makha' [Cat Macha], sing 'Vyetyerotshek Tshut Tshut Dishet' [The breeze is blowing], sing 'Zhil Bil Na Khanaykakh' [There used to live in Khanaykes]."

The singer raises his hands like a conductor raising his baton, and in a minute there is silence:

"All right, my dear beloved guests of 'Nikolayevske' [Mikołajewska] Street and Khanaykes, of 'Kupetsheske' and 'Plakers' Street, of 'Aleksandrowske' and 'Moyshe Ruves' Street, I will sing 'Kot Makha'. Every Białystok High School student will recognize himself in it, and you will support me! And every Białystok 'mamashke' will learn how she is fooled by her daughter!"

In the pose of a sentimental girl in love, the singer contorts his face into a sweet expression and sings a song. At night in her room's bed, she dreams of her beloved one.

103

And suddenly, in the blue, starry night, under the pressure of a light summer breeze, the window opens and her beloved appears, approaching her with a small jump and outstretched arms. He puts his finger to his mouth to warn her not to cry out in surprise.

And when her dreamed lover is already going to her bed in the darkness of the moonlight, he knocks over a vase on a high flower stool, which shatters with a terrible bang.

In the next room, her mother's panting, sleepy voice sounds, asking anxiously:

"Kashenka, who is it?"

And she, Kashenka, is very embarrassed and does not know what to say. It escapes her:

"A cat, mama, a cat, mama, a cat!"

The whole audience joins in: "A cat, mama, a cat, mama, a cat has caused Mashenka great trouble!"

The audience goes wild with joy, laughing, stamping their feet, applauding and shouting:

"Bis, bis! [Encore, encore!]"

The second number of the singer, who made a strong impression in Białystok, is the popular song "Rivotshka", which the singer sings with much feeling in Russian. It is the drama of a young Jewish girl from Khanaykes, whose father is very pious and fanatical. He studies day and night in the Bes-Medresh and guards his daughter very strictly. The daughter longs for an easy life as a woman and for pleasures, and the audience, sympathizing with the unhappy Rivotshka, sings silently along with the singer, accompanying him and repeating the words:

"Zhil bil na Khanaykakh Borekh Pik....

In Khanaykes once lived Borekh Pik,

He was a pious Jew.....

He went to the Bes-Midrash,

To pray to God with songs,

Protected from unkosher things..."

And the audience, which the singer leads with his hands, joins in:

"Oy, oy, Rivotshka! Oy, oy, Rivotshka! Oy, oy, Riva,

Riva moy kumir..." [Riva is my idol]

The audience is in ecstasy. The cheeks are glowing. The girls nestle tenderly against their cavaliers, and a warm, summer night breeze plays with the hair of the amorous, dreamy girls who radiate

the scent of the forest, of chamomile, field flowers and freshly mown hay, which makes the young blood drunk. The last applause slowly abates, still lingering in the air, until it gradually dies away completely. The performance is over.

The men are still humming the melodies of "Zhil Bil Na Khanaykakh", looking with amorous eyes at the young girls, and the youthful passion flows into the luscious bodies.

In the distance, a rooster crows, not asleep and annoyed that the others are asleep. The big lamps slowly go out. A few women's mouths open to a slight yawn, which is quickly covered with a hand so that the gentlemen do not notice.

The officers click their boots and say goodbye to their ladies, kissing their hands and glancing hostilely at their corpulent mothers, who bustle about and won't leave their daughters.

Outside Roskosh Park, several brightly painted carriages wait. The coachmen with their long whips sit stiffly like wooden dolls, waiting for their "barines", the rich textile manufacturers of Białystok, the powerful ones who live in grand style. Most of the visitors to Roskosh Park, however, have to run to get a seat on one of the last "konkes", which are specially reserved for park visitors.

The richer people, who can pay five kopecks, sit at the back of the "konkes". At the front, near the ponytails, sit those who want to save two kopecks, paying only one copper "ditke" [three-kopeck coins]. Poor people and "crooks" from Khanaykes hang on from behind, and to the musical accompaniment of the "konke" bells, the fully loaded vehicles move toward the city.

Couples walk arm in arm along the "Green Alley" and the wide main roads of the Białystok Forest. They are faithfully accompanied by the white, smiling moon, which does not leave them and looks down on the children of the earth with love, while it curves into its eternal, mysterious, ironic smile.

But the naive children of the earth forget that, compared to the infinity of the moon, their birth and death are like a short, quick child's laugh that sounds in carefree joy, only to immediately turn into a long, wailing cry.

### Neighbors of Gonyondzski's Yard

May, 1912. The spring sun no longer has to melt the icicles, shimmering like diamonds, that appeared after Passover and hung from the windows. The absorbent cotton has already been removed from the space between the windows, and through the wide-open windows you can already hear the cheerful chirping of birds fluttering about on the thin, bare branches with their young buds.

My mother is busy at work, walking around the room, looking in the drawers and talking to me with great joy. And while her beautiful face is radiant with the joy of life, her eyes are wet with tears, for as usual, my mother laughs in times of sadness and cries in moments of joy.

"You see, Yankele, you got to have family! Blood is thicker than water. My brother is going away... and you, Yankele, are going to perk up! I'm sick of Khanaykes! No, God forbid, may God not punish me for my words, because we have good neighbors here. They are simple people, workers, but good, warm people. But what is the result? You won't learn good manners from them. Khanaykes and Gumienna Street, where all the merchants live - it's quite a difference! Once I get a foothold there, I'll never want to leave!"

I already know the reason for my mother's joy. Her brother, my uncle Meylekh Darshin, is going to his summer house in Tsertl's Forest. He asked my mother to move to his apartment for the summer, which is located in Gonyonzki's yard on Gumienna Street. So my mother "floats" around the room, packs the laundry, talks half to me and half to herself, and finally infects me with her enthusiasm. I'm already curious to get to know the new area, Gumienna Street and the people and neighbors of Gonyondzki's Hof.

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The carriage, with its [three] iron wheels, drives over the edged pavement of Lipowa Street, bumps into my childish buttocks, tosses me up like a ball from underneath, and each time throws me into the arms of my mother, who holds the big sack with the blankets, sheets, and linen in one hand, and pulls me to her with the other hand each time [when I am hurled up].

Now we are in my uncle Meylekh's big, bright apartment. It has five rooms with beautifully carved tan furniture, armchairs with white antimacassars, and floors covered with red furs.

In the office room there is a desk with an iron box. Next to it is a large front room with opaque floral curtains in the color of yellowed autumn leaves. They cover a large, white-painted iron balcony facing Gumienna Street. The apartment has another balcony facing "Rokhe the Shvartser's" Alley, and on this balcony I discovered a treasure, a small keg of Hungarian red wine with a tap.

I can't resist my curiosity, so I tiptoe over to the keg with a glass in my hand. I open the tap and drink half a glass of sour Hungarian red wine in one go. Immediately the wine has such an effect on my childish head that I begin to stammer drunkenly. And the ceiling blurs with the floor and begins to spin before my eyes. My mother is wringing her hands and speaking to me, angrily and softly, as if she were telling me a secret in my ear:

"You are not to touch this, do you hear me? This is not Khanaykes. The neighbors will soon be gossiping about it. .... What were you thinking? Aunt Yakhe is strict, and we should behave accordingly in view of her kindness. You've done quite a foolish thing, the measure is full...".  
Mother continued to speak for a long time, and she seemed to float in the air in front of me. My face twists into a foolish grin in a state of intoxication, and I am so content, so satisfied....  
I like the new apartment.

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My favorite place is the balcony overlooking Gumienna Street. I sit there for hours and watch the life on the street. To the right I can see the semicircle of the market. The sounds can actually be heard all the way to me: A jumble of human voices, the clatter of horseshoes on Lipowa Street, the whistle of the police and the clang of the Białystok horse-drawn tram, all melting into one sound.

Small-town "drongove" wagons [broad, flat, horse-drawn wagons that carried loads and people], loaded with Jews and Jewesses, their feet pointing up or down, roll down Gumienna Street. The drivers crack their whips and take their passengers to Khoroshtsh or Vashlikove.

In the market you can see peasant women with their carts. Barefoot and wearing colorful headscarves, they peer over the hustle and bustle of the big city market. In their arms, they carry a straw basket with some silver money tied to it wrapped in a handkerchief.

Market thieves hover around them, watching them closely, and suddenly a loud, high-pitched scream is heard from a gentile woman from the village. She is pushed aside, wringing her hands and wailing, almost crying, in a kind of monastic chant:  
 "Matko a boska, shvyenta Maria! Zlodzhey mi obrokali!" [Mother of God, Holy Mary! The thieves have stolen from me!]

A policeman turns to her, yells angrily to the bystanders, trills on his pipe, wipes his moustache vigorously, and the curious people around the goy bombard her with advice and "wise sayings".

In the midst of the market, the women sellers of fruit, pears, apples, and plums, which they have laid out in wooden crates and straw baskets, bustle about squealing and trying to shout over one another:

"Unique apples, Madameshi, you shall have a long life! You real 'Antonover', 'Citrinover', 'Pergamatn', [here are] sweet pears, flavorful as from the Garden of Eden, here are grapes like Passover wine and fresh plums, a meal for the Tsar!"

In the center of the market, the tall, shapelessly fat, heavy-set Kheylutshke, the fruit merchant, stands out. She is a warm Jewish woman and known for her benevolence and goodness. She lets her thunderous, masculine bass voice ring out. Next to her in support is a tall, strikingly elegantly dressed man, with a small black mustache and patent leather boots. He is a well-known figure in Khanaykes, called "Khayim Puter". He feels out of place there, in the market, and looks down on the Jewish women from above, as if the trade is not appropriate for him.

A small, thin Jewish woman with a large headscarf pulled low over her forehead waves a kosher slaughtered goose with bloody hands and shouts angrily at a "madame," who bashfully slips away:

"Madameshi, since when do you eat geese? Did you get sick from eating such cheap stuff? How can you eat geese when you are used to eating meat from fattened animals?" And turning to the women around her, she says, "She can kiss my ass, that rich social climber! I guess my geese offend her dignity!"

From afar you can see the whitewashed "Bremlekh" [the houses that stood on the "Breml", the square near the clock tower] built in rows, with the proud, cocky city clock at its center. At the top, on its tower, walks a fireman in a brass cap, a faithful sentry protecting the city from fire.

In the market, next to the "Bremlekh", you can see the tall, strong figure of Yashke. His tall, broad-shouldered body with a red neck and the appearance of a Russian gentile, dressed in a rustic fur coat and high boots, gives the impression of a metropolitan "goy". A remnant [of cloth] is hanging over his arm. Now his eyes find a victim: a young peasant woman from the village,

108

her cheeks burned blood-red by the sun, her high bosom heaving under her fringed blouse.

Yashke approaches her. He pats her good-naturedly on the shoulder, shows her the rest of his cloth, and whispers something in her ear. Suddenly a second person appears, giving the impression that he wants to buy the goods. He fingers it and purses his lips in amazement at the quality of the fabric.

But Yashke snatches the goods from his hands and shouts:

"Pashal, parkati! [Get lost, you idiot!] I don't deal with Jews!" And he whispers in the ear of the gentile woman, whom the patriotic Christian "goy" pleases very much:

"Well, my dear, I don't deal with the Jews and the infidels, only with the people of my faith, the children of Jesus!"

And the "goye" is all carried away with Christian pride and the "bargain". She counts out the silver coins for Yashke, and he measures out the goods so skillfully that with him 4 "arshin" [yard] becomes 5 ½ "arshin", and after receiving the money he stands for a while looking into the eyes of the "goye" with his kosher, honest, innocent eyes of a "tzadik" [honorary title for a particularly righteous, pious, wise man].

Then he leisurely walks off to meet his Jewish partner, the supposedly interested person, at the corner of the street and laughs out loud: "There, we have fooled the goye, let the cholera strike her. See how she melted away when I ranted about Jews!" Yashke, however, quickly disappears, knowing that the goye will soon be screaming for help and looking for a policeman, even though they are all bribed and get cash in their hands.

On the corner of Gumienna Street, the small, lively Bishke the "Gazhetnik" [newspaper vendor] whirls, clamors and shouts:

"A 'Haynt,' a 'Moment,' a 'Togblat,' a 'Sinai Zhurnal,' an 'Ogonyok,' a 'Bizhevye Vyedomosty!'

He pulls the newspapers out of his large leather bag, which reaches up to little Bishke's neck, and searches with his hand for remnants in a large leather wallet.

A carrier with an emaciated, bony face, dressed in a yellowed caftan, with a singed rope tied around him, short boots greased with blue blubber, gazes around in all directions, looking for customers.

A small, shriveled Jewish woman with a kerchief around her ears walks around with a large, rectangular, black-burnt tin on which she carries the goods from her shop:

Brown baked buckwheat-potato pancakes.

109

Groups of merchants stand on the corner of Gumienna Street and talk about textile goods, long journeys in the Great Russia and bankruptcy, about the nouveau riche and and about world politics.

A big "drongove" wagon with a harnessed poor worn out horse carries highly loaded bales of cloth goods: "kastor", "karelekh", "drap" [see page 38] and flowered "montanyak" blankets.

The cart driver sits on the bales, purses his lips, pulls the reins and drives the laboriously moving broken-down horse.

Next to the famous bakery of "Grek" [Greek] in the market street, where the famous "tshastes" [pastries], "pirozhines" [pirozhki] and "kislos-ladkes" [sour potato pancakes] are sold, a few idlers stand and anxiously and amusedly watch a little titmouse, which has lost its way among the pastries in the shop window. Excited by all the curious onlookers, it ran back and forth in search of an escape route.

A Jewish woman with a woven straw basket over her arm, filled with "Avnet's" pastries, Striezeln, Haman bags, "rogalyes" [rugelach] and pastries, rejoices at the scene and speaks in a loud voice for all to hear:

"It serves them right, after all, they are not supposed to eat Grek's pastries. Look at the chickadees hopping around on the pastries. Ugh, those gluttons!"

A Jewish woman carries a basket from Tanchum's Bakery full of baked bagels and small bagels tied together on string to form a wreath. She shakes her head and cheerfully agrees: "It serves them right, the little gluttons! They really want to eat pastries!"

Next to the "Grek" is the "tshayne" [tearoom], where I go every Shabbat afternoon with a receipt to buy a jug of [hot] water for tea. From far away I can see the clothing store of "Varat the Gotovoplatnik", where there is a balcony on the second floor facing the front. There lives "Mr. Shuster the Khazn" [cantor], where as a choirboy I would sing to "Yomim-neroim" and accompany him, the cantor, for one silver ruble.

I look at the shops on Gumienna Street from my vantage point on the balcony. There is Inditski's bookstore with newspapers and books displayed in the wide window. There is Ferder's fur shop with fur collars hanging down like ponytails. In the middle is a musk collar that the women of Białystok wear proudly on their shoulders when they go to the Bes-Medresh on Shabbat.

In Shoshke's Tobacco Store, you can see colorful boxes and cardboard men in the display. Cigarette packs are stacked in a high "barricade" shape, forming

110

a pyramid of decorated boxes.

In the far corner, a sign with a top hat painted on it swings in the air. This is Tal's little hat shop.

Below my balcony is Khashe Goldshteyn's fabric shop, with a large door and two windows. Early every morning, when I am still wandering in my unfinished dreams, I hear the sound of the iron blinds she opens in her cloth shop. The sharp, grating "clang" would ring in my ears for a long time and wake me from my childlike sleep.

Next door is Shtupler's soap store, where boxes of blue-green soap are hauled out all day. But the most festive shop is Khazan's women's clothing store. There are always women walking in front of his shop window and inside. They go in and out, staring with avaricious eyes at the colorful floral fabrics, in a never-ending hunt to show off their feminine beauty and physical charms.

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Friday evening. The sounds fade. The hustle and bustle disappears more and more. The air has become quiet.

The group of traders has dispersed. The market becomes quieter. A last fruit seller picks out the rotten apples, throws them away and packs her baskets.

A coachman on his rubber-wheeled cart lazily pushes his tired horse, which can only drag along after a day of hard work.

A last late carter, powdered with white flour, passionately encourages his horse, which noisily pulls his floured "drongove" cart over the sharp pavement, its noise fading into the almost silent street.

Opposite the market is Grudki's wine shop. The owner himself serves there, a Jew with an intelligent face and a strawberry-blond goatee. He sells wine for kiddush to his late customers. His two daughters, rosy-white skinned with red-blonde fiery hair, assist their father.

A Jew with an unbuttoned kaftan and wide coattails sticks his red, sweaty, combed head out of the bathhouse and shouts angrily: "Reb Yid, hurry up, Shabbat is about to begin, only a quarter of an hour until the blessing of light!"

The shutters of the shops on Gumienna Street begin to close. Khashe Goldshteyn's shutters close with a loud, noble and powerful sound.

[The shutter] of Shoshkes'es tobacco shop slides down with a quiet, respectful "swish," and that of Tal's hat shop with a small, modest, rusty "squeak.

A fat Jewish woman in a floral headscarf pokes her head into Shtupler's soap shop through a half-closed door. But the other door closes unceremoniously,

111

right in front of the Jewish woman's nose.

A "goy" with a red nose and an unbuttoned jacket sweeps the asphalt with a long broom, pushing the dirt into the gutter.

A young woman with tangled hair hurriedly walks past with small steps. In her hand she holds candles wrapped in white paper with white hanging wicks.

Blue streaks cover the sky. A gray darkness spreads over the empty streets. The footsteps of individual pedestrians echo loudly on the asphalt sidewalks. From the windows, the small flames of Shabbat candles, swaying and submerged in God-fearing silence, shine solemnly on the bright-white, opened out tablecloth.

In Gonyondzki's courtyard, across from our balcony, two large, rectangular, brightly colored flower windows shine from "Salye Oge's" Bes-Medresh.

The large hanging chandelier plays with its flickering flames, making them shine brightly over the full height of the windows,

indicating that the "kaboles-shabes" [קבלה-שבת, the prayers to welcome the Shabbat] are being prepared to celebrate the sweet, blessed Shabbat with the delicate sounding "leku- neraneno" [לכו-נרננה = "Come, let us sing", first words and name of a chapter of the Psalms sung on Friday evenings]. Its melody swings in time to the swaying flames of the large, proud, snow-white candles placed at the top of the "omed" [podium].

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A summer morning. Birds are chirping, jumping from one roof to another below my window. The street is quiet. It's "kanikul" [summer vacation] and that's why I'm lying in bed so early with my eyes wide open. And strangely, I can't fall asleep. I feel that every minute of my life is too good to sleep. I dress quietly so as not to wake my mother and go out into the street.

Gonyondzkis's yard awakens, shakes off its nightly sleep, and the gray dawn opens a new day of life. The door of a little house stands wide open. Vinograd the upholsterer, a tall, stately, broad-shouldered Jew with rosy cheeks, is carrying a large mattress that is very stubborn and refuses to go through the narrow door. As soon as he manages to maneuver it through, the springs of the mattress make an unpleasant noise.

A cloud of dust escapes from its innards, and with a bang the mattress is placed on a small, sturdily built cart with massive iron wheels.

112

On the mattress are large, blurry marks, like oceans on a map, and in its corners are brown, spreading stains, the signs of a bitter struggle between a Białystoker jewess and her red, uninvited guests. [I assume that bed bugs are meant]

The wind has fun shaking a metal sign in the courtyard above the stairs to the first floor, where the tailor Vilentshik lives. His window proudly looks out onto Lipowa Street, where you can see wooden fashion dolls and heads that look like frightening ghosts.

Deep in the courtyard, the iron bars of the Noviks' small shoe shop fall down [to open it].

A brother and sister are talking in a "squeaky" tone of voice. Both are runtish, energetic and agile, with round faces. Brother Novik looks like a little boy in a man's suit that's too big. The doors of their shop are open wide, and shoes and galoshes hang from the doorposts.

Inside is a tall, fat Jewish woman sitting on a wooden stool. She has one leg half rolled up, and little Novik, squatting on one knee, puts

on a durable linen shoe and quickly "squeaks" the words:

"The shoe fits like a glove! As if it was tailor-made just for you! I'll give you a very good price right off the bat!"

The Jewish woman gets up, tries to walk a few steps, limping on one leg, and then croaks:

"It hurts! Here, and there, and on the big toe too!"

From his apartment, which is connected to his mechanical workshop, comes the locksmith Kalman Meler. He is a medium-sized Jew with yellowish skin, a slightly bent head, and a thoughtful, absent-minded face.

He takes a few steps, but then he realizes that he has forgotten something. So he turns around and comes right back out with some tools in his pockets. He searches for something with his brown, hard, calloused fingers that look like they've been burned, feels through his clothes, and finds a folded tape measure in the top pocket. Then he disappears through the exit of the narrow courtyard into "Rokhe the Shvartser's" Alley.

With an annoying bell-like sound, the large lock and metal bars of Feygele Kirzhner's glass shop move, which she, the owner, opens herself. Feygele is a small, portly woman with an apple-red, warty face. Full of confidence and energy, she looks around proudly as she opens her large glass shop. A little later, her two daughters join her, looking just like their mother: lively, confident,

113

and with red cheeks as if they had been dyed with red paper. Gorondzki's yard begins a day of its usual life.

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The hustle and bustle of everyday life drives me away. Too many people. I look for a corner to be alone. I climb the iron staircase that connects the balconies and floors inside the courtyard. Now I'm standing next to a door in the attic, I open it, go in, and warm air and silence surround me.

Old suitcases, iron beds, boxes stacked on top of each other. From above, the skylight laughs at me. On one side I discover a mountain of books, newspapers and notebooks. A real treasure! I lie down on my stomach on the floor and am happily surprised by the Russian books, newspapers and textbooks stacked there.

I pull out fully written notebooks wrapped in shiny blue "obyortkes" (covers) with red labels that read: "G. Gonyondzki." I realize that I

have come across the former schoolbooks of the son of the yard owner.

There is a geometry book with drawings and parallelograms, cones, trapezoids, and there is a physics book. I open the page about "Archimedes' principle", which says that a body placed in water loses as much [its own weight] as the weight of the water it displaces.

This makes me think of a connection with the wonderful legend of Rabbeinu Reb Gershom [Ben Judah], who constructed a golden throne for his royal monarch and was sentenced to prison because of the intrigues of the court ministers and the denunciation of his second, young wife. Therefore, Rabbeinu Gershom proclaimed a ban on polygamy among the Jews forever.

There are newspapers that are barely touched: "Ogoniok" with the humoresques of the famous Russian writer Arkady Averchenko and [Nadezhda] Teffi. The "Sinai Zhurnal", even with blue paper cuttings. Additional books to the newspaper "Birzhevyie Vedomosti", whose famous editor Proper turned away from Judaism.

And there, tied with a rope, are books of Russian classics:

Tolstoy, Gogol, Nyekrasov, Tshekhou, Dostoevsky, Mikhailov, Alexander Kuprin, Leonid Andreyev, Maxim Gorky, and others.

I'm drunk with happiness over all these books, and I don't even know which one to pick up first. I open, read, shuffle some pages.

Then I hear a pigeon cooing. I raise my head and see a gray spotted

114

dove coming out of her nest in the corner, pitter-pattering, raising and lowering her head. It approaches me. Gently and tenderly, I reached out my hand to stroke it. But her trust in me doesn't go that far. She quickly runs back, raises her wings and disappears into her nest. Yes! Poor little pigeon, you're right! You can't trust anyone!

Who knows what the evil man will come up with in his wild, evil, twisted brain?

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Shabbat morning. I lie with my head tucked under a blanket so as not to see the gray morning light that keeps me from my sweet night dreams. But it doesn't help. My mother's voice already reaches me. She is scolding our neighbor's daughter, Sorele Grodzki, a 12-year-

old girl, hot-blooded, with a full, round, lively face. She is already physically developed. She wants to provoke me and wake me up, but my mother asks her to be quiet because "Yankele is still asleep".

But Sorele is wild and boisterous, she immediately runs into my room and, laughing loudly, pulls at my blanket, which I hold on to with one hand.

But she pulls the blanket down and I get angry and run out in my short shirt, which barely covers half of my lower body (there were no pajamas in Białystok at that time). I chase after Sorele with a long broom.

Sorele squeals, runs through all the rooms, is happy about the game and screams, supposedly desperately: "Teme, Yakov is beating me!"

My mother holds me and gets angry: "It's Shabbat! It's time to go to Bes Medresh, your father left long ago, and you're still running around naked!"

I sluggishly get dressed, drink a glass of tea, eat a small pancake with it, and while I still have some left in my mouth, I take my prayer book and crawl sleepily down the stairs, wiping my eyes. If you walk through the small courtyard opposite Kalmen Meler, the doors are opposite, you can already see the small entrance with the narrow staircase on the second floor that leads to Salye Oge's Bey-Medresh.

From the windows on the east side of the Bes-Medresh, you can see the wide, iron, rusty balconies of Gonyondzki's house. The women's section above, which requires a stairway up one floor, makes the Bes-Medresh seem even smaller.

115

The large hanging chandelier with electric candles takes up part of the ceiling, yet there is a contemplative, pleasant intimacy over the Bes-Medresh, as if an extended family were praying there. You know everything about each other, you know each other's joys and sorrows, concerns and joys.

The "Shakhres" [Shakharit, morning prayer] is prayed by the tall Ofenbakh, the glove-maker from Lipowa Street. Calm and serene, he ponders every word. My father sat pensively over his prayer book, and with a silent wave he called me to him.

Father, absorbed in his thoughts, prays little. Most of the time, he turns the pages and wrinkles his forehead - a sign that he's absorbed in a thought that torments him and won't leave him alone.

But when it comes to "Shokhen Ad" ["He Who Dwells in Eternity"], some prayers urge my father to say the "Musef" [additional prayer].

Especially Vilentshik, the tailor, coaxes him. He thinks very highly of my father's education and politics, but also of the clarity of his prayers and his clear explanations of the words:

"Now, Reb Gershon! Now... show what you can do!"

I love my father's recitation when he prays simply, without cantorial ornamentation. And when Father gets to his "Naaritskha Venakdishkha" ["We will worship You and sanctify You"] in the additional prayer, "Sh'mone-Esre" [Eighteen Petitions, Amida], there is silence in the Bes-Medresh, and those praying are filled with the Bialystoker version of my father's recitation - with so much trembling of heart and soul, as if my father had finally found an opportunity to argue with the Lord of the world and to proudly and gracefully demand justice from Him for His people Israel - and thus for himself.

His voice trembled with tears and protest.

At the reading of the Torah or at "Aleynu", before the end of the prayer, he is already restless. Groups of Jews are already standing on the threshold of the Bes-Medresh or in the vestibule next to the stairs, discussing politics. Above all, Leybl Faynsod is upset about the mirror business, and so we actually call his son, Yisrolke, "the High School student", the student of Aleksandrov's Gymnasium, called "Shpigele" [little mirror].

Leybl Faynsod is a Jew with sunken cheeks and reddish, half-closed eyes. He is quick to shout, his voice hoarse:

"Jews shouldn't get involved in politics...making revolutions. Nothing good comes of it. They want to bring order to the Tsar's land. They want to take care of the Russian workers. They should take better care of their own fathers and mothers, who live in terror because of their strikes and proclamations, because - what are we here? Foreigners! Foreigners!"

Standing next to Leybl Faynsod is his son, Yisrolke, a High School student, who smiles mockingly at his father's speech and winks at me.

116

Kalmen Meler, the mechanic, stands still, serious and thoughtful, listening conscientiously as always and remaining silent. Next to him are his sons, Avroheml, who jumps around and can't stay in one place, and Yakev (now in New York), a quiet one, with a strong, rosy, round face and a full body, calm and thoughtful, like his father.

Except for the fact that he is still a boy, he is already like a fully developed human being.

Veydenboym, the colonial merchant from "Rokhke der Shvartsers Gesl" [Rochke the Black's Alley], a short, hot-tempered man, and his

two short sons are full-bodied, restless and temperamental.

Medovnik, a Jew with a pointed beard, always knocks on the table to stop the commotion in the vestibule next to the stairs by the open door.

Vilentshik, the tailor, with a round, fresh face, narrow at the bottom and wide at the top, turns his ears and listens. His tall, scrawny, lively son, with his skinny neck and squeaky voice, runs from one friend to another, squealing rapidly in his sharp-sounding girl's voice.

In the middle of the crowd is Yerokham Levin, a fair-skinned blond boy, sturdily built, his hair well coiffed in the back but not cut at the sides. Yerokham is holding his prayer book with both hands behind him, and he lets his voice be heard with a deliberate calm and poise.

The older Jews listen to him with interest, but do not have the patience to listen to the end, interrupting him in the middle. But Yerokham Levin is rarely surprised, does not lose his composure, and tries to enlighten them.

At the end of the prayer, when the mourners say the Kaddish, it is quiet for a moment, but at the "Ve'Imru Omeyn" [And say Amen], the Jews already begin to quietly discuss or finish discussions that began at the reading, while putting their prayer shawls in their little bags. The Jewish temperament and restlessness roars. Going out and standing in the yard, worried Jews are already talking about Russian politics and world affairs. They are predicting many prospects for the future of the world, prophecies that are now being confirmed before my eyes, for which great diplomats of world renown had found no justification at the time.

Bialystok had wise, far-sighted Jews.

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One Shabbat afternoon, my brother David did me a "favor" and took me, accompanied by his friend Potokski, to Tsertl's Forest, to Roskosh Park. In the evening hours, when the music

117

was playing in Roskosh Park, my brother David went to the cash register three times, but each time he was supposed to take out ten kopecks, but he could not decide to spend such a capital.

So the two friends decided to try their luck with a "free ticket".

My brother took me on his shoulder and lifted me onto the fence in a dark corner to see if it was possible to crawl over to the other side.

As I stood on my brother's shoulder with my hands on the fence, observing the strategic position, a guard had hidden from the inside and struck my hand with the full force of his lead-tipped whip.

A fingertip of my childish hand turned to a bloody pulp.

I fell to the ground at my brother's feet, screaming terribly. My brother turned pale with shock when he saw my bloody finger, knowing that as the older brother, he was entrusted with the fate of his younger brother, who was his father's favorite child.

So it was decided that I should say at home that I had fallen on a broken beer bottle in the woods and cut my finger.

My brother wrapped a piece of cloth around my finger to stop the blood, put me on the tramway and took me home.

When my father saw my bloody finger, he wrung his hands and took me to our neighbor, Antokolski den Feldsher, on Shabbat evening.

Antokolski the Feldsher, a middle-aged man with broad shoulders and thick, slightly silvery, tousled hair, a quiet, philosophical, intelligent Jew, used to ride around in his own two-wheeled carriage. He was the only passenger and driver, and he enjoyed it. I knew the children of his family well: Bashke, an intelligent young woman with manners; Pinye, my brother David's classmate, with whom he was good friends and went to Yafe's School together; and Vinye, the youngest daughter, a boisterous and slender girl with a narrow, long neck, a student at the Commercial School.

At home we joked that the Antokolski children were a "holy trinity": Pinye, Vinye and Bashke, the "grafinye" [countess] - because of her stiff posture.

I had deeper feelings for Vinye: the first trembling awakened in a young boy because of a girl who was several years older than him and who probably looked down on him like a "snotty nose" - a "smarkatsh" (the well-known Białystok expression of that time).

After the "drama" with my finger, I became a patient of our neighbor Antokolski and a frequent visitor - not only because of the "perevyazkes" (bandages), but also because of Vinye, with whom I recited from Russian poetry, from the works of Nadson, Lermontov, Pushkin. And to be honest, I looked at her more than I spoke.

I was deeply grateful to Pinye, my brother's friend, for lending me detective stories to read.

The whole of Białystok was drunk on detective stories, erotic-romantic books and sensational novels with sequels, which flooded the youth. The most famous were

The detective stories of Nat Pinkerton, Nick Carter, Sherlock Holmes, Lord Lister, "The Gentleman-Thief", as well as general novels such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, "The Cave of Leichtweiss", "The Beggar Countess", for which the women and girls of Białystok shed rivers of tears when they followed the dark fate of the countess, who became a street beggar, in the sequels.

When two boys from Białystok met on the street, they would say to each other a quote from the detective stories by Nat Pinkerton and Nick Carter:

"Stop right there, you criminal! One more move and you're dead!"

Or:

"Stop right there, scoundrel! I've finally got you! You're arrested in the name of the law!"

Fortunately, the standard of education in the Jewish homes was morally and ethically so high that the cheap trash books did not cause any drama.

The years passed. Vinye Antokolski became a slender, graceful merchantess with dreamy eyes and delicate looks.

But political events did not stand still either. The First World War began.

The Germans entered Białystok.

The war lasted four years and in 1919 the Poles occupied Białystok. In 1920 the Polish-Bolshevik [Soviet] War started. The Bolsheviks entered Białystok, but the Poles took advantage of the military help and strategy of the French General Weygand and the Bolsheviks were defeated.

The Poles retook Białystok in August 1920 and carried out a terrible massacre of Jews on the streets, highways and behind the city, accusing them of Bolshevism. They carried out pogroms, robbed and murdered.

As soon as the Polish government had restored order in the city, I was informed of the terrible news:

119

The proud Vinye Antokolski was no longer among the living. She had bravely stood up to the Polish pogromists when they stormed into her apartment to loot, and they brutally shot her on the spot.

Thus ended the young, tender life of my childhood friend Vinye, the daughter of Antokolski the Feldsher, who lived next door to us on Gonyondzki's yard.

### **The Death of a Bialystok Teacher**

Summer is fading, it is dying. Occasionally, a warm wind blows on a mild September evening. Young couples rush in, pour into the night shadows of the Białystok forest, into Tserl's weekend houses, nestle in hidden corners under tall, chummy, old, dark trees, lose themselves in the green of the grass. They are protected and concealed by green young trees that sway exuberantly and good-naturedly, hiding the kissing couples from prying eyes.

Yellow and red leaves, brick-colored like the sunset or withered, lie wearily beside the trees, kissing the earth in their final passing, reminding us that everything is doomed to die.

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In the morning the schoolchildren from Khanaykes [Chanajki], Surazer [Suraska], Lipove [Lipowa], Gumyener [Gumienna] and Vashlikover Streets run with their leather satchels on their backs. As they walk, they shake their satchels happily and they begin to slip off the leather straps. The satchels are full of books - grammar, chrestomathies, notebooks with "sotshinyenes" [essays] and, in one corner, mom's breakfast: a Białystok cake with sausage or fried herring with a piece of dark peasant bread, and all this is happily dangling in the satchels of the Białystok students from Fridman's, Menakhovki's, Babitski's or Yafe's Schools.

Students from High Schools, Commercial Schools and Real Schools are more deliberate and stately in their movements. With neatly pressed suits, like people who have made it big. They are young lads with serious intentions who already have one foot in adult society.

They learn for themselves and teach others to help pay the tuition that weighs so heavily on their father: Take the Białystoker shopkeeper, who

120

already has to support a grown-up boy, get him through the interest norm with the special Jewish tax, buy him books and clothes, and put an extra half a ruble in his pocket for a concert, an event or a date.

Even the smaller private schools open after "kanikl" [summer vacation], when children's voices and songs fill the air and echo in the alleys with their childish squeals. Full of life and the curiosity of youth, they hop on one leg as if to have one last fun before they have to get out their exercise books.

My father's school is also ready for the new semester. The room is freshly wallpapered. It still smells of the sticky paper, of the big green flowers on the cheap wallpaper.

The "skameykes" (school desks) have been polished. The inkwells are freshly wiped and filled with fresh ink. The floor is freshly scrubbed, wiped clean - the drudgery of my exhausted mother.

There is a new mezuzah on the door, quietly replaced by my mother; perhaps it will bring good luck.

The large hanging chandelier is painted with glossy black lacquer on the chains and decorated with a large "bomb" of blue-green-red paper attached from below.

The soot-blackened glass of the lamp has been carefully wiped clean, and a new wick sits slightly out of place in the lamp, which is filled to the top with bluish kerosene. White curtains adorn the whitewashed windows of my father's school, covering a half-broken pane of glass skillfully glued together with rye flour.

The freshly scrubbed spittoon in the corner stings the eyes with its rusty stains and looks like an old girl cleaning her face.

Next to the threshold is a thick green doormat made of woven straw so the children can wipe Khanayke's mud off their shoes.

The mat lies there like a privileged person who must be the first to receive my father's breadwinners as soon as they enter - the schoolchildren, the daughters of Białystok's craftsmen. A new term has begun at my father's school.

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On a cool September morning, my father's female students began to arrive:

Peshke Farbshteyn a slender, skinny girl, a quiet, serene one. She was the daughter of Itshe Farbshteyn, a Jew with a paralyzed leg and arm, who had a grocery store and four beautiful daughters.

The two older ones, Dobtshe and Shoshke, helped their mother in the shop. They would help sell a herring, kerosene, or sugar, and turn on the faucet to draw a bucket of water from under the window outside. Payment was made with a penny inserted through the opening in the window pane. The water was then turned off from the inside.

Rivke Faktor was a girl with black pigtails, red cheeks, and lively, inquisitive black eyes. Her father, a milk merchant, tried to give his children a little education and Jewish upbringing out of his meager income.

Poznyak the coachman's daughter, was a girl with a full, fleshy face, a broad nose, and juicy, thick lips. Poznyak was a broad-shouldered, strongly built Jew with a ruddy, tanned face who liked to drink his fill. He was a brave, hard-working man with a coarse wagoner's tongue but a good Jewish heart.

The two "Gerbergolts" sisters had lean, sunken cheeks, black frizzy hair, and slightly crossed eyes, and spoke Polish Yiddish, having come to Białystok from Lodz. The children called them "the Poylishe".

The daughter of Videlets the cobbler, with the Russian-sounding name of Manye, a plump girl, very mature for her age, with a pair of boiling, passionate eyes in her broad, slightly Mongolian face. She was very talented and the consummate leader of her comrades. Her father, a poor cobbler from Shayes Street, was strict with her.

Manye Goldberg was a small, slender, graceful girl, shy and with a delicate, noble face. She was the daughter of Shloymke the Feldsher and the sister of my childhood friend, Dovtshe Goldberg.

Each girl comes in with the same words, one sad, one happy, depending on how she feels:

"Good morning, teacher! Good morning, teacher!" and sits down at the wide, brown-polished desk that holds five students, with an inkwell next to each one. My mother greets each student warmly and lovingly and asks if their parents are doing well.

My father, calm and serious, looks at the prepared notebooks and books.

Father's eyes are lost in the air. They are far away from the school and the students who slowly run their fingers over Krylov's fable "The Monkey and the Glasses". Father often stands at the window in the middle of class and looks up at the blue sky, as if he would find an answer there to the questions he has never been able to answer.

The small, poor, cramped life of an insignificant teacher with a limited livelihood and a hard struggle for every ruble had deeply depressed my father. Looking at my mother's hard life and his own shattered dreams, my father focused all the enthusiasm of his intelligent mind on reading books that led him into a wide world of fantasy, distancing him even further from harsh reality and making him even more awkward.

He tried to escape the merciless reality with the help of fantasies and false hopes, and paid a high price for not wanting to conform to the law of a sober view in the daily struggle for his existence and the continuation of his life.

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Evening time. At home it feels like a storm is brewing. I sit with my hands rested under my ears, absorbed in a Hebrew children's book. In the kitchen, my mother is busy fiddling with the cast-iron pots on the stove, her cheeks glowing as she tosses wood chips into the oven. The aroma of my favorite dish wafted through the apartment: lentils with dumplings, with greaves in the middle. As he does when he's excited, my father is tapping a Bessarabian regimental march on the windowpane.

Mama's speech echoes from the kitchen. She doesn't have the courage to tell it to his face, so she yells from the kitchen while she's obviously busy with the pots:

"Gershon, what are you complaining about? Did not many students come? Then it's your own fault. Do you even think about studying with the girls? You're always absent-minded. Children can sense that. During class you're lost in thought, in other worlds. The kids ask you the same question several times in a row, and you don't even listen. Do you think they won't tell their parents? So how do you expect to have many students? What good is it to me that you know many tongues but can't make any funds?", my mother wants to express it in a rhyme.

"Look at the teachers you know! They can't do half as much as you, but they have full classes and a good life. Gershon, what are you dreaming about? Don't fly in the air, but look at what's going on around you on the earth. See how the teachers Ilivitsky, Babitsky and Menakhovsky have worked their way up. And others too - your good acquaintances. Withdraw from Khanaykes - you can't make a living from hobos. You're only drawn to poor people. You are infatuated with Khanaykes and don't want to leave the place".

Father presses his lips together and bites them until they are bloody. His face is stiff and frozen. Sparks fly from his eyes. He pulls himself together not to answer rudely, weighing and measuring every word. Mother's speech hurts him even more. He feels that some of what she says is true. But it seems to him that it would be a betrayal to give up his dreams and flee the poor neighborhood and his respect and affection for his neighbors.

"What do you want, Teme? It takes time to teach poor people to let their children learn. Besides, it is hard for them to earn a ruble. When they earn, they will pay me. What do you know about the joys of Gumienna and Lipowa Streets? You don't know how ashamed you are vis-à-vis the rich and powerful when you have to beg them to send a child to your school. Do you think, Teme, that Triling, Gubinski and Novik will send their children to my school? The rich cloth manufacturers are looking down on us. I'd rather have half a ruble from a wagoner, a bricklayer or a cobbler! At least they still have respect for me!"

Mother comes out of the kitchen, flushed from the stove. She stands by the table, hands at her sides, grimly dragging out each word: "Gershon, your pride is killing you! You won't die of poverty, but of shame, if you're ashamed to do many things out of pride. Remember, Gershon, I'm warning you. Such things don't end well. I'm warning you."

Mother's prediction came true. It did not end well.

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The last "gulyanye" of the season takes place in the City Garden. Dense crowds of schoolchildren move along the avenues. The gray dust hangs in the air as white, flying splashes in the glow of electric lights and settles on their shoes. Lively, ringing conversations, loud laughter, and flirtatious eyes sparkle from heated faces. Colorful confetti is scattered among the walking feet. I wander around alone, a little boy, lonely and

124

awkward, like someone who has wandered into someone else's wedding.

I walk hastily through Lipowa and Popovshtshinzne Streets, which are bathed in semi-darkness, illuminated by gas lanterns. The little red flames behind their square panes flicker like sad "yortsayt" [memorial] candles.

I walk along the stone wall of the old Białystoker cemetery, through which the pale moon, which accompanies and follows me, illuminates the "oyholim" [Jewish monumental tombs] of the Białystoker rabbis and "good Jews" [miracle workers], against which

small childlike graves nestle. The trees sway in prayer to the Almighty, and pale moon shadows float in mysterious silence.

I approach my home, which is adjacent to the cemetery. From a distance, I see groups of people next to the gate of our yard. With soft whispering voices, teary eyes and hand-wringing, their faces full of pain and pity, they clear the way in front of me, whispering to each other, accompanying me with heartfelt sympathy, pointing to the other in my direction, sighing and shaking their heads.

I immediately realize that something has happened at home. I push my way through, past a group of neighbors who hadn't noticed me in the darkness next to the door to our apartment. Heart pounding, I open the door and see strange Jews in our bedroom and someone covered in a white linen sheet lying on the brown-polished wooden bed.

In the blink of an eye, years are thrust upon me. Minutes turn into years. Time flies and ends my childhood. A little boy with a big yoke and worries about the future. I become stiff, masculine, hardened and responsible. I go to the linen sheet. I pull it down and my father's glassy eyes look out. His face is stern and calm, as if he were paying his last debt, settling his last score with his life. With the life he left voluntarily.

Mother's soft, convulsive wail from the next room echoed as if from afar, like a lament hanging in the air, repeating countless times the same phrase her hot, parched lips muttered heartbreakingly:

"I have brought you to your grave, Gershon! I have brought you to your grave!"

125

But it wasn't my mother's fault. It was the dark fate of an intelligent man who, living on the gray earth, wanted to roll up to heaven. The poverty of Białystok had crushed the noble man. The misery of the Khanaykes hardened and embittered the driven inhabitants with every terrible groan before the next morning: "Where and how shall I earn my living today?"

It was hard for a delicate, quiet, intelligent man to elbow his way through the worried, impoverished, melancholy faces. A young life was uprooted. A teacher from Białystok closed his eyes early and sought shelter under the calm but cold wings of death.

## Bialystok in the First World War

On June 28, 1914, the world was thrown into turmoil by the sensational news that a Serbian terrorist, Gavrilo Princip, with the help of 23 other terrorists, had carried out an assassination in Sarajevo, killing the Grand Duke of Austria, the heir to the throne, Franz-Ferdinand.

Born in 1863, Grand Duke Franz-Ferdinand was the eldest son of Grand Duke Karl-Louis, the third brother of Emperor Franz-Joseph, who had completely retired from political life to make way for his son Franz-Ferdinand on the Habsburg throne.

Franz-Ferdinand was an energetic man of determined character, but simple and modest. Despite the protests of the Austrian imperial court, he married a poor Czech noblewoman on July 1, 1900, promising that their children would not claim the Austrian throne.

For the Serbs, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which had absorbed and oppressed many millions of Slavs, was the embodiment of imperialism. It also threatened the very existence of Slavic Serbia. The murder of his popular, talented and energetic nephew Franz-Ferdinand

126

was a great blow to old Franz Joseph, who was still deeply wounded by the tragic suicide (in January 1889) of his only son, Crown Prince Rudolph, involving a 17-year-old beauty, Maria Vetschera, under mysterious circumstances. The suicide still serves as dramatic material for playwrights and dramatists today, known as the "Tragedy of Mayerling".

On July 23, 1914, Austria sends an ultimatum to Serbia, giving it 48 hours to comply with Austria's demands. On July 25, Serbia replies that it is impossible for it to meet Austria's demands. At the same time, Germany officially warns the other states not to interfere in Austria's actions against Serbia. British, French, and Russian diplomats begin efforts to prevent war, but on July 28, Austria declares war on Serbia. The Austrian military bombed Belgrade and Russia began a partial mobilization.

On July 30, Germany demands that Russia stop mobilizing. Meanwhile, on July 30, the famous socialist leader Jean Jaurès is assassinated in France for his pacifist speeches.

On August 1, Germany declares war on Russia and France mobilizes. Italy informs Germany that it will remain neutral. On August 2, the Germans invaded the Principality of Luxembourg and the German military marched into Liege [Belgium]. Belgium

protests the German military marching through its territory. On August 3, the German ambassador is recalled from Paris and the French ambassador from Berlin, and war breaks out between France and Germany. Germany invades Belgium, and Belgium asks England for help. On August 4, England declares war on Germany. Meanwhile, the United States declares neutrality.

On August 6, Austria-Hungary declares war on Russia. On August 8, the British military arrives in Belgium. Portugal declares itself an ally of Britain. On August 11, France declares war on Austria-Hungary, and on August 21, England declares war on Austria-Hungary.

On August 20, the Germans march into Brussels and meet no resistance. The number of allied nations grows. Even the Chinese emperor declares war on Germany on August 23.

127

On September 1, in protest against German aggression, Russia changes the German-sounding name of Petersburg to the Russian name of Petrograd.

On December 6, after a three-week battle, Lodz is occupied by the Germans. On August 23, the Turkish army begins to approach the Suez Canal, a strategically important base for traffic and transportation, but England has already made a strategic move: it declares Egypt its protectorate, deposing Sultan Kedive [Viceroy] Abbas Hilmi and replacing him with the pro-Allied Prince Hussein Kamal.

On February 10, 1915, Russia suffers a terrible defeat in East Prussia, and it is said that it happened because of treason. Meanwhile, on May 7, 1915, the great transatlantic liner "Lusitania" is sunk by the Germans. In the process, 1150 passengers lost their lives, including hundreds of American citizens. The American government sends a strong protest to Germany. On July 21, America sends a third note of protest to Germany about the rights of passengers from neutral countries to travel on ships of belligerent countries.

It is a pleasant surprise when Italy declares war on Austria-Hungary on May 23rd. The German and Austrian armies, which had already penetrated deep into Poland, march into Warsaw on August 5, 1915 and approach Białystok. On August 26, at 9 o'clock in the morning, our dear, beloved hometown of Białystok is occupied by the German army.

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Białystok, August 1914, it's the sweet "kanikul" [summer vacation]. The pleasant idleness of not having to bother one's mind with "zadatshes" [homework], grammar, geography and history. My leather satchel lies in the polished closet, and I avoid the corner as if

I'm afraid it will ensnare me. It seems to me that the satchel is speaking to me through the door of the closet, beckoning to me:

"Just one look, just one look at me. Take history, for example. When they ask you later in the exams when Ivan the Cruel was born? Will you know the answer? Who knows? Come, my child, give me just one look, just one look."

128

I know the sweet, seductive language of the satchel. I'm drawn to it, and I'm scared. I leave the corner of the closet and hear Mom's voice, who doesn't like me hanging around doing nothing.

"What are you doing pointlessly? A boy your age should be making himself useful to his mother. Well, go downstairs and bring me half a pound of sugar loaves, a "lot" [unit of weight] of tea, and half a herring from the grocery store. And for God's sake, ask for some lyak [herring sauce]. There's a jar for you. And make your way downstairs to get some fresh cookies. You hear - for God's sake, fresh, not yesterday's stale. Yes - if the shopkeepers see there's only a child, they'll deceive him from head to toe!"

My mother puts the glass in a woven straw basket, opens the door for me, and calls after me:

"For God's sake, don't dawdle!"

We live on Gumienna Street, in Shmuel Tsitrin's [Citrin's] yard, in the upstairs room that has a window facing the street. Our neighbor in the upstairs room is the Jew Yisroel Dunyets, a "maskel" [enlightened person], a teacher and scribe. A small, thin, stooped man with a round, shaved beard, he is constantly lost in thought, either sitting in the upstairs room writing or thinking. His door is always open because he is sickly and needs some air.

And when I pass by, I sneak by quietly to see if Minyele is there.

Yisroel Dunyets has two daughters and a son, all beautiful, quiet and calm people, except for the fiery Minyel. Khave is the older daughter and already a real lady. She's too old for me. I'm attracted to the younger Minyel. She's a little joker who giggles all the time, and she has a shapely face and a nose like a carving, with two shapely nostrils that open symmetrically when she bursts in with a bratty laugh, and her voice trills like a little bird.

But I pretend not to be interested in her, look indifferently into her eyes, which are narrowed with laughter, and ask her coldly, "What are you laughing at? You're just laughing. Isn't Khavele there?"

It cuts to her heart when I mention Khavele and she stops laughing:

"What makes you think of Khavele? She's already a lady and you're just a little boy!"

So Minye pays me back for mentioning Khavele and gives me the needle at my age.

129

I go down to the street. Gumienna Street is boiling and bubbling. Something is different than usual. Packers, tied with ropes and wearing heavy boots smeared with blue tan, walk with sacks of flour on their backs, white as demons, and sacks of potatoes peeking out of the few holes. They also carry sacks of rice and peas and tons of herring, surrounded by rusty tires and smeared with "lyok". Transport wagons with small-town passengers pass quickly, rumbling over the sharp cobblestones on wooden wheels covered with iron tires.

Young people, well-groomed and dressed like dandies, drift around in groups, discussing political news, the war, and conscription into the Russian army. Mothers with worried faces look into each other's eyes, share the latest news they've picked up, and, with their hands hidden under their aprons, consult with their neighbors and share their maternal concerns.

The stern-faced Russian policemen are often seen, suddenly emerging from the ground at the slightest disturbance, tapping their white nickel sabers and barking angrily:

"Nothing to see here, move along!"

The newspaper sellers, hurried and breathless, run around every few hours with bundles of newspapers, ringing with their leather satchels slung over their shoulders, quickly handing out peanuts as change, shouting:

"Extra, extra, extra, telegrams! Austria has declared war on Serbia!"

The gloomy, sad, worried faces of the parents mingle with the cheerful, joking expressions of the young conscript boys, feigning expertise. A little curiosity gleams from their eyes. They may be facing troubled times, but there is also something new and interesting in it - and with youthful optimism and a thirst for adventure, they welcome the news with a sweet heartbeat.

Next to Bulkovshteyn's Bes-Medresh, between afternoon and evening prayers, a group of Jews stand and talk politics until they are called. And between the quiet, level-headed, God-fearing "Sh'mone-Esre" [Eighteen Petitions, Amida] and the noisy "Aleynu", people exchange opinions and remarks.

They are already divided into groups. One group is quiet and composed, another is already discussing details and singing a Talmud-nign. I stagger between the feet of each group, picking up on the words, the tone of voice, the gestures and facial expressions. I completely forget about the errand for Mom, the quarter [sic] pound of sugar loaves, and the half herring. After all, I am also a part of

the events taking place in my city, Białystok.  
A strong curiosity is aroused in me.

130

What is happening? And what will happen next? Something is stirring and rumbling in my city! What will come of it? And what will happen to my brother David, to my mother, and to me?

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August 1914: The tense war atmosphere and the warm summer weather drove the inhabitants of Białystok into the streets. The hurried, nervous steps, the excited, restless faces of the passers-by made the atmosphere even more tense. The shops looked sad because half of their shelves were empty. In a few weeks, the goods had been bought up by the richer inhabitants, and some of the goods had been kept by the shopkeepers, who were afraid that they would not receive new goods from the wholesalers and factories, or would have to pay exorbitant prices for them themselves.

The "pasek" was in full swing. This term, "pasek", was used to describe the sharp rise in prices. There were people who became rich and powerful in a few weeks, speculation had taken hold of all commercial circles, and not only goods were affected, but also [foreign] currency. Especially English pounds and American dollars, which were secretly called "lokshn" or "hard and soft," meaning gold pieces and paper money.

The people followed the porters with feverish eyes, running after them and inquiring from whom they had received the "dray-nulike" (flour), "montshke" (sugar), or "a blekh olyye" (a tin of oil).

The prices increased from day to day. Flour, oil, light, pearl barley, cloth, leather, honey, coffee, kerosene, and even chocolate and "landrynska" sweets became desirable goods for which high prices were paid. Hardest hit were the poor Jews of Białystok, the craftsmen who had to live on their weekly income and had no savings. Poverty and hardship began to knock on the windows of the better-off families and increased the fear and anxiety about the coming events, which were war, hunger, and the loss of young sons, brothers, and sons-in-law who had been mobilized in the "fonyes" [Russian] military.

In the evening, my mother sat anxiously in our small room and consulted with our neighbor:  
"Rashe, what are we going to do? The prices are rising like yeast dough.

131

With my miserable few rubles, I can buy only a third of what I could a month ago. And what will happen next?"  
Rashe, our neighbor, smiled mildly and well as always, held her hands under her apron and shook her head. Rashe Dunyets was a grocery store owner herself and knew the situation better than my mother. She sighed and said:  
"Teme, why doesn't your David go to a small shtetl? It's cheaper to buy from the millers, grocers, or bakers there, not like here in Białystok. He should go to Khoroshtsh [Choroscz] or Knishin [Knyszyn], as long as you can get something there".

When my brother David came home late at night from his work at the Rafalovski-Zeligzon factory, where he was a loom master, my mother immediately told him: "We have to stock up!"  
And three days later, a sack of flour, a sack of pearl barley, and a tin of oil made from real linseed stood proudly in our kitchen.

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Only now did the great worries begin. My mother paced, wringing her hands, her lovely, shining face covered in clouds. Premature wrinkles creased her forehead, and she sighed softly, secretly wiping her eyes with her apron. Mom was worried about the draft. My brother David was liable for military service, and Mom racked her brains to see how he could be exempted from "sluzhbe" [military service]. My brother David was angry with our mother:

"You're carrying all the worries of the world with you, don't worry, I'm not going to serve. It will be "komilfo". ("Komilfo" is a French term meaning "as it should be" [comme il faut]. It made the rounds in Białystok for a while, and many people actually didn't know what it meant).

"Mama, I've already arranged something with my friend Potokskin. We met at the 'Tshotshen' (Tyotye's Kavyarne, a famous square in Białystok). And we, a whole group, agreed: A 'ma-ke fonyen', that is, we won't go to the Russian military service. We're going to 'moren'!"

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The word "moren" became the most popular word in Białystok. All the young boys who had to do their military service had to "moren" (starve) themselves in order not to gain the required weight and be drafted as a soldier.

Large groups of young men used to stay out all night, playing billiards at "Mets" on Nikolayevske Street, eating "latkes" [potato pancakes] fried with castor oil, drinking Epsom salts, and starving. Some of the boys from wealthier backgrounds sent crippled boys with disabilities, called "malokhim" [angels], in their place and name to be exempted from military service and receive a "blue certificate".

The poorer ones, however, inflicted disabilities on themselves.

Some inflicted a "kile" [hernia] on themselves, others had fluid running out of their ears. Some imitated "scabies" and others became deaf or dumb.

You really had to be a good actor to play this role, and it wasn't just one boy who pretended to be deaf who fell for a trick. When, after the interrogation, he was quietly told "You're free," and the boy ran joyfully to the door, the doctor of the "prisustve" [draft board] would call him back with a wily smile and shout:

"Fit for military service, you bastard! Fit for military service, you son of a bitch!"

Those who had family members in America would only appear pro forma at the "priziv" [draft board] so that their parents wouldn't have to pay a fine of 300 rubles. But later, when they were already in the barracks, they managed to get out with a false "governor's pass" and smuggled themselves across the border into Germany at [the town of] Prostkin. And from there they went to America to forget the Tsar, the pogroms, and the revolutions forever.

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One Shabbat afternoon, my brother David came limping into our living room, dragging a foot that looked like it was made of wood. And as Mom, pale as death, stared at it with frightened eyes, my brother exclaimed heroically with laughter and feigned joy: "You see, Mama, this foot will set me free. And as he rolled up his pants above the ankle, he revealed a shiny, smooth, blue-stained, swollen foot that looked like a foreign, "grafted" foot. And he ended triumphantly: "Don't worry, Mom! After the deliverance, my foot will be as it was in three days. I told you, Mom, not to worry. We'll do the "komilfo."

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September. I carry my satchel to the "Remeslenoye" (Artisans' School) and wait with palpitations and youthful curiosity to see how the war atmosphere has affected my school.

I approach the courtyard where the large buildings of Visotski's [Wissotzky's] "Talmetoyre" [Community School for the poor] and the "Remeslenoye" stand, built in 1905 by the handouts of the tea magnate Wolf Wissotzky the foundation stone of which was laid by the Grodno governor, Stolipin. He later gained sad fame as a bloody, anti-Semitic minister of the Tsar. Stolipin was shot by the Jewish provocateur, Bogrov.

My studies at the school begin as usual. Later, during the "peremenes" [breaks], I meet the "zavyedoyuzhtsh" [administrator] of the "Talmetoyre", Samson Yakovlevitsh Grosman, with his thick, well-styled hair. He is a medium-sized, energetic, proud Jew who looks like a goy.

I also meet the short, always serious Pesach Kaplan, with his deep, sharp, penetrating eyes; the red-blond Rakovski, the Hebrew teacher, as always sad and gloomy; Druskin with the half-round beard, who looks like a deputy of the "Gosudarstvener dum" [Russian Parliament].

And there are our teachers from "Remeslenoye":

Samuil Yulyanovitsh Kaletski, our director, who liked to chat with me while holding his hand on my head, and put his private home library at my disposal. He has a pair of lively, laughing eyes and a fresh, cheerful face.

The "risovanye" [drawing] teacher Abukov with his blond pointed beard, betraying his affiliation to the world of painters- and indeed he is our teacher of drawing and painting. The stiff, pompous Lyusternik in his uniform with shiny brass buttons, and Belenki, a tall, muscular man who speaks Russian with a sharp, Russian "r" and looks like a gladiator carved out of stone from the Roman era. He is the teacher of "mechanics" and the best declaimer of Russian poetry at our school's ceremonial balls, which are held twice a year: Purim and Chanukah.

Studies are progressing idly. The teachers are upset. They can't concentrate on their lessons. And my classmates - grown-up boys - feel the restlessness of the teachers and are themselves unbalanced, melancholy and cheerful, wavering between fear and youthful curiosity.

In the textile department of the steam loom, the new teacher, Master Grabovski, who has taken the place of the former Master Mayrem Frankfurt, is demonstrating before us. The students do not have much respect for the new teacher, who himself was a student of "Remeslenoye" not long ago.

Somehow the subject doesn't stick. The great events that are about to unfold cause anxiety, palpitations, and also great curiosity. And they have made us little men, responsible for our parents, brothers and sisters in the cruel hours to come.

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Early one morning, as I was walking down Lipowa Street, curiously observing the agitated minds of my usually quiet Białystok, which now resembled a city of people just released from a lunatic asylum, I stopped to politely greet and flirt with Eva Topolski next to the [family's] glass shop.

The plump, shapely Eva sparkled with life, and her full, rosy cheeks breathed the spring of youth. But our conversation was interrupted by people running to the Breml, and my ever-thirsty curiosity to observe street life overcame my desire to flirt, and after saying goodbye with a polite "Do Svidanye," I made my way to the Breml.

And there before my eyes unfolded a scene characteristic of that time.

Next to the "Bremlekh", across from Sorin's wooden toy stall and my aunt Rutshke's herring shop, a crowd was swaying. In the center right, a group of recruited "tsherevnikes" could be seen surrounding a Russian policeman, the well-known officer Reshute in Białystok, who was whistling incessantly on his pipe to call for help and firing his revolver in the air. He saw the angry faces and wild eyes of the recruits, who approached him threateningly.

Some of the recruits ran to the corner of Rutshke's herring and lime shop, grabbed a barrel, ran up behind Officer Reshute, dropped the barrel on his head, and strangled him to the ground. The wild, bloodshot eyes of the recruits expressed the elemental force of the rage and indignation of the raw crowd when it awakens to savage hatred. They showed what they could do to the representative of Tsarist power - and even to the entire Tsarist government.

This was the first herald of the roaring wave of revolt which had already begun in Russia, and which later swept aside the Tsarist government with merciless cruelty.

It flooded Russia with terror and blood and led to the execution of the entire Russian royal family, the last of the Romanov dynasty, in

a dank, dark cellar in Yekaterinburg, in the house of the Russian merchant Ipatyev.

Białystok was in turmoil. Normal life had been completely destroyed. Events were changing like in the movies. Yesterday's rich and powerful people were now impoverished, shamefully suppressing their poverty so that no one would see it, and yesterday's poor people had become rich and powerful, running a state with servants and driving a carriage with rubber tires and two horses in a row.

Lodz was occupied by the Germans (fallen on November 26, 1914), cut off from Great Russia, and all orders for textiles went to Białystok. The textile industry in Białystok expanded rapidly. The factories ran in shifts at full speed. The main manufacturers, who had no care in the world and who controlled the textile industry, were:

Triling, Novik, Tsitron [Citron], Yakobi, Kamikhov, Gubinski, Moes, Preysman, Markus, Slonimski, Moreyn, Vetshorek, Sokol, Zilberfenig, Khone Zilberblat, Poretski-Govinski, Knishinski, Nyemtsovitsch, Kanel, Makhai, Polak, Pines, Bril, Beker (plush factory), Yudl Kronenberg and Efraim Linski (Horodok), Amdurski (in Peshtshaniki), Bukhholts (in Supraśl). New manufacturers emerged who had previously been merchant's clerks:

Gotlib Seletski and others.

The city is full of Russian military. Osovyyets [Osowiec] is occupied. The German artillery bombardment, like a distant, silent thunder, cruelly penetrates the quiet Białystok nights...

The city is full of "bezeshentses" [refugees] from the area of Grodno and Łomża, from Brisk and Grajewo, Jedwabne and Rajgród. They were victims of the decrees of the oppressor of the Jews, the Tsar's uncle Nicholas Nikolayevich, who suspected the Jewish population of spying for the Germans and expelled them from the border towns.

The buildings of the "Linas-Hatzedek" shelter the poor refugees wandering around in confusion. Millers, textile and leather manufacturers have become rich and powerful in a short time. Prices have almost doubled in one year. Speculation is in full swing. Poverty and despair on the one hand, and a brilliant period of golden business and quick riches on the other, alternate at a rapid pace.

The factories of Białystok are noisy day and night.

136

The main products of the Białystok factories were "karelekh" [cheap woollen cloth] made of torn cloth nets, cotton "kastor" [cheap

suit cloth], simple blankets for soldiers, scouring cloths for cleaning cannons, and the most beautiful flowered "montanyak" blankets: heavily loaded carts with bales of cloth dragged themselves over the cobblestones of Białystok. The mechanical looms of Groseneyner, Shvaber, Sheyner and Zhakard did not rest, they clattered day and night. Large orders from the Russian government came in, creating a new class of wealthy Jews who began to play a role as donors and activists in society.

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My brother became a "big earner".

He is a loom master at the "loynketnikes" [piecework/piece rate] company "Zeligzon-Rafalovski" on Nadretshne Street, opposite the city baths. There are two partners.

Sholem [Shalom] Mordekhay, as everyone calls him, is a fresh, lively Jew, dressed like a cart driver, always cheerful, with bright, laughing eyes. And no matter what he earns, he behaves in a companionable manner, always joking, pinching the "nuperkes" [female workers who look for and repair flaws in the fabric], and driving a horse and cart, whip in hand, to Gubinski's big blanket factory and back.

He carries packages of yarn and ribbons of different colors and brings finished pieces of fabric to Gubinski, free of defects.

The second partner, Nokhem [Nachum] Leyzer, is a Jew with a small paunch and a gold chain dangling from his waistcoat. He is finely dressed, with a fat, contented, stiff face, drooping cheeks, and a nose crowned by a golden pince-nez.

Nokhem-Leyzer is a man who meticulously calculates every kopeck, behaves with dignity, and speaks with the typical Grajewo "I" [that is, the Polish *I* ]. He has just said angrily to Sholem-Mordekhay:

„Sho‘em Mordekhay, far vos klaybstu nisht tsuzamen di kontses fun di pekłakh garn?...Far vos?...Es kost dokh gełt...“. [“Sholem Mordekhay, why don’t you collect the end pieces from the yarn packets? Why? After all, it costs money!”]

My brother David works hard, and he earns a lot of money, between 20 and 25 rubles a week. He works during the day and sometimes also the night shifts. But he can’t handle the money. He’s like all poor children who suddenly get a lot of money and want to quench their thirst for the nice clothes they dreamed of as children. He constantly has new suits made for him, with a narrow waist and protruding chest, according to the fashion of the time.

and leads a dissolute life with his comrades.

My mother is annoyed: "David, remember - you don't always have a job and earn a living! You have to be able to put a penny back! Circumstances change. You have to think about tomorrow!"

But I already know. How can my brother David think about tomorrow when there are so many desirable things today? And today is so nice.

So he hangs out with friends who smell money on him: in the cafe "Tyotye" [Aunt] on Lipowa Street. He plays billiards at "Mets" on Nikolayevske [Mikołajewska] Street, dances with girls at "Keymers" on Lipowa Street, goes to "German's" cinema "Modern", disappears for whole nights in Roskosh Park, and comes home from the forest in a modern carriage with rubber tires and songs of chanson singers.

Once he came home bruised and blue-eyed. He defended the honor of the Jews, fought in Roskosh Park with non-Jewish louts and officers who insulted the Jewish people.

My brother David always had to be the one to stand up for the people of Israel and take a beating for it. And once my brother was almost stabbed in the side with a knife when he stood up for a barefoot gentile woman who was amazed to see the Białystok clock tower "reaching to heaven" and raised her head to the top of the tower where a fire-warden was doing his rounds on the circular balcony. That's why she didn't see the Białystok pickpockets reaching into her woven straw basket - they were after her handkerchief with the wrapped silver coins!

My brother went and took care of her, warning her of the thieves. But if my brother hadn't happened to meet some of his sturdy comrades, the "blote yatn" [dirty bastards] would have stabbed him in the stomach.

But my brother David also worked hard, and my mother often sent me to him with food to take some refreshment. She sighed that unfortunately he worked hard and bitterly and wasted his money. Once my brother bought me a present, a blue, sleeveless cape with holes in the side for the arms to stick out, which was very fashionable for boys at that time, and which the famous conductor of the school choir, Jakow Berman, wore for a long time, although he was no longer a boy.

I was happy with the blue cloth pelerine, which matched my white round face and the blond hair of the gentile peasant boys, and I swung with special pride on the Białystoker "konkes" [horse trams] to go to my friends: Sheymke Zak, Sheymke Plovski and Khayim Kruglyanski, who lived in the street "Behind the Prison".

On one of those evenings, when I was visiting my comrades and walking down Vashlikover Street towards the "Lakhankos" High School, I saw large vehicles and Red Cross medics.

There was a smell of blood and war, although it was still a long way from Białystok. I approached the "Lakhankos" High School, which served temporarily as a hospital, and stood next to the people who had gathered to see the wounded and dead being taken out of the vehicles.

But suddenly everyone's eyes widened in wild terror:

People began to carry out the Russian soldiers who had been the first victims of the German gas war. They looked terrible: Bloated bellies and yellow swollen faces, like yellow-blue death masks. A small plaque with the name and address of each gassed man dangled from his foot. They were lined up in the hospital hall and sprinkled with lime to prevent epidemics. In the twilight they looked like shadows of the dead in strange colors - in a cemetery on a moonlit night.

This was the first herald of what the German culture was capable of, the first announcement of the future gas victims. Of Majdanek, Auschwitz and Treblinka, in the German extermination orgy of blood and tears.

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On a beautiful blue morning on April 20, 1915, when I was still sleeping contentedly, rosy and blossoming, covered in my duvet, I noticed that Mama was waking me cautiously, as if she was still hesitating whether to wake me or not. I opened my eyes and snapped out of a faraway dream.

Mom looked lovingly into my eyes and repeated softly a few times:

"Yankele! David is working through the night. Unfortunately, he's extremely exhausted, he needs something to bring him so he can regain his strength."

Sluggishly I got dressed, put the food in a straw basket and walked sleepily down to Gumienna Street.

139

There I pass a corner of Gumienna Street, the house of Gutman the Teacher, to whom I sometimes come up, because his daughter, who calls me "Zhabkele" ["little frog"], belongs to our group. There, in teacher Gutman's living room, I once met the Białystoker

Maggid Rapoport, a cheerful, humorous and witty man who surprised me because I compared him to Yosef HaTsadik, given his rosy cheeks, beautiful face and blond beard.

I often listened to his sermons in the Bes-Medresh next to the large City's Synagogue [the Wielka Synagogue]. He used to shake me with his quick, sudden tearing open of the Holy Ark during his sermon, along with a wailing prayer and lament to the Lord of the world, which he would link with a frightening wailing cry from the women's section, whereupon even the men would quietly sob and stand there with tears in their eyes.

There's the house of my aunt Khaye'tshe Shustitski, where two worlds lived in one home: The pious, bearded, God-fearing, quiet Benyamin-Fayvl and his modern daughters Tsilye and Soshe, who read Russian novels, walked in the City Garden on Shabbat for amusement - they had bought tickets on Shabbat - and dreamed of Eugene Onegin and Sanin, the heroes and men of pleasure of Pushkin and Artsybashev.

From a distance, in Yatke Alley, I can see the "Lines-Khoylem" [Charity Hospital] and the famous ice cellar near the outpatient clinic, which supplied hundreds of Jews with ice during the summer days and nights for various illnesses, when cold ice was the primary remedy.

I enter Nikolayevska [Mikolajewska] Street and approach the "Polkovoyen" Bes-Hamedresh, but suddenly I see people running from all sides to the gates and courtyards, curiously looking up to the sky, where my young eyes clearly see formations of airplanes, three flying in a row, like black storks approaching.

I assume that they are German planes. They arouse in me feelings of admiration for the human genius that created such incredible things.

I remember the first flight demonstrations, on the way to Vashlikove, by the Italian pilot "Kampo di Stsipy" [Scipio del Campo]. All of Białystok ran to see the miracle of people flying like birds! What a comparison with the majestic German birds that flew so beautifully, symmetrically in the air, as if in a performance.

I raise my head to the steel birds, cross the small bridge on Nikolayevske Street and follow the German planes with my eyes, forgetting that I should actually turn into Nadretshne Street, opposite the bath.

After all, I'm supposed to take food to my brother.

As if hypnotized, I follow the planes, forming a small roof over my eyes with my hands, and I am not far from Aleksandrovskie Street when suddenly I hear a terrible, shattering explosion. Four or five houses away, thunder rattles the windows in the morning silence. Then followed a series of bomb explosions.

From a distance I see a schoolgirl, a girl in a brown dress, lying with her books on the corner of Aleksandrovskie Street next to the bank. Thin rivulets of blood flow around her head, like long, red, bloody legs of a bloody spider.

On the other side, a bank clerk lies with his arm torn off, his blood-soaked sleeve hanging somehow shapelessly down.

My eyes were blinded by all this, by blood and death, by the aimless killing and brutality of grown-up people, of whom I - a small, dreamy boy - had to become one. I am overwhelmed by the fear of my future, an elementary fear of what lies ahead, of the unknown, of what the grown-ups, the adults, the omniscient elders are preparing for me.

I was afraid of life for the first time, I turned pale and trembled like a young leaf torn off by an evil, cold storm wind.

Among the victims of those beautifully flying airplanes - moving across the blue sky like a public display of human genius, which I had stopped admiring and which filled my childish heart with hatred and suspicion - were six young children, among them Jewish schoolboys and schoolgirls.

One of them was the sister of my close friend Podrabinik, whom I used to visit at his home to discuss poetry, romance, the beauty of the human soul, and the greatness of the human race.



Żydowski oddział sanitarny w Rosyjskim Czerwonym Krzyżu w Białymstoku podczas pierwszej wojny światowej w latach 1914-1915

*The Jewish Sanitary Unit of the Russian Red Cross in Bialystok during the First World War, 1914-1915.*

Source: [Ksiega-album-pamieci-gminy-zydowskiej-w-Bialymstoku-czesc-1.pdf](http://www.ksiega-album-pamieci-gminy-zydowskiej-w-Bialymstoku-czesc-1.pdf)

## The Invasion of the Germans

Białystok changed its face. New people arrived, foreign Jews, refugees from the surrounding towns: Choroshtsh, Vashlikov, Supraśl, Zabłudów, Horodok, Goniądz, Jedwabne, Grajewo, and other small villages, who, fearing the retreating Russian Cossacks and soldiers, sought refuge in the large Jewish Białystok.

141

Some of the Jews from the fortified towns are forced to evacuate by decree of the Russian government, because rumors are circulating that Jews are German spies and that it is "appropriate for the security of the Russian Empire to rid the fortified towns of the dangerous Jewish element".

The "spy mania" hovers in the air.

People are looking for them everywhere.

Rumors spread in Białystok:

The old man with the childishly sweet face, who sells fragrant, vibrant flowers at the corner of the "Daytshishe" [German Street] leading to the "Gorodski Sad" [City Garden], and who speaks a "gentile" Yiddish, and who, while holding a bouquet of flowers in his hand, which he has taken from a large, woven straw basket, asks so softly and warmly:

"Buy a beautiful flower for a beautiful bride", this old man is not supposed to be so childishly naive.

He is a spy! He is an Austrian colonel disguised as a pathetic, somewhat foolish flower seller for espionage purposes.

And another rumor spreads: the Italian artist there, the singer and magician who performed at public events in the Palace Theater, singing sweet, romantic arias from operas in Italian, catching pigeons from an empty cage and live rabbits from a top hat, and bowing so charmingly and gracefully after the enthusiastic applause - he is actually a German spy who was later arrested while photographing the Osowiec Fortress!

Espionage and sabotage were in the air. My brother, who was a loom master in the Zeligzon-Rafalovski factory, which worked for Gubinsky's blanket factory, was suddenly paid in gold coins. The same phenomenon was observed all over Białystok and Russia.

The banks began to put a lot of gold coins into circulation, and rumors spread that German saboteurs - directors of Russian banks - were trying to exhaust the Russian gold reserves. They put the valuable gold reserves into international circulation in order to cause inflation

and devalue the Russian ruble.

Rumors of espionage even surrounded the Russian Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna, who was of German descent and greatly idolized the famous, boisterous monk Grigory Rasputin, who indulged with the royal ladies-in-waiting

142

in extravagant, saucy, daring orgies and parties with half-naked courtesans, among whom circulated the name of the lady-in-waiting "Vyrobova," the Russian Tsarina's closest and most intimate friend.

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Białystok is in turmoil! Soldiers travel to and from the front. Shops earn money. Arrivals from small towns, military and civil servants, Białystok residents, where "the rubles roll" and who earn money quickly and easily with contracts and the supply of provisions, lead a comfortable life and make money in the midst of the bloody nightmare of war. They are easy customers and pay well.

Military convoys clatter over the pointed cobblestones of Białystok, large cannons covered with tarpaulins but clearly showing the long barrels of the cannons, rattle proudly across the streets as if to say: "Look who the aristocrats are today!"

Large wagons with carts full of hay and straw, pulled by lazy, dragging horses, bring the smell of the village and mowed meadows.

A detachment of soldiers with red, steaming, sweaty faces and towels under their arms marches in the middle of the street with firm, drilled soldier's steps, coming from the old baths of Starashoseyne. They smile and wave to the passing girls and maids from the villages in flowered headscarves, singing soldier songs that smell of "high culture".

There is a song about villages and eight girls whom the soldier follows through the forest and across the field. The soldier, the hero, does not let go of them. It is the famous soldier's song: "Три деревни, два села, восемь девок, один я" [Three villages, two villages, eight girls, and I alone].

Or a melancholy song with a happy sound about a nightingale that sings so sadly. Suddenly the Russian soldier became sentimental - a romantic.

The Officers' Road leading to the Białystok Forest has been revived. The income is great. One gets rich quickly.

The half-naked streetwalkers on the verandas, in short, wide open dresses, showing parts of their naked bodies - what's to stop them?

Puffed-up women with shaggy hair wave their hands in a cheeky, ambiguous, drunken laugh, while women with black-rimmed eyes - a sign of their profession - smoke coquettishly and lead their guests into rooms with half-closed windows: Soldiers, workers and visitors from the small town who have never seen anything like it. They combine it with the exciting allure of the big city, full of unknown but juicy adventures.

143

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Russian military personnel are quartered in the town: The officers in wealthier homes, in particularly large rooms of nicer houses in the city- together with their staff, by whom they are served.

The common soldiers were quartered in groups in poorer houses or in empty, uninhabited apartments. They, the Russian defenders of "Mother Russia", sleep on the hard, straw-covered floor, scratch and scrub themselves in the morning, eat black bread, drink "kipyatok" [hot tea] with it, and carefully count the remaining pieces of sugar wrapped in a rag, which is pushed together with a colored spoon into their boots. The latter exude the scent of blue, smeared tan and sweat from feet wrapped in rustic linen footcloths.

The unrest in the city is growing. Large white posters are put up with large Russian two-headed eagles at the top and a proud introduction at the beginning of the poster:

"We, Nicholas the Second, Great Emperor of All Russia, Prince of Poland, Finland and others, order the entire male population of Białystok and the surrounding area - aged 17-45 - to register at the military offices for evacuation to Russia as conscripts. The registration will take place from August 15 to 25, 1915. Anyone who refuses to comply with this order will be severely punished according to the laws of war."

It is signed "The Police Master of the City of Białystok".

Panic spreads through the city. Jewish mothers are wringing their hands. What to do now? To register is to send your son to war. And not to register means a severe punishment, after all, it is wartime.

The distant thunderclaps from occupied Osowiec can be heard more clearly.

The Germans have brought bigger cannons, the famous "Bertas". In July, Warsaw falls and Osowiec is surrounded on all sides. Białystok is surrendered to the Germans. The State Bank, the Post Office and the government institutions had already been evacuated. A decree is issued to evacuate the factories of Białystok deep into Russia. The Russian government promises all kinds of help with the evacuation, helping with loading onto trains and free transportation. The Jewish factory owners are in no hurry.

144

They know the Russian disorder. However, the iron foundries of Vetshorek, Mazur-Shkurnik, and also the absorbent cotton factories of Nyevyazhski, Shpiro are evacuated. A large part of the textile manufacturers and traders leave for Russia, taking with them their warehouses with raw materials and finished goods.

The city begins to lose its rich and wealthy Jews. The factories begin to close. The rulers set up a demolition squad to burn the factories, destroy the machinery that could not be evacuated, blow up the boilers, and destroy government property such as barracks, food stores, and ammunition depots.

Some of the power plant machinery is destroyed during the night. The city is in semi-darkness in the evening because of the power cut.

Grief and shock spread throughout the city. The tram no longer operates. The train no longer runs for civilians. The railroad connection for civilians to other cities is completely cut off.

The police begin to arrest people at work: They are told to load machines onto the trains and dig trenches. The city is a large military camp, with armies of soldiers marching to their positions and departing units leaving the front.

Newspapers are closed. The people are cut off from the outside world because the railroads, which used to bring Russian and Jewish newspapers, have stopped. On July 5, the only national Jewish newspaper in Russian, "Golos Byelostoka" [The Voice of Białystok], published under the editorship of Y.S. Zeligman, ceased publication.

Rumors about the imminent evacuation of the Russian authorities from Białystok grew stronger. One date is given: the end of August, the beginning of September.

The inhabitants of the most distant streets behind the city move to the center. Afraid of the approaching cannonade and battles in the city, people look for apartments in stone buildings, leaving the wooden houses.

Confusion and fear are growing, the majority of the rich and powerful, wealthy merchants, manufacturers and suppliers of the city, have already left for Russia; among the only remaining social activists are:

Moyshe-Mordekhay Manisevitsh, A. Tiktin and M. Barash. The city is in semi-darkness, besieged by the military.

Distant explosions echo from unknown directions. The rattling of military freight trains and the clattering of horses echoed with terror in the hearts of the Białystok Jews hiding in fear.

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ULICA GUMIENNA (na pocztówce: Kupiecka)

Pełna gwaru Gumienna z przeładowanymi sklepami. Tu mieszkał znany historyk A. Sz. Herszberg, autor „Pinkasu Białegostoku”, a przez pewien czas również nasz białostocki Szolem Alejchem – Szmul Lejb Rabinowicz (patrz strzałka).

*Gumjener Street – the throbbing commercial center, which quartered stores stocked with all kinds of goods. On this street lived the famous historian A. S. Hershberg, author of "The History of Bialystok". House with arrow-mark was, for a time, the home of Shmuel Leib Rabinowitz, the "Bialystok Sholem-Aleichem".*

Here, in Gumienna Street, the author lived in a small wooden house around 1915.

source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf) (wirtualnie.lomza.pl)

On August 25, it is already dangerous to go out into the streets. The wooden and iron gates are locked, and the population is anxiously awaiting further events. We live in the yard of Shmuel Tsitrin [Citrin]. The big, heavy iron gate is slammed shut, but it's only a weak protection for my mother and me, and our wooden house has its front windows facing Gumienna Street.

My brother David has been gone all day today, and my mother sits on the edge of the bed with a frowning, worried face, her hair carelessly disheveled, her eyes half mad and wandering, as they always do when she gives in to her nerves.

She shakes her head like a pious Jew at prayer and mumbles to herself, lips parted:

"Where could he be? He's been gone a whole day, and at a time like this, woe is me! He has no morals, he doesn't have mercy on his own mother, and at a time like this- when everyone is sitting behind seven locked doors - he's walking around outside".

My mother is upset that my brother David isn't here. And my brother doesn't know what it's like to be afraid. I admire him. In my eyes, David is a great hero who stops at nothing.

I'm burning with boyish curiosity to find out what's going on in the city. I crept to the window, carefully pulled open a corner of the silk curtain, and saw a group of Cossacks on horseback, riding slowly in pairs, one behind the other, as if on a walk.

The horses' hooves clattered on the pavement like the beating of a drum. The Cossacks wear high round fur hats on their heads, high pikes on their legs and red striped trousers.

A silver belt decorated with engraved patterns and a short silver dagger are wrapped around the rigid sides of the Cossack. The horse's gait is rhythmic. Their faces are heavily tanned, with a cold, steely gaze cast suspiciously to either side of the pavement. The thick, blond, well-styled hair is combed into a "chub," a high, long curl on one side.

Suddenly it seemed to me that they were lifting their heads to the windows of the upper floors and looking at my window. Both my fear and my growing curiosity held my fingers tightly to the corner of the raised curtain. I can't tear myself away from the faces of the Cossacks, which radiate an ancient wildness of the Ukrainian steppe.

It reminds me of the Cossack "Ostaps" <sup>[1]</sup> of Zaporozhe from Gogol's book "Taras Bulba". My mother notices that I've been standing

too long at the window, quickly pulls my hand away from the curtain and says angrily:

"I have nothing but grief from my big one. Must I also suffer because of you? What now? Do you want them to shoot at us through the window, like Shabes on Tisha B'Av? You can do that with the Cossacks!"

The clatter of horses' hooves fades into the distance. It becomes quiet. An eerie silence where you don't know where it's going.

Suddenly there is a knock at our gate. We tremble with fear. But my mother's eyes light up. A mother's heart feels but does not betray. She quickly runs down the stairs and I run after my mother. We run down to the gate, look impatiently through the bars of the iron gate, and see my brother David. He looks around cautiously, knocks gently on the gate, and we hastily push open the heavy iron latch. David enters the courtyard, his eyes alive, alert and refreshed.

That's the way my brother David always looks when he's in danger. Then his eyes are calm and cold.

Mom is happy. She asks him questions. Her face has become brighter, rounder, and more graceful. She now has a youthful freshness about her. And, as she always does at such moments, Mother becomes jocular and witty, looking twenty years younger. David is in no hurry to answer. We went upstairs to the living room.

We are burning with curiosity, but David calmly says to Mother:

"Mom, I'm starving. Let's eat, and then I'll have a mountain of news for you.

Mother set the table. She puts down a bowl of porridge with milk, a piece of brown bread, and some potato pancakes. David ate slowly, looking at his plate. Mom looks at him with love in her eyes. And I admire my brother David, who has spent a whole day walking along the road, between soldiers and Cossacks, and is so calm.

Suddenly he opens his mouth and blurts out: "Mom, I've enlisted in the militia! I'll get a white armband with a badge on it," he smiles calmly, "and maybe they'll give me a revolver too!"

His eyes were full of excitement.

My mother felt cold on this warm August evening and tried to hide her shock with a joke:

"Soon you will become a supplier for the town, get a badge and become a swashbuckler!!"

quiet, good-natured woman who always smiles. Her calm has a healing effect on my mother. She is delighted with David: "Oh, David! You're like Noah's dove, flying into the flood. What news do you bring today? You're everywhere and you know everything. Your mother was very worried, and no wonder! Well, the main thing is that you're here! What's going on outside?"

David leaned back in his chair and smiled, his eyes sparkling. A sign that he had a day full of events and danger. Because then my brother David feels like a fish in water. (This impartiality of his character actually led to his tragic death a few years later).

"Listen, we get to say the Goym [prayer of thanksgiving]," my brother David laughed, "what Jews are capable of. A strange people, a 'small nation'. It seems to me that they are a people of fear, but when danger threatens, they become heroes. You heard me - heroes," said David excitedly, "the Jews of Białystok can sleep peacefully, there will be no pogroms. No attacks on Jews.

Everyone has already been bribed where necessary. The Jews even had the audacity to go up to the Cossack officer and make a heavy deal with him. I heard today from the newly recruited militiamen that the whole covenant cost a fortune.

And yet they made a bargain. The manager of the Ritz Hotel was the mediator, and the Cossack officer agreed to lead the soldiers and Cossacks of the departing army through the side streets and not through the city.

The Cossack officer is the deputy of the commander-in-chief Orlov, who entrusted him with the evacuation of the city. You understand that he took a financial advantage of this. Moyshe Mordekhay Manisevitsh is a brave Jew, and he is also bold. He, Tiktin and Barash negotiated. And tonight the Russians are leaving the city“.

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The night was terrible. I often crept to the window. There were explosions of shrapnel, vibrations in the air from exploding bridges and railroad tracks. Fires broke out in some parts of the city.

148

The railway station, the military depots, the steam-powered mills, the warehouses of the military administration and the military installations lit up the sky like a red torch, in magnificent red flames. A majestic spectacle for my boyish, romantic imagination. I was reminded of the historic Napoleonic battles at Waterloo. At times it occurred to me that this is probably how Nero must have felt as he watched the sea of flaming red tongues engulfing Rome on all sides.

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My brother David was right. The news he brought was true. On the night of August 25-26, 1915, the Russians left Białystok. The Cossack officer was true to his word. The soldiers and Cossacks were led out through side streets behind the city to avoid robbery and looting. But only some of the population knew this, because money had been secretly collected from the wealthier Białystok Jews to give to the Cossack officer. The intermediary between the Jewish representatives and the Cossack officer was the manager of the Ritz Hotel, Leshgold, where the Cossack officer was housed.

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On Thursday morning, August 26, my mother woke me up because we had to go down to the yard of Shmuel Tsitrin's [Citrin's] brick cloth warehouse. I could hardly wake up, so I lazily got dressed and went down to the cloth store. Semyon and Khayim Tsitrin and some neighbors were there. I had brought a large tin of "Landrin" candy, which I distributed to everyone there.

My brother David had already disappeared.

A few hours later he came back with the news that everything was all right. The Russians had already retreated and the German secret service agents had already entered the city on bicycles.

We all go to the gate. We open the gate carefully. Opposite us, next to Bulkovshteyn's Bes-Medresh, a few Jewish worshippers can already be seen sticking their heads out. We become bolder and step out onto the sidewalk. Next to me stands my friend, short and round-faced, with quiet movements and quick eyes. He is Maggid Yitskhok Barg's son. There was also one of the children of Slonimski, the shipping agent. Suddenly, a German secret service officer appears from a distance on a bicycle. He rides slowly, his rifle at the ready.

149

We hurry back to the gate, but he calmly drives past, smiles at us with a slightly startled, tense face, and sends us a polite "Good morning," after which we feel so relieved. A wild joy seizes us. We all burst out onto the sidewalk. One by one, windows and doors open.

The morning is already here, with blue skies and warmth. For me, it's a new world. New hopes. The young blood begins to play. The young imagination floats far up to the summery, blue, light-filled sky and the rising warm sun, which fills the heart with hope for a bright, sunny future.

<sup>[1]</sup> Ostap is the name of a son of the Zaporozhian cossack Taras Bulba. The novel of the same name is set in the Ukraine and was published in 1835. See [Taras Bulba - Wikipedia](#)

## The New German Order

At the end of August 1915, beautiful sunny days arrived, as if nature wanted to pay back all the bitter suffering, excitement and fears of the past year. The mood of the people suddenly calmed down. Smiling faces shone with joy, hope, and lightness of spirit. The streets were full of people. Somehow it seemed that the number of Jews had doubled.

Especially striking was the large number of young people who appeared in the crowded streets, talking loudly, gesticulating, throwing words at each other, passing by with wild remarks, strolling.

They were girls who had returned, scattered in small towns for fear of the Russian soldiers and Cossacks. They had settled in Białystok. But they had also fled out of fear of the German planes and zeppelins which, for the first time in human history, were dropping bombs on open cities and civilian populations.

Among them were frightened Jewish sons who, for fear of being drafted into the army or arrested at work, were kept hidden in their homes by loving Jewish mothers or sent to small towns where they were unknown.

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My brother David is already a militiaman, with a hat and a coarse, short cane, and a white armband with a militia stamp.

150

My brother is happy. No more factory, no more clattering of steam-powered looms, no more night shifts. Instead, a simple, interesting life of wandering around the city begins. Now Mama doesn't say a word when he disappears from the apartment. After all, he is taking care of the Jews of Białystok.

The shops are open. There is trade with the Germans. Every word is followed by an additional "lieber Herr" or "gnädiger Herr" [dear Sir]. A simple corporal is called "Herr Leutnant" [Mister Lieutenant] and the words "Dankeschön" [thank you] and "Bitte schön" [please, here you are, you're welcome] and "Jawohl" [yessir] flow.

The Christian children envy the Jews who are so good at talking to the Germans. And indeed, the Jewish shopkeepers are sincere in their love for the Germans, because they have freed their sons from the fear of Russian military service and being sent to the bloody war.

My brother brings the latest news. Fiskl has become a "komisar" and his friend Tapitser a "sanitar" [paramedic]. We laugh at the successful rhyme.

And there is something else new: a delegation of three religions - Jewish, Catholic and Protestant - has presented itself to the German rulers. A "Citizens' Committee" is to be elected from among them, which will act as advisors and helpers to regulate the needs of the urban population. However, the Jews and the Christian Poles on the "Citizens' Committee" do not live in harmony. Although the Christian Poles are a minority of 25% compared to the 60% of the Jews, they want to play "first fiddle".

A German resident of Białystok, Mr. Luterer, who was quite anti-Semitic, is elected "militia leader".

The Jewish members of the Citizens' Committee are

M. Manisevitsh, M. Barash, A. Tiktin, Sh. Hershberg, Vilbushevitch, Dr. Ziman and others.

Białystok is supplied with ration cards. Food is rationed. Each inhabitant receives cards for bread, potatoes, vegetables and sugar. The quality of bread deteriorates from time to time. Bran and ground peas are added. The "mantshke" (powdered sugar) also changes from white to yellow. This is "mantshke" for horses with syrup mixed in, but it is given to people.

The women have already discovered a secret:

151

Yellow "mantshke" is very good for cooking a carrot stew and baking honey cakes. There is also news in the food supply, which the Germans call "Kartoffel-Flocken". These are simply potato peels that have been cleaned and dried with chemical substances, and are one of the substitutes that made Germany so famous during the war- under the government of the German-Jewish minister Walter Rathenau, who was later murdered by a Nazi who could not forgive him, "the damned Jew", for being the city's minister.

With great triumph, my mother rolled up her sleeves and we all stood around her. She was working like a juggler, doing "hocus-pocus." We watched my mother's fingers, which operated with extraordinary speed, and saw how she took the "proshek" [powder], kneaded it with a little water, formed chops out of it, put a few pieces of onion in it, dipped it in a jar of lyok [herring sauce], smeared some on a small tray, and put a chop down to fry. Suddenly, the chop began to pop, coming from the pieces of salt in the lyok, so loudly that the great juggler, our mother, was startled and blinked her eyes in shock.

We burst out laughing, much to our mother's dismay.

But when the popping of the salted lyok had stopped, Mom triumphantly pointed to a brown cutlet, which we all tasted with great curiosity. We praised the taste to please Mom, but secretly spat it out.

This was Mom's first attempt as a beginner to make potato flake chops.

Later, she progressed and became a real expert, giving advice to other women.

In fact, the chops already had a completely different taste, like a substitute for chops, you even have to congratulate the Germans that it was so good.

The German rulers began to reign.

152

The orders and prohibitions came like a bolt from the blue: You can't go out after 10pm, the gates must be locked. The entire population must be registered and issued with "Personalausweisen" (a kind of passport). Food supplies have to be declared; hidden soldiers who had changed clothes have to be handed in (they were later deported to prison camps during the war). The names of those who fled to Russia and the furniture they left behind must be declared (it was later confiscated). All illnesses have to be reported and health regulations have to be observed. It rained with orders!

German guards were posted behind the town, on the main roads leading to the small towns and villages, and it was very difficult to bring in food. Bread was usually brought from Radoshtsh, Supraśl, Starosielce, Zabłudów and potatoes from Białostoczek, but when the Germans began to confiscate the produce they had taken from the small towns, hunger began to grow very strong. Love for the Germans began to cool.

The iron order, which reached the point of brutality, weighed heavily on the population. A series of sanitary regulations began. To be honest, the German rulers were forced to demand it. But, as usual, they carried it out with German harshness and arrogance, without a shred of sensitivity to human feelings.

This showed the Germans in their true form, as a brutal nation of cold automatons who, because of their super-nationalism and chauvinism, could carry out any order, however brutal, and who looked down on other peoples.

The superiority complex was already evident in the Germans in all its pure, cruel ruthlessness, which was later softened by doubts about victory and demoralisation as the war dragged on.

They began to send the Jews of Białystok to the "delousing centres", carried out hygienic searches in the houses, stripped the beds and bedclothes, with anything but polite remarks about the "dirty Jews". The beards of old Jews were examined, even of clean, modest, honourable Jews, and this was done rudely and impudently, without ceremony.

Physical examinations of young men's genitals to check for sexually transmitted diseases began.

153

The examinations took place in the open air, in the courtyard of a government institute. Undressed and half-naked, the men stood in the bitter cold, at risk of bronchitis, severe colds, angina and pneumonia.

Epidemics of spotted fever, abdominal typhus and tuberculosis, caused by poor nutrition and vitamin deficiencies, began to spread. Added to this were germs carried in the air from the corpses of soldiers, from those killed and shot in battles on the nearby fronts, and from those suffocated by poisonous gases.

Later the Germans began to pour lime on the dead bodies as a remedy against epidemics. I saw many such dead bodies of fallen soldiers with my own eyes when I looked at the war wounded who had died on their way, doused with white lime, lying in Lakhanka's High Shool - which had been converted into a German military hospital - in "Hinter der Turme" [Behind the Prison] Street.

The German rulers were unhappy with the 'Citizens' Committee' for failing to carry out its duties of confiscating what was necessary for the German army, and as a punishment it had to pay a levy of 300,000 marks. Most of the levy was imposed on the Jewish population because the anti-Semitic leader of the militia, the German Luterer, helped the Christian Poles by arguing that they were unfortunately poor and the Jews were the wealthier part of the population and had a lot of money.

### **The New Rich and the New Poor under German Occupation**

New wealthy and powerful lords sprang up like mushrooms. Jewish ingenuity and Jewish spirit paved the way for them to amass large amounts of capital and trade on a large scale, even during the years of famine.

I knew one such couple. They were brothers Mair and Tevl Krugman. They were said to have come from Narevka. They were simple people, uneducated and without a good upbringing. Although they had rough working-class manners, they were in fact already great, influential gentlemen. They used a coarse language, rude and rough, but they were really Jews with a warm-hearted soul, and they donated large sums of money to charity.

154

The two Krugman brothers had transformed themselves from small timber merchants into forest moguls with huge companies. They employed hundreds of workers as lumberjacks in the forests and transported the wood to all the conquered territories and to Germany. The wood was exported mainly for paper.

The name "Geynovke" was on the tip of everyone's tongue because the Krugman brothers ruled there. They owned and managed a large part of the Byelovezher [Białowieża] forest.

The forests of Białowieża were the hunting grounds of His Majesty Nicholas the Second. They were fenced in on all sides and had the finest paved highways. Russian royal coats of arms with the two-headed eagle adorned the side roads of the majestic highways, which were visited only by royal guards and selected members of royal society. They accompanied the hunts for light-footed, horned deer, gazelles and stags, as well as the unique, strong, wild bison.

The hunters hunted by riding to the sound of horns, accompanied by specially trained hounds. They were also accompanied by elegant female Amazons, dressed in colourful gowns and mounted on black or white, proudly shining horses. These were ladies-in-waiting or titled, invited aristocrats of high Russian descent. The forests of Białowieża were now ruled by two Jews from Narevka: Mair and Tevl Krugman.

Also in the textile industry - of Białystok origin - new faces appeared, who in a short time were elevated to a prominent place among the old, established cloth factories with a world name. The two co-manufacturers were Amyel Kulikovski, who before the war had been a "prikaztshik" (clerk) in a cloth warehouse, and Gotlib Seletski, who before the war had been a traveller for a shoe company and a simple clerk.

In a short time, the two companies were making profits and led generous, rich lives. At the same time, the population of Białystok sank deeper into poverty, unemployment and hardship. Some of the Białystok Jews openly flaunted their poverty, but others hid it. The motto was: "Knaypn die bakn di farb zol shteyn" [Pinch your cheek so that at least the colour remains].

Białystok's textile industry slowly began to recover, but many manufacturers were missing and many factories had been destroyed and looted. The Białystok "loynketnikes" [piecework companies] also began to reopen their steam-powered looms.

155

On Belostotsyan and Tshenstokhov Streets one can hear the knocking of the "Grasenein Scheinersche" and "Swabian" steam looms; the houses of Yakev [Jacob] Burshteyn and Novinzon (Alterke Kleyn) are gradually filled with the noise of weavers, winders and "niterkes" <sup>[1]</sup>.

However, this is not on the scale of Russian times. The strict control of the Russian rulers, the lack of raw materials and the absence of the large Russian markets of the Russian Empire had caused the textile industry to shrink and dry up, and only a small proportion of the workers and employees were employed. Białystok convulsed with misery and hunger.

The confiscation of food by the German gendarmes on the roads led to a new trade: smuggling. The Jews do not give up easily, and ways are sought to organise a regular exchange of food between large and small towns, although this is forbidden. One wall has already been breached: The Germans "already take" (bribes). People give each other advice.

Some of the beautiful girls and women of Białystok have found a new line of business: Getting "paper tickets" to import food. These women make friends with majors or lieutenants, who give them permission to import food. The girls soon find partners with capital, and a large trade develops.

Jews earned a new income. The girls in this trade were called "tsukerpushkes" [sugar bowls] and they did not enjoy a good reputation. After all, it is not the way for Jewish daughters to become "close companions" of officers, even German ones. They speak a little German - which is almost like Yiddish - visit their homes, their offices in the "Kreis-Amt-Stadt" and their military balls. All for their financial gain.

In Białystok people whisper about this and that, names are spoken. Decent parents should take care of their daughters. But how can you take care of them when it has become a plague in the country that wherever there is a German, a Jewish girl immediately attaches herself to him. The German mark is kosher, but the way it is earned is unkosher. And the demoralisation of the Jewish daughters is growing. Oy, this hunger!

Many things are ignored. In some homes, parents cover their eyes and pretend they can't see. But in the majority of Jewish homes, daughters are kept under strict surveillance. The Jewish law of "family purity", ingrained over generations, is not easily subdued, not even by hunger. And in decent homes, silent dramas are played out between the desire to preserve the decency of daughters

156

and the poverty, need and desperation that creep through every crack and threaten to destroy honest Jewish family life.

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A Russian proverb says: "Gol na vidumki khitra" - poor people have clever ideas. Especially the Jewish poor. They rack their brains for ways to fight poverty. In addition to the lack of food, there is also a lack of clothing. The weekday clothes are already worn out, so with trembling hands people take out their Shabbat or holiday clothes to wear during the week. If they see an acquaintance wearing a better suit on weekdays, they joke among themselves:

He's already rich. He's already wearing the dinner jacket of the ball!

The tailors hope to find work by turning the worn suits inside out and sewing them back together for reuse. It would have worked well if certain parts of the trousers hadn't been badly worn, especially at the ankles and where you sit.

There were women in strange, wild winter coats, with "varse" (the hair from the wool) sticking out in wild colours, and if you wear the coats a few times in the rain, they start to form hollows and bumps and look like an inflated bubble, and the colours take on the appearance of a rainbow. It turned out that the elegant daughters of Bialystok had an idea:

They bought blankets from the German soldiers, which they had previously stolen from the barracks, dyed them in various bright colours and turned them into ladies' coats.

New problems arose: walking around without work meant that shoes, especially the soles, quickly tore. After rain or snow, water seeped into the shoes through the holes in the soles. And again they had an idea: they took some old shoe soles with heels to a cobbler in Bialystok. They were hammered with pieces of cut-up straps from old conveyor belts stolen from factories, which had once been bought in the famous shop of a German named Scherschmidt on Nikolayevske Street. But later they realised there was a better way: They hacked round pieces of sheet iron onto the soles and heels of the shoes so they wouldn't wear out so quickly. This was just something for me. I was so happy!

And when I had hacked the iron plates onto my shoes, I used to walk deliberately across the tarmac, putting my feet down with as much force as if a regiment of Germans were marching. People who passed me used to cover their ears because of the noise my iron shoes made.

The number of trades increased. Clever people started forging the ration cards, and with forged meat cards, especially bread cards, people could breathe a little easier. Until the Germans found out. But the forged ration cards circulated in Białystok for a while. Then they started to forge German stamps, the so-called "Oberostmarken", and the Germans insulted the 'damned Jews'. But there were some Germans who cooperated with the counterfeiters and helped to spread them.

Patriotism among the Germans had already waned considerably. German songs circulated in Białystok: "Die Wacht am Rhein" [The Watch on the Rhine] and "Deutschland über alles" [Germany over everything]. Jokes were added to the rhymes: "Nishto keyn broyt, nishto keyn khales" [There is no bread, there is no challah].

I knew a "tsukerpushke" from Yurovtser Street (when I visited my friend who was her neighbour). She used to have all the good things: rectangular loaves of bread, rectangular pieces of biscuits called "zwieback" made of dazzling white flour, tins of jam and brown "chocolate". She used to hum the tune of a German song, snuffling through her shapely nose to make it sound even more German, and tossing her head with her jet-black hair and singing: "Darling, darling, buy me an automobile, it doesn't cost much".

As you can see, the Białystok Jewish "tsukerpushkes" had a pretty good grasp of things. Even in those days.

My aunt Rutshke got help.

In Białystok herring came to light, coming from Holland. Because of Holland's neutrality, the clever Dutch Queen Wilhelmine made a good deal and sold the Germans whole wagons full of herring, which the starving, "victorious" Germany desperately needed. And this clever woman, my aunt Rutshke, the herring seller on the "Bremlekh", enjoyed the merit of the clever Queen Wilhelmine. The merit of the Dutch queen also extended to us, for the dear, good, pious Aunt Rutshke had not forgotten us. When my mother came to buy what looked like a single herring, Aunt Rutshke would hurriedly wrap up three or four herring and look up at the shelves of lime pots with an embarrassed smile:

"Gut, gut, Teme!"

Vest mir shoynt mol batsoln!“ [“That's all right, Teme! Surely, you'll pay next time!”].  
 And Mom would sneak out of Aunt Rutshke's herring shop, embarrassed and her cheeks flushed.  
 She held the herring in her hand and felt as if she had stolen them.

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Where had the romanticism of Białystok's youth gone? Where were the discussions about Artsybashev's [novella] "Sanin", about Verbitsky's "Vovotshka", about Gorky's "In Opgrund" and about "Eugene Onegin", written by the tragically deceased Pushkin? (He was shot in a duel for defending his wife's honour).

The conversation centred on everyday matters. Wherever you met with friends and acquaintances, in the family or even on a 'svidanye' [date], the topic of conversation was food. There was a joke back then:

It was so boring to talk about bread and potatoes that if someone started to talk about food, the other person would interrupt:  
 "Let's talk about happier things than food. Who died in your house?"

Never before had Białystok been so busy with the culinary art of cooking and baking as it was during the German occupation. The women of Białystok used all the artistry of generations of experience to find a way around the famous law of physics that 'nothing can be made from nothing'.

They made "povidle", a kind of jam from sour lemons, gooseberries, orange peel and red "kalines" [berries from the viburnum plant], which you didn't know where they had been brought from. Because you never saw them in Białystok. Wine or brandy was made from "zhitshkelekh" (such rare small pears) to preserve strawberries or raspberries. Apple skins were dried and used to make tasty brown tea. All kinds of greens and parsley were used, along with chopped onions and a dash of egg yolk to make vegetarian chops.

The Germans gave us dried fish, hard and stiff like the Egyptian pyramids. A piece of leftover gizzard and of a chicken leg were chopped into it to make a kind of 'Hungarian goulash' or braised meat.  
 And yet "his majesty", hunger, ruled over Białystok with an iron fist.

<sup>[1]</sup> niterke: A technical term from the old weaving trade. I suspect it comes from 'nit' = iron pin. An Anglicism [knitter] would also be possible.

### Hunger and the Hunt for Work

In Białystok, the division into social classes began to disappear. The years of hardship, hunger, unemployment and idleness under the German occupation put an end to the privileges of leather and haberdashery merchants, textile manufacturers, commission merchants and world travellers. Their children were also affected by poverty, and the uniforms and hats of the Grammar, Real and Commercial Schools for both sexes were replaced and pieced together from the wardrobes of fathers or older brothers, mothers or older sisters, or simply bought on occasion.

Pupils at Grammar and Commercial Schools no longer showed off. And the mighty Lord, hunger, democratised the youth of Białystok and made them all equal: dear, warm Jewish children from Jewish homes, without the pompous arrogance of the foreign but so beloved Russian culture. And as always in moments of need, during national calamities, the Jews returned to Judaism, threw off the colourful feathers of the foreign "peacock" of assimilation, and returned to the ancient source of the "people of Israel".

The slogan of the French Revolution, 'Equality, Liberty, Fraternity', prevailed in Białystok: everyone was equal before hunger, free from labour and brothers in need. As the Russian proverb says:

"Nuzhda utshit, nuzhda mutshik, nuzhda pyesenki poyot" (hardship teaches, hardship torments, hardship makes you sing songs). And a new song was heard: 'Go to work!'

The youth of Białystok, even the vast majority of the once wealthy ones, set off to seek work with the "Victorious German Power", which ruled in the conquered "Oberost-Gebiete" [territory of Lithuania and Belarus] and had brought "modern civilisation to the backward Russian territories".

The Germans had set about installing electrical wiring in the smallest, most remote towns and villages, which had inherited from their grandfathers and great-grandfathers the system of lighting the village hut with the chicken coop with paraffin or simply with a 'lutshink' (a piece of pine chip) glowing over the stove to the sound of cricket music.

The German rulers also took care of the highways - they were widened, paved with smooth stones and a convenient network of central road connections was created.

Whether this was done in the belief that this would remain "with the great German Reich". Or whether it was out of fear of collapse on all fronts and the need to provide themselves with good roads for a quick retreat, we didn't know. But the fever for building highways and power stations throughout the occupied territory had flared up, and the Jewish youth were running to the Germans to get a job to bring home some of the much-needed ration stamps for rations of bread, rusks and potatoes.

"Mum, my friends have registered for work. Why should I be idle any longer? I want to register for work too!" I said to my mother one morning.

Mum narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She just couldn't believe that I, the dreamer, the anxious, well-dressed boy who blew every speck of dust off his trousers, could have the will to go to work. His mates had probably talked him into it.

She liked my loyalty a little. But she was much more afraid that her Yankele, who was still a "little child", would have to do hard work. Although she said afterwards:

Bigger, more distinguished children than her son also went to work. And she could really use the few marks. But, God forbid, should she send such a young child to work?

Mama's heart wouldn't allow it. She reprimanded herself and broke it off:

"What, are you bitten by the bug? You must be doing too well. Look at my labourer! Don't you have bread and potatoes? Stay at home, little boys shouldn't be sent to work. The Germans can manage without you. Look at this worker!"

My Mum's firm decision not to let me go to work stemmed from the fact that my brother David was a 'militiaman', a privileged man. And every very early morning, after a night on militia duty guarding Białystok, he would come home with a long loaf of bread under his arm, which served as a bribe to keep the eyes closed when bread was baked in the bakery with smuggled flour and sold without ration cards.

One of the "luptes" where my brother often "scrounged" was the Dobnyevski bakery on Yurovtser Street, whose daughter, a girl with sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks, belonged to my brother's "khalyastre" [gang].

(The famous union leader David Dubinsky, president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, was a relative of the

My brother David saved me. While he was chewing pieces of brown bread with jam on both cheeks after a night on guard duty, he made himself heard:

"What do you want, Mum? Many boys sign up for work, people more privileged than us and nobler people send their boys to work, and even girls are sent. A 'bar-mitsve' [13-year-old] boy is already a young man today, Mum, times have changed!"

I was suspicious that my brother was standing up for me. I had a strong suspicion that David wasn't doing it as a favour, but was looking for a way to get rid of a witness who was at home, saw too much and turned up his nose at his brother's behaviour, but above all couldn't stand his comrades.

But my brother's words had an effect on my mother. They calmed her down. And when my mother remained calm and stopped talking about it, I understood that her resistance had softened a lot and that I could catch up with other boys, achieve something and earn something.

The word "earn" made me feel proud. Soon I would be a man.

Three days later, a gang of boys from Białystok and the surrounding towns - and I was one of them - rode on a shaky farm cart to a small village behind Zabludove [Zabłudów] called "Ribale", which I don't even know if it's on a map.

We arrived in Ribale in the evening and had already been hired by the Germans as labourers to help build the road from Ribale to Zabłudów. My bones were very aching from the jolting load, but I was in a good mood, looking forward to the new life that was beginning for me.

I jumped down from the cart with my rucksack on my back, which reminded me of my leather satchel from the "Remeslenoye Utshilishtshe" [Artisans' School], and with respect for myself - for I was already half a man and a full worker - I crawled with the other boys to the village barrack, which consisted of wooden blocks covered with grass. A German soldier had taken us there to put us up.

When he opened the door, led us in and pointed to a large wooden cot where we would sleep, all my heroism melted away. I had one consolation.

grandfathers greeting a young grandson.

The next day they woke us at seven in the morning, gave us black coffee with bread and jam, lined us up two by two, gave us spades, pickaxes and hammers to break stones into "shaber" <sup>[1]</sup>, and led us in military march to the highway.

I couldn't stand the work any longer than that day. From holding the wooden handle of the hammer in my scrawny hand, my fingers were swollen like red sausages. My skin began to peel and blister. That same evening, as I lay sick on my wooden bed, a good-hearted Jewish girl from Zabłudów, Genye Perlus, put compresses on my head and hands and compensated me for the burning pain of my hands and the burning shame that I was already leaving my role as a man and worker.

The only thing I had gained in Ribale from my work as a "shober hacker" was the acquaintance of the good-hearted Genye Perlus, with whom I became close friends, and to whom I wrote romantic letters that "marched" from hand to hand in Zabłudów, and of which the sentimental Genye with her beautiful, full face boasted to her comrades, friends and acquaintances. And the people of Zabłudów were my first literary critics.

This is how the "Ribale" episode ended for me, showing me that the will to be a worker alone is not enough. You also need strength, muscles and hard, calloused hands.

Many years later I got to know "human drudgery". I saw how people work, and only then did I understand what flesh and blood workers with a saw, a hoe and an iron will can achieve. I also saw an extraordinary picture of a religious Jew who filled hundreds of Christian workers with awe at his preservation of Judaism, his unshakeable faith and his honest life. They flocked around the weak, physically awkward Jew, but with his observance of Judaism he was a spiritual giant in a remote corner of a wild forest.

This happened when Białystok already belonged to Poland, and when the then famous brothers Mair and Tevl Krugman owned the ancient Byelovezher [Białowieża] forest, which stretched for dozens of miles. (Incidentally, I was delighted to learn that Mair Krugman's daughter, Lyoba Palani-Krugman, is alive and in the Land of Israel.

163

She holds an important position there and is a respected woman with education and language skills.

I also learnt that one of Tevl Krugman's daughters lives in New York, where she is a well-known painter. Mrs Lyoba Palani-Krugman told me an interesting story about her late father, Mair Krugman, peace be upon him, who was known as a man of compassion for Jewish

needs, generous in his charity and devoted to his family with great love.

Although he himself was a simple man of the people, with excellent skills but no education, he made sure that his children received the best education possible. His daughter Lyoba told me that once, when he was in Karlovy Vary, Mair Krugman bought a large, beautiful hanging chandelier, brought it to Białystok and gave it as a gift to the courtyard of the great Białystoker shul [synagogue], where the greatest cantors in the world prayed and gave concerts of liturgical singing).

Tsvi Hirsh Cohen, my God-fearing father-in-law, the treasurer of the Krugman brothers, lived in a lonely, remote, moss-covered green log hut in the middle of the forest. He lived there, subsisting on a few potatoes and some grits. There he kept the huge books of the Krugman brothers, and there, in the midst of all the busyness of the world, he kept his Shakhres, Minkhe and Mayriv prayers and Shabbats quietly, calmly, piously and with a firm, unbending will- his world of absolute devotion to the Creator of the world and to Judaism, which had nothing to do with financial calculations and the intoxicating ambition to make financial gain from the people who were fast disappearing from the earth in the midst of brilliant plans to accumulate capital.

One summer I visited my father-in-law in Białowieża, and he embraced and kissed me. My father-in-law loved me very much. I brought him a cheerful greeting from his beloved wife, the righteous Mrs Reyzl, a rare type of woman of the old generation, kind-hearted and pious, who was often left alone with little money, but who gave people interest-free loans that were very often not repaid. Her door was never closed to poor people who knew that you don't go empty-handed, especially not on Friday - the day of giving for the holy Shabbat.

I have often thought:

For all our faults, we are a great people, with ethics and social aid built up over thousands of years, laws of justice, purity of family life and holidays of different colours:

164

Each Jew was endowed with his own special complexion, his own sense of belonging to the people and his own faith, based on rock-solid laws, traditions and rituals designed to preserve the unity, health and moral purity of the people of Israel.

Even in the remote hut in the Białowieża Forest, the firm belief in Jewishness breathed in the figure of the physically weak Jew, who had inspired a kind of admiring respect among the hundreds of non-Jewish workers.

I remember a picture that was a testimony to the incredibly noble relationship between the rough, coarse village “goyim” and the weak,

religious Jew.

It was on a Shabbat evening. In the hut of the Białowieża forest. Tsvi Hirsh Cohen was praying Mayriv [evening prayer], quietly singing every word with the special nign [melody], preserving every sentence, and he put a lot of longing and invincible trust in every letter of the Mayriv. Outside, on Shabbat night in the Białowieża Forest, dozens of goyim stood around the hut, waiting patiently until the treasurer would finish his Mayriv, perform the Havdole ceremony and begin to pay the wages.

One rolled a cigarette of "makhorke" [cheap, high-nicotine tobacco] in cigarette paper and covered the edges with saliva. Another was talking quietly to his neighbour, who was sitting with him on a sawed-off log. He spoke in a hushed whisper, as if afraid to disturb the treasurer at prayer. A third person, who began to laugh out loud, was met with a reverent remark from another worker:  
"Tshikho, pan kasirer modli shen!" [Quiet, the head treasurer is still praying!]

And another worker turned his head to the sky, searching his eyes to see if a star had already appeared somewhere in the slightly bluish sky.

But I, in the hut, held the colourful, woven havdole candle, and my brother-in-law said the Havdole, lifting his head to the whitewashed wooden beams, and with tearful eyes he watched every word. He must have been thinking of his wife and children in faraway Białystok, and he sent a prayer to God that the children would walk in the ways of Judaism, and that he would soon return home to his wife, sons and daughters, to his Jewish neighbours in Byelostotshanske, and to his fellow worshippers in the great, festive, wide synagogue of "Nayvelt" [Nowy Świat, New World].

<sup>[1]</sup> shaber= This word can have many meanings, so it can mean 'crowbar', but it can also mean the act of plundering or looting. I think in this case it means something like 'gravel'.

### **Electricity, Love and Art in Supraśl**

The years of the German occupation dragged on. It seemed as if the state of paralyzed inactivity of the youth would last forever. We didn't know to which nationality we actually belonged: Russians? Germans? Or even future Lithuanians or Poles? Białystok was somehow stuck between countries, peoples and borders.

The problem of employment was agonizing. Strange, peculiar trades grew:

"tsukerpushkes", smuggling, fencing, speculation.

We were everything together and yet nothing. They were "air trades" with no today and no tomorrow. We traded in flour, groats, linseed for pressing oil, leather and manufacturing. Everything was on the tip of a fork, you grabbed something small quickly, in the manner of Menakhem Mendl <sup>[1]</sup>, some things were very large, others smaller. <sup>[2]</sup>

The majority struggled with a small number of ration stamps and pennies. Morale was low.

Everything was "kosher" according to the devaluation of terms: even the trade in the bodies of women and daughters. But according to German law, everything was illegal.

Everything had become a commodity:

Rotten potatoes, candles without wicks, moldy cloth, rotten chaff, hard yellow German soldiers' shoes, yellow oatmeal, red string, and combs with large, sparse teeth for the village women. Kerosene and salt were as precious as gold. And in the midst of the symphony of hunger and decay, our little family turned and turned, not knowing the day before what the next morning would bring. And I grew like a wretched plant in a barren field.

My cousin, David Kovalski, the eldest son of my uncle Abraham Kovalski, was swimming in those days like a fish in water. He was the right man in the right place. Small in stature, strongly built, with bubbling energy and the head of a genius, full of ideas, without education but with many skills. He quickly became an electrical engineer and traded in electrical materials. He brought in Germans to steal from the military depots so that he could sell the electrical materials, which were as valuable as gold. He traveled all over the occupied territory with military passes from German personalities and set up power stations in small towns and villages.

My cousin asked me to become an electrical engineer. He wanted to teach me.

166

He was building a power plant in Supraśl, and I was able to help him. He talked to my mother about it, and it was easy for him to get his way, because the main thing was that it wasn't about "shaber" hacking on the highways.

So Jacob went on a trip - Jacob got up and went to Supraśl with his cousin David.

Suprasil enchanted me. The small town had everything: beautiful forests, large rivers, Jewish houses with verandas and benches, and beautiful Jewish daughters.

Shmuel Tsitrin [Citrin] and his two sons, Semyon and Khayim, ruled the shtetl with their large factory for finishing and tearing cloth. And half the shtetl lived off them, worked for them, and called Shmuel Tsitrin "nash krul" (our king).

My cousin, David Kovalsky, was friends with everyone and everything. He was always busy. He was always looking for people, and people were looking for him. He always needed somebody and everybody needed him. He spoke fast, in half-sentences. His mouth turned like screws and his head was a laboratory of projects and plans. And he built the power station of Supraśl in the neighborhood of the big fabric finishing factory of Hirshberg, who was actually the "money shooter" and the owner of the power station.

I became my cousin's private secretary because I was better at writing and arithmetic, but he had more brains.

I also became his assistant, laying electric cables under the rafters of the low wooden houses in Supraśl. The work was botched. The electric cable did not fit well with the porcelain buttons and hung in the air like a rope for hanging laundry in the attic.

But who among the Supraśl Jews was an expert in the field of electricity? The main thing was that it lit up, that there was an electric cable dangling in the middle of the ceiling under the rafters, swaying there and giving off a reddish fire that glowed constantly, sometimes brightening and sometimes dimming, as if the fire was wondering if it was worth the whole business of burning. And often the electricity would actually go out, plunging the shtetl into darkness.

The small fires reminded me of the kerosene lamps in the Białystok street lamps of Khanaykes.

The first electric lamps of those days were very primitive. The head of the household, who had such a lamp burning, felt like an aristocrat and called the neighbors together.

167

Surrounding the faint, red electric light that could barely keep itself alive, they marveled at God's miracles and man's ingenuity.

One day my cousin David told me the good news: "We are going to the palace of Baroness Bukhholts [Buchholz], or 'Bukholtszove' as the Supraśl Jews called it, to lay electrical cables. When we arrived there to work, I was delighted to see the large halls with high semicircular domes in the Byzantine style, which made the interior look more like a church, like a palace with high semicircular ceilings painted with pictures.

It was an old palace of Baron Buchholz, from the dynasty of German barons. They were probably among the first pioneers of German technology who introduced the textile industry to Russia and Poland and established a network of textile factories in the following cities: Białystok, Łódź, Tomaszów and other centers.

The German textile industry, so artfully described in Gerhard Hauptmann's drama "The Weavers", in which the first strikes and struggles of the weavers are reflected. They were afraid of the mechanical looms, those iron monsters that would take away their last piece of bread by flooding the market with goods and displacing the weavers who worked with their hands.

Yes, the workers of that time did not know that the mechanical looms would be used to support the workers.

My cousin David was a smart guy in everything: in electrical engineering, but also in courting girls, carrying around wads of money, and drowning in debt. As usual, he told us the latest news and announced that this Shabbat evening we were going to see a Białystoker "lyubitel" (amateur actor) who had come to Supraśl to visit his friends. There would be a play in a local house.

That same Shabbat evening, I sat with my cousin David in a low, whitewashed shack, along with a few dozen other boys and girls from Supraśl. We were sitting in chairs in various places, applauding a broad-shouldered, burly young man with a full, round face and chestnut hair like a big fur cap, with a sympathetic, manly, full-throated laugh. The young man was wrapped in a large white linen shawl and was reciting Dranov's famous monologue from "The Crazy Man in the Hospital". The amateur actor's name was Avigdor Peker (Viktor Packer). He came from an intelligent family of Białystok pharmacists.

When Packer, with a voice like a lion, growled, "Today I will be king of all Spain", and stood up in the majestic pose of a king

168

I admired his manly beauty and simply envied him. I looked so small and pitiful compared to him. And when he was staring madly with his eyes, humming and tapping his forehead with his index finger, when he was shouting in ecstasy, "Eldad and Medad were by day and not by night", I did not understand anything, but I saw before me a real madman in the pose of the Białystoker "Sane" or the "Khayim Stai" (the two well-known Białystoker madmen).

I admired his talent, but even more his masculinity, and Avigdor Peker used it quite well, he was surrounded by girls, flirted to a fare-thee-well, and in the summer nights sailed in a boat on the Supraśl River with the fair sex, which is not as beautiful as it is bad (may the women forgive me).

Even I, the little tender, romantic boy, did not remain alone in the love-soaked Supraśl. And one Shabbat, as I was walking alone in the forest, roaming among the green, tall roses, I saw a little white-skinned girl with a head full of blond hair, with a pair of sky-blue, wondering eyes fixed on me, as if asking, "Where do you think he came from?"

She was accompanied by a skinny, bony dog on tall, slender legs, snarling and looking at me with evil, bloodshot eyes. She kept the dog under control with a leather leash, probably not having much faith in its good nature. And on the banner of green and solitude, the young

blonde girl with the light pink body, in a white dress trimmed with lace and white linen slippers, looked like a planted heroine from Andersen's fairy tale.

I was attracted to the girl, though the dog frightened me. But the girl shouted at the dog in a firm, stern voice, with the commanding tone so characteristic of the German breed:

"Stay calm!"

And the dog looked submissively and quietly stretched out beside her feet, licking his paws.

We met like old acquaintances, like two little children who had just passed from childhood to maturity and had childlike trust. The play of young blood and childlike imagination quickly brought us together. My knowledge of German helped me a lot (I had the opportunity to practice speaking German with our neighbor:

169

The divorced wife and her three daughters of the German Knepel, who had a coffin shop on German Street).

The blonde German girl had stood before me with curiosity mixed with impudence, a characteristic of German girls. She took me under her arm and walked with me for the next half hour, looking me in the eyes and babbling her whole biography. Often she looked at her half-naked legs with their short white socks, trustingly walking with me step by step.

The fresh, rosy-skinned, blonde creature aroused in me feelings of vague desire, a mixture of restlessness, the desire to see her and to hear her beautiful, melodious voice. And yet I was a little afraid, especially of her boldness, which didn't match my shyness.

I met her several times in the woods, only on Shabbat, in the early morning hours, when brilliant drops and bubbles of morning dew played with the colors of the red rays of the rising sun. I learned that she lived in a wooden house in the forest, surrounded by tall, massive trees and with a flower garden that she, as a lover of botanical art, helped to plant and water.

Once I met her father, the forest ranger, and this put an end to our quiet romance in the dense forest. It was one Shabbat when the German girl was in an aggressive mood. We were both sitting under a tree, picking off the bark and arguing about where life was better, in Białystok or in Supraśl. She envied me for living in the "big, fabulous city" where life was "flawless". For my part, I tried to convince her that she was lucky to live in the beauty of the fragrant green forest with its fresh air.

"Oh, what do you understand?" she dodged. But her anger quickly dissipated, as it always did, and she wrapped one arm around me and snuggled against me.

A minute later we heard heavy footsteps and the sound of breaking branches. A medium-sized, powerfully built man with a tanned face and sharp eyes, dressed in a green half-length jacket and a rifle slung across his armpit, appeared before our eyes.

My German girl jumped up and as if she was hypnotized by the horror,

170

looked at her father and crouched down beside a tree like a hunted animal. Her father didn't even look at her, but stood next to me and looked at me intensely with his eyebrows furrowed and his eyes filled with hatred, as if he wanted to know who he was dealing with. Then he hissed in my face:

"You cursed one, make sure you get away, and fast!"

I didn't even wait for his second request, but ran away quickly, taking one more look at the blonde girl who was turning to her father, her face turned to the side in hatred. Her eyes sparkled, her face had actually turned green. I could never understand how a girl could look at her father with so much hatred, how a person could have so much hatred in them, especially a young girl.

I saw such eyes, full of hate, dozens of years later in Brussels with a group of "Hitler Youth" returning from Paris after a "friendly visit". I had been discussing with them in German in a restaurant and was surrounded by Belgians who were listening to our conversation with excitement. I tried to explain that their power-hungry, fanatical "leader" was bringing the world closer to a terrible bloodbath.

Their bloodshot eyes pierced my face with an indescribable hatred. At that moment the blonde Supraśl girl appeared before my eyes with her hateful gaze directed at her father.

I believe that only Germans can hate like that, even their own father and mother.

[<sup>1</sup>] This refers to the optimistic Menakhem Mendl (in the book by Sholem-Aleykhem), who dreamed of becoming rich but failed with every trade

[<sup>2</sup>] Free translation

## The Romantic Years in the First World War

Human life consists of three periods: youth, when we dream of the future; middle age, when we live with the present; and old age, when we dream of the past.

It's strange that young people think they have an infinite future that never ends.

That's how I and my childhood friends felt in those romantic years of the First World War.

171

We were too young to understand the horrors of human hatred, the struggle for power, and the merciless murder of war. For us, those war years were filled with poetry and prose woven together without meaning, without understanding, without logic.

Science and emotion go hand in hand in youth. There is no strict barrier between them, no boundary. Everything is poured together.

That's how we felt then. At school we were taught in Russian that the forest and the trees give us "kislorod" (oxygen), which is so necessary for human beings, and the trees absorb "uglerod" (carbon) from human exhalation. But when we were in "Tsertl's" Forest, walking in groups along the "Green Alley" of the Białystok forest, we forgot all scientific theories and made the forest resound with our children's voices, perceived with joy the sound of the echo, followed with childlike happiness the golden spots of the setting sun, chasing each other like rabbits on the branches of the trees, and completely forgot the scientific theory that the sun emits fiery hydrogen, which will have cooled down in three trillion years, so that our Earth will sink into a dead, cold rigidity. It would then rotate with a world of dead, frozen inhabitants, a dark world of empty houses, bridges and extinct cities.

And in the evening, when a piece of the round moon accompanied us on our nightly walk, casting mysterious pale shadows on the sides of the trees, looking like night spirits in a cemetery, devils from that world disguised as "mekhblem" [demons of destruction] - who would have thought then that the moon is a planet illuminated by the sun, 240,000 miles from us, and that we see only half of it? That a human being there weighs only one-fifth of its weight and can leap into the air, and that the pensive, pale face of the moon is actually mountains and craters.

And when we have stepped on the flowers of various colors, which looked so beautiful with their bright, pink-white-green, innocent shades, and so delicate, who thinks that they are waging a bitter, murderous struggle among themselves, and that the stronger flower is sucking up all the sap of the earth for itself, thus starving and suffocating the weaker. All this according to Darwin's theory of evolution

and the victory of the stronger species.

172

I also saw and observed Darwin's theory of "natural selection" in nature in a different context in those romantic years. I saw it and didn't understand it, but today I do understand it.

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In a strange and original way, the theory of "natural selection" was realized in Białystok at that time. Circles and groups of the same educational level or upbringing, as well as class or capital and economic position of the parents were created.

The educated youth of merchants and wealthier families recruited students from Commercial Schools, Real Schools and the Aleksandrov Gymnasium, and paired with girls from Commercial Schools, Bishkovitshe's High School and Khvoles' Middle School.

Yafe's School was already at a low level because a significant number of its students had proletarian parents. Couples from the two-grade Primary Schools of Babitski, Menakhovski and Fridman got to know each other. The groups became veritable marriage institutions, with one couple leaving at a time to build a family life.

The "matches for marriages" among the religious youth took place mostly in the Hasidic shtiblekh, in the Bote-Medroshim, and in the "minyonim" [prayer quorums].

The group to which I belonged consisted of the boys from the "Remeslenoye" [Artisans'] School and the girls from the "Professional" School. Among the latter there was the first girl who made my heart beat faster, who gave voice to hidden feelings - vague but deep, nebulous but strong - which enveloped my boyish body and threw it into an ecstasy between torment and happiness, jealousy and despair, heavenly hopes and melancholy depression.

Her name was Sonye Lifshits [Sonya Lifschitz].

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Down the street "Behind the Prison" to Nikolayevske lived my friend Khayim Kruglyanski. A fresh, smiling boy with red cheeks, always dressed in a well-ironed, clean black suit or school uniform, with polished shoes and a well-combed parting of shiny black hair.

His father was a simple, quiet Jew, a kind of "Bontshe Shvayg". He worked in the kosher slaughterhouse, was always smiling, and never let his wife worry.

His wife, Esther, was a short, plump Jewish woman with fiery red cheeks, as if they were dyed. She was always cheerful and witty and loved youth. She herself was a woman with a young soul - she liked to tell jokes and was maternal with her broad, softly flowing limbs. She attracted the boys and girls, the friends of her son Khayim. Theirs was a loving home where we met on Shabbat evenings. Esther also had a daughter, Yashpe. She was wild, kind, and smiling, just like her mother. But she didn't look like a girl, she looked like a mature mother.

Shabbat evenings at her house were especially pleasant. It was usually in the winter, when the snow swirled in the air, covering the asphalt and cobblestone streets so that the tracks of the carts and sleighs were indented. And the winter blizzards used to drive the inhabitants indoors. On such Shabbat evenings, we would meet at my friend Khayim's house.

The hospitable Ester served us hot, boiling tea from the copper pot in the preheated "top stove," along with raspberry jam and homemade cakes on small plates, cut from a piece of dough with a glass and sprinkled with granulated sugar and nuts.

Then we went into the bedroom, a low room with beams overhead, where there were two wide, inviting beds with flowered "Ladner blankets". We took benches and chairs into the room and sat down comfortably, each boy sitting close to the girl he liked, or into whom the god of love had already shot his arrows, and where a hidden or open love affair had already been kindled.

My friend Khayim always arranged it so that he sat next to Rivke Shvartsman, a tall girl with a chubby body and a beautiful round face. She spoke quickly, in choppy sentences. Khayim loved her very much and really devoured every word she said. Rivke Shvartsman, her sister, and her brother-in-law had a shop where clothes were cleaned and dyed. It was located on Surazer [Suraska] Street, not far from Tsarep's hardware store.

My friend Lampert, a big boy who grew up with his grandmother, looked like a "yeshive-bokher" [student at a Jewish college].

He had a lean, tall body and thick hair, which is why his cap with the black peak always sat on his side, and two thick mops of hair stuck

out at the sides like a Don Cossack. He usually spoke Russian, and he spoke it well, laughing after every few words. Despite all his masculine beauty, somehow no girls clung to him. It has to do with the mysteries of the sexes, why someone who is not at all handsome is successful with women and they run after him, and another, a personality, a Don Juan, remains indifferent to women.

The opposite of him was Sheymke Zak, a well-educated boy with sensible manners from a "better family", who had a lot of charm and was popular with our girls. Sheymke had a pleasant, soft voice and usually sang Russian songs because Russian was spoken at his home-although Yiddish was also spoken. I knew his beautiful older blonde sister, Tinya, and his brother, Nyomke, who looked like a physically well-developed blond gentile peasant boy - in contrast to his brother Sheymke, who was brown-skinned and thin, with fiery black eyes and dark hair.

But his cousin Sheymke Plavski, who came from an intelligent family and lived in the street "Behind the Prison", was considered a frivolous boy, a cynic who already knew a lot about life and how a child is born... The girls liked to talk to him, but they were afraid of his sneering, cynical laugh and too much boldness with his hands...

Such a boy was a rarity in our circle.

Our circle also included two close, intimate friends: Odel Sheynman and Sonye Lifshits [Sonya Lifschitz], who always went out together and were an inseparable couple, like Bobtshinski and Dobtshinski in Gogol's "Revisor".

They were two opposites, outwardly and inwardly: Odel Sheynman had a brother, Betsalel. He was a boy with poetic abilities. She, Odel, was full-figured, with a broad face and broad limbs, very charming and sensitive, wise and serious.

175

Sonye Lifshits was slim, slender, with a pair of lively, irresistible eyes, and she was always laughing. When she laughed, her eyes closed into two narrow slits, and she always had something to say quickly, to which she laughed brattily. My feelings for her were so strong that I tended to forget and search for words in her presence, although I was not usually at a loss for words. My rich language skills at that time, especially in Russian, could bring out the many nuances of feelings in a poetic and flowery way and describe them clearly and precisely with my vocabulary.

I felt that I was lost and that the girl could do whatever she wanted with me.

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High mounds of sparkling white snow covered the low windows of the wooden cabin of Khayim Kruglyanski's small house. A dreamy silence enveloped us and carried each of us to other worlds. Each boy sat next to his chosen girl, humbly feeling the warmth of touching elbows and the quiet happiness, tenderness and shyness that were part of our upbringing. We looked at a girl differently. Our pure, chaste, sublime feelings had to do with exultation and sweet naivety...  
Absolutely far from raw, sexual, cynical relationships.

A soft song could be heard in the sentimental atmosphere. It was Sheymke Zak singing the melody of a Russian song, "Karye Glazki". It was about eyes that were hidden, disappeared forever, and could no longer be seen... And it was about eyes that reappeared in powerful dreams...

Immediately after that Sheymke segued into the song "Za mig naslazhdenye" (For a minute of pleasure I am ready for eternal suffering). And then he jumped to the song "Bublitshki" (which is translated into Yiddish as "Buy bagels, fresh bagels").

Sheymke's pleasant voice echoed softly in the magical silence, harmonizing well with the surrounding darkness, shrouded in deep thought, where ten boys and girls sat. Then the popular Russian songs began: "Otshi Tshornye" [Black Eyes], "Kutsher, treyb nisht di ferd" [Coachman, don't rush the horses]

The most successful song was the melancholy, deeply philosophical and pessimistic "Ti sidish au kamina ay smotrish s'taskoy" ("You sit by the stove and watch with melancholy how sadly the stove is going out"...). Years later it was translated into Polish and became a hit, "Przy Kominku".

176

But when it came to "Eyda Troyka", everyone joined in the chorus. - The fluffy snow, the frosty night all around, the silver moon shining, and a couple riding in a sleigh. He murmurs words of love, looks tenderly into her eyes, and she is completely distracted, what will this love bring her? –

The songs join together: "Vikhozhu Odin Ya Na Dorogu" [I Walk my Path Alone]<sup>[1]</sup> by Lermontov, "Volga, Volga mat' rodnaya" [Volga, Volga, dear mother], and then, to create a cheerful mood, we brought out the Russian folk song, "Ukhar' kupyets" [The dashing merchant], which tells how a young merchant enters a village, gets the whole village drunk, and spends the night with Natashka's daughter after the night lights in the windows have gone out... But the village girl doesn't leave empty-handed; she returns to her hut at dawn with an apron full of silver money.

But the hot-tempered boy Lampert can't control himself and wants to show what he can do. He turns the mood around, stands in the

middle of the hut and almost reaches the ceiling beam with his disheveled Cossack mop of hair. He begins to recite Pushkin's "Kto on" [Who Is He], a declamation dedicated to Peter the Great. "Between the stars and the dense forest, between the ditches and the grass, a horseman rides to the bright banks of the Neva".

And immediately after that, Lampert babbles another declamation about the "prophet Oleg" who predicted that the king would be killed by his own horse. When the horse was already dead, the king laughed at Oleg's prediction and went to check on his dead horse, stepping on the horse's head with his foot and mocking Oleg for his foolish prediction, but then a snake crawled out of the dead horse's head, bit the king's leg, and he died in great pain.

The prophet Oleg's prediction had come true.

A sense of transfiguration hangs in the air, as it usually does when one is immersed in mysterious, enigmatic forces.

But my friend Khayim can no longer contain himself. His Jewish blood is boiling: "Why only Russian songs and poems?"

And he sings, stretched out, a cantorial New Year's song, "פֶרְאָשָׁנָה יִכְתְּבֹו" [Rosh Hashanah will be written]<sup>[2]</sup> and everyone supports him. The squeaky soprano voices of the girls hover over the alto voices of the boys, and it seems as if we are in the Białystok "shul", as if a rehearsed choir is performing a cantorial concert under the direction of the Białystok conductor Rubin.

It is strange how the Białystok girls decorate the "נַשְׁבָּר יְעֹפָה" [As a dream will fly], the "נַשְׁבָּר יִשְׁבָּר" [As a broken vessel] and the "וְכָל מַאמִינִים" [And all the believers] with embellishments. Yes, these are hearty Jewish daughters from Jewish homes in Białystok.

And then we sang, prolonged, the "Kol Nidrey" [All Vows], and a deadly torpor and seriousness enveloped us all in darkness.

177

It seemed to us as if the figures of the Jewish martyrs, wrapped in white shrouds, were floating around us. It weighs on our hearts, which are full of love for the Jewish people and reverence for its past and its great Jews. But we are also gripped by fear. Our childish hearts are throbbing with fear because we have touched something hidden that has to do with Jewish prayers for the dead, Jewish cemeteries, death and the afterlife.

<sup>[1]</sup> [Выхожу один я на дорогу \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyfJLjyfJ1U)

<sup>[2]</sup> [בראש השנה ייכתו - זמראות](https://www.zemereshet.co.il/2018/09/01/%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%A1%D7%A8%D7%A0-%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A0%D7%A8%D7%A0/)

My mother had set her sights on my brother David to get him married:

"How much longer are you going to wander around by yourself? You've been around enough. It's time for you to become a man, to have a wife and a home. You're not getting any younger, and I don't have the strength any longer to bustle about such a big boy. If I only live to see this with Yankele, Tate Ziser [Sweet Father]!"

My mother looks at me and asks me to help her find the right words to convince my brother David that "tis enough of the prowling," but I diplomatically remain silent. Although I often argue with David, I love him and will be sad when I'm alone. And all in all, at least I have a "bit of a brother".

My brother David gets angry:

"What do you want from me? I still have time before a wedding. It's wartime, and where am I going to earn money to support my wife?

What then, mother, do you find it difficult to cook and wash for me? So I will look for a living quarter!"

If my mother had been hit on the head, it would have hurt less than my brother's objection. Mother turned her head toward me, crossed her arms with an expression of offended innocence, and said theatrically, with feigned excitement:

"What do you think of him? He's even twisting my words! I would find it difficult to serve him, I would find it difficult...".

She turned to David and said, emphasizing each word:

"A mother never finds it difficult to work for her children.

178

Nor should it be difficult for children to work for their mothers. As the saying goes: "A mother can feed ten children, but ten children often cannot feed a mother...woe!"

\*

Surely you understand that my mother went through with her plan. So one day a little Jew with a white freckled face, a red-blond beard, and the naive, innocent eyes of a little rabbi arrived. And - not at all in the manner of a matchmaker - he spoke softly and shyly of a suitable girl for David, who was just right for him.

She was from a middle-class family. She was beautiful and kindhearted, nobility personified. She is also a businesswoman who helps her mother run the business. And she also had money.

David went to meet the girl, and when he came back, he was completely changed - he liked her very much.

"Mom, the matchmaker was telling the truth - she's a fine girl and seems to be a good soul, just like the matchmaker said. She is nobility

personified. Well, Mom, what do you think? You saw her too, didn't you?"

My mother sobbed, wiped her eyes, and, as all mothers do, already felt regret because she sensed the loneliness her son would leave behind at home. So she hesitated and said softly, with motherly wistfulness:

"Yeh, she looks like a very fine woman. But why are you in such a hurry? You're still a young man, why are you so hot-headed? Do you really think I'm going to chase you away from home?"

David turns to me, shakes his head in despair, and says to me:

"That's how Jewish women are. Just now she's giving me a hard time because I don't want to settle down, and now she's doing an about-face. Mom! I like her," David turned to our mother, "and you've been bustling about a big boy like me long enough. You said so yourself."

Our mother sobbed even more, raised her hands to the ceiling in a tearful, pleading voice, and exclaimed piously:

"Riboyne- Shel- Oylem, Lord of the world, you rule the world, so it should be with Mazl! I am a poor widow, and it is time for me to have a little joy".

And our mother fell into a silent weeping.

My brother David was getting married and had done very well. His wife's maiden name was Sore [Sarah] Fabrikant. She was the daughter of Malke Fabrikant, the owner of a shop in the "Bremlekh" that sold haberdashery and accessories for military tailors.

179

They were wealthy, and Malke Fabrikant, a widow who was fat and obese and had difficulty moving, was supported by her children: her son Itshe, a capable, hard-working and very honest lad, and her two daughters, Sore, the elder, and Babshe, the younger. They came from a fine "balebatish" family, related to the Belous, who were well known in Białystok.

Sorele was a chubby, fair-skinned girl with a pair of gentle, loving eyes that shone with kindness, and it was hard to find another woman with such a good character. She loved my brother David very much. He was of medium height, slender, with a dark, weary face, lively black eyes, and a small black moustache that made him look like a personality.

He also dressed very well, and even on weekdays he wore a black pressed suit, tailored according to the fashion of the time, and lacquered shoes. These were left over from the good pre-war years, when he was a master weaver in the large piecework weaving mill of Nokhem-Leyzer Zeligzon and Sholem-Mordekhay Rafalovski - in Nadretshne Street, opposite the city baths, not far from the "Polkovoyen" Bes-Medresh.

Sorele used to look at David with a radiant smile and loving eyes, and what David said was law for Sorele. To her, David was always right, even when a conflict often broke out between her brother Itshe and David over a business deal.

Sorele's voice and speeches were as noble and tender as she was. You could give your life for such a woman, and my brother David gave his life for her in a very special, tragic way that shook Białystok.

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My brother David started looking for a way to make a living. The entire textile industry had shut down. The steam mills of the factories stood cold and frozen. The spinning mills, ripping mills, weaving mills and looms were abandoned, rusted and dusty.

The war trade flourished: smuggling of bread, flour, cereals, salt, sugar, saccharine, kerosene, herring, jam, old leather, shoes for repair, German soldiers' biscuits, "makhorke" [cheap, high-nicotine tobacco] and tobacco - the devil knows what the yellow, dried leaves were made of - and poorly made soap with bruises in the middle from local soap makers.

180

There were also smuggled socks with holes in them, knitted on worn-out circular knitting machines where the sock was pulled down by an old-fashioned weight that dangled around as if wondering what it was for. There were also sweaters made from pulled threads from old jackets in strange rainbow colors.

I saw some knitting machines at the home of the talented music conductor Rubin, whose wife had to support him financially by working on knitting machines. She was a hardworking, energetic woman with short-sighted, narrowed eyes, constantly running around the apartment in a hurry to take care of their three children.

All kinds of dried German vegetables were smuggled in, as well as dried potato flakes, flat salted herrings, as thin and wide as a board of wood, which had to be soaked in water for a week until they looked a little like a photograph of a piece of fish.

There was trade in everything and among everyone. Cheder boys and old Jews, little girls with red ribbons in their braids and old Jewish women with swollen feet they could barely carry, became war merchants, trading shoelaces, combs, sweet rare pears and sour apples for cider, bringing home their contribution to the living.

My brother David racked his brains as to how he could get into the "war trade" and support his wife. His easy years as a boy were now over and he had to face the serious side of life.

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My brother's brother-in-law, Itshe Fabrikant, was a boy with great business skills and ideas, and was able to adapt to all conditions. He came up with the idea of setting up a candle factory in partnership with my brother David. Trading and manufacturing candles was not a bad business and my mother was beaming with joy. David was already married, David was already settled, and David was already a candle manufacturer with Mazl. However, some customers complained that on Friday evenings, after the blessing of the light, the candles somehow began to crackle, the flames began to rebel, jumping up and down in protest, until they went out completely in anger, plunging the room into darkness.

When our mother found out about this and received accusations about her son's manufacturing, my mother was deeply affected. She complained to David, but he wasn't to blame either and said mockingly to our mother:

181

"Mom, do you think these are candles to burn? They're candles to sell!"

The truth was that there was often a shortage of cotton for the wicks, and the workers poured candles without wicks. But neither my brother David nor his brother-in-law Itshe knew about this. It was wartime, after all, and who cared about such trifles? The main thing was that they were candles that looked like candles. A lot of goods were made to be sold, not used.

But Itshe, my brother's brother-in-law, was too honest for that kind of income, and the two brothers-in-law didn't see eye to eye.

The partnership collapsed, and one day David came to our mother with the news that he, with Mazl, had given up the candle-making business and were already looking for another source of income. Mother didn't like it very much and said with a sigh:

"Mazltov to you! May you soon have other news to tell... what are you going to do now? Cut up ration coupons? Or become a partner in Horodishtsh's bank or Shmuel Tsitron's factories? If you don't have Mazl, you'd better not be born at all. What will you do now?"

But my brother David didn't feel like a failure - after all, he was not a candlemaker, but a fabric manufacturer. He had a background in textiles, and there were still a lot of hidden textiles in Białystok that hadn't been reported to the German occupiers. There was an illegal trade going on, with all the skill and Jewish zeal. So, what about him? Does he have no impulse? Has he become a lame tailor? Everyone trades in "korelekh" [bark], in "kastorke" [cheap suit fabric], in "drap" [coarse, two-ply winter fabric] - so he will trade too!

So my brother David became a war cloth merchant, where you had to know to whom you could sell without being denounced, where you could store the cloth without being discovered, and which carriers and packers to use at what time: With those who already had practical experience of when and through which roads the goods could be transported, and who were already practiced in the whole art of smuggling

cloth.

It was not an easy job.

182

### **The Flourishing of Yiddish in Bialystok under the German Occupation**

Gradually in Bialystok the safe characteristics of the former Tsarist Russia began to disappear. The brown, tight-fitting dresses of the High School girls, the green costumes with white cuffs of the Commercial School girls, the uniforms of the junior High School, the High Schools, the Middle Schools, the stiff, masculine uniforms of the Aleksandrov Gymnasium with shiny brass buttons, were packed away in the trunks of Jewish homes - and with them the habit of speaking Russian.

A modern curiosity had developed: Jewish "ladies" and "gentlemen" who spoke a beautiful, literary Russian, a better Russian than the native Russians, answered questions in Yiddish in Russian, giving the illusion that the Yiddish language was completely foreign to them. They threw in only a few Yiddish words, scolded and otherwise argued like a goy, using Russian swear words such as: "Nakhal, Svinya, Svolotsh, Merzavets, Negodyai, Podliyets".

Suddenly they began to speak good Yiddish, with real Bialystoker expressions like:

"Farmakh di tshir! [Close the door], or, "Mama! Vu shteyt der bunke tey?" [Mom, where is the pot of tea?], "Host efsher a bisl montshke?" [Do you have any granulated sugar?]

They showed that the Yiddish language, which prevailed in almost all Bialystoker homes, had somehow also penetrated the subconscious of Bialystoker's Jewish youth, and apparently the Russian "Dybbuk" had suddenly jumped out and disappeared somewhere.

With the end of the "gulyankes" [social, festive events] in the "Gorodskoi Garden" and in the "Park Roskosh" with the large proportion of officers, soldiers, musicians from Vladimirske, Cossacks and the "Ulanovske Regiment", the pro-Russian feelings of the Jewish girls had partially disappeared, as well as Russian romanticism and Russian military uniforms. This marked the beginning of a rapprochement between many strata and classes of Jewish youth, who had previously been separated as if by barriers of Russian schools, Russian language, and school uniforms. It was customary to look down with a kind of arrogance on the simple boys and girls who were not wealthy enough to study in a Russian school.

183

A rapprochement began among the youth, in which the source of the Yiddish "mame-loshn" [mother tongue] suddenly opened.

On Shabbat evenings, during walks in Lipowa and Nikolayeva Streets, one began to hear the free speaking of Yiddish. Some of them, especially the female students of the High Schools and Commercial Schools, pretended to speak broken Yiddish with a few bits of Russian. Mischievous Jewish boys from Surazer Street and Shul Street used to make an announcement to such women: "Hey, daughter! Doesn't your father eat 'kugl' and 'cholent' on Shabbat?"

A great convergence began among the youth, who had a lot of free time and were confined because they couldn't go out to other cities. Various Jewish, artistic and cultural circles, groups and movements emerged. The Zionist groups took the lead, among them the "Poale-Zion" party (the successors of Ber Borochov), pure Zionists with a bourgeois approach, without socialism and class struggle; also religious Zionists of the "Mizrachi" type.

But the socialist parties also occupied a respected position, among them the "S.S.". At its head were: Yisroel Geyst [Israel Geist], an intellectual and good speaker with his hard, Russian "reysh" ["r"]; Yakov [Jacob] Pat, a writer, speaker and party leader; and Bishke Gdanski, a popular type and idealist.

"Jewish art" began to function again, with a choir under the direction of Pesach Kaplan. Literary-dramatic evenings with one-act plays, recitations and declamations were organized. There were even literary "mishpotim" [judgments] with a defense attorney, a prosecutor, and a jury, such as the literary judgement on Bergelson's novel "Nokh Alemen" [The End of Everything]. The trial lasted several evenings and sessions, and the youth of Białystok were divided into two groups: There were those who stood by the "defender" and others who went along with the "prosecutor".

Every Friday evening in the "S.S." pub on German Street, there were lectures and discussions on party issues, as well as lectures on Jewish authors and their works. Often there were literary evenings with "local talents" in recitation and declamation.

A group of theater amateurs was formed with the participation of Yudl Grinhoyz [Greenhouse], Mair and Sholem Shvarts, Feylet, Zevkina, Birnboym [Birnbaum], and Ayznshtad [Eisenstadt], the son of the director of the Jewish Theater. These amateurs later performed in the "Palace Theater": Goldfaden's opera-rette "Sulamit", "The Sorceress", "Tsvey Kuni-Lemls". Or Gordin's plays: "Kashe di Yesoyme" [Kashe the Orphan],

A literary circle was established in the "Lines-Hatsedek" [Linas Hatzedek, Home and Association for the Poor and Sick] and a dramatic circle in the "Lines-Khoylim" [Linas Cholim, Institution for the Sick]. Later, the "Volkspartei" [People's Party] was founded, headed by Pesach Kaplan, Moyshe Visotski [Wisotsky] and Aharon Albek, the later publisher of the newspaper "Dos Naye Leben", whose editor was Pesach Kaplan.

In Poale-Zion, the red-haired Khmyelnik [Chmielnik] was the absolute leader.

The dramatic circle of the "Lines-Khoylim" organized a literary "mishpet" [judgement] on Nomberg's "Tsvishn Berg" [In the Mountains], in which, later, Khayim Visotski, the talented writer, was the "defender". "Ani hakotn" [I, the Little One] was at that time a strict moralist and was the "prosecutor". In "Lines-Hatsedek", in the literary "mishpet" on "Motke Ganev" [Motke, the Thief] by Sholem Ash, I also took on the strict role of the "prosecutor". My opponent, the "defender", was Shteynsafir. He was a scribe and humanist who later worked on various editions.

The cultural circle of "Lines-Khoylim" often held medical lectures by Dr. Zadvoryanski. Others spoke about the anatomy of the body, the development of diseases and how to fight them, emphasizing the importance of hygiene and purity. At that time abdominal and typhoid fevers were widespread in the city.

The sounds of the famous, newly formed "Vilna Troupe" with its new repertoire had already spread to Białystok: "Di puste Kretshme" and "Der Dorfs-Yung" by Leon Kobrin and "Die grine Felder" by Peretz Hirshbeyn. Also "The Dybbuk" by An-Ski, which later became so famous. Everyone in Białystok knew the names of the first amateurs of the "Vilna Troupe" by heart. They were: Aleksander Ezra, Sonye Elamit, Lyoba Kadisan, Noyekh [Noach] Nokhbush, Tanin, Kovolski, and Avrom [Abraham] Morevski, who joined later.

It was the beginning of a new era, the awakening of the Jewish language, culture, ideas and art. The awakening created a Jewish youth with a love for their people, with dreams of social ideas and a strong urge to free themselves from assimilation in exile. It was the beginning of dreams of an independent people in a land of their own. But now I come back to the beginning.

\*

pressed the wooden foot of the semicircular cradle, she sang Avram Goldfaden's [Roshinkes with Almonds]:

„In Beys-Hamikdash, in a vinkl-kheyder,  
zists di almone Bas-Tsiyen aleyn...  
zi zitst un vigt dos vigele keseyder,  
un zingt derbay a lidele gants sheyn...“

[In the Bet Hamikdash, in the corner of a room,  
The widow, the daughter of Zion, sits alone,  
She sits there rocking the little cradle all the time,  
And sings a beautiful little song].

It seemed as if the child was dreaming. Her little eyes were half closed, her round, pink cheeks reddened in the first dreams of a child, but the process of absorbing the "mame-loshn" [mother tongue] had begun. In the long nights of my later years, my mother's lullabies rang in my ears like magical accords of song. And probably the same was true for other Białystok children during their sweet childhood years in mother's house.

\*

This is part of the explanation for the "overnight miracle" of the Białystok youth's switch from Russian to Yiddish during the First World War.

New names of authors lit up the imagination of the Jewish youth. No longer Russians, but Jews: singers of the social struggle, such as Morris Rosenfeld, Morris Winchevsky, [Joseph] Bovshover. Singers of national pride and struggle, like Chaim Nachman Bialik, with his works:

"In the Shkhite-shtot", "Ha-Masmid", "A Freylekhs", "El Hatsipor". Or Abraham Reyzer's folk songs, Zalman Shneour's "Margaritkelekh", Z. Segalovich's "Sheyn iz Reyzele dem Shoykhet's", Sh. Frug's "Ha-Kos" (The Cup).

The names of Jewish prose writers also began to take their place among the youth of Białystok. Mendele's "Di Klyatshe" [The Old Horse], the allegory, the sad comparison with the Jewish people, or "מסעות בנימין השלישי" [The Travels of Benjamin the Third], which awakened in the youth a wanderlust for new lands with new customs and new people.

The Hasidic stories of [Isaac Leib] Peretz from his "Folkstimlekhe Geshikhtn" became the main attraction of lectures at all literary evenings, as did his "Di Dray Matones", "Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekher", "Di Aropgelozene Oygn", "Der Gilgel fun a Nign", "Baym Goyses Tsukopns", and others.

Sholem Aleichem also contributed with his comic one-act and two-act plays, which were very popular:

186

For example: "Mazel-Tov", "A Doktor a Soykher", "Ekspropryatsyes", and "The Get".

Every other boy and girl belonged to a literary or dramatic circle. There was a tremendous thirst for a thorough knowledge of the Yiddish language, in which a boy and a girl made their first declaration of love, interwoven with song and the secret trembling of the first "flirting feelings" of awakened desire. This, however, was wrapped in noble, tender feelings of pure love, without raw sex and vulgarity, which was unknown to our naive, pure, innocent youth of that time, because they had been brought up in the tradition of the Jewish "pure family", the sanctification of a more beautiful, higher, nobler level, up to the ecstasy of a divine elevation of man and woman.

\*

My friend Lampert lived on Yurovtser (Potshtove) Street, the tall boy with the Cossack mop of hair and a constant hoarse laugh. He was very popular among us. He grew up with his grandmother. Once, taking advantage of the fact that his grandmother was away somewhere, he invited us to his house.

As usual, our circle consisted of my friends Sheymke Zak, the chubby Lurye, the son of a spinning master, Tshapnitski, the son of a grocer in Gumienna Street, and Sheymke Plavski. The latter was the son of the well-known merchant Hilel Plavski from the street "Hinter der Turme", a relative of Sheymke Zak. The circle also included Khayim Kruglyanski, the girls Rivke Shvartsman from Surazer Street and the two sisters Okun and Sonye Lifshits, and a few others.

Khayim Kruglyanski, a singer with a cantor, always carried a tuning fork to imitate the famous conductor of the choir school, Jakow Berman. Kruglyanski tapped his tuning fork and began to perform a third, and a discussion about music broke out.

Suddenly we started talking about other things: Where to get potatoes, how to smuggle in rye, how to get cooking oil to fry latkes, and where to "catch" a goy woman with a "shok" [sixty] eggs.

The transition from prose to poetry and art - and vice versa - was, as with all young people, a rapid process. The youthful imagination bends hunger and need and flies in a few minutes to higher worlds, forgetting daily cares.

And so we, a hungry group of young people, got involved in a discussion about music.

Each composer had ardent admirers among us. And so the names of composers and their compositions came up: Beethoven and Mozart as creators of symphonies. We sang Franz Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody", took up the "Dance of the Doll" from Offenbach's "Tales of Hoffmann", danced Strauss' salon waltz, sang the oriental motifs of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherezade" in chorus, shook our heads at arias from Richard Wagner's "Nibelungen" cycle and arias with our main heroes, "Tristan and Isolde". Also arias from "Carmen", the wonderfully melancholy motifs of Ippolitov-Ivanov's "Kavkazer Nigunim" [Caucasian Melodies/Sketches].

But it was Chopin's "Nocturnes" that had the greatest success with us, not because of Polish patriotic feelings, but because of his famous romance with the French novelist George Sand, who not only had a male pseudonym, but was also the first woman who dared to walk down the street in men's trousers and a top hat!

But suddenly our stomachs rumbled and grumbled, and Lurye, who had a good appetite and knew little about poetry, made an announcement in simple Białystok:

"Khevre! Vu nemt men itst epes a geshmakn key?" ["Guys, where can we get something tasty to eat now?"]. One of them picked up on this, stood up and recited this rhyme:

"Khevre yatn, es kon nokh farshatn,  
nisht redn fun muzik...  
Fun fidl and smik,  
es iz gut farn zatn..."

[Roughly: People, it can still hurt to talk about music, about violin and bow, it's just good for a full man...].

My friend Lampert is ashamed, scratches his thick head of hair and blushes like a shy girl:

"How is this possible, he's invited guests and doesn't even have anything to offer..."

But suddenly his face lit up with joy. From a dark corner, he pulled out a small sack of potatoes, so wildly crumpled with their long white roots, as if the potatoes were saying to us:

"What do you want from us? Please let us live in our old age, we're struggling.

But Lampert doesn't argue with the disgruntled potatoes.

He grabs them and puts them on the coals, and in a few minutes you can smell the aroma of baked potatoes - the taste of paradise... Lurye does not calm down.

"And is there such a thing as smoked herring?"

"So!" our gang imitates him, "is that all you like? And you can't digest a simple piece of herring? Look what a distinguished fellow he is!"

"It can be a simple piece of herring," agrees Lurye, "but it must have a corner and an end. It must be clearly visible!"

My friend Lampert blushes again, but his face lights up again with joy. He runs to a neighbor and comes back with a quarter liter of salted "lyok" [herring sauce]. Our band claps "Bravo," but Sonyele Lifshits grimaces:

"Salted lyok...!"

Nevertheless, when I get a big, almost black burnt potato, looking like a piece of banished wood left behind after a fire, and I break off the biggest part of it for her like a "cavalier", she enjoys the fried potato, which scalds her lips, and even dips it into the salted lyok.

I can't resist the temptation and cuddle up to Sonye. And after eating the potato, I demand my reward and kiss her lips with relish. But I grimace and make a sour face:

"Sonyele! Your lips taste like salted lyok..."

Sonye laughs:

"Wait, once you marry me, you'll see what a salty woman I am!"

But the temptation to kiss her is stronger and, strangely, after the other kisses, I already feel her delicious, juicy lips and not the lyok. It looks as if I've licked the lyok with my kisses. And I'm already floating on clouds of happiness. Everything seems so beautiful and sweet to me, full of dreams of a beautiful, long, endless life. It confuses my young head: the whole world seems to be mine!

The vitality of the Białystok Jews at that time was enormous, as it was always the case with the Jews in all the most tragic and bitter historical moments of the two thousand years of Jewish exile.

The epidemic diseases, mainly typhus, typhoid fever and dysentery, did not decrease at any time, neither in stronger nor in milder forms. The main reasons were hunger, which caused malnutrition and weakened the body's defenses, and poor sanitary and hygienic conditions, such as a lack of soap, clean linen, clean clothing, and necessary medicines.

The German rulers fought against the diseases not for humanitarian reasons, but simply out of fear that their soldiers and officers, who were quartered in private apartments in the city, might become infected.

The preventive fight against disease was waged by the Germans with the specific Prussian coarseness - by a race that strongly believed in its cultural superiority and its ability to spread "culture" in the world. And this in general, especially among the "stupid Russians" and the "dirty Jews" in the occupied territories.

The Germans used to go from house to house, searching beds, throwing bedclothes out of order, and taking whole crowds of people to the "delousing center" for disinfection. And if anyone happened to pass by such a crowd, he was brutally dragged into the group.

And in the midst of this "bacchanalia," of hunger and disease, of poverty and human degradation, the Jewish word and Jewish culture flourished among all classes of Jewish Białystok with a passion that gripped the whole city. Beginning with the adolescent youth, it swept away the middle-aged and even the elderly, who suddenly felt that "Yiddish" was not only a language of communication, but also a living word of the mind, of the heart, of thought and feeling.

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190

The epidemic diseases brought to the fore an institution that began to occupy a respected position in Białystok. This was the "Lines-Khoylim" [Linat-Kholim] on Yatke [Butcher] Street. The organization owed its popularity primarily to its famous ambulance with its small staff of doctors, headed by a young doctor, Zadvoryonski. He had studied in Germany before the war, earned his doctorate, and settled in Białystok. He was a great diagnostician.

Another reason for the great popularity of "Lines-Khoylim" was the ice cellar, the only one in the city. It could provide ice for the sick at

any time of the year, and very often a wailing Jewish mother could be seen dragging herself to Lines-Khoylim in the middle of the night to get ice for her sick child.

The ambulance also provided bladders to carry the ice and alcohol-based vaporisers to produce steam for sore throats. The "Linisten" section of the "Lines-Khoylim" was also very popular in the town, as these were boys and girls who had formed a group to bring help to the sick and would usually stand guard all night to distribute the medicine at the appointed time, wash the sick, take their temperature and even prepare a glass of tea and cook some soup.

Dear boys and girls of Białystok! How many sleepless nights did you spend with the poor sick? Without making a fuss and without being thanked, in the cold Białystok nights you went into the most remote, poor alleys, crawled up the high, narrow, dark stairs to the poor apartments far away from the beaten track, to do your Jewish humane duty!

It was a youth that no longer exists, a rare youth that has disappeared and will never return.

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The leading group of "Lines-Khoylim" consisted of ordinary persons from the Jewish people, but these individuals had a lot of energy and devotion, which raised "Lines-Khoylim" to a very high level.

Among the most important leaders were: Reygrodska and his wife, who had a paint shop on Rozhanski Street (across from the Lines-Hatsedek). Both he and his wife were small in stature, but lively as quicksilver and full of energy.

191

Reygrodska used to leave his paint shop at noon to fulfill a mission for the Lines-Khoylim: An important consultation or urgent help for a sick person.

Velvl Lifshits (a brother of my friend Sonye Lifshits) worked in a soap factory and was enthusiastic about his work for the Lines-Khoylim. He was full-figured, of medium height, with a pleasant smile on his face and narrow, laughing eyes, and was very popular because of his clear, straightforward mind.

Mines, the son of a baker next to the shul's courtyard, was the king of the "Linisten" and received a prize every year for his light and skillful hand in administering injections to the sick.

### **What the Bialystok Youth Dreamed of**

The year 1917 was approaching - a year that would shake Russia and lead to the reshaping of the world before the Second World War and for dozens of years to come.

Revolution broke out in Russia. Behind the scenes, the German hand was supporting both the Bolshevik leaders from abroad, in Switzerland, and the Russian underground movement with huge sums of money. The Russian autocrat, Nicholas Alexandrovich the Second, was forced to abdicate and was arrested with his entire family. He was later murdered with his wife and children in a cellar in Ekaterinburg, in the house of the merchant Ipatyev, on the secret orders of the Tsheka [secret police]. In later years, a rumour spread that one of the tsar's daughters, Anastasia, was able to escape with the help of an officer who secretly hid her as a seriously wounded woman. The story was never confirmed.

Kerensky, an intelligent and talented lawyer, became the leader of the new Russia. But because he was loyal to the allied governments of England and France, he preached the continuation of the war. The idea of continuing the war was not popular with the exhausted, bleeding Russian masses, who were fighting a war on the fronts as well as a civil war at home. The Bolsheviks exploited this mood for their slogan: "Bread and Peace".

192

They dissolved the Constituent Assembly, the legally elected representatives of all Russian parties, and seized power.

Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamieniev, Rykov, Bukharin, Joffe, Lunacharsky and other Bolsheviks became the leaders of Russia. Trotsky and Joffe were sent to Brest-Litovsk to negotiate an armistice with Germany. Trotsky, who visited the fortress of Brest-Litovsk, wrote a slogan that is still used by Soviet leaders today. It is his famous slogan: 'No peace, no war', because Soviet Russia cannot commit itself to peace treaties that would completely paralyse its underground activity of provoking struggles, uprisings and strikes and thus stand in the way of the realisation of the world revolution.

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With bated breath, Białystok followed the huge political events unfolding in the various countries involved in the bloody war. The war dragged on for many years, torturing soldiers to death in fortresses and trenches dug for many miles on all fronts.

It seemed that the war would never end. Suddenly, the events, the claps of thunder, echoed in all parts of the world, including Białystok, which lay on the borders of Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

In Białystok, local war strategists sat over maps, pinned national flags to them and tried to predict how the war would continue: Such was the belief in German military power that many Białystok 'politicians' from the Bes-Medresh bet that Germany would win the war. Until America, taking advantage of the fact that German submarines had been sinking American ships, declared war on Germany and Austria and joined the Allied forces led by the famous American General John Pershing.

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Białystok, which in recent years had been cut off from the Russian language, literature and general Russification, thirstily exploited the Yiddish source.

193

Yiddish became the official language of the entire youth. If there were still certain circles in which Russian was spoken among themselves, it was more out of habit than [lack of] knowledge of Yiddish.

The dominant parties in Białystok were:

The Jewish Socialist, the Zionist (Poale-Zion, the General Zionist and the Mizrachi) and the newly formed "Volkspartei" [People's Party]. The latter was led by the famous Warsaw lawyer, orator and social activist Noach Prilutski [Nojach Pryłucki]. The leaders of the People's Party in Białystok were:

Pesach Kaplan, Moshe Visotzky and Aharon Albek.

The Jewish socialists were very active at that time and had great hopes for the progressive ideas of the new Russia. It did not occur to anyone that the Bolsheviks would become the rulers of Russia, where for dozens of years slogans of freedom and liberal views had been propagated with the aim of establishing a just democratic system.

I often came to their pub in the German Street, which was blessed with social institutions such as 'The Dramatic-Literary-Vocal Circle', which later developed, 'The Jewish Art' and the editorial office of 'Dos Naye Leben'.

The pub of the Jewish Socialist was exceptionally crowded, especially on Friday and Shabbat evenings. Young writers read their works there. Intellectuals and socialist theorists gave lectures, and there were stormy, lively discussions on various ideological problems. There was also a cheap buffet where you could take a mock cheap pastry with a glass of hot tea.

But the Zionist world was also feverish with announcements of dreams of "Shivat Zion" [return to Palestine]. Rumors were already circulating about an official declaration by the British government, which in the same year, 1917, became the famous Balfour Declaration, raising hopes for the renaissance of an independent state.

This led to a great upsurge of Zionist forces among the Jewish people and strengthened the hope of realising the great Jewish dream: The establishment of a Jewish country.

194

### **The First Symptoms of the German Revolution**

Białystok, nineteen-seventeen. The quiet years are over. The Russian Revolution had ended the monarchist regime of the tsarist, despotic ruler over Greater Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and aroused great enthusiasm in socialist circles in Białystok. The Balfour Declaration, officially proclaimed by Professor Chaim Weizmann - the famous English Jew from the small Belorussian shtetl of Motel [Motal], who had distinguished himself during the war years with his chemical inventions - received the official proclamation assuring a "national home" in Palestine for the Jewish people. With England as the Mandatory Power.

The broad Jewish masses in Białystok in general and the Zionist fighters in particular were filled with ecstasy. America's entry into the war on the side of the Allies and against Germany and Austria aroused great hopes that the war would enter its final phase with the announcement of the collapse of powerful German militarism.

The youth of Białystok changed as suddenly as in a magical story during the years of German occupation. From 13- or 14-year-old boys they became grown men, with changed, masculine voices, with the beginnings of sprouting moustaches and with the self-confidence of a young man who feels within himself the strength to step into life and have something to say.

The girls of this age had also grown up in a few years (women mature earlier) and were mentally advanced because they had read a lot of Jewish and Russian literature during the war years and had taken an active part in social life with newly emerging national and social ideas. Such girls and boys had to be "gesiezt". Such girls and boys had to be "gesiezt". Somehow the "Du" no longer suited them.

Romanticism began to take up a lot of space. The young people of Białystok were mostly traditionally national Jewish, but less fanatically Orthodox (unlike Polish Jews), and this had allowed them a free upbringing. And "flirting," "falling in love," "svidanyes" [dates], and "ukhazheven nokh meydlekh" [courting girls] were all an exciting part of Białystok youth life.

On summer evenings the "Gorodskoy Sad", which was already called the "Shtotisher Gortn" [City Garden] in simple "mame-loshn", was crowded with young

195

people sitting on the benches of the alleys spread all over the garden.

They walked in long rows in the middle of the alleys, covering their shoes with gray dust. Couples kissing each other tenderly had even advanced into the alleys by the Byale [Biała] River, which cut through half of the city and flowed through the City Garden.

There was a lot of cheeky banter as people strolled through the alleyways in broad lines, "hitting" on girls, both known and unknown, in a straightforward manner.

The loud giggles of young, joking girls, who knew that they had beautiful voices and were successful with their laughter, did not need much begging and made the City Garden resound with their high-pitched laughter.

Men with alto and bass voices discussed "big" problems, and when they passed a girl from Surazer [Suraska] Street, from the yard of the "shul", from Pyaskes [Piaski] or Khanaykes [Chanajki], they gave her a light nudge. They were less conceited than the female graduates of Middle Schools, High Schools, and Commercial Schools from Nikolayevske, German, Potshtove, Gumyene, and Lipove Streets.

They had not lost their arrogance: a cheek! After all, they weren't just anybody! Their fathers were cloth manufacturers, owners of cloth shops, owners of large glass or colonial stores.

In Tserl's Forest, groups of boys and girls could now be seen in the "Green Alley," especially on Shabbat evenings. They sang dreamy-romantic Jewish and Russian songs, such as "Sheyn iz Reyzele dem Shoykhets" [Beautiful is Reyzele, the Butcher's Daughter] by

Segalovitsh, "Margaritkelech" [Daisies] by Zalman Shneour, and the very popular folk songs "A Brivele der Mamen" [A Letter to Mom] - accompanied by a groan to their nearest and dearest in faraway America - as well as "Dos Talesl" [The Little Tallit] and "Der Idiot" [The Idiot].

Or Russian love songs like "Otshi Tshornye" [Black Eyes],

"Yamshtshik nye Goni Loshadyei" [Coachman, Don't Rush the Horses! ], the cheerful "Ukhar Kupyets" [The Dashing Merchant], the melancholy and sad "Akh Zatshem Eta Notsh" [Oh, Why This Night], "Vikhozhu Odin Ya Na Dorogu" [I Walk My Path Alone], "Eyda Troyka" and others.

Full of dreams, with hot blood and even hotter imagination, the youth of Białystok rode out into the arena of young, promising life, ready for youthful adventures and the struggle for a position in life, with the individual talents that the youth of Białystok possessed: wisdom, maturity, energy, a sense of reality and a cosmopolitan outlook.

A youth raised in the atmosphere of the spiritual heritage of the Haskalah era, of commerce, of awareness of national and socialist ideas.

196

The city was surrounded by countries of different cultures, such as Russian, German, Polish and Lithuanian. These bordered on Białystok, and so a special Jewish youth was formed - a fine combination of a rare type, which bore the name "בִּיאַלִיסְטָקָעַר" [Białystoker].

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Demobilisation began in the lower ranks of the German occupation forces. Even in the higher ranks there were already doubts about victory, but attempts were made to maintain the mask of German discipline and obedience. Like a building that still holds up a little when it collapses, there were already large gaps in discipline through which thefts in the military depots could often be seen. The German administrators stole in secret and sold the stolen goods to civilians.

Some electrical shops in Nikolayevske, Lipove and Gumiener Streets made a lot of money by secretly buying up many electrical items, such as electrical glasses, copper wire, electrical cables and insulating tape. This was urgently needed as electric lighting was becoming widespread in Białystok and in many surrounding towns where dynamos had been installed and electricity supplied, such as in Supraśl, where Hirshhorn, the owner of a textile finishing factory, had taken over the entire electricity supply for the town.

There was also a public sale of woollen and cotton blankets, light military shoes with spikes, which caused terrible vibrations when walking on the asphalt and pavements of Białystok. All these goods were sold by Germans. We were no longer afraid to buy them, because the Germans were already so depressed and resigned. Even military uniforms were secretly sold by the Germans, but they had already been dyed and mended.

My friend's mother, who was a skillful Jew and not even afraid of the devil, traded with the Germans. Once she brought three revolvers with bullets, which she kept in a sack under the potatoes.

197

The Germans became very close to the people. Their pride and arrogance were gone. Professor Vederakin, a well-known German doctor, had a love affair with the owner of a restaurant in the Market Street.

Part of the population of Białystok, who lived on trade with the Germans, watched the approaching events with unease. Many of those who had already come to terms with the Germans still remembered the bitter situation of the Jews in the Tsarist army and the bloody pogroms. They had become accustomed to the idea of remaining under German rule, which at the time was relatively more humane than the Tsarist regime and had not yet shown its bloody brutality.

Moreover, every Jew had some knowledge of the German tongue and could squeeze a few 'basics' into his German-style Yiddish, so that he already considered himself a 'professor' of the German language... to spite the Russians, Poles and Lithuanians, who had respect for the "Jewish brains" who could freely converse with the Germans.

The excitement grew. Once, walking down Lipowa Street in broad daylight, I saw a scene near Topolski's glass shop that showed what the Germans held of their famous German discipline.

A drunken German soldier in an unbuttoned uniform walked with unsteady steps along the sidewalk of Lipowa Street. He was approached by an elegant German officer in a stiff uniform befitting his rank and with even stiffer, proud manners. The soldier tried to salute, but the officer gave him a contemptuous look and struck him on the chest with his baton.

The soldier didn't think twice, gave the officer (as we say in Białystok) a "khmal" [a slap in the face], turned the officer around like a "lulev" [palm branch] and clenched his teeth: "You damned pig! "...And when the German officer grabbed his revolver, but did not dare to

shoot - the soldier turned out of the officer's arms, gave him another "tarobants" (also a Białystok expression) over his head, ran into the yard of Topolski's glass shop, which led out to Yatke Street, and disappeared.

198

This scene clearly showed how "victorious" Germany stood by its famous "Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles," of which my Białystok friend Hershl Veynreykh [Weinreich] wrote this rhyme:

Daytshland, Daytshland iber ales,  
Nishto keyn broyt, nishto keyn khales,  
Un in dayn groyser, liber "heymat"  
Geblibn iz der groyser dales...

[Germany, Germany, above all, there is no bread and also no challah, and in your great, dear "homeland" a great misery has remained...].

### **The Collapse of German Militarism**

The Bes-Medresh Jews, the "diplomats on the podium," who chewed their beards, twiddled their thumbs in talmudic dispute, and preached with the certainty of military strategists that Germany could not be defeated in war, were bitterly disappointed. The collapse of Germany was complete and was sealed with a terrible defeat of Germany on November 11, 1918 with the Treaty of Versailles.

Białystok revived. New times, new hopes arose, especially among the youth.  
"What will happen next?" was the question Białystok asked itself.

Suddenly, one fine morning, young Polish "shkotsim" [non-Jewish – mostly peasant- boys] could be seen patrolling the streets with rifles slung over their shoulders. Białystok had hardly expected it. Yesterday's Yanek Vatsek Stashek suddenly became a "balebos" over Jewish Białystok. Polish patriots had secretly prepared the "coup" with the approval of the German "soldiers' councils".

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My mother walked around exhausted.

How could her Germans, who spoke the German of the novels of "Shomer" <sup>[1]</sup>, those gallant, polite Germans with the fine manners and the beautiful, clean uniforms, the officers with the aristocratic monocles before their eyes, those "all-knowing" and "omniscient", suffer defeat?

Should the people of Goethe and Heine really have lost the war against the "Ivan" [Russian gentile]?

199

Even with the help of faraway America? Mom somehow couldn't believe it.

Then there were new motherly concerns.

There was her older son, David, a boy of military age, and her younger son, Yankele, who was also a young boy and approaching his military service years. In what army would they have to serve now? After all, they were two healthy, lively, cheerful sons, fit for military service.

As they used to joke in Białystok:

"Godyen tsum militer" - a brokh tsu der mamen". <sup>[2]</sup>

Mom continued to wring her hands and walk around worried. When Mom had no present worries, she always worried about the future. How is it possible for a Jewish mother not to worry - so is she then a *Jewish* mother, anyway?

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My brother David didn't worry much. His wife, Sorele, looked into his eyes and believed in him like God. No problem - David will think of something and everything will be fine. Her beautiful smile, full of confidence, never left her face for a minute.

And my brother David had bigger problems than worrying about the military.

He dealt in cloth: "Karelekh" [cheap woolen fabric], "kastor" [cheap suit fabric], "dublir" <sup>[3]</sup>, blankets that were hidden during the war years and came from Białystok manufacturers such as: Gubinski, Triling, Moreyn, Preysman, Kamikhav, Tsitrin [Citrin], Maes, Paretski, Govenski, Novik, Novik, Yudl Zilberfenig, and also from new wartime manufacturers such as: Gotlib-Seletski, Marinski, and Shimen Kulikovski.

The latter was very popular among the workers. They later saved him from the Soviet Communist police, who invaded Białystok in August 1920.

The carriers were already walking freely with "carcasses" <sup>[4]</sup> on their shoulders. People adapted in an appropriate way, without fear <sup>[5]</sup>. At the corner of Gumyena Street there were "birzhevikes" [stockbrokers] dealing in "hard" (gold coins) and "soft" (bank notes), Russian "kerenkes" [Kerensky rubles], Tsarist rubles, German "Ost-Marken", English pounds and "lokshn" (American dollars). My brother David bartered for German goods and even acquired a revolver with bullets.

Hardly anyone looked around for the "shkotsim" with guns, the young tots. It was thought to be a temporary phenomenon, like a disease that would soon disappear,

200

and Białystok would become a purer country with a world name, with a solid, secure government. The Polish "shkotsim" were thought to be only temporary "balebatim".

<sup>[1]</sup> שומר=Shmr, pronounced "shomer", was the pseudonym of the playwright Nachum-Meir Shaykevykh.

<sup>[2]</sup> Fit for military service" - a "brokh" for the mother. The [cynical] joke lies in the ambiguity of the word "brokh," which can be translated either as "calamity" or "rupture". Some conscripts deliberately contracted a rupture to avoid serving the Tsar.

<sup>[3]</sup> I don't know for sure what kind of fabric this refers to. It may have something to do with two layers of fabric, or it may refer to the blankets mentioned below.

<sup>[4]</sup> פגרה = The Hebrew term actually means "carcass," but here it is misspelled and put in quotes. In any case, it refers to "forbidden" goods.

<sup>[5]</sup> free translation

### Białystok under Polish Rule

Bitter disappointment with the Polish government came quickly.

The young Polish recruit was exchanged for a well-trained, older Polish "zholnyezh". The Polish police set about establish "pozhondek" [order].

During the demobilization of the German army, a military division had been created from one of its parts, which consisted of non-Jewish Poles from Poznań who knew both languages - German and Polish. It was under the command of the notorious general of Poznań, Józef Haller.

The "Halertshikes" (also known as "Poznantshikes"), with their square hats, quickly became the most anti-Semitic section of the Polish army.

They terrorized Jews throughout Poland with their brutality and anti-Semitic riots. Among the saddest chapters of this period were the excesses in Łapy (a town near Białystok), where Jews were driven off the train and whipped with leather straps.

The suffering of the Jews with the new Polish government grew from day to day. Jews had their beards ripped off and pieces of flesh were torn out along with their hair. It was customary to throw Jews out of the windows of the train during the ride and to give them murderous beatings. Polish policemen used to throw baskets of goods from poor merchants into the gutter out of hostility towards Jews.

The Polish anti-Semites became increasingly brazen. An anti-Semitic campaign began to force part of the Białystok textile industry to throw Jewish workers out of the weaving, spinning and tearing mills and replace them with Polish workers, allegedly as a fair demand for a percentage standard of worker distribution.

The Polish government began to extend its sharp, poisonous, pointed anti-Semitic claws.

The millennial habit of the Jewish people to adapt to all conditions,

201

was also evident among the Jews of Białystok - in their adaptation to the "new order", to Polish rule.

Polish-language schools were opened: elementary public schools ("Szkoła Powszechna") and some High Schools. Among the latter was Gutman's Hebrew High School, which enjoyed the privilege of the Polish rulers and Druskin's High School. Its director, Druskin, had previously been a teacher at Yafe's School.

Under the name "Szkoła Rzemieślnicza", the Artisans' School began to function again with courses in carpentry, locksmithing, furniture repair, textile and electrical engineering (a newly introduced subject), with the engineer Mordekhay Zablodovski as its director. The Takhkemoyne [Tachkemoni] School also resumed its activities as a Hebrew school, with Mr. Ekshteyn as director and a number of good teachers: Khane Stolova, Levi Shkolnik, Dr. Tuleman (Polish literature), and others.

Overnight the Jewish youth began to speak Polish. It was admirable how quickly the Jewish children mastered the Polish language and could speak literary Polish. Compared to the Jews, the native Poles with their primitive, poor Polish looked like simple peasants. It became fashionable to speak Polish, especially among young girls. If a girl from Białystok spoke Russian, people would joke, shake their heads

and say regretfully: "Too bad she's an old girl, from the time of Nicholas".

But the Jewish youth, educated in Russian High Schools and universities, continued to parade with Russian.

They did not give up their love of Russian language and literature, and when they walked in the streets they spoke loudly and demonstratively in Russian, which was a discordant sound to the ears of the "Polyakn" [non-Jewish Poles].

They saw this as a disregard for the newly established Polish state.

In fact, it was a deliberate mockery of the "Polyakn" by a number of proud Jews. They wanted to show that there was much less anti-Semitism in anti-Semitic czarist Russia than in the newly established but already chauvinistic and anti-Semitic young Polish state.

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The Polish government began to establish "order" on the issue of Polish citizenship and made it very difficult to become a citizen. The question of "Obywatelstwo" [citizenship] was on the agenda in all its severity. Only Jews born in the occupied Polish territories were recognized as Polish citizens.

202

Other Jews who came from Russia, Lithuania, the Baltic countries, or from abroad, but who had been living in Białystok for decades, could only obtain a "Tymczasowa", i.e. a temporary residence card, also known as a "Karta Pobytu", which had to be renewed every few years with great difficulty.

One had to be in the good graces of the Polish rulers. Anyone who had a "Karta Pobytu" was in fact subject to arbitrariness and was under constant threat of being expelled from the country.

From the very beginning, the Polish government decided to strictly seal off its territory from "undesirable elements". Pure, brutal chauvinism poked its head. Polish soldiers marched through the streets singing the famous Polish liberation song "My, Pierwsza Brygada" [We Are the First Brigade] and "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła" [Poland Is Not Yet Lost].

To the latter, Jewish pranksters immediately composed a worthy parody: "Yeshtshe polska nie zginela, puki my zshyemi, yeshtshe vudka nie skvashnyeala puki mi pyemi" ("Poland is not yet lost as long as we live, vodka has not yet turned sour as long as we drink.").

This was a broad hint at the widespread drunkenness among the "Polyakn".

For the first time, articles appeared in the Polish press about certain territorial claims against Russia, such as Minsk (Belarus), where there was apparently a high percentage of Poles. This later developed into the "March on Kiev". Poland's territorial claims against Russia were strongly reminiscent of the German "Lebensraum Theory" and the "Drang nach Osten" [Drive to the East] (towards Russian territories).

This was an attempt by the newly formed Polish government to seize Russian territories by taking advantage of the revolutionary chaos in the Russian civil war, where the Bolsheviks had to fight a bitter battle with the armies of the White Guard [White Army] under Admiral Koltshak, General Kornilov and others after the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly.

They also had to fight the murderous, anti-Semitic Cossacks and their atamans [army leaders] such as Petliura and Makhno and their bloodthirsty gangs, as well as the remnants of the French army in Odessa and the American army in Arkhangelsk.

Apart from the fact that the newly formed Poland was led by Józef Piłsudski, formerly an activist in the P.P.S. (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna), the chauvinist right-wing elements, the "Endekes" [Endecja], (N.D., Narodowa Demokracja), who demagogically called themselves "People's Democrats," began to become very active.

203

They called themselves "National Socialists", just like the later Hitlerites.

Already during the "honeymoon" of liberated Poland, the national-chauvinist Polish leaders stuck out their poisonous heads. This later led to the assassination of the progressive, liberal Polish President Narutowicz. It was a dark stain on the young Poland; it was also an announcement of the path the newly created Poland would take and the tragic fate of the Jewish minority who had to live in such a poisoned, reactionary, anti-Semitic state.

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The names of a number of streets in Białystok were changed. The famous "Nikolayevske" was renamed "Ulica Sienkiewicza", the "Daytshishe" [German] Street leading to the City Garden was renamed "Kilinski" (Kilińskiego), the large market next to the "Bremlekh" was given the name of the Polish national hero and became "Rynek Kościuszki".

For the first time in its history, Białystok held democratic elections of a Jewish "kehile" (community) in which the whole city and all parties participated. It was a fierce struggle between parties and organizations to be represented in the first democratically elected Jewish community, which was to be a representation of organized Jewish social life in Białystok.

The main parties leading the campaign were:

the General Zionist Party with Khaykl [Chaikel] Aldok, a young man with a pale face and fiery, nervous eyes. He was the main speaker at the Zionist restaurant Beys-Am [House of the People];

the "Poale-Zion" with the red-haired leader Chmielnik at its head;

the Orthodox groups that conducted their election agitation in all the Bote-Medroshim: the "Bund" with Shmuel Goldman and Jacob Vaks [Wachs] as its leaders;

the S.S. party with the well-known labor leaders Jacob Pat, Israel Geyst, Bishke Gdanski, Moshe Lev, Zaydl Novinski and others.

They conducted their election campaign in their restaurant on "German Street" and at public meetings, even in the "Palast [Palace] Theater";

Tsvi Vider [Tzvi Wider], the baker, a talented orator and publicist in "Dos Naye Leben", was the leader of the craftsmen.

Even the "Traders Union" and the "Tenants' Union" had their lists.

The "People's Party", whose leader in Poland was the famous

204

Jewish lawyer and folklore collector Noyekh Prilutski [Noach Pryłucki], also played an important role in the election.

The main leaders of the People's Party in Białystok were: Pesach Kaplan, the editor of "Dos Naye Leben", Moyshe Visotski [Moshe Wisotski], the journalist and orator, and Aharon Albek, the editor of "Dos Naye Leben".

The Poale-Zion party even brought [Yaakov] Zerubavel, who had a strong influence as a labor leader, Zionist and mass speaker.

During the election campaign some funny curiosities happened.

Once an old Jewish woman was walking down Gumyener Street. A young man handing out leaflets urged her to vote for the Zionists and argued with her:

"Bobeshi! Surely you want to go to Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel]?"

"Of course, my son," and the Jewish woman became very animated, "of course I want to go to Eretz-Yisroel. So what, am I to be buried in Bagnówka<sup>[1]</sup>?"

"Listen, Bobeshi, you have to vote for the Zionists, because then you will go to Eretz-Yisroel!"

A fiery Bundist lady passed by. Angrily she said to the Jewess:

"Bobeshi, what does your son do for a living? Is he a worker?"

"What do you mean, he's a banker?" smiled the Jewess, "he stitches spats, unfortunately he's only a poor worker, woe is me!"

"Bobeshi!" said the Bundist with passion, "then you must vote for the workers, for the 'Bund'. For the liberation of the working class - and not for the Zionist bourgeois and capitalists".

In 1919 Białystok also suffered great losses.

The famous rabbi, Reb Chaim Hertz Halpern, who was extremely popular because of his simplicity, devotion and love for the poor Jewish masses, died. He was known for truly sharing his bread with the poor Jews who needed help. He himself was far from being a rich man.

During his funeral procession, the streets of Białystok were besieged by thousands of people who accompanied him to his eternal rest.

Rabbi Chaim Hertz had been a "moyre-hoyroe" [rabbi, judge] in Białystok for over 50 years, and had taken over the position of rabbi after the death of Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever.

In addition, the Kобрiner Rabbi, Nachumke Kобрiner, the father-in-law of Rabbi Mair Shtsedrovitski [Szczedrowichi], who lived on Gumyener Street, next to the bridge over the Byale [Biała] River, died.

205

Rabbi Mair'ke was very popular in our family, and people did not hesitate to consult him, for he was a wise and beautiful Jew, with a pair of wise eyes, a fresh, rosy face, like a face painted by Yosef HaTsadek.

The well-known Hebrew poet, language teacher and city jester Menakhem-Mendel Davidzon, the father of the famous painter, a cheerful, good-natured and warm-hearted, popular Jew from the Davidzon-Radushkov painting company, also died.

Davidzon left behind *two dear children*, grandchildren of Menakhem-Mendl Davidzon, warm-hearted compatriots from Białystok.

There is Raoul Davidzon, a well-known, wealthy diamond dealer in Antwerp, who had studied at a Belgian university. He has a sweet, kind heart and helps institutions and individuals, as does the second grandchild, Dvoyre [Deborah] Kleyn-Davidzon, an intelligent Jewish daughter. She is the wife of Shimen Kleyn, a warm and popular Jew.

Dvoyre Kleyn-Davidzon also has a talent for Jewish music and heartfelt folk songs, which permeate the extended Davidzon family tree.

<sup>[1]</sup> District in Białystok with a large Jewish cemetery



Żydowska delegacja z rabinem Fajansem na czele  
wita marszałka Piłsudskiego na białostockiej stacji  
kolejowej w 1919 r.

*A Jewish delegation, headed by Rabbi Fajans, greets Marshal  
Piłsudski on the Białystoker railroad station in 1919.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://www.bialystok24.pl/ksiega-album-pamieci-gminy-zydowskiej-w-Bialymstoku-czesc-1.pdf)

## Types of "Breml" Storekeepers

Next to our cord and rope store was the shoe store of Berl Grinshteyn [Greenstein], a Jew with a brown, broad beard, good, gentle eyes, quick, hasty movements, and a constant smile on his lips. It was the confident smile of a God-fearing Jew who accepts everything out of love and unshakable faith in the God of Israel.

Not once did I see Berl get angry - except on Friday nights when he was the first to close his shoe store. Every few minutes he would come out of his shop, jerk his head up to the clock tower, and when he went back into his shop he would say to his wife, Mushke: "Well, we've worked enough for Yanek and Stashek, offering shoes! Mushke, it's time to close the hut! After all, the otherworld is also a world, and Shabbat is above all else!"

Mushke, a quiet, warm Jewish woman with a wise, feminine smile,

206

and the eyes of a quiet dove, herself thought that Berl was too pious, worried too much about the hereafter and too little about this world. But for the sake of family peace and to be a good, pious, Jewish daughter, she did not object, but quietly and calmly, as was her way, she closed the wooden doors, put the iron bars with the lock in front of them, and went with her husband, Berl, to receive the light-filled, joyful Shabbat.

But for a whole week Mushke and Berl were busy in the little shop, selling durable shoes to peasants and peasant women, such as boots with rubberized sides, high shoes with twenty buttons that had to be fastened skillfully with an iron hook, and Petersburg galoshes with the red star of the "treugolnik" [Russian triangle].

There were "balebatic" shoes for the rich class, which were soft shoes made of goose leather that would not bruise the corns of the rich, and there were very cheap, coarse shoes made of cowhide that was so hard that you could see fire in front of your eyes when you wore them. But, after all, they were worn by poor people, and poor people were used to suffering. Should the rich suffer?!

Berl and Mushke had an only son, Davidl. A noble and fine, quiet and good man, just like his parents. The saying "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" proved to be one hundred percent true in their case. David was always ready to help someone and do a favor. The kindness of Berl and Mushke was natural, coming from the bottom of their hearts and conviction: "על שלושה דברים העולם עומד" [The world stands on three things]<sup>[1]</sup> - and a kindness, a "gmiles-khesed", is one of those things.

If a shopkeeper walked around worried because he had to pay a bill tomorrow but had no income, Berl could smell it and called the

neighboring shopkeeper. And as was his way, he would quickly say to the Jew, "Foolish Jew, what are you worrying about? God is our Father. He creates life and gives everything for life!"

And turning to Mushke, he used to say: "Mushke, take out 50 zloty and give him a 'gmiles-khesed'!"

He would comfort his embarrassed neighbor and add, "Today you borrow from me, tomorrow I'll borrow from you. It's not the end of the world."

Although Berl knew that he didn't need to go to his neighbor for a "gmiles-khesed," because Berl had money, ran his business solidly, and had few expenses. And if he didn't have any money, he didn't think twice, but sent his wife to move the jewelry so that he could give a "gmiles-khesed".

207

Berl Grinshteyn had a brother, Shoyke. He also had a shoe shop on the "Bremlekh", but Shoyke was cut from a different cloth. He was the opposite of Berl.

While Berl was a quiet Jew who was happy with everything and did not chase after money, Shoyke was a very greedy person and in love with money. He ran large businesses, was an educated merchant, and was more devoted to people than to the Creator of the world. He was a solid trader, but when necessary, Shoyke could take high risks with thousands of zlotys. He traded with generosity and his skills as a merchant were well recognized.

It is strange how the same parents can have two children who represent two different worlds. They were two opposite people, not only inwardly but also outwardly, for Shoyke wore no beard and had a shaved face, did not rush to the Minkhe or Mayriv prayer, but left the "oybershtn" [the Lord] alone. In fact, one might think that Shoyke was happy that the "oybershte" left him alone and did not interfere with his business.

Across the street from Berl Grinshteyn's shoe store, next to Leon and Genye Dreyzin's haberdashery, was a paint store as big as four Breml stores combined. The owner of the paint store was Moyshe Bakhrakh, a modern Jew with bright, moving eyes, a mischievous smile, and a good, smart merchant's head on his shoulders. Moyshe, of medium height, with a graceful face and an easy tongue, was the joker of the "Bremlekh", but also the advisor in various cases when people needed to reflect.

Most of the time, Moyshe was busy in his shop, his eyes smeared with paint, wearing short boots and, in winter, a high "barashkenem" [lamb] hat. Moyshe was the favorite of the "Breml" because in his spare time, when he had no customers, he tried to amuse and cheer up the neighbors. His wife Esther, a small, beautiful, cultured woman, didn't particularly like her husband's tricks, but she didn't say anything and laughed along with her husband's tricks and funny remarks.

Esther was a "no-sayer. She was one of those cautious women who would not be tempted to do a favor for someone because something bad might come of it.

It is characteristic that people fall into two categories: Good people who almost always have a "yes" on their lips, even if they suffer from it later.

208

And there are bad people who have "no" on their lips. But they also suffer later, because bad people are rejected by everyone in hard times. Moyshke was a cheerful scoundrel. Although he was a rich Jew with a big business and a lot of money, and the owner of a big house on Angers Street, he kept himself simple and folksy. He was not arrogant and liked to play practical jokes.

He used to sneak into the shop of the old, God-fearing, somewhat naive Feygele Krinski, a Jewish woman in her sixties, and run out shouting that Feygele wanted to rape him. The pious, quiet Feygele would blush like a young girl, smile shyly, and reply:

"Go on, go! What can he think of! You know Moyshke and his jokes! He'd better go and pray to Minkhe!"

The shopkeepers of Breml would hold their stomachs with laughter and look at the naive, bashfully blushing Feygele.

That's why they used to "take revenge" on Moyshke when his shop was so full of customers that you couldn't even throw a pin in it. Gentile men and women were sent to his store to buy two pins for a penny. But Moyshke didn't have any pins to sell in his paint store. When he finished serving his customers, he would go out of his store, stand in the middle of the other stores, and call out loudly:

"Well, my benefactors! Who will get the commission for the buyers of the needles you sent to me?"

He laughed good-naturedly himself, and joined in the laughter of his neighboring shopkeepers on the Breml, for this time it was they who had played a trick on Moyshke.

But Moyshke had a fine, good character, and when a shopkeeper from Breml needed an endorsement for a bill, he turned to Moyshke, who, when he thought about it, knew only too well that his neighbor's signature was worthless, since he was in a difficult financial situation and no one knew if he would be able to pay. Nevertheless, Moyshke did not refuse, but gave the poor neighbor a bill, risking several thousand zloty, which was a considerable sum among the shopkeepers of the Breml.

On the corner of the Breml, next to Moyshke's paint shop, was a shoemaker's supply store, run with seriousness and dignity by a not-so-young girl with the surname Likhtenshteyn [Lichtenstein]. The girl did not fit in at all with the Breml. She was an intelligent, well-educated person with fine, noble manners.

She had some education and considered herself a fine woman, so she suffered a lot from having a shoemaker's accessories shop. This meant that she had to deal with cobblers, with makers of "paputshe" (cheap cloth shoes), and with simple, rough people with poor manners or rude peasants who came in with manure-stained boots and often treated her harshly.

She suffered a lot, but didn't show it. Later she married a noble, handsome man, a cloth manufacturer named Fridman. He often suffered from the crises in the textile industry and was glad that his wife had a secure livelihood. He often helped her in the shop. They were both a couple of noble, educated people. Although they were a little too stiff and didn't mix with the neighbors, they were respected and liked.

This was almost the basic characteristic of the Breml: there was not a bit of arrogance among the shopkeepers. Though some were rich and others bitterly poor, relations among them were cordial and friendly, even between shopkeepers who traded in the same goods and were close to each other.

The silent competition among them did not interfere with the friendship and cordiality among them, truly like a large, branched, and diverse family.

One of the most remarkable types on the Breml was the "Kulyavke". She had a rich haberdashery business, which she ran together with her daughter and son-in-law. The "Kulyavke" was a short, fat, broad Jewish woman who ran her business with enormous aggressiveness, an iron will, and a firm hand. Her daughter and son-in-law quietly followed her instructions. The daughter, a quiet, calm woman, and the son-in-law, a former student of the Talmud, were afraid of her gaze.

The sales system introduced by the "Kulyavke" was based on their firm character, which in America is formulated as follows: A person who doesn't take no for an answer. She always had to finish something and have the last word. She usually sat by the door of her store, while her daughter and son-in-law haggled with customers inside. They knew that a salesman would ask for twice the price, so they would offer half, shouting in Polish:

"A połowy nie chcesze? And you don't want half?" And the haggling continued. One shouted over the other.

The shopkeepers usually threw in Hebrew words among themselves: "A ma'ke dem orl, gib im bekhinem...andersh vil er nisht". [A plague on this goy, give him nothing at all, he doesn't want it any other way]. They would clap their hands and the customer would go to the door

as if he was leaving - a kind of political war of nerves in a primitive way. Most of the time, the customer really wanted to leave for the competition, having felt the goods and wasted the shopkeeper's time.

But not at the Kulyavke, not at Motye!

A customer could not leave the store without buying something. The daughter or son-in-law would wink at the "Kulyavke". If a customer wanted to leave the store without making a purchase, the "Kulyanke" who sat by the doors would pull her "kulye" [crutch] all the way in front of the door, not letting the customer out, but driving him back into the store. The customer would feel sick and usually buy something. In short, you didn't leave the kulyavke store empty-handed.

The "Kulyavke" was cold and stiff even to her neighbors. Maybe she wasn't a bad person, but she was a great despot. She couldn't tolerate me since I couldn't stand her, because shopkeepers with such business ethics deserve no respect. When she found out that I was studying English at night at Tachkemoni School, she crowned me with the name "Englishman". If she had called me "American," she would have foreseen it earlier.

She was also angry with me for standing up for Mushke Grinshteyn. The "Kulyavke" deliberately covered Mushke's shop with its door, which was next to hers. So I stood up for Mushke and pulled her small door over "Kulyavke's" big store. (The "Kulyavke" had a big shop and Mushke had a small shop).

But the "Kulyavke" usually waved her "kulye" [crutch] at me and told me to pull the door of her shop back over Mushke's door.

Mushke used to wink at me, telling me not to bother and not to pay any attention to her. However, my eternal revolt against injustice could not accept that the noble Mushke should submit to the malice of the despotic "Kulyavke".

But these were isolated cases. For the most part, the Breml shopkeepers lived in extraordinary unity.

211

They helped each other with interest-free loans and rejoiced together in the celebration of "brisn" [circumcisions], "tnoim" [betrothal contracts], and "khasenes" [weddings]. And they mourned together at family tragedies. This touching kindness, the mutual help, the sympathy in case of misfortune, the mutual interest in each other - all this bound the loyal and hearty Breml shopkeepers closely together in one big family.

This was so genial at that time, when all kinds of Jews were so mercilessly exterminated.

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Itkele was one of the most remarkable types among the shopkeepers of the Breml. She had a long, narrow shop where she sold haberdashery. But she was poor because she had no goods. But she had many children.

And so Itkele was always surrounded by children who were ragged and terribly hungry.

Itkele was a small woman, with a rather beautiful face, red cheeks and burning eyes that never rested. She was a devoted "yidishe mame" who was always running around worrying about how she was going to make a living for the week - with a dress, a pair of pants, and most of all, food for her "little birds" who were always getting between her feet. They were small, lively, spirited children with red cheeks like their mother's and voracious appetites like all poor people.

Itkele had a husband who helped her run the "business," "mishteyns gezogt" [alas!]. His name was Yisroel, and like the children, he was always running after Itkele. Because she was in charge and "wore the pants". The quiet Yisroel didn't mess with Itkele, because in the course of things he would have lost. He didn't make fun of her, but let her run the business, even though he didn't like many of the arrangements. Little Itkele did things that were not allowed and could only be excused by her concern for earning a living and a morsel of bread for her little "squirrels".

So Itkele waged a battle against the farmers from the village who came to the "Bremlekh" to sell something: pears, potatoes, and other produce from their gardens and fields. If a farmer came to sell a sack of apples and asked a high price for them, Itkele's roaring temper would boil over. As she stood next to the farmer with the sack of apples, she would summon her "hungry army," the children. And while she haggled with the farmer, she put an apple in each of her children's mouths.

212

When the farmer saw that Itkele gave each child an apple, he was sure that he had found the right customer who would certainly pay the price. So he became stubborn and would not budge from his price. Itkele would pluck the bitten pieces of apple out of the children's mouths and throw them back into the farmer's sack. Accompanied by the laughter of the shopkeepers of the Breml, who were already aware of Itkele's pranks, she would quickly move off.

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One of the best Breml types was the rich Fayvl Rogovski with his manufacturing business. He was also called "Fayvl the Heyzeriker" [the

hoarse one]. His son, a handsome, elegant, well-dressed fellow, was a friend of mine. Fayvl gave a lot of time to community activities, especially collecting money for the poor. Every Friday you could see the tall, honorable, well-dressed Fayvl with his neatly combed beard standing in the middle of the Breml, with his hand outstretched to the right and left, collecting money for poor Jews who didn't have enough to "make Shabbes" or for other needy poor people.

Fayvl Rogovski made a wonderful impression with his friendliness, his courteous manner, and the kind smile that hovered on his lips, and it was impossible to refuse him. Everyone gave him a handout. He was part of the Breml and a kind of "charity" himself. It was not easy for Fayvl to collect donations in the middle of the Breml every Friday of the week, regardless of the weather, because he was the owner of a large manufacturing shop and his wife desperately needed him in the shop. But she looked her husband in the eye and remained silent. Was she not supposed to follow her husband?

Like many Jews of that time, Fayvl believed that Judaism had no value without "mitsves" [mitsvot], without helping the poor, without a measure of mercy, without charity and benevolence. I do not believe that Fayvl, who was a modern Jew, did this with regard to the "hereafter", the "paradise", the "shor-haber" [the legendary ox of the hereafter], or the "levoysn" [Leviathan]. In his case, it was the call of his soul that led him to help people in need.

The "Bremlekh" were especially colorful and lively on a market day, which usually fell on a Christian holiday. Farmers from all the villages would arrive on [wide, flat] "drongove" carts or on carts covered with tarpaulins. They wore colored shirts, had tanned faces, and their boots were smeared with blue tan. With them came non-Jewish women in flowered headscarves, with fat, bloated bodies from the constant consumption of bread and potatoes.

213

They were full-bosomed, with sunburned, smiling faces and sparkling eyes. Many peasant women also came on foot along the highways from Kharoshtsh, Zabłudów, Suprasl, and Vashlikove. They marched barefoot, with their healthy village feet, their clothes rolled up over their knees and their shoes thrown over their shoulders. After all, shoes were a fortune to be spared - and there was more than one young peasant woman who married an old peasant for a pair of shoes.

When they came to Białystok, they wiped their bare feet and crawled into their shoes without socks, or they put "onitshes" (pieces of linen) over their feet and marched proudly into the city. They looked with childlike curiosity at the city life, at the tall, painted stone buildings, the cobblestone streets, the beautiful restaurants and cinemas. But most of all, they looked at the people. The men in good suits with goose leather ankle boots and the women in new dresses with high, shiny, laced goose leather shoes that were worth a fortune.

More than one Christian woman in the village crossed herself when she went into a house and turned on the tap. She would admire it and call out:

"Olya-Boga! Woda wylewa się ze ściany!" [My God! Water is pouring out of the wall!]

It was precisely this crowd of village "goyes and goyim" who made up most of the Breml's customers, except for the urban Christians from Białystok, who were shrewd, watchful people. They haggled, clapped their hands, offered half the price, thought they knew all the prices, and if they didn't get a bargain, they didn't buy.

And the Jewish Breml shopkeepers were sick to their stomachs with such city customers, who stood at the door, threatened to buy from someone else, and kept saying:

"Don't be so smart! We'll get it cheaper!"

On such a market day, when it was teeming with gentile ladies and men, "shiksas" and "shkotsem", dressed in wild, bright colors - mostly in home-woven dresses of drillich - the Breml was lit with life.

They [the shopkeepers] fought, screamed at the top of their lungs for customers, exaggerated as much as they could, tried to convince the customers that they were giving them the goods "za darom" (for free), and tried to shout over the others. This went on until one side got tired and gave in (usually the customer).

The farmer would then, with calloused hands, pull out the leather purse, which was usually as long as the Jewish "goles" [exile], and begin to count the copper coins.

214

They smelled of wagon grease, petroleum, or turpentine.

On a market day like this, pickpockets also scrounged. It often happened that a shopkeeper who was haggling with a peasant woman saw someone pull the knotted handkerchief [containing the coins] out of her basket, and the thief disappeared with the few pitiful pennies. All their work was in vain, for the gentile woman had nothing left with which to pay. But the shopkeepers were scared to death of the thieves and had to keep quiet for fear of revenge.

When the peasant woman went to pay, she noticed that someone had pulled out her knotted handkerchief, and she cried out:

"Matka Boska! Mother of God! Thieves have stolen from me!"

The thief usually gave the knotted handkerchief to another thief so that if he was caught, no stolen goods would be found on him.

On one of these market days, my mother worked very hard in her little shop, and when there was a lot of hustle and bustle, I helped her sell string and whip sticks. I didn't like to haggle, and I would give the "final" prices right away. And when the gentiles began to haggle, my patience and pride would burst, and I would give them a sharp reply. My poor mother would shake her head:

"Yankele, you'll never be a shopkeeper."

I would then wait until the hustle and bustle was over, leave the shop, and wander around the market to watch the bustling market life.

Once, as I was passing Lintseki's glass shop in the big market, I stopped beside the shop, overwhelmed by childhood memories. Lintseki was the son-in-law of our landlord on Khanaykes, Fisher, with whom we lived, and I was at his daughter's wedding.

I remember when Fisher's daughter, a small, fat person who spoke fast and mumbled, celebrated her wedding.

We live in Fisher's stone house on Khanaykes, on the corner opposite the "Khanaykover" Bes-Medresh. And there Mom cleans and washes me, combs my hair, puts on new pants, and we go somewhere.

"Where are we going?"

"To the wedding of our landlord Fisher's daughter."

I am dragged along by the hand. It is a long, very long journey for a boy of three or four.

Papa takes me in his arms, and I am curious: where are they taking me so late at night, when the sky is black and I should be going to sleep? Where are we going? And now we were approaching a big house, a long house (Piser's wedding hall) and many droskies.

215

I am led by the hand into a large hall with many chairs on both sides and many, many people. They are hugging and kissing. Why are they kissing? And they are crying! Why are they crying? Strange, these adults. My parents lead me to many people, strangers, I don't know them. They pinch my cheeks, kiss me, bend down and say something.

I don't understand what they say. And there is music - so much music and so much commotion.

People are drinking from glasses, eating cakes, and crying. I don't understand the adults. And there is more music - such commotion, such noise. And I am tired, terribly tired.

I can't take it anymore. I fall on the carpet, next to the bride's chair. Good people take me and put me under the big chair where the bride was sitting. I fall asleep, sleep soundly, and disappear into vague, blurry childhood dreams. I don't remember them, they are far away, far away from all the incomprehensible, big, grown-up people.

They are so big and incomprehensible!

<sup>[1]</sup> from Mishna Avot 1:2, "On three things the world stands: on the Torah, on the service and on acts of loving kindness".

### **Literature, Theater, Art and Romanticism in Białystok**

Białystok in 1919: Time does not stand still. It moves forward, but very slowly. When you are young, every day is big and long, full of news and different experiences. The blood is young. Life is big, hidden, interesting.

What gives today has so much beauty; and what will give tomorrow promises to be even more beautiful.

Białystok is Poland. Somehow you don't want to believe it. The Jewish youth of Białystok studied mostly in the "kheyder" [cheder], with private teachers, or in the modern "kheyder-mesukn" [the Reformed religious children's school], where Torah and secular subjects were taught. A smaller number of them studied in "yeshives" [Talmud schools]. Now these young people are already learning languages and arithmetic, and they are even well advanced in geometry. Some of the Białystok youth are already attending Polish High Schools and are even studying at Warsaw University or Polytechnic.

216

They are crossing borders and have already reached Switzerland, France and Belgium. It is a youth that aspires to a new world; a youth that grew up mostly with the Russian literature of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Tschechov, Turgenev, Pushkin, Nadson, Leonid Andreyev, Artsybashev, Gogol and others, whose works introduced a revolutionary view of man and life, of people and classes, of marriage and sexual relations, and created a turning point in terms of orientation within our everyday reality.

However, Russian literature is no longer a "bas-yekhde" [only daughter]; it is now in competition with two rivals: Yiddish and Hebrew literature-especially Yiddish.

During the four years of German occupation, Białystok threw itself into the arms of the Jewish National Awakening. Yiddish writers and poets were widely read, discussed and commented upon. The greatness of Russian literature is appreciated, but there is already a strong

connection to Yiddish literature, which is one's own "mama," a dear, sweet, close friend, with novels and stories about Jewish life, with poetic works and folk songs from one's own source, with the popular Yiddish classics:

Mendele Moykher Sforim, the singer of Jewish misery, of the hardworking crowd that transforms itself from an everyday poor "klyatshe" [old horse] into a Shabbat prince; Y.L. Peretz, the symbolist who enchants with his stories and brings light with his Chassidic passion; the pessimist Sh. Nomberg; the mystic Sh. An-Ski, who leads the reader into the mysterious spheres of a "Dybbuk"; David Bergelson with his novels and stories; Vendrov with his dramatic-satirical writings; the famous Hebrew-Yiddish writer Sh. Frug; the special national poet and lament writer Chaim Nachman Bialik; the master of folk novels and playwright Sholem Ash, and others.

The group of young people is also refreshed by the works of our own native Białystok poets and writers, the romantic Zusman Segalovitsh, the playwright Yosef Perelman, known under the pseudonym "Osip Dimov", and the warm-hearted storyteller, orator, pedagogue and preacher of social ideas Yakev [Jacob] Pat.

The brief description of the influence of Russian and Yiddish literature can help to give an idea of the spiritual and cultural state of the Białystok Jews in general, and of the Białystok Jewish youth in particular.

217

It offers a glimpse into the thought processes, aspirations, and dreams of a multilingual youth who intellectually and socially surpassed the average Jew and even the more religious and less educated Jewish youth of Poland at the time.

The youth of Białystok was more educated and less religious, bubbling over with new ideas and social and cultural activities.

Many people returned from Russia, including my uncle Meylekh Darshin's family.

My uncle himself had died in Ekaterinoslav, at the same time and in the same town as the famous Białystok "people's doctor" Khazanovitsh. My aunt returned, as well as my cousin's daughters and their children. These are the families of Gershon Rozental and Benyamin-Fayvl Shustitski: all with the same proud gait; beautiful children, both girls and boys, one prettier than the other - especially the daughters: Roze, Dore and Sashe. My cousin Khaye'tshe Shustitski also has two beautiful daughters, Tsilye and Sashe.

Białystok is filled with repatriates from Russia. They kiss each other in the streets and cry with joy. Thank God for the reunion!

The shops opened. The connection with "Crown Poland" grows. Warsaw merchants with long caftans, Chassidic hats with dark linen brims, long forelocks and even longer beards are a novelty in Białystok. Who has ever seen such long beards in Białystok?

Chassidim in shiny boots, as if they were varnished, with "zhvave" (lively) eyes full with Chassidic passion.

We are all Jews in some way, but there is a gulf between the Polish Jews and the Jews of Białystok. No, it's not that we are enemies, but these Chassidim with their boots, long belts and even longer kaftans are strange to us and somewhat separate.

But little by little we get closer. There are marriages between young men from Warsaw and pious girls from Białystok. My cousin Gitl-Rutshkes ("of the herring," as she is called in "Bremlekh") has a daughter. Her father is an ardent Chassid, and she is to be married to a fine, quiet young man from Warsaw, Avraham Vudke. He is a decent, pious, well-educated, intelligent and healthy man who is well suited for the trade. And I became a good friend of the pious fellow.

Even his family name is Polish: "Vudke" [vodka]. My acquaintance from "Surazer Bindl", Gitl Goldshteyn, a well-educated, intelligent girl, well-versed in Russian literature, is also getting married to a Warsaw boy, a handsome fellow with a pair of burning, lively eyes.

218

He is always joking and everyone likes him. These two talented Warsaw youths later became my closest supporters in carrying out a revolt, namely in splitting the "Traders Union" and founding the "First Small Traders Union" in Białystok.

Leon Dreyzin and his wife Genye were saved from the Great Destruction during the Second World War and are now respected leading members of the Parisian "Białystoker Landsmannschaft". Leon Dreyzin comes from a "mixed marriage".

His mother is a warm Jewish daughter from Poland, and his father is a loyal, good, devoted Jew from Lithuania.

In 1924 I served in Warsaw in the famous "Citadel" where the Tsarist rulers shot the Russian revolutionaries in the infamous "Tenth Pavilion" [X Pawilon Cytadeli Warszawskiej]. I was a clerk in the Army Government Office and often visited Leon Dreyzin's parents, who laughed at me, the "żołnierz Polski" [Polish soldier] with the child's face, the big military coat down to my feet and the Polish military hat with four points that had slipped down over my ears. As a joke, they used to call me "dos lyalkele" [the doll].

I already had a wife, and when I carried my little son in my arms, my friends joked: "A child carrying the other child.

\*

Białystok, a city of 60,000 Jews, was bursting with life. The four years of German occupation were already a thing of the past, and Polish order - or Polish disorder - was gradually being established.

The year 1919 arrived in Białystok with a Jewish population that spoke and wrote in five languages.

The rabbis, the Bes-Medresh Jews, the Chassidim, the "Yeshive-bokherim" [Talmud students] and simply "Hebrews" and Talmudists wrote Hebrew or interspersed their Yiddish letters with many Hebraisms and began their letters with the great, respectful, ", כבוד הרב הגדול והמורם המופלג" [in honor of the great, extraordinary and famous rabbi] and concluded it with "ברגשי כבוד" [with respect], even when the addressee with a high title was the sub-shames of a small Bes-Medresh.

This showed the good custom of mutual great respect among Jews.

The Jewish letters began with the well-known "ershtns kum ikh dir tsu meldn" [First, I would like to inform you] and ended with "fun dir dos zelbe zsu hern" [hoping to hear the same from you]... It was not only one Jewish woman reporting the death of her husband who included this phrase - according to custom <sup>[1]</sup> .

German and, above all, Russian also appeared prominently in the Białystok Babylonian jumble of languages.

219

With Jewish enthusiasm, the youth threw themselves into "Polish": Slovatski, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Przybyszewski, and especially the popular Polish writer from Grodno, Eliza Orzeszkowa, with her famous novel about Jewish life, "Meir Ezofovitsh", in which she portrays Jews in a very sympathetic tone <sup>[2]</sup> .

But the most important "mekhuteneste" <sup>[3]</sup> was the popular folk Yiddish with special Białystoker expressions such as:

"host shoyn farrukt dem tshont?" [Have you put in the cholent yet?]

"vos loyfstu arum vi a *pintipluschke*?" [Why are you walking around like a *flighty woman*?] - I have never heard this expression in any other city. <sup>[4]</sup>

I also heard in Khanaykes and on Surazer Street: "du opgesmalyeter yold" [you brain-burning fool] and "bist a yat fun yatnland" [you are a rascal from rascal-land].

Oy, the sweet Białystoker Yiddish!

<sup>[1]</sup> In fact, everyone who received the letter knew that it meant the extended phrase, even though it was not written out: "We are in good health. We hope to hear the same from you". It is worth mentioning here that in many cases the actual state of health was concealed, even if someone was very unwell, so as not to worry the recipient of the letter.

<sup>[2]</sup> the English translation is titled "Stranger in Our Midst", [Meir Ezofowicz](#)

<sup>[3]</sup> עַתְּנָתָה מִשְׁׁמָרָה = [female] in-law, wedding guest, humorously also a participant, sharer

<sup>[4]</sup> This really is an interesting neologism, which probably derives from the Polish word "fintifluszka", or the Russian "финтифлюшка", fintiflyushka. The word has different meanings, but can also mean "flighty, frivolous woman".

### **"Lines-Khoylim" and "Lines-Hatsedek" - Medical Aid and Jewish Culture**

Jewish culture, which had flourished during the German occupation, became even more dominant in Białystok. To such an extent that even institutions that had never had any connection with it and had no claim to be its leaders followed suit. Even those institutions that were based on philanthropy and medical aid, such as Lines-Khoylim [Linas-Cholim] and Lines-Hatsedek [Linas-Hatzedek], introduced cultural and theatrical departments that organized literary judgements, singing performances, declamations, recitations, and lectures on literary topics.

In the previous chapters I spoke about the wonderful help that the "Lines-Khoylim" provided to the sick Jews of Białystok. This "Lines-Khoylim" established a literary and dramatic circle in which I actively participated, although I was still so young.

The literary and dramatic circle of "Lines-Khoylim" performed, among other things, a one-act play of Artsibashev's "Jealousy," in which the intelligent Hebrew teacher Khane [Chana] Stolova appeared as Yelena Nikolayevna and I as Sergey Petrovitsh. But the play ended with a comic finale: after I had choked her with jealousy in the scene and she remained stretched out at full length (Keyn aynore! <sup>[1]</sup> She was a big girl!), the curtain could not be drawn.

220

And after lying there for about 5 minutes, she decided that there was no point in staying like that. To the general laughter of the "honored audience," she rose from the dead and shamefacedly walked off the stage.

We also performed a literary "mishpet" [judgement] of Nomberg's "Tsvishn Berg" [In the Mountains], which was a great success. It was watched with excitement over two Shabbat evenings in a packed hall, and was hotly debated in the city.

Aharon Berezinski - or Artshik, as we called him - was also a member of our literary-dramatic circle of "Lines-Khoylim" [Linas-Cholim].

Later he became co-editor of "Unzer Leben" [Our Life], where the versatile and talented Pesach Kaplan was the chief editor. By the way, Pesach Kaplan wrote under three pen names:

Political articles under his own name, social articles under the name "פֿוּקסְמָן" [Fuksman], and humorous, satirical essays and theater reviews under the name "אַרְגּוּס" [Argus] (the name of the Greek god with many eyes).

Chaim Visotski, who later became a well-known author of short stories, was also an active member of our circle.

His brother was Moyshe Visotski. He was a well-known journalist and orator and, together with Pesach Kaplan and Aharon Albek, the most important activist in the "Volkspartei" [People's Party], whose leader was Noah Prilutsky, the famous fighter for Jewish rights and member of the Sejm [Polish Parliament].

The circle also included the old Talmudist and writer Yisroel Lipski, who at the presidium table of the literary evenings looked like the grandfather of Jewish literature, Mendele Moykher Sforim. Other important members were Ekshteyn, an intelligent young man who later became the director of the famous Hebrew "Tachkemoni" school, and the talented young man Berkner, who wrote humorous stories on long rolls of paper that rolled like a "megile" [scroll] to the delight of the audience.

The only woman in our literary-dramatic circle was the aforementioned Khane [Chane] Stolova. Her sister, Feygl Stolova, had a shop with paper and writing utensils in the passage of "Varngolts" on Lipowa Street.

Chane Stolova was a highly intelligent girl, a Hebrew teacher in the "Tachkemoni". She spoke four languages: German, Hebrew, Russian and Polish.

She had a phenomenal memory and could quote by heart passages from Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin", Mickiewicz's "Dziady", Przybyszewski's "Homo Sapiens", as well as passages from the works of Chaim Nachman Bialik.

221

She was a remarkable girl. As the daughter of a Jew, a great scholar, she showed great interest in Talmudic studies from childhood. Her father encouraged her, and so she knew the "Tanakh", the "Gemara" [part of the Talmud], and the "Shulchan Aruch" [the most important collection of halachic laws]. In the "Tachkemoni" school, on the second floor, where there was a Bes-Medresh, Chane used to sneak in and get into a discussion with the bearded Jews about the Gemara or the religious laws of the Shulchan Aruch.

The teachers always admired her astuteness and were happy to have a pointed discussion with her, although they were a little uncomfortable being drawn into such a heated religious debate with the "fiery girl" with the brown, close-cropped hair.

The youth of the literary-dramatic circle "Lines-Khoylim" occupied a respected place in Jewish literature, in the press and in social life. The youth of Białystok, with their talent, their general education, their dreams for the future and their energy, could have made our beloved city famous all over the world, if the Hitler beast had not torn it up by the roots, along with the whole of Polish Jewry.

\*

Rozhanski Street, where the "Lines-Hatsedek" building was located, and which the Białystok Jews called "Lines-Hatsedek" Street, was a remarkable street. It was a concentration of different types of Białystok Jews, each of whom had a special character.

The Visotski family lived there, consisting of a father, the owner of a leather shop in Surazer Street, a mother, a dear Jewish "mame" who bustled around her husband - a Jew with a gray beard and the wise look of a Talmudic scholar - day and night, and their two sons, who played a prominent role in the literary and social life of Białystok. They were Moyshe and Khaim [Chaim] Visotski.

Moyshe Visotski, of medium height, chubby, with a sarcastic smile, was an employee of "Dos Naye Leben". He was a capable publicist, one of the most important activists of the "People's Party", a talented speaker, who spoke calmly and sedately in front of his audience, with logical arguments. He was on friendly terms with all organizations. I met him personally at a large meeting of the Traders Union.

222

There were about three hundred people at the meeting, and I and my friends Leon Dreizin and Avraham Vudke gave an enlightening speech about the need to form a Small Traders' Union.

Moyshe Visotski was delegated by the Traders' Union as an opponent. He had a thankless role, because most of the people at the meeting were small shopkeepers who trembled at the name " Traders' Union", which gave the tax authorities the impression that they were wholesalers.

They insisted on the name "Small Traders". Moyshe Visotski was a good orator, but his overconfidence and slightly disparaging tone toward other speakers greatly diminished the impact of his speech.

His younger brother, Khayim [Chaim] Visotski, was a close friend of mine whom I used to visit at home. At nine o'clock in the morning, when the hard-working Białystokers were already at work, Chaim Visotski would be lying in bed, eating the breakfast his faithful mother brought him.

Chaim was small in stature, with a large, round head. He had a lot of grace and a wise, philosophical, calm smile that always hovered on

his sympathetic face; a little joking, more mocking, but good-natured.

He was already publishing stories in "Dos Naye Leben" and later in Warsaw magazines. Chaim worked with me in the literary-dramatic circle "Lines-Khoylim", and we both competed for the heart of the talented and learned Chane Stolova. She liked Chaim very much, but my romanticism and my "polished language" of poetry captivated her more.

Two remarkable characters in the "Lines-Hatsedek Alley" were the father Moyshe Gdanski and his son.

Moyshe Gdanski, a small, compact Jew with the ingenious mind of a financier, made interest-bearing loans. His customers were poor shopkeepers who had to pay bills every day.

Later, Moyshe Gdanski would go to the shops and collect the monthly or weekly payments. Often the shopkeeper could not pay the debt, then he usually hid behind the empty boxes, in a back hiding place, and the "kremerke" [the shopkeeper's wife] put on a theatrical comedy that would make the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt envious.

With an innocent expression, the "kremerke" would say: "Oh, Mr. Gdanski, my husband has just gone out, he was actually asking after you. As soon as he comes back, he'll bring you the money!"

223

But Moyshe Gdanski was well aware of this little piece, and he knew that the "he'll bring you" would probably take about two weeks. So he looked at the "kremerke" with one eye closed and one eye open, as if to say: "I already know your excuses!"

Moyshe Gdanski had a son who was one of the most famous lawyers in Białystok. He was short, like his father, with curly, thick, dark, disheveled hair and always without a hat. He had a stern face with a shrewd, shady look. Father and son were two strong opposites, like a Jewish father with a gentile son. But the latter was a lawyer with a good Jewish heart, and he often defended poor clients for a paltry fee, sometimes even for free.

My friend Lozovski lived on Lines-Hatsedek Street. He had a yard where he and his family sold mortar and building materials. Lozovski and his sister looked very much alike. They were white-skinned, with freckles and reddish-blond hair, well-mannered, quiet and self-confident. They belonged to the "better" youth of Białystok, with good manners and education.

My cousin David Tzfas, who married Leah Mazurski, the daughter of the well-known ironmonger Mazurski from Lipowa Street, also lived in the same "Lines-Hatsedek Alley". (The brother of my cousin David Tzfas managed to escape; Leybl Tzfas now lives in England).

The activities of "Lines-Hatsedek" consisted of providing medical assistance to the needy, often giving financial assistance or free prescriptions, taking in the poor sick, and lending medical equipment to Jews who could not afford it.

As in the "Lines-Khoylim", many Jewish youths from Białystok volunteered to watch over the poor or lonely sick at night, to serve them, to give them prescriptions, a little soup or a glass of tea, to administer injections, and even to take out the chamber pot. This was done by fine young Jewish boys and girls, often well-educated and well-bred, who came from the better classes of Białystok.

One of their most energetic leaders was Lin - a tall, fat, agile man who was always in a hurry, neglected his own affairs, and often visited the "Lines-Hatsedek" in the middle of the day.

224

He was the owner of a men's hat shop - not far from Shoshke's tobacco shop and Ferder's butter shop - on Gumienna Street, opposite Khashe Goldshteyn's large shoe shop in Gonyondzki's house, where my parents lived with my uncle, the commission cloth seller, Meylekh Darshin.

The enthusiasm of the Białystoker youth to help the sick and the poor had been instilled in them in Jewish homes by their parents, who taught their children that without "mitsve" [mitzvah], without charity for the poor and the needy, Judaism is not Judaism. They knew that the meaning of Jewish life is for one Jew to help another.

I remember my childhood years when my Aunt Yakhte Darshin gave alms to the poor all Friday, and the door was never closed. She was a tall, plump woman with a beautifully shaped face and a stern look that hid a lot of kindness. Throughout the Friday, she usually went to the door every few minutes, to the "tsharnikhod," the door that led to "Rakhke the Shvartser's Alley," where there was a restaurant at the corner of Gumienna Street. This alley connected the first and second Gumienna streets.

Aunt Yakhte walked with firm steps, her key chain jingling at her waist, giving alms. I supported her well in her work, pulling her dress each time to inform her that a poor person was already there for alms.

Very often a poor woman would ask for alms "for two". When Aunt Yakhte was surprised that she was asking for alms "for two", the beggar used to show her through the window that there was a second beggar downstairs, but that unfortunately she was ill, had just given birth, and could not climb stairs. Then she would utter a curse.

"Madameshi, you shall have a good life, but may Rothschild have her 'riches'!"

Every year a banquet was held in the "Lines-Hatsedek" to honor the most loyal and devoted "Linists". They were praised all over Białystok and became famous as the most beautiful and kindest boys and girls. Their parents were very proud of them.

The two-storey building of "Lines-Hatsedek" had a dispensary and a large hall for social events or theatrical performances. Their dramatic circle was called "Gilyarina" [Gilorina], which was a combination of two words, גיליה ורינה, and its members consisted of the most intelligent young people of Białystok. In later years the circle gave performances in the "Lines-Hatsedek".

225

The proceeds of these evenings went to "Lines-Hatsedek" and often to other philanthropic institutions.

The main founders of the circle were: W. Bubrik and Y. Tapitser [Tapicer], who was an important militiaman during the German occupation - a kind of policeman for civilians to maintain peace and order in the city. He was very popular among the citizens of Białystok. The performances of "Gilyarina" [Gilorina] were of high quality because the participants were among the most educated youth of Białystok, although they were amateurs and not professionals. The literary part was conducted by Pesach Kaplan, the musical part by Ts. Berman <sup>[2]</sup>.

The "Lines-Hatsedek" was also the venue for the "mishpotim" [literary judgements] on famous works by Jewish writers, which were so popular in Białystok at that time.

I participated in the literary "mishpet" on "Motke Ganev" [The Thief Motke] by Sholem Ash.

The collaborator of "Dos Naye Leben," Y.G. Shteynsafir, was Motke's defense attorney, and I was the prosecutor.

Since I had not yet experienced life, I was a strict moralist. I did not take into account that Motke had grown up in poverty and that his mother had betrayed him right after his birth. By giving him a piece of sugar wrapped in a rag to suck on to stave off hunger instead of nourishing food, she had already made him a bitter member of society. However, I felt that Motke could have remained honest with more self-discipline.

Life in later years showed me that Motke's defense was correct and my approach was wrong.

At that time, Pesach Kaplan, Mendl Goldman (pseudonym: Menakhem Gan) and other prominent heads of the Białystoker press and organizations took part in the literary "mishpet".

Even then, I had a reputation as a good orator, but I still don't know where I, a young boy, got the audacity to appear as an opponent of

authors almost twice my age. My only explanation is the large number of admirers among the young, exalted girls who followed my speeches with moral ecstasy.

They were as naive as I was. Although I was well versed in literature in various languages, I resembled those young, enthusiastic female admirers who knew little about life.

But as soon as I and many dear boys and girls of Białystok entered life with a belief in goodness and nobility and with devotion to ideals, oh! how many disappointments

226

awaited me, just like the other pure, chaste, idealistic young people. My most terrible tragedy and disappointment about the species "man" was the murder of six million innocent victims of our Jewish martyr people, who were killed with such systematics, organization and planning by the German people.

This people had always considered itself a nation of high civilization, had always prided itself on its high education and even higher culture.

Life has taken away my faith in people and destroyed my belief that good is rewarded with good. Oy, how many tears life has brought me, in the sad past, in the disappointed "yesterday," and in the sad "today".

[<sup>1</sup>] עין ערע= This folkloric phrase is used to avert the "evil eye" and is usually translated as "No evil eye!" However, the phrase is also used jokingly or ironically, and can mean something like "All the best!"

[<sup>2</sup>] Probably not Ts. but Y. [Yakev, Jacob] Berman is meant.



Grupa członków Linas Hacedek, instytucji udzielającej pomocy ubogim chorym

*A group of members from the "Linas Hatzedek", the organization that provided medical assistance to the poor.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)



#### ZESPÓŁ TEATRU REWIOWEGO „GILORINA” PRZY LINAS HACEDEK W ROKU 1930

Od góry od prawej: Icht, Kowalewski, Knyszyński, Gelczyński (Ameryka), J. Gaz, Wileńczyk, Szulzinger, panna Szwec, Newadowski, Niedow (Nowy Jork), M. Gaz, Katenko, W. Bubrik (reżyser), N. Perelman (dyrektor), pani Zylbersztejn, M. Szwif (przewodniczący), panna Kopelman, J. Frid (wice przewodniczący), pani Abelow, J. Tapicer (reżyser), M. Berkman (kierownictwo muzyczne), pani Sybirczewa (w Ameryce), M. Goldman (w Rosji).

*The ensemble of the review theatre "Gilorina" of the "Linas Hatzedek" in 1930. – From right to left, top: Icht, Kowalewsky, Knishinsky, Gelchinsky (America), L. Gaz, Wilenchik, Shulsinger, Miss Shwetz, Newadowsky, Niedoff (New York), M. Gaz, Katenko, W. Bubrik (Associate Dramatic Director), N. Perelman (Director), Mrs. Silverstein, M. Schwiff (Chairman), Miss Kopelman, I. Fried (Vice-Chairman), Mrs. Abeloff, I. Topitzer (Associate Dramatic Director), M. Berkman (Musical Director), Nina Sibirtzewa (America), M. Goldman (Russia).*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)

## Art and Romanticism

After Białystok became a part of Poland - following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles - the city was quickly "polishized".

Nikolayevske Street [Vashlikover] was renamed to "Sienkiewicza" and German Street to "Kiliński[ego]". The latter housed the editorial office of "Dos Naye Leben" and the "Arbeter-Heym" [Worker's Home] of the S.S. Party (its program was socialist in character and included the struggle for Jewish national autonomy).

The large market square [and the "Bremlekh"] with the shops was named "Rynek Kościuszki" after the famous Polish general who fought in America under General Washington to drive the British out of America. Later he organized the Polish uprising against Russia.

The name of the famous Gorodskoy Sad [City Garden] was translated into Polish and became "Ogród Miejski".

The commercial Nay-Velt [New World] Street was also the street where the large "Nay-Velt Bes-Medresh" stood.

The factory owners Shmuel Tsitrin [Citrin] and his sons Semyon and Khayim worshipped here, as did their mother, the capable and energetic Mrs. Khavele (I knew her well, because we lived for four years in the front building of her yard, with the windows facing Gumienna Street).

Shmuel Tsitrin owned a large textile factory in Supraśl, with a spinning mill, a weaving mill, and a loom, and the local Christians called him "nasz król" (our king). The factory owner Khone Zilberblat and his sons Efraim, Moyshe, and Aleks [Alex] also prayed in the "Nay-Velt Bes-Medresh".

227

Moyshe and Alex Zilberblat were dear, close friends of my brother-in-law, the beautiful, ever-singing Nathan Kagan, with whom they studied at the "Aleksandrov" Gymnasium.

Also my father-in-law, the wise Jew and Talmud scholar Tsvi Hersh [Hirsh] Cohen - the capable bookkeeper of the great forest merchants V. Rozental and Mair and Tevl Krugman - was the constant prayer in the "Nay-Velt Bes-Medresh". From time to time, the versatile, talented editor Pesach Kaplan also visited the "Nay-Velt Bes-Medresh". He lived in a small wooden house near the Bes-Medresh.

Polonization in Białystok progressed rapidly, and young people immersed themselves in the novels of

- Henryk Sienkiewicz, especially "Quo Vadis," which describes the rise of Christianity and the beginning of the collapse of the "rotten, once mighty Roman Empire,
- Przybyszewski, especially "Homo Sapiens", a sharp criticism of the "rational" man,
- our neighbor, the Grodno writer Eliza Orzeszkowa, especially her sympathetic novel about Jewish life, "Meir Ezofovitsh".

I immersed myself in the Polish language and devoured such works as "Pan Tadeusz", "Dziady" and others.

Białystok, July 1919: The youth sings and blossoms. They receive everything easily. They passed the years of the German occupation and jumped over to the new Polish order. This young life is beautiful and will be even more beautiful. How could it be otherwise? Fantastic illusions about the future are woven. They want to sing the famous song: "Oy, Mame, I'm in love! I could embrace the whole world and squeeze it to me...".

Well, I am in love with life and all the people around me. My life is full of literature, art, theater, politics and, above all, sweet romance.

I come to the "Arbeter-Heym" in Kilinsky [Kilińskiego] Street and listen to the lectures of the S.S. group on the ideas of Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle and Friedrich Engels.

The main speakers: Yisroel Geyst [Israel Geist], the educated intellectual with his beautiful speech, with the hard, Russian "r". Yakev Pat [Jacob Pat], the writer, orator and educator, who speaks with a confident tone about the coming happy time in which a new world will be built with justice and equality for the working masses and nations in general.

And now I'm in the Zionist restaurant "Beth Am Zion" on Market Street, across from Sienkewicza Street.

228

I listen to the pale young man with the bright, enthusiastic eyes, Khaykl [Chaike] Aldok, who speaks of the heroic "khalutsim" [pioneers], the heroic "shomrim" [guardians] who ride their horses in Palestine to guard the Jewish kibbutzim and colonies and dream of a country of their own, and of the "Bilu" [an acronym for "House of Jacob, let us go up"] movement.

I also listen to the analytical-logical speech of the red-haired Khmyelnik [Chmielnik], the leader of Poale Zion. He talks about their theoretician, Ber Borokhov, and justifies the synthesis of Zionism and socialism - the two components of Poale Zionism.

I also visit the activities of the Zionist youth association "Hashachar", where my friend Pomerants is the main activist. Pomerants, the son of a baker on Potshtove [Yurovtser] Street, is very well-read, a warm-hearted Jew and an enthusiastic Zionist. He believes that the time is not far off when the Jews will have their own country.

But I've also been interested in art and painting since I spent years at the Remeslenoye [Artisans' School], where I learned art and painting under the supervision of the chubby, blond Abukov with his fine manners.

The two talented students Utkes and Veynshteyn [Weinstein] also studied there.

Utkes was the son of a poor glazier who had an older brother who was a painter and had studied at the "Betzalel" art school in Palestine. Veynshteyn was a pleasant, lively boy, always ready for a joke. On the street I often met the famous painter Razanetski, the son of a poor cheder teacher, who was a talented painter of still lifes and realistic art.

He was also a talented portraitist.

My close friend, with whom I share a love of painting, is Avroml [Abraham'l] Berk, the son of an educated teacher in Mazur's Street. (His father lived from private lessons and later also worked in "Dos Naye Leben").

I often visit my friend Berk and connect with him and his home, with his intelligent parents with their refined manners. There is a kind of thoughtful silence in the apartment, and my friend Berk is a product of this upbringing.

We talk mainly about the world of art, painting, in which he is interested and for which he has a deep understanding.

We are particularly interested in "medium-aged" Italian, Dutch, Belgian and French painters from the 14th to the 18th century. The years of the greatest flowering of realistic art painting were devoted mainly to religious, Christian motifs.

229

However, galleries with portraits of the noble aristocrats of the time or with female nudity related to Greek mythology, in a wonderful artistic form of natural, physical vitality that breathes with real life, so that it seems you can touch the warm, rosy-skinned, pulsating bodies, also played an important role.

The greatest painters of this era were Leonardo da Vinci, a versatile talent who, in addition to paintings and sculptures, also created the first plan (blueprint) of a future airplane, as well as other famous painters such as Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Van Gogh, Cezanne and others who painted those world-famous paintings that are in the world's greatest museums, such as:

"Mona Lisa" (Gioconda), "The Last Supper", "Titus", "Portrait of Rembrandt's Little Boy" (sold in London in 1966 for the sum of \$2,400,000 to the famous millionaire and art collector Norton Simon), "The Virgin and Child", "Amor and Venus" and other art paintings and sculptures.

Berk and I both fantasized about visiting the Louvre in Paris and Madame Tussaud's in London, with sculptures of famous men and women from around the world, including sculptures of the greatest criminals, such as Jack the Ripper - the London mass murderer of many prostitutes.

My striving for beauty, poetry and youthful dreams that life has shattered is accompanied by a Mephistophelean laugh that bitterly mocks the fantasies of youth.

Sometimes it seems to me that I am as old as our planet "Earth" - about three or four trillion years; sometimes I am full of sweet tenderness and longing for love, as at the beginning of my youth, and I remember the words of our great composer and folk singer Mordechai Gebirtig:

"Do not look at my gray head, my heart is still young,  
as it was many years ago... for from spring to winter is a cat's leap... "[from the Yiddish song "Khulyet, Khulyet Kinderlekh"].

September 1919. A new world stood before me, full of novelty, curiosity, and stirring experiences. Every part of the world's beauty attracted me. The romantic feelings of youth could not be satisfied, and literature and art were the greatest source of feelings and inexhaustible beauty.

I jumped from one field of art to another like a young butterfly drunk with youth, fluttering happily from one colorful flower to another.

230

During my four years in the Remeslenoye and later with my friend Avroml Berk, I absorbed the beauty of art painting. When I walked through the streets of Białystok and watched people passing by, I always measured them with a painter's eye, seeing contours, shadows, perspective, color nuances, proportions, features and lines of houses, trees, plants and the sky.

I was often fascinated by the contours of female physical beauty.

I would stop for a long time and gaze back at a girl, her beautifully carved face with a Greek nose, her attractive, beautiful, magnetic eyes with sparkling black eyeballs, and her thick hair braided back in the Białystok fashion of the time.

As the girl walked in her high shoes, closed with 12 buttons, her curvaceous, graceful body swayed with such self-confidence that I thought after a minute she would angrily throw a few words of the proud Białystoker "barishnyes" [ladies] at me.

If you tried to "bump into" them to make contact and arrange a "rantke" (from the French word for "rendezvous"), they would usually reply proudly with their heads held high: "Nakhal! Impudent man! I don't mix with street acquaintances." She would turn and walk away. [But] at that time one could still "redn tsum lomp" <sup>[1]</sup>, as they used to say in Białystok.

<sup>[1]</sup> redn tsum lomp= fall on deaf ears; a warning remains unheard. In this case, it is ironically expressed that the young man ignored the young lady's rejection and continued to court her.



### UL. NIEMIECKA (Kilińskiego)

Tak nazywana, choć Niemca można by tam było szukać ze świeczką. Ulica zaczynała się przy polskim kościele i ciągnęła się do ogrodu miejskiego.

*Niemiecke Street – also known as the German Street. Began at the church and run to the city garden. The editorial offices of "Our Life" and the famous "Palace Theatre" were located there.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)

## Jewish Theater

Well, I was attracted to a new field of art, and that was theater.

I knew very little about Jewish theater. I knew plays by world-famous writers in other languages, such as Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," Leonid Andreyev's "Anathema," Strindberg's "The Father," Artsybashev's "Jealousy," Shakespeare's "Shylock" (which provoked a heated discussion about whether it was an anti-Semitic work), Schiller's "The Robbers," Molière's "The Miser," and others.

But Jewish theater was little known to me, and I was tremendously drawn to Jewish theater, which is so closely associated with Jewish literature.

It was begun to select local talents for the theater arts, who began as "lubityels" (amateurs) and ended as "professionals".

231

Some of them were somewhere between amateurs and professionals, as they had not yet established a reputation as talented actors. Most of them I knew personally. As for the others, I followed their careers with interest, being as always "a seer but invisible" <sup>[1]</sup> to their performances.

One of them, who was a good mimic and a talented actor, was Abraham Feylet, a former weaver.

He was good in comic roles as well as in "life portraits", but his crowning role was "Bobe Yakhne", the role of the witch in the operetta "The Sorceress" by Abraham Goldfaden.

When Feylet appeared on the stage in a crooked posture with a stick in his hand - dressed as an old, repulsive witch in a colorful skirt, with a nose like a shofar and wild eyes - and imitated an old, ugly woman with a wild, devilish look, limping and singing seductively in a screeching woman's voice to the wandering orphan, "Come, come, come to me, come home to me," the whole hall of the Palace Theater trembled.

The old, damned witch with her repulsive figure was so real that no one could have known that the cheerful, funny Avraham Filet was inside her. All Białystok sang the song of the Bobe Yakhne:

"Come, come, come to me, come home to me..."

A talented boy I knew from the "Remeslenoye" was Y. Glogovski. He was slim and slender and a great connoisseur of Russian and Jewish literature. My brother David used to exchange books with him for reading. Glogovski used to direct, act and declaim at the Purim and Chanuka evenings organized by "Remeslenoye" twice a year.

He was talented in many ways, but later he did not use his theatrical experience professionally, which was a great pity, because he showed his great talent in the performances he directed and acted in. I saw him in the performances of Sholem-Aleykhen's "The Get", "A Doctor a Soykher", "Mazl-Tov" and others, in which he excelled.

Two theatrical amateurs with whom I had studied in the "Talmetoyre" (which was named after Zeev Visotski, and where Pesach Kaplan, in the same courtyard and administration as the Remeslenoye, was my Hebrew teacher):

Y. Kamen and Sholem Shvarts. Later I often saw Sholem Shvarts play; he became a professional actor in Białystok.

232

He was a gifted actor. I can still see him playing the role of "Khatskl Drakhme" in a play [God, Man and Devil] by Jacob Gordin, in which he artfully portrayed the witty Jew soaking his tired feet in water, groaning with pleasure as he felt the taste of soaking his feet in cream. The characters he played were Jewish types with all the flourishes and wrinkles.

Talented showmen were also selected in the field of artistic recitation and theater criticism. One of them was Mendl Goldman, a versatile talent in declamation and recitation, as well as a great literary talent. He later became co-editor of "Dos Naye Leben" under the direction of Pesach Kaplan, as well as a theater critic and poet under the name: Menachem G-n [Gan].

Mair Schvarts was a talented actor who enjoyed great success with his lively, touching and comic one-act plays, in which he often acted as well.

The multi-talented Pesach Kaplan also had a relationship with the arts. He was the director of the Jewish Art Society, composed music and knew a lot about the theater. His theater reviews in "Dos Naye Leben", which he wrote under the name "Argus", were interesting and instructive, and were much appreciated in the world of Białystok theater enthusiasts.

And among them was Ester Zevkina, who was a professional actress. She was a girl with a beautiful, flexible body, a lovely, graceful face and a talent for singing. She was excellent in soubrette roles and good in "life portraits". She started as an amateur. She was full of enthusiasm, full of life. I can still see her in a soubrette role at the Palace Theater, jumping on the stage in breeches with a whip in her hand,

happily singing, "I am Khantshe from America". It burned under her feet.

In Białystok you didn't often see actresses wearing pants, especially when it came to Jews. In those days only men wore pants...

Ester Zevkina had many qualities of a good actress: A beautiful, slender body, a beautifully carved, nobly shaped face, a lot of vitality, a beautiful voice and a sufficient ability to sing. Ester Zevkina even rode to America in her breeches...

Her future husband, Yisroel Barenboym, who had also started as an amateur in Białystok, also became a professional actor. He came from the aristocratic family of Kadel Barenboym, who owned a large wallpaper shop.

233

It was located at the corner of Nikolayevske and Lipowa Streets, opposite the "Shisl" [Bowl], and had large columns in the front.

Barenboym's family was not happy that their handsome, educated Yisroel had become an "aktyorshtshik". But to his credit, Yisroel Barenboym was an intelligent actor, with an education and understanding of the literary plays of the better repertoire. He also had a good voice for singing. He was a tall and handsome man, with a manly appearance, thick hair, fine stage manners, self-confidence, no cheap jokes, and was one of the actors of the better theatrical class.

He married the beautiful Ester Zevkina. (In later years, when I was a theater critic and writer in Belgium, I saw her play in Antwerp, at the Amegang Theater).

In the summer of 1917 in Supraśl I met by chance the amateur actor Avigdor Peker, who later became a professional actor.

He came from the intelligent Pekers' family, the pharmacists who had their pharmacy on Yatke Street, at the corner of Lipowa Street.

Avigdor Peker was a "man" in the full sense of the word. Of medium height, with broad shoulders, the strong shoulders of a "prizefighter", with thick, always long hair. With his clearly accented baritone voice, he spoke clearly and distinctly, with a sharp diction. He was born for the theater, and he quickly became a respected actor. With his perpetual cheerfulness and jocularity, with his perfect Yiddish, he became a good actor, a good and capable reciter and declaimer.

As a fiery Don Juan, but with good manners, he even had great success with women.

Later he reappeared in America as an actor and radio commentator, also appearing at social events under the name Viktor Packer.

One of the most talented actors and singers from Białystok was Yudl Grinhoyz. Nature had given him everything that such a great talent should have: a beautiful stature, a slender body, a noble, thoughtful expression on his face, beautiful, thick, curly, shiny black hair, a clear,

touching voice, and confident behavior on stage. Yudl Grinhoyz was also a talented director who contributed a lot to the development of young talents in Białystok.

His sister Shifre Grinhoyz rarely acted and was not famous.

234

I can still see Yudl Grinhoyz in his crowning role as the majestic, grizzled prophet Jeremiah in the operetta "Khurbn Yerusholayim" [Destruction of Jerusalem]. Dressed in a long white tunic that reached down to his feet, just like the prophets of the time, he sang his bitter lament:

„Oy, azoy zogt Got itst,  
Ikh ken dikh nisht merh,  
Bist nisht mer mayn kind,  
Far dayne zind...far dayne zind...“.

[Oy, this is what God is saying now,  
I don't know you anymore,  
You are no longer my child,  
Because of your sins... because of your sins...].

[1] רואה ואינו נראה = In rabbinical literature, this is a pseudonym for God, who sees everything but is not seen; here, of course, it is meant ironically.



#### KÓŁKO DRAMATYCZNE „SZTUKA ŻYDOWSKA” W BIAŁYMSTOKU, W ROKU 1908

Od prawej do lewej siedzą: nieznany, Sara Pat [Sarah Pat] (dziś w Chicago), Rachela Slapak (żona Meira Szwarcera, Nowy Jork), panna Besel, między nimi Herszel Grochowski [Grochowsky] (dziś kantor w Australii), Abramel Fajlet, Mulie Chwat z żoną (dawniej Luba Sloan). Stoją: Abraham Sznajder (dziś w Anglii), Mosze Szwif, panna Kokoszka, Rywe Zakhajm, Ch. Zilbersztejn, dyrektor banku, Judel Grinhojc, pani Janowska, Jefim Bacer i Jakow Tapicer.

*Dramatic group, "Jewish Art," in Bialystok in 1908. – Seated, right to left: unidentified, Sarah Pat (now in Chicago), Rachel Slapak (Mrs. Meyer Schwartz, New York), Miss Besil, between them H. Grochowsky (now a Cantor in Australia), Abraham Paylet, M. Chwat and his wife (the former Luba Sloan). Standing: Abraham Schneider (now in England), M. Shwiff, Miss Kokoszka, Riva Zakhajm, H. Silverstein, Bank Director; Yudel Greenhaus, Miss Yanowsky, Yeffim Batzer and Jacob Topitzer.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)



*"Habimah" in 1912 presenting "Hear, Oh Israel!". First row, right: I. Kamen and Sh. Schwartz. Second row: I. Greenhouse, Nachum Zemach, Sarah Pat, Nitzberg; third row: Paylet, (?), Groschowsky and I. Glagowsky.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](http://www.ksiegabialystok.com/ksiega-album-pamieci-gminy-zydowskiej-w-Bialymstoku-czesc-1.pdf)



KÓŁKO DRAMATYCZNE PRZY STOWARZYSZENIU STUDENTÓW  
W ROKU 1928

*Dramatic Circle of the Students' Society, 1928.*

Od prawej:  
Pierwszy rząd: J. Fiszer, J. Grinholz,  
Sz. Serlin, J. Serlin, Z. Kagan.  
Drugi rząd: M. Lewin, N. Klemen-  
tynowski, L. Cytron  
Ostatni rząd, trzeci: Gershuni.

*Right to left, first row: I. Fisher,  
I. Greenhaus, S. Serlin, I. Serlin,  
Z. Kagan. Second row: M. Lewine,  
N. Klementinovsky, L. Citron. Last row,  
third from right: Gershuni.*

Source: [Księga-album-pamięci-gminy-żydowskiej-w-Białymstoku-część-1.pdf](#)

## The Omens of the Approaching Storm

Białystok, November-December 1919.

Relations between the Polish government and the Jews of Białystok deteriorate; beards are pulled out and cut off; Jews are beaten on trains and thrown out of windows.

Among the excesses (pogroms), the "Halertshikes", the Polish soldiers led by General [Józef] Haller from Poznań, stand out. The Polish slogan "Swój do swego" (Our own for our own) is an open propaganda for the Christians to boycott Jewish merchants and shopkeepers.

The Polish political parties were engaged in a bitter struggle. The leading governing party is Pilsudski's former party, the P.P.S. (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna), which includes famous socialist Jews such as:  
Liberman, Diamand, Pozner.

The most reactionary Polish party is the Narodowa Demokracja, known as "Endekes", and it is more than any other bitterly anti-Semitic. The N.P.R. (Narodowa Partia Robotnicza) is also a workers' party, but of the right wing and decidedly anti-Semitic.

The Polish Peasant Party, under the leadership of Witos, is an unclear party with no clearly defined program and is more centrist.

\*

The Jews of Białystok, educated to self-respect and pride, are unable to tolerate the insulting attitude of the Polish rulers,

235

government officials, and [non-Jewish] Poles in general toward the Jews of the city.

Especially the proud, educated Jewish youth, i.e. the former students of such higher educational institutions as the Real School, the Commercial School, the Alexandrov Gymnasium, the Lakhane's Female Gymnasium opposite the prison, and the "Gorodskoye" [Municipal School], are unable to do so. But also the youth of Middle Schools such as Yafe's School, Remeslenoye and Khvoles' and Bishkovitshe's Middle Schools.

But also students of former smaller educational institutions, such as Babitski's, Menakhovski's and Fridman's, make Poles feel that they demand respect for themselves, and demonstratively speak loudly in Russian on Shabbat or holiday walks in the streets: On Nikolayevske (changed to Sienkiewicza), Aleksandrovske (Mickiewicza), German Street (Kiliński[ego]), on the Market Square with the "Bremlekh", in the Center (Rynek Kościuszki). Also in the City Garden (Ogród Miejski) or in Tsertl's Forest, Park Roskosh [Rozkosz] and others.

Although the talented, intelligent Jewish youth quickly mastered the Polish language and read the works of Henryk Sienkiewicz, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and others, they avoided using Polish at home and in the streets.

The revived Polish state already harbored ambitions of territorial conquest and was "sharpening its teeth" on territories bordering Poland, such as Lithuania and Belarus. Russia was preoccupied with its own civil war. Poland was intoxicated by its successes as a newly emerging state and gripped by "megalomania".

Chauvinist-nationalist rumors spread throughout Poland, based on the fact that Poland had been liberated by the Treaty of Versailles on November 11, 1918, with the active participation of the university professor and then American President Woodrow Wilson, the initiator of the "Fourteen Points" for the liberation and self-determination of peoples through democratic elections.

In fact, the tract included our hometown of Białystok in the new Polish state, and its date became a "black day" for our dear home in the grip of the Polish rulers.

It was precisely this tract that led to the rise of murderous, bloodthirsty Nazism, to the annihilation of Polish Jewry and the destruction of Białystok, to the extermination of sixty thousand Białystok Jews in German killing factories, crematoria and gas chambers.

236

### **The Eulogy on Białystok**

The Cultural Circle at the Club of Białystoker Friends, New York, is releasing the album of pictures and ghetto songs from Białystok with a special purpose: to leave forever a memory of the mourning songs that were created and sung in the face of death and on the walk to the final path.

The pictures reflect two leitmotifs: Białystok as it looked in peaceful, normal times before the destruction, and Białystok during and after

the ghetto era, as one big Jewish cemetery, with wiped off streets, burnt black brick ruins, a field of a dead cemetery.

The song notes and some of the pictures were collected by our dear, kind-hearted compatriot Yitskhok [Isaac] Ribalovski, who was miraculously saved and is now with us in New York, and who already published such an album once in Paris, but in a small, limited form.

We received some of the images from our esteemed compatriot, community activist and director of the Białystok Center, friend David Sohn.

Our foreword must contain a brief chronological picture of the tragic, bloody events of the destruction of our dear Białystok, deeply rooted in our hearts, the cradle of our birth, the city of our childhood fantasies and youthful dreams.

And here is its sad sequence of tragic dates, which must forever remain engraved in the memory of every Białystoker, as his eulogy and his Kaddish.

These are the dates of February 7 and August 16, which were proclaimed as holy "yortsaytn" at the first convention in Białystok.

### **The Burning to Death of More than a Thousand Jews in the Shul on June 27, 1941 <sup>[1]</sup>**

On 27 June 1941 the murderous Nazis marched into Białystok and on the same day attacked the Jews living around the Great [Wielka] Synagogue. They murdered Jews with revolvers and hand grenades, dragged over a thousand Jews from their homes and locked them in the synagogue, which they set on fire.

237

In the hellfire of the holy shul, about a thousand martyrs perished in terrible agony.

Together with the Jews murdered in the surrounding districts, over 1500 martyrs were counted on the day of 27 June.

### **The "Donershtike" [The Thursday Ones]**

On 10 July 1941, hundreds of men were arrested in the streets, taken from Petrashe [a village near Białystok] on the way to Vashlikove, shot and buried in previously dug pits. This was confirmed by the Christians who lived near the village and heard the last, heart-rending

cries of the murdered Jews.

### **The "Shabesdike" [The Shabbat Ones]**

On 12 July 1941, the Germans blockaded a number of streets in Białystok, arrested about five thousand Jewish men and demanded a ransom from the Judenrat. The Jewish population went to great lengths to collect gold, money, furs and expensive objects and transported everything by wagon to the Judenrat, which handed it over to the Germans. The Germans take the "contribution" and promise to release the men, but the Jews never return. We later learn that the unfortunate victims were murdered in Petrashe.

### **The first liquidations - from 5 to 14 February 1943**

On 5 February 1943, the Germans surrounded the entire area of Białystok and arrested twelve thousand Jews with the false promise that they would be sent to work. They were deported to Auschwitz, where they were burned in crematoria. About a thousand Jews were murdered in the streets and houses of Białystok with German revolvers and hand grenades.

In all, about 13,000 Jewish lives were lost.

Yitzkhok [Isaac] Malmed, who lived in Gumienna Street, resisted heroically.

238

He poured "vitryol" [sulphuric acid] into the face of a German officer who came [to the apartment] to deport Jews, cauterising his eyes. As punishment, a hundred Jews from the surrounding streets were shot in Prager's Garden and Malmed was hanged in Kupiecka Street. The hero's last words were:

"My name will survive you, you doggish murderers!"

His prophecy was fulfilled.

Here in Białystok today there is a street named after Isaac Malmed [Ulica Icchoka Malmeda].

And this is the former Gumienna Street.

### **16 August 1943 - the Final and Complete Liquidation of the Białystoker Ghetto**

On 16 August 1943, at 12 o'clock at night, the whole of Białystok was surrounded by the Germans. At 9 o'clock in the morning the last thirty thousand or so remaining Jews were gathered at the assembly point and deported to Auschwitz and Majdanek. The old and the sick were shot on the way. Twelve hundred children were sent to Theresienstadt and then to the crematoria at Majdanek.

About two thousand Jews from Białystok rose in armed resistance, fought heroically and tenaciously, with a sense of revenge, and killed many German murderers. Most of our heroes died in unequal battles. A small number fled to the forests and joined the partisans in the underground struggle against the most bloodthirsty murderers the world has ever known: the doggish, bloodthirsty, murderous Nazi Germans.

This is how Białystok fell!

\*

We write these words with reverence.

We feel as if we were in Białystok, in the destroyed, burnt down Białystok;  
and thousands of souls of our loved ones, with whom we spent our childhood in our mothers' homes, are wafting in the air.

239

And in the dead silence of a large, devastated cemetery - the whole of Białystok - we stand in silent, devout mourning and unite ourselves with them, with the thousands of dead souls.

We do not see them, but we feel them around us and converse with them in the silent language of deep reverence for their martyrdom, in the language of grief and mourning.

We hear the lamentations of the martyrs in their last hours of life, wafting silently in the silence of the cemetery, speaking to us with a quiet, imploring prayer:

***Do not forget our deaths, the deaths of your 60,000 Białystoker parents, brothers, sisters, loved ones and families who lived in your Białystok.***

***Generations pass.***

***May the soil of Białystok, soaked with our blood, be a shrill reminder of the bloody German atrocities!***

***Remember us!***

***Do not forget us!***

***Keep us in your memory!***

This is the last silent testament of our dead, their last silent will, which we fulfill in a small way by publishing this album of pictures and songs, compiled as a silent eulogy and a humble Kaddish.

Honor to their memory!

New York, February 1948

<sup>[1]</sup> The events described here are only briefly outlined. More detailed information can be found in [Białystok and its Destruction](#), in the [Pinkos Białystok Yizkor Book \(Poland\)](#) or in [The Białystoker memorial book](#).

## "Veynen Vintn" [Crying Winds]

Crying winds, winds that cry  
Over Bialstoker roofs,  
Tearing down chimneys, throwing tiles  
Over black holes of soot.

From Chanajkes to Bojary  
The wind whistles a weeping tune,  
Laments a melancholy Kaddish  
For the Bialystoker Jew.

Weeping over graves, pleading over graves  
Of our brothers and sisters,  
Pain cries out its lamentations,  
That destruction is the greatest.

From Shoseyne to Zverinyets  
The wind touches just blackened walls,  
Shaking itself in furious dread  
No longer recognizing its own town.

Wafting souls, spirits float  
over the cemetery shtot,  
while their suffocated moans  
are sent out to the great God.

From the Pyaskes to Gumienna  
The wind squalls like a raging beast,  
As if it were its will to tear  
The whole world into little pieces. <sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup>Partly free translation



The Wielka [Great] Synagogue, Source: Tomek Wiśniewski, collection of MIEJSCE, The Jewish Place in Bialystok, [Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu](#)