Around the World in 90 Years





The Life Story of Goldy Hager

Around the World in 90 Years



Goldy Hager

With

Nechamie Margolis

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Around the World in Ninety Years

Introduction

My grandfather, R. Yisroel Duvid Katz, cried as the workers laid the cornerstone in the apartment building he built in our hometown of Sátoraljaújhely, Hungary. His tears wet the ground as he said Tehillim, praying that he should be successful in the home he built, the building that became my home during my short childhood. My mother stood next to him.

Decades later, she recounted the story. "The earth shimmered as the tears soaked the land," she told me.

Nothing remains of that house today, but I am still here to tell the story.

Over the years I cried enough to melt my own cornerstone had I had one. Instead, I have this book, shards of my life, pieces glued together in a vessel that has one purpose – that my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and beyond learn about those who came before them and hold close to their hearts the souls that departed, and give them life for generations to come.

As I enter the tenth decade of my life, I thank Hashem for the tears I shed, the prayers I whispered for my children to walk in His ways, to grow up as beautifully as they did, to create the families which give me so much nachas today.

At my age, I sometimes feel that I've cried my allotment of tears. These days I just daven. Daven that you, reading this book, will be a proud Jew, always giving thanks for the good in your life, and will believe and love Hashem with all your heart and soul. I don't write this book out of a sense of importance of my own life. My goal is to inspire future generations to get closer to Hashem, to work on their middos, to care for one another and to always have hakaras hatov.

Seder Hayom comments on the words of the *Mishna*, *"Ben Tishim Leshuach,"* that at such an age, it's our duty to recount why we merited to reach this day, and tell all the good Hashem gave. I must tell the story of all I went through and how Hashem saved me from harm's way.

Please try to understand that for so many years I was struggling to forget, in order to be able to raise my children as normally as possible. Now I see, and everyone else does, that it is vital to remember forever, but alas I did forget lots of things which unfortunately I cannot share.

Here is my story. It doesn't start from the day I was born. Life never starts at the beginning. It goes way back, like a tree sending its roots deep into the earth, breaking through layers of rocks and reaching for the waters of life that never end.

Goldy Hager, 2018

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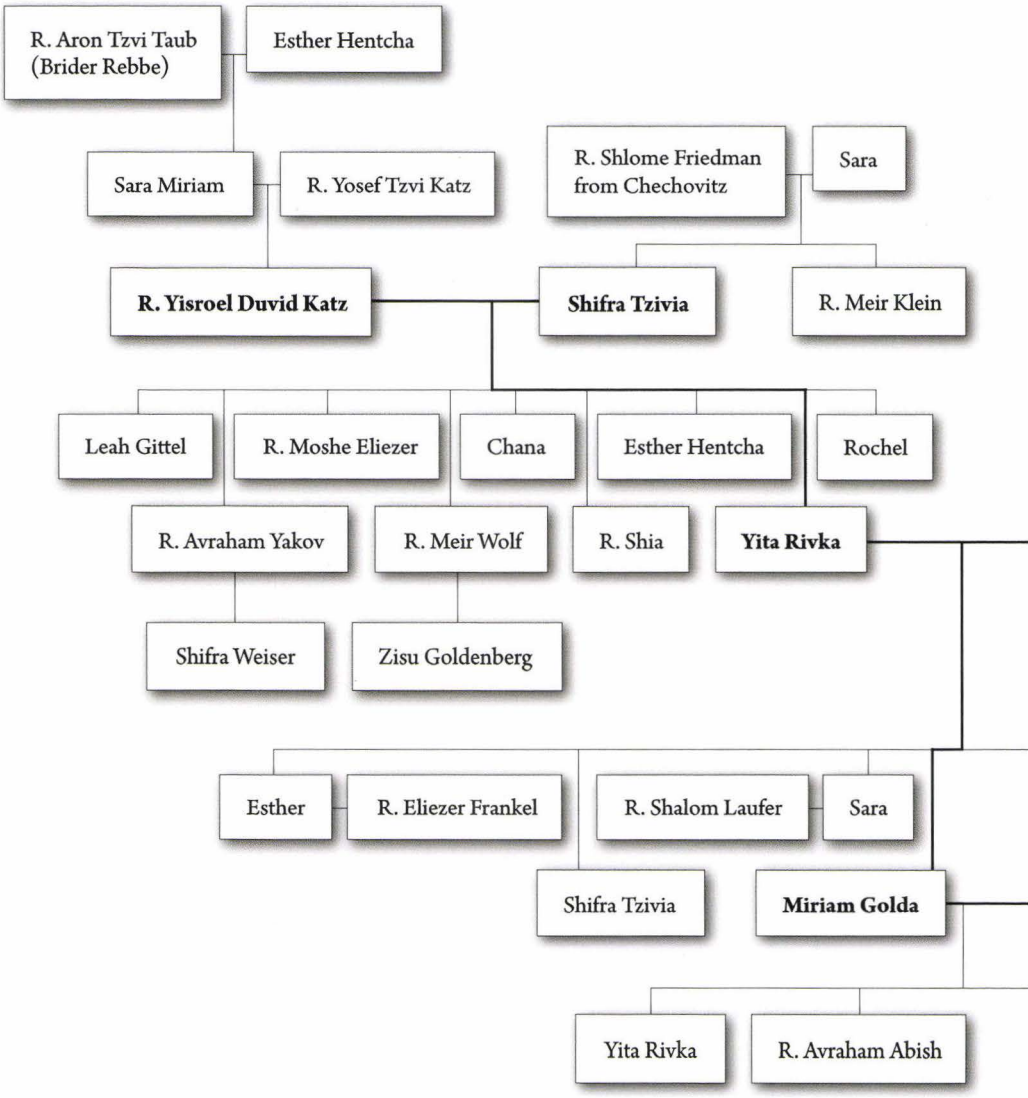
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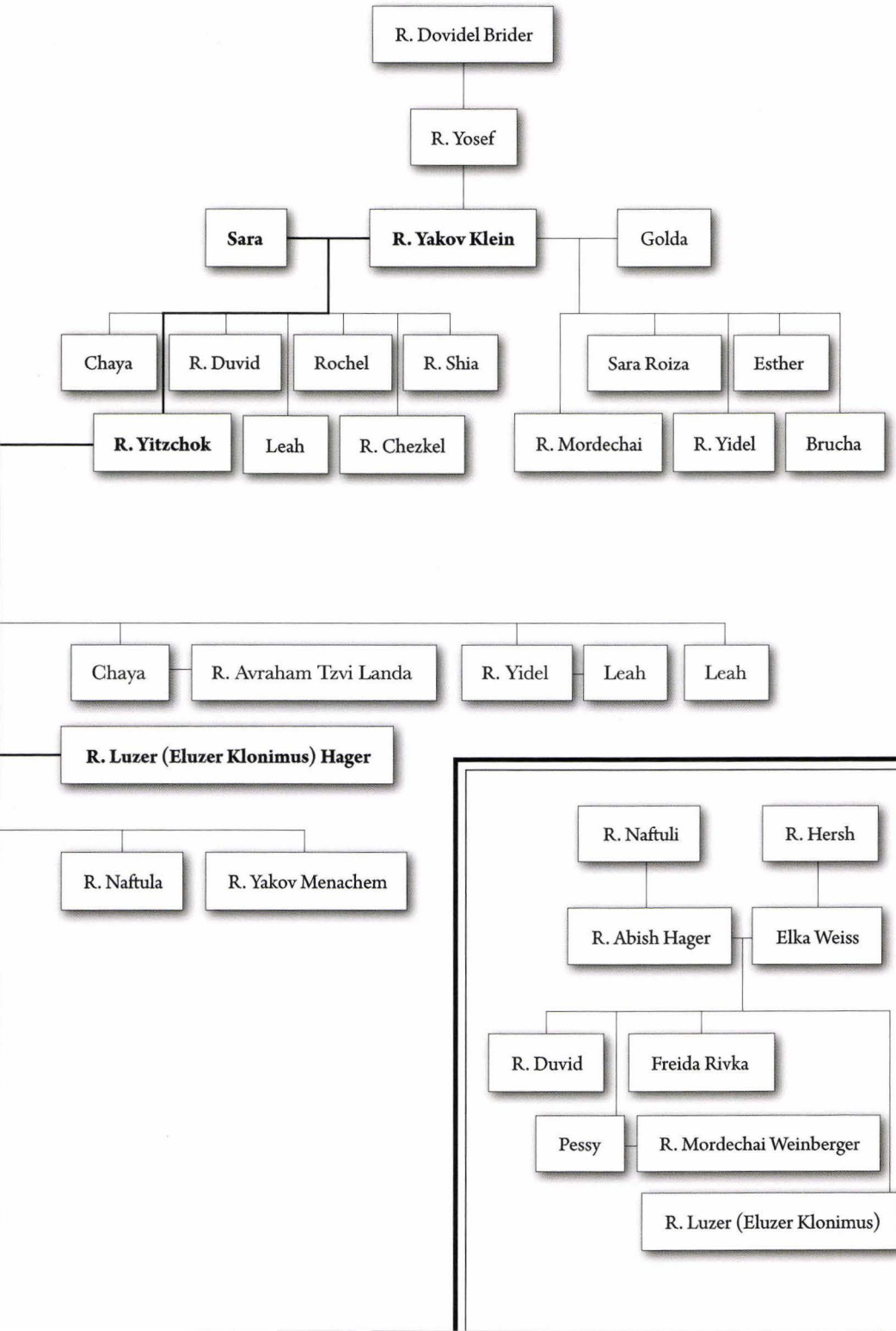
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The Family Tree of
Goldy and Luzer Hager


R. Dovidel Brider
R. Yosef
Sara
R. Yakov Klein
Golda
Chaya
R. Duvid
Rochel
R. Shia
Sara Roiza
Esther
R. Yitzchok
Leah
R. Chezkel
R. Mordechai
R. Yidel
Brucha
Chaya
R. Avraham Tzvi Landa
R. Yidel
Leah
Leah
R. Luzer (Eluzer Klonimus) Hager
R. Naftula
R. Yakov Menachem
R. Naftuli
R. Hersh
R. Abish Hager
Elka Weiss
R. Duvid
Freida Rivka
Pessy
R. Mordechai Weinberger
R. Luzer (Eluzer Klonimus)



Part One:

Before the World Ended

1. Joy and Love

JOY AND LOVE. THAT WAS THE WAY OUR FAMILY LIVED together in the city of Sátoraljaújhely (or, as we called it for short, Ujhely), Hungary. We lived in the apartment building my grandfather owned, which was right next door to his house. Our apartment had two bedrooms, a basement and attic for storage, and a grand entrance way. It must have seemed very large to Maame and Taate when they first moved in, but it didn't take long before our family grew and overflowed into the space.

I was the sixth of seven children, Esther, Sara, Yaakov,[1] Shifra, Chaya, Yidel and then me, Goldy, followed by my youngest sister Leah.[2]

My parents, Yitzchok and Yitta Rivka, treated each other like king and queen. Taate never simply told Maame to give him something. He'd always acknowledge how much he cherished anything she did for him. He'd say, "Forgive me, can

1. Yaakov passed away when he was two years old. Sadly, it was not rare in those days, when antibiotics had not yet been discovered, and people, especially children, died of simple bronchitis or pneumonia.
2. Esther was born in 1915, Sara in 1917, Yaakov in 1919, Shifra in 1921, Chaya in 1923, Yidel in 1925. I was born in 1927, and Leah in 1930.



Yidel, Chaya, Goldy, Sara, Shifra, Leah.

you give me that?" Always. Watching them, we learned how to act ourselves. When I was growing up, I presumed it was what everyone did.

Taate worked as a fundraiser for Reb Meir Baal Haness Kollel Shomrey Hachoimois, traveling all over Europe and as far out as Morocco in North Africa.

The truth is, Taate could have stayed home and earned enough money to survive, without needing to travel. But he had six daughters to marry off and he didn't want to compromise on their shidduchim. Girls who didn't have any dowry remained old maids their whole life. But he didn't just want us to get married. He wanted the best for his girls – true talmidei chachomim.

We were a happy crew, but Taate's absence was a gaping hole in our life.

"How come Taate always goes away?" I asked Maame

once. She paused for a moment, then rose, went upstairs and climbed to the attic. After a few moments she brought down two big black accounting books. The ledger was full of names.

"These are all the people who owed us money," she said. "Taate let everyone buy on credit."

He was a believer in people to a fault, as it turned out. Many promised to pay but only few did, and his two businesses went bankrupt. The wine factory and textile business were gone. Two failed businesses made it impossible for Taate to borrow money to open a third one, and no explanations how it was not his fault would help.



Taate's letterhead states that he's a wholesale wine merchant.

Instead, soon after I was born, he hit the road. He started fundraising for Rabbi Meir Baal Haness Kollel Shomrey Hachoimois. The Chacham in Morocco, Chacham Yosef Mashash, greatly respected my father. He'd often write letters of approbation for him for other communities, poetic letters written in ancient Hebrew, praising his character and mentioning Taate's decision not to eat meat or chicken on any of his travels because he wouldn't rely on a shochet he didn't know personally. This was a testament to Taate's character. Sometimes in his letters, Chacham Yosef Mashash would reminisce about the good days that they spent together, Taate reading Megillas Esther and singing Shoshanas Yaakov in many different tunes.

> A great man, great in Torah, wisdom and Chasidus Rabbi Yitzchok Halevi Klein from Hungary... stand by to help him with all his needs, host him in your home, do not give away this blessing of hosting him to someone else,

> for he is a holy person, it is clear that you will blessed in his merit. Especially since he does not eat any meat nor any food cooked with meat, only fish, eggs and fruit...
>
> ...for not any day do you have such holy person...

He'd also sell seforim during his travels – from his Rebbe in yeshiva, and various other ones. He wasn't schnorring door to door – he'd go to big corporations and establish a personal connection with the executives there, often convincing them to set up a fund that would support the Kollel on a consistent basis for as long as their business was in operation. He had a captivating, open smile that would reveal his deep commitment to others and his impeccable honesty. People never failed to see kindness exuding from his eyes, and in that difficult and cynical world between the two Great Wars it was a rare find. Many of them continued to give generously long after his first visit, and some of the funds he set up back in those turbulent days are probably still supporting the organization until today.

Maame never complained about his absences – not when he traveled the world in those days of slow transportation. She did not even complain when he got caught up in the turmoil of an impending World War II and couldn't leave America. I was twelve years old then.

She didn't complain, but you can only imagine how happy she was when he was back. She'd cook and bake far more than usual, feeding us children first, and then setting the table lavishly for them to eat alone. When Taate was home, they were like newlyweds, spending practically every moment with each other, sharing the closeness and the joy of two souls who were forced to spend so much time apart. Once, when Taate wasn't

home, my older sister said, "Maame, can you bake something? It doesn't have to be as fancy as when Taate is home. Just something round and sweet." No words were needed to describe the nostalgia. We all felt his absence.

Taate once came home from one of his fundraising trips and noticed that Maame would keep sending the girls to buy a pound of flour or a pound of sugar, small quantities at a time.

"Why don't you just get a sack of each?" Taate asked, puzzled. "It will make your life so much easier."

It didn't take long for him to find out why. Maame would use the money that Taate sent her to give to those people in need, and was so generous that she was left with no money to stock up herself. She often had to write down the groceries we bought on credit until Taate came home to pay the bill. To remedy this, he made sure she stocked up while he was home.

On Mondays, we had a washerwoman, a gentile woman from our town, come wash our clothing. In those days it was a huge undertaking; water needed to be drawn from the town pump and brought home in buckets, then heated up on a fire stove in a massive cast iron pot. We didn't have bleach in those days, and much of the linen and clothing were white. So the washerwoman would use this special pot to boil the clothing. Most people, us included, didn't own their own pot – they borrowed from neighbors.

One Monday, Taate noticed that Maame was very aggravated because the neighbor was still using the pot and she couldn't get the laundry started. "Let's just buy our own pot once and for all," he said. Back then, it was a major expense for our family. But for Taate, it was a small token of love.

2. Maame and Taate

My parents played together as little children, little Yitzchok (Ignatz) Klein and Yitta Rivka (Rebecca) Katz. They would throw little burrs at each other that landed in their hair and stuck, flinging sand at one another when they built sand structures. They were both born in Hungary, in the city of Sátoraljaújhely. It is a long name, hard to pronounce, meaning "under the tent," referring to the tent-shaped hill nearby. The Jews simply called it Ujhely, which sounded like "ohel," the Hebrew for "tent."

Taate's great-grandfather was Reb Duvidel Brider, a great Tzaddik and master of Kabbalah. Not much is known about his son, Reb Yosef, who was the father of Reb Yaakov Klein (born circa 1868), Taate's father. Reb Yaakov was the baal tefillah and shochet in Ujhely and had seven children with his wife Sara, daughter of Reb Yitzchok and Esther Moscowitz. They got married in 1889 in Gibárt, some 30 miles away from Ujhely, and settled in Ujhely.

When my father Yitzchok was born to his parents, Yaakov and Sara Klein, they lived in a small cottage surrounded by a large plantation. He was the third of seven siblings, and he was born on the second night of Sukkos on September 5, 1893. My grandmother was in labor for a long time, and my

grandfather didn't want to leave to daven maariv or eat until the baby was born. Close to midnight, he stepped out to the Sukkah to make sure he didn't miss the mitzvah of making kiddush and breaking bread on the second yom tov night. As he said the words inviting the Ushpiz Yitzchok to his Sukkah, a woman who assisted during the labor ran out to tell him his son had just been born. My grandfather named him Yitzchok, in honor of the Ushpiz, and after his late father-in-law, Reb Yitzchok Moscowitz.

The Ujhely my parents grew up in was very different from the one I did. Then, the five thousand residents, of which approximately 1500 were Jewish, lived in rural cabin-style homes. As my parents grew up, the town grew with them, city streets taking over the farmland, apartment buildings replacing cottages. The Jewish community grew as well, and by the 1930s it numbered 4,500 Jews, out of a total population of thirteen thousand. There were three separate communities: the chassidish community which they belonged to, the Orthodox, and the status quo which was similar to Reform today. They were mainly chassidim to the Tzanzer dynasty, but everyone davened together in a chassidic shteibel.

On the morning of January 2, 1904, when Taate was ten years old, his father woke him up early in the morning, in the dead of the subzero winter night.[1] "Yesterday, when you went to sleep you had a mother," he said. "Today as you wake up, she's no longer here." The world became even colder.

As was so tragically common in those days, she passed away in childbirth, leaving seven orphans. A year later, he remarried. His second wife's name was Golda Karmiel, and

1. י"ד טבת תרס"ד.

they had five more children together, raising a beautiful family together, 12 children in total.[2]

From the time he turned bar mitzvah in 1906 until the winter of 1914, Taate learned in Satmar, the yeshiva of the well-known Hungarian godol, Reb Yehuda Greenwald.[3] He excelled in his learning, gaining a reputation as one of the top bochurim in the yeshiva, growing in middos and yiras shomayim at the side of his Rebbe. As a young teenager, he was appointed to a high position in the yeshiva, testing the new bochurim who applied to study there.[4]

In 1914, with the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austria-Hungary Empire, World War I broke out. Little did we know, as anyone at that time, the old order, old dynasties, old empires and world powers, were dissolving with the beginning of war, and a new world was about to take hold.

Ujhely was located far from the war theater, and many refugees fled the war to our vicinity. The influx of people led

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2. Children from Sara: Chaya Frankel, Duvid, Yitzchok, Ruchel Amsel, Shia, Cheskel Shraga, Leah. Children from Golda: Esther, Mordechai, Yidel, Sarah Roiza, Brucha Fendrich.

3. The great Gaon, Reb Yehuda Greenwald was born in 1848, and passed away יט אדר תר"פ, March 1920. He was one of the great talmidim of the Ksav Sofer, and his yiras shomayim was extraordinary. He had a large yeshiva in Satmar where he was the Rav. It is said that all of his talmidim stayed ehrlich all their lives. He left no children, but his talmidim were like his children. He wrote many seforim, which my father printed and distributed all his life.

4. Many years later, in New York, my husband accompanied Taate to a meeting. When Taate walked in, the Sharmasher Rov, one of the prominent rabbonim in Williamsburg, stood up for him. When asked why, he said that my father was one of the top bochurim in his yeshiva and he was the one who farhered him on his first day.

to the development of Ujhely as a booming urban center. New businesses opened, apartment houses were constructed, and new schools, Talmud Torahs and batei midrash opened.

That winter of 1914, Taate's father took ill, and Taate was called back home from yeshiva. Taate stayed by his father's side till his last day. His father passed away on February 9, 1914[5] from pneumonia at the age of 45 and was laid to rest in Ujhely. Penicillin and other antibiotics had yet to be discovered, and pneumonia was often a fatal disease.

Taate didn't return to yeshiva, but he remained close to his Rebbe, always speaking of him and seeking his advice on important matters as long as he lived.



The matzeiva of Taate's father Yaakov Klein. Niftar at age 45 in February, 1914 (13 Shvat 5674). Buried in Ujhely.

Taate remained in Ujhely after his father's passing. He was lucky – he wasn't drafted into the Great War that decimated Europe. Instead of bleeding on the killing fields of that pointless war that gutted the world, bringing violent, senseless death upon millions of innocent people and consequently gave rise to the monstrous empires of Communism and Nazism, Taate was preparing to meet Maame.

5. י"ג שבט תרע"ד.

Maame was the second oldest of nine children.[6] Her parents Shifra Tzivia and R. Yisroel Duvid Katz were well off and owned several properties. Her father also owned a wholesale grocery, but on the rare occasions he actually spent time in the grocery, he had a sefer in his hand and spent the time learning.

Maame was three years Taate's senior, but it didn't bother them at all.

True to their chassidic upbringing, they met briefly in one of their houses, maybe two or three times, before announcing their engagement. But it was just a formality. They always knew they were destined to be together, bashert.

As they prepared for the wedding, Taate received a postcard from his Rebbe, Reb Greenwald, in which the Rebbe ordained him with the title Moreinu Harav. He treasured that postcard, and it remained in our house until it was destroyed during the war. As a child, I remember Taate always talking about his great Rebbe. He cherished his Rebbe's wisdom and scholarship, and took great effort to have his books printed in Europe, and later in America.

They were 24 and 21 respectively when they got married on Lag Beomer, 5674 (May 14, 1914).[7]

Taate brought several of his half-siblings who were much younger than him, into our home, and took care of them with love, as if they were his children, and named me after his stepmother Golda. My full name is Miriam Golda, Miriam after my grandmother Sara Miriam, the daughter of the Brider Rebbe.

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6. Avrum Yankel, Yitta, Leah Gittel Horowitz, Moshe Eliezer, Meir Vulf, Chana Klein, Esther Hentcha, Rochel Braun, and Shia. Only Leah Gittel, Hentcha and Shia survived the war.

7. Maame was born in 1890 and Taate in 1893.

(My older sister was already named Sara.) Remarkably, Taate chose to call me always Goldele, a testament to the woman who raised him since he was a little boy. Taate's siblings all did the same, naming a daughter after their stepmother.

I always reflect on how wonderful it is when, despite being broken by tragedy, families can come together and unite, and heal through selfless love and gratitude, transcending blood and division and feelings of entitlement. We all live together, love together, grieve together, and rejoice together, despite the pain and the loss.



Maame



Taate

3. Deeper Into Our Roots

My mother's father, R. Yisroel Duvid Katz, passed away at the age of 67, when I was five years old, so my memories of him are vague.

He lived in the house next door to us, in a lovely villa with a big garden. My most powerful memory of him is from the time we temporarily moved into his house when my sister Chaya got scarlet fever. It was life-threatening in those days, and very dangerous for everyone around since there were no vaccinations yet or medical treatment for viral diseases. It was only a question of luck if you survived the disease or not, and an outbreak of scarlet fever, or any kind of a viral disease, could spread like wildfire and ravage the city, leaving countless dead. To prevent an epidemic, the city would plaster a red paper on the front door to show that the house was quarantined. We all moved in with my grandfather for a few days while Maame stayed with Chaya until she recovered.

I was still a very little girl, and I'd cry at night in Yiddish, "Maame, Maame, kum aher," "Maame, Maame, come here!" I couldn't quite pronounce the "h" in "aher" and it sounded a bit like "*acher*" in Hungarian.

After that, Zaida would always tease me. "Kim acher," he'd call, putting out his arms for me to sit on his lap.

I never met my mother's mother, Shifra Tzivia. She passed

away young, at the age of forty, long before I was born, five years after Taate and Maame got married, on February 19, 1919.[1] She became very ill and traveled to Vienna where the best medical care was available. It wasn't as easy as it is today. She needed first to travel to a major city to have a passport issued to her, which took a long time in those days. Only then could she travel to Vienna, Austria, and in the meantime the illness progressed. Her son, Avrum Yankel, traveled to Vienna with her. She was admitted to the hospital and they prepared her for surgery. The entire process took weeks. When they finally performed the operation, she died on the operating table. She was buried in Vienna in the Jewish cemetery there.



Yisroel Duvid Katz, Maame's father. Niftar on September, 1932 (15 Elul 5692). Buried in Ujhely.

Almost a century later, in the summer of 2014, I traveled with my sons Naftuli and Yanky and their wives to Vienna and found her grave. Yanky arranged to erect a new matzeiva that I sponsored. I think it is a great zechus to have offspring come more than a hundred years later, and remember that you once were here in this world. When the soul leaves this world, memory and gratitude are what creates the unbroken chain of our history.



Matzeiva of Maame's mother, Shifra Tzivia. Niftar in 1919 (9 Adar I 5679) and buried in Vienna.

1. ט' אדר א תרע"ט.

4. The Small Things Called Life

SIX YEARS OLD WAS THE MANDATORY AGE TO START school, and almost no one had the money to send their children to the fancy Hungarian kindergarten. My mother's brother Shia had a daughter my age named Shifra, and his wife wanted her to go to the kindergarten, as she worked full time in the bakery. Maame's oldest brother, Avrum Yankel, was disturbed by the idea. He was the sole heir of the fortune left by my grandfather, but he never forgot his responsibility toward his siblings and their families. I remember him as a very bright and nice person who looked out for his family.

"Convince Shia not to send the girl to a Hungarian kindergarten," he told my mother.

"She doesn't have anywhere else to send her," Maame said.

They came up with the idea of sending Shifra to Reb Mechel, an old man who lived near us. He had a group of five-year-old boys in his house and he'd teach them to daven. Feter Avrum Yankel also had a daughter, Shifra, my age, so the two Shifras and I joined the group of boys. We learned how to daven and some alef-bais there. If Reb Mechel needed to go to the bathroom, he'd give me his stick and make me the mentor.

Of course I never hit anyone. Even if I wanted to, I don't think it would have deterred those rowdy boys!

The next year, I went to public school, as there wasn't any Jewish school in our town yet.

I still remember how I wanted to play with my new classmates. I was an innocent kid who just wanted to do what all kids do, play and share the little joys of childhood in a school courtyard. One of the boys pushed me hard and said, "You go to Palestine!"

I didn't even know what or where Palestine was, but I understood the intent. I was different. I belonged to a different place. I wasn't wanted.

The year after, a Jewish school opened and I left the public school.

The Jewish school had to follow Hungarian law and study all the secular subjects with one hour of Jewish instruction allowed a week. During that hour, we were taught some Hebrew, about the holidays, and some prayers. We learned shema and hamapil by heart.[1]

None of our learning was inside a text. The rabbonim in Hungary were against girls learning from inside a sefer.

According to the laws of the state, our school was co-ed and the boys weren't allowed to wear yarmulkes, since any display of religious attire other than Christian was forbidden. Luckily, all schoolchildren had to wear school uniforms, and part of the school attire was headwear, as was customary in those days. So they designed a school cap they could wear all day long.

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1. It always amazes me how seemingly insignificant things in our lives make a difference, great or small, many years later. When my husband was seriously ill, those lessons came in handy. He was about to fall asleep and asked me to say hamapil with him. I didn't want to turn on the light, so I said it with him by heart that night, and every night after.

I enjoyed school. The education was very rigid and traditional, with a lot of attention paid to manners, behavior, and obedience. We had to sit with a straight back, our hands folded on the table in front of us, and we weren't allowed to ask questions. Students who didn't do their homework, or had any infractions, were hit. Corporal punishment was legal; moreover, it was very much a mainstay of what was considered an upright education then. But I never got hit. I did well in my studies and was well liked by my classmates and teachers.

School ended at one in the afternoon. The boys continued studying in Talmud Torah, and the girls went home. Lunch was the main meal of the day, and Maame was always there to serve us the food she so lovingly cooked. She'd always sit down at the table and give me her full attention, asking about my day in school. We often had bread for lunch as my mother baked bread and challah each week. On the first day it would be deliciously fresh. The next few days it would become more and more stale, because there were no preservatives to be put in the bread and just like homemade challah today, the bread would harden pretty quickly.

Why wouldn't she bake every day, you'd ask. Well, consider what it takes: Sifting the flour and adding water, which is what we do today as well. But here the similarity ended. Adding the sourdough to the dough overnight on top of a warm oven, chopping more wood to heat up the oven in the morning, and only then begin baking. Well, it was a major undertaking, just like doing laundry, and there was a special day allocated for it. Thursday night, the dough would be mixed and first thing on Friday morning, Maame would start baking. After the bread was ready and cooled off, she'd wrap it in a piece of cloth and put it in a cupboard. No freezers or sealable plastic bags to keep food fresh in those days... To make our stale bread

more edible, Maame would spread jam on the bread, and it was delicious. How little a girl in love with her life needed to be happy...

Chicken was mostly saved for Shabbos, so during the week we ate a lot of potatoes, pasta, and cabbage. The people in small villages usually had their own cow and chickens, and even if they couldn't afford having a chicken, all too often they had a steady supply of their own milk, eggs and butter. We lived in a town and had to go to a grocery store or a market to get food. Maame would make soup with a little flour, oil, and butter when she could get it. We had no refrigerator, but our cellar was a little cooler, so we'd store the extra food we made for Yom Tov there.

My mother made sure my sisters and I stayed busy! Between going to the shared sink in our courtyard to get the water and carrying it back, bringing in wood from the shed and then using it to light a fire in the stove, cooking all the food from scratch every day, without any fridge or freezer to store leftovers, bringing the chicken to the shochet every Friday, plucking feathers, cutting it open and cleaning it, salting and soaking, preparing for Shabbos and Yom Tov, there wasn't much time left for leisure. I rarely watched my mother soak and salt the chicken so I didn't learn how to kasher chickens. I wasn't interested in the kitchen and with four older sisters I wasn't needed. My interests lay elsewhere. We had a neighbor, the daughter-in-law of Feter Meir, and she was very knowledgeable. I loved sitting on a small stool next to her as she cooked and baked, while she told me stories and customs from Jewish history.

We had some time to play with our friends outside, typical games for the time. Hide and seek, drawing on the ground

with chalk, using stones to play what you'd call hopscotch, and we'd jump the rope and sing. We lived near the beautiful Diana Park and often played there as well.

I didn't have a doll carriage, but I had a doll made of rags and a shoebox as its crib, and I was perfectly happy with it. I never saw a toy store in the years I lived in Hungary. Sometimes I think we had it better than this generation with fancy toys and camps and houses. We could play outside and not have to worry about cars, strangers, or all the things parents worry about nowadays.

Even though by the standards of those times we were "town people," unlike the vast majority of Europe that still lived in villages, we still were close to the ground. Houses were two storied at most, and we mostly got around on foot. If you needed real transportation, you had to go uptown and rent a horse and a buggy. But people rarely did that, unless they needed to move their entire house worth of belongings or travel to a different village. If they needed to carry a bed or a table from one house to another, they could always call a neighbor and get a helping hand. Only two people in Ujhely had a car – the surgeon and someone else of prominence whom I don't remember. Knowing how to drive was considered a rare skill, so in order to have a car one needed to also have a driver on full pay.

No one had running water in their homes, so we used an outhouse. It was quite an ordeal to go out into those cold and snowy nights and I always hated going alone in the dark. I'd beg my sister or mother to accompany me when I needed to go at night.

Our town was surrounded by beautiful mountains and every Shabbos afternoon my family would climb together up the mountain, enjoying the fresh mountain air. We'd often

go hiking on school trips as well. In the summer, Maame's brother Meir Wolf and his wife Aidel would come to Ujhely to enjoy the fresh mountain air, renting a cottage not far from our house. Shabbos afternoon we'd walk over and pay them a visit. I'd play with Zisu, the cousin my age. One Shabbos, when I was about seven or eight, we stayed for shalosh seudas and my aunt offered me a piece of challah spread thickly with butter. Challah wasn't a novelty, but butter was. As I ate the bread, the butter dripped all over the beautiful light blue silk dress my sister had just sewed for me. She'd spent hours sewing and embroidering it, and I burst into tears when I saw the butter sinking into the silk. There were no cleaners and no way to clean the dress. My mother reassured me. "Don't worry, it will be ok." But I couldn't stop crying. I didn't care so much for the dress as I was afraid of how upset my sister would be to see her handiwork ruined.

Typically the Jews in our village worked as dressmakers, shoemakers, store owners, and other small businesses. Jews were basically the lifeline of Ujhely, supplying it with produce and running businesses, which allowed the townsfolk to go about their lives. If they needed to fix their shoes or make alterations to an old suit that was given over from father to son, they'd go to a Jew. When they needed to buy kitchenware or even, once in a lifetime, buy a modest wedding ring, they'd go to a Jew. When Hitler took away all the Jews, all the businesses disappeared as well, and our once-brimming-with-life city turned into an obsolete, forlorn village lost in obscurity. How much Europe lost having killed its Jews...

We didn't have much to do with the local non-Jewish population, with the exception of the washerwoman on Mondays. But I do remember there was a tenant, a non-Jewish single

woman, living in the basement of our building. She cleaned homes for a living, and sometimes cleaned in our home as well. She had nobody in the world – not a husband, not a child, and she became very sick when I was a young girl. I always had the personality that my heart bleeds when I see someone crying, and it bled when I saw how hard on her luck she was. I'd go and sit with her. I can still remember the picture of her sitting at a small table with a mug of tea next to her, and the last light of the day filtering through the small windows at ground level. She'd ask me to massage the area over her heart, she was in so much pain and in a desperate need of human touch. I'd do it, but there wasn't much more I could do to help her. When she died, I cried like a baby; her lonely life and lonely death pained me so much. Thinking that maybe I was the only person in her entire life who ever touched her hand breaks my heart.

5. Our Castle

MY GRANDFATHER, R. YISROEL DUVID KATZ, OWNED the building we lived in on Károlyi 18. There were six units – three on either side of a large courtyard where we'd play outside, with a few steps leading up to our open porch.

The front door opened to a large room where we did homework, ate dinner, and was also the place where my sister Shifra sewed her lovely creations on her sewing machine and where Esther embroidered beautiful curtains to hang on our front windows. She used vibrant reds and purples against an ivory background. They were so lovely that friends and neighbors came to delight in them. Esther wanted the house to be pretty for visitors, so one day when Maame was out, she dragged the large wooden cradle we all used as babies to the shed. The youngest, Leah, was well past an age for using it and it only cluttered up our main living room.

Maame noticed right away that it was missing.

"We don't use it anymore," Esther defended herself.

"But I still want to have another boy," Maame said.

"If you want another boy, then you also have to have two more girls!"

There had been another boy named Yaakov born after Esther and Sara, who passed away when he was two years

old. Then came two girls – Shifra and Chaya, then Yidel, then me and the youngest, Leah. I always remembered that story – Maame wanting one more boy, and Esther's quick wit.

To the side of that main room was our kitchen with a big wood burning oven that we fed with the wood we stored outside in the shed. Maame stored a set of china dishes in the wooden cabinets that we used for Shabbos, Yom Tov, and for out-of-town guests, but mostly we used simple earthenware dishes for everyday use.

We only had two bedrooms. One of the bedrooms was very large and the beds were pushed against the wall with curtains hanging in front of them. In the middle of this room was our big dining room table and chairs where we ate our seudas on Shabbos, and a couch.

Somehow, we managed to fit in guests – there was rarely such a thing as sleeping in your own bed. More often than not, I would share a bed with one sister or another.

Since Taate traveled constantly, my mother wanted Yidel to grow up with a role model. So when Taate was away, Yidel lived with my great-uncle Reb Meir Klein. Feter Meir was a very respected talmud chochom and dayan who'd authored several seforim, including *Toldos Shmuel*. People came from all over the vicinity to ask his advice or to pasken shaylos, and my mother frequently turned to him when Taate was away. In trying moments, he was a source of strength to her during those long years of running a house full of kids all on her own.

Yidel slept on a couch in a little alcove outside Feter Meir's room. This way he could see how his uncle woke up and said modeh ani, washed negel vasser, and recited birchas hashachar

with great kavanah. Otherwise, living with so many sisters, how would he learn?

Feter Meir had a beautiful apartment and his daughter and son-in-law lived with him as well. They never minded having Yidel there, and I imagine Yidel didn't mind either as I know Maame wouldn't have forced him to do something he didn't want to do. Almost every Shabbos, Maame would take Leah and me to Feter Meir's house for shalosh seudos. We'd sit in the alcove where Yidel usually slept and listen to the men singing and saying Divrei Torah. Often I'd play hide and seek with his grandchildren, but always listened to the singing. Years and years later, sometimes I sit alone in my house Shabbos afternoon, and the words and melody of bevoyo me'edoym, ring in my ears, so I take my siddur and sing along to the music of my past.

One night, when Taate was home, I slept in their room. I awoke to the beautiful sounds of Taate singing the morning brochos. He had the most beautiful voice and he sounded so happy as he davened. I'd do anything to hear him again. Hearing him sing the morning brochos with such joy helped me realize why Maame was so insistent that Yidel leave his home and live with her Feter Meir, to witness firsthand what it feels like living a life of Avodas Hashem.

6. An Empty Throne: Days of Our Joy and Longing

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Taate had a beautiful voice and a warm heart and he was offered a lot of money to be a Chazan in big cities in England, France or Morocco for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For five years he was the baal tefillah at Rav Briesch's kehilla in Zurich, Switzerland. He traveled for those engagements and we had to celebrate the holidays alone. His father was also a baal tefillah, so he grew up with a deep grasp of the melody in prayer, how to sing to Hashem, and how to move others to follow him in pouring their hearts out. From the year he got married, he never missed a year davening at the amud on Rosh Hashanah, as the halochah is that only a married man, unperturbed in his thought, can daven at the amud and plead for the Jewish people on the Day of Judgment. Older chasidim would say that when Moshiach comes, Taate will lead the davening in the Bais Hamikdush.

I am sure his heart bled just as much as ours when he had to spend the Yomim Noiroim away. But he always made an effort to be home Sukkos, Chanukah and Pesach. Looking back, he was more like a long-awaited, somewhat mysterious guest, warm and surprising when he was at the door, and

sorely missed the moment the door would close behind him. His presence was fleeting, and as he would leave, the sense of longing and loneliness would hang in the air, like a faint scent of rain and autumn leaves deep in the winter.

Once, he davened in a big shul for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Before Rosh Hashanah, the president of the shul asked him to give a speech before kol nidrei. Taate refused. "I'm not a speaker," he said. "And it's not in the contract."

The president didn't give up. "Just a short speech," he begged. "A few words."

Erev Yom Kippur arrived and my father looked around the shul. Everyone seemed broken as they prepared to say kol nidrei and he had a change of heart. Why not say a few words and inspire them to do teshuva, he thought. "I'll do it," he told the president. "I'll say a few words."

The president was thrilled. "But don't forget to tell them what the president means!" he said.

"Such a speech I won't say," my father said. And that was the end of that. I am not sure if his contract was ever renewed with that community, but it became a long-standing joke in our home. When someone would fish for a compliment we'd say in unison, "You want to know what the president means!"

When he would return from exotic countries, friends and family would fill our house, as if a traveling circus had come to town. Maame would prepare food, and our visitors would sit around the table as Taate shared stories in his deep, warm voice late into the night. He told us about the Jews in Morocco, Iraq, and Iran. My memories of those stories are hazy, but I do remember him describing how they sat on the floor in Morocco and drank liquor from a big glass and wine from a small glass. His attention to detail brought those stories that almost sounded like fairy tales to life. As a little girl, I was trans-

ported to all those exotic lands, walking the narrow winding streets of a noisy Marrakesh market in Morocco, standing above the majestic Tigris River in Baghdad, and davening on the grave of Mordechai and Esther in an Iranian city of Hamadan. Everyone in that room must have felt the same way. The wide, unknown, mysterious world breathed into our living room, and all present were entranced.

Once my older sisters went with a carriage to pick up Taate from the train station. Maame stayed home with the little ones – Leah and me. The minutes passed by slowly and soon I couldn't take the waiting anymore. I walked up the main street, knowing the carriage would pass that way. The sun shone brightly, enveloping me in a haze of heat as I waited outside.

Finally, I heard the coach coming down the street and waved my hands to get their attention. They stopped the coach, and Taate pulled me into the coach, put me on his lap and kissed me. He noticed immediately that my tooth was missing and asked me about it.

To this day I remember how proud and happy I was to sit on his lap riding a coach, getting to say hello to him first, before my mother and little sister.

Sukkos

On Sukkos we'd build a wooden Sukkah in the courtyard, and Maame would hang our washed, ironed and starched damask tablecloths on the walls. We brought our beautiful maroon velvet couch outside. It was also the bed for three kids during the year, but on Sukkos it became my father's bed in the Sukkah.

There were no stores that sold decorations for the Sukkah; everything was handmade. We children made stars from

thirteen different colored papers. My father's brother, uncle Cheskel, a shochet who lived 40 miles away in a village of Patroha,[1] brought his own stars in a glass and wood frame for us to hang up. My older sisters had deft fingers and they'd poke a tiny hole in an eggshell, spill out the egg, and paint it gold or silver. They'd take a feather from one of the chickens in our chicken coop and attach it to the eggshell. They worked on it for hours, night after night, and I thought our Sukkah couldn't be any more beautiful with those gorgeous homemade birds swaying in the breeze as if in flight. To this day I believe that decorations made with your own hands, no matter how crude and simple they may seem, are more beautiful than the ones bought in a store. They exude the warmth of a loving heart. They keep in them a tiny spark of a soul.

Grapes were plentiful in our country as the "Hungarian wine" was a synonym for a deliciously sweet wine of great value. We'd hang big bunches of grapes everywhere, and place fresh flowers in a glass on the table.

Taate was always away for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It's customary for the father to bentch his children before Yom Kippur. I can still picture Maame wearing the white dress she wore every Yom Kippur, her face serious, tears in her eyes as she brought my brother Yidel to Feter Meir to bentch him in Taate's place.

Taate came home very close to Sukkos, so my big sisters stayed up all night preparing everything for when Taate returned. On Simchas Torah, we'd go to shul and Taate always got the first Atah Horaisah and he'd lead the dancing around the shul for hakofos. It wasn't the big mishmash of dancing

1. Pátroha is a village in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county in the Northern Great Plain region of eastern Hungary.

most shuls have today. Everything was disciplined, the men following Taate's lead around and around. Maame and my older sisters usually stayed home to prepare the seuda, but I always went to shul. The women who came watched the dancing behind the mechitza. But there was a big table on the side of the shul and we younger girls stood behind the table to watch the dancing, waving our flags. I always felt so proud, almost like a celebrity, watching my father lead the procession, singing all the while as all the men joined in. He'd call out the Atah Horaisah in a resounding voice that resonated across the entire shul and seemed to travel from Ujhely all the way to a mysterious America, far far away. We always brought him three clean shirts to change into, because he'd be soaked with sweat after each round. When I try to put it into words, all I can think of is the phrase in the prayer Nishmas kol atzmoysai toymarnah, all my bones speak. His very essence was in that moment. Every word he sang flew up to heaven and called out to Der Oybershter.

This was an amazing vision, each person feeling as if he was a witness to an extraordinary event, a conversation between a Godly soul and its Creator. People would speak about those moments of true Avodas Hashem in the midst of hakofos for years to come.

Chanukah

On Chanukah, our home would be the magnet for our relatives and neighbors. Maame would put a piece of wood to burn in the oven and roast potato slices on our stovetop, a homemade version of potato chips. It was fresh and crispy, and felt like the most delicious delicacy on earth. It was eight nights of playing games, and lots of laughter. We would have massive amounts of guests, even if Taate wasn't home. Maame

always wanted it to be a happy home, particularly on the holidays when Taate's absence was so glaringly felt, and we did all we could to share our part of merrymaking, even if the one person who knew to make every second of life so full of joy and magic was not there. We didn't want to let Maame down, and we didn't want to let Taate down either.

Purim

Purim then couldn't be more different than it is today. It was simple. Maame baked a few cakes – some with nuts, some with chocolate, some with poppy seeds, and baked fluffy meringues made with egg whites and sugar.

She took one of her nice china plates on which she placed a few pieces of each of her cakes and covered it with a starched damask napkin. I'd deliver it to my aunt who took off all the cakes and replaced it with her own cakes. Sometimes I'd get a penny, or an extra piece of cake or cookie for my efforts, especially if I said a purim shpiel, a short Purim-themed skit, in a comical way. I'd return home with the plate, Maame would take off the cakes and refill the plate for me to deliver to another friend or relative. And so it went all day... There was no delivering to my own friends – they were all as busy as I was, delivering for their mothers. Sometimes girls dressed up as boys and vice versa, but that was about it, unless they were dressing up for a Purim spiel.

I remember only once, the yeshiva in our city asked my sisters to sew costumes for them for their Purim spiel. My sisters sewed them all the costumes they needed. As a thank you, the students gave them a written copy of their spiel and invited them to attend the performance.

Being that Taate was mostly away during Purim time, more often than not we'd hear megillah in the home of a neighbor.

We'd stomp on the floor when we heard the name of Haman. I don't remember any of the children having the kind of groggers we have today. After a morning spent baking cakes, toward the afternoon, when the festive Purim meal was coming close, Maame made delicious holopchi, stuffed cabbage rolls, and kreplach filled with meat.

Pesach

We never ran out of cleaning jobs in our day-to-day life, but cleaning for Pesach intensified that a hundredfold. It was the one of the few times that I actually felt needed to help in our household.

One sunny day before Pesach, we'd spread a blanket out in our courtyard and bring all the seforim and lay them out to air all day in the fresh air. We'd attach a rope from one end of the yard to another, hanging all the clothing on it, brushing out the accumulated dust and letting it air out from the winter moldy scent.

This was in addition to our regular Monday wash day where the washerwoman worked from morning till night, schlepping water, dragging wood to build the fire, rubbing and scrubbing our clothes and linens.

By the time Pesach came, our house couldn't have been cleaner, the linens bleached white, everything smelling of fresh air and sun, any musty smells banished.

We made a hessev bet for our father – a beautiful white damask sheet covering the couch, and an embroidered pillow. He looked like a king reclining at our seder table while we would sit listening to him tell the wondrous story of our redemption and sing until three o'clock in the morning. We were too young to read ourselves yet, so he'd translate word for word, telling us the stories so we'd understand. To this day

whenever I say Hallel, I remember when I was four or five years old how he explained to us the pasuk, *Even moasu habonim hoyta lerosh pina*. Taate described how precious the yidden will be in the time of Moshiach. They will be like a magnificent stone placed on top of the building for everyone to see and admire. Taate laid out for us the meaning of the words, so that a small child was able to comprehend.

When he saw our eyes closing, he'd give us almonds and fruits we couldn't buy in Hungary, which he brought back from his travels. There was no custom of stealing the afikomen, no presents. Stealing was never something to entertain, and we didn't need presents to have the zechus to sit at the table with the grown-ups and hear our Taate talk.

It wasn't just us he kept spellbound. As people in the city finished their seder, they'd wander over to our courtyard, standing under our windows, until it seemed like half the community was listening to Taate telling stories, singing and singing, his wonderful voice flowing over us as we fought away sleep. It felt as if he took us on the wings of his voice, all the way across the countries and foreign lands he traveled, down to Egypt, and together with him and Moshe Rabbeinu, we were watching the miracles Hashem performed for us, and then marching together from the House of Slavery to the Red Sea and on to Har Sinai to receive the Torah, and almond trees, and beautiful angels singing and singing and singing in the dark Hungarian night...

7. The Chandelier of Light and Tears

MY MOTHER WOULD CRY WHEN LIGHTING CANDLES Erev Shabbos. She would cover her eyes while tears ran down her cheeks. I felt the vastness of her pain for a world splitting at the seams, the longing for a husband who was far away, the prayers for her seven children who were growing up in a world that was becoming increasingly menacing. She would recite a yehi ratzon, whispered words unknown to me. I was young but took in what I saw; those tears falling at licht tzinden stirred me deeply, a feeling that has stayed with me until this day.

When the tears ran their course, and she uncovered her face and turned to me, a beautiful smile lit her face up, and everything was right again. We were a house full of girls, and all the neighbors and our cousin Shifra would come over and play, and the room rang with our laughter.

Shabbos morning my mother would come to the room I shared with my sisters and Taate's orphaned sister who lived with us. This sister had other siblings who lived nearby, but she wanted to live with us even though Taate wasn't home. She felt that Maame was the closest person she had in the world, and I could understand why.

She'd talk to us as we lay huddled under the blankets, mellow and sleepy, giving over the lessons from her beloved *Tz'enah U'reenah*, the Torah portion of the week translated into Yiddish. She added in her own lessons, using it as a gentle form of mussar. I can still remember her talking about the yeshiva boys who would come to us for their daily meals. As was the practice in most of Europe, the yeshiva would send two or three boys to eat the main meal of the day with us. It was called *essen taig* (eating day). Our only brother was away in yeshiva, and she tried to explain what it was like for these bashful boys to come into a house full of girls.



My brother Yidel as a young boy.

"When they come in, you go out," she said. "And if it's raining or snowing, go play at a neighbor."

As an example of how tough it could be for a yeshiva bochur to come to a strange home for a meal, Maame told us how difficult it was for our brother Yidel. She believed that *essen taig* would be a good learning experience for him. As he grew up, he went to live with my older sister Esther, whose husband Eliezer Frankel was the head of the yeshiva in Salgótarján, 120 miles east of Ujhely, two-thirds of the way to Budapest, the capital of Hungary. Sure enough, he was sent to someone else's house to eat. He didn't like the food so left it on the plate. His hostess yelled at him when she saw the leftover food – most people were poor and it was a sacrifice to host the boys.

"You have to eat everything on your plate," she shouted at him. He didn't respond. When she left the room for a minute, he put all the food in his pockets, and showed her the

clean plate when she returned. My sister Esther had quite a job cleaning out those pockets when he arrived at her home that day!

After that incident, my mother sent him to a yeshiva in Opalyi, halfway between Ujhely and Sato Mare, known today as Satmar. Opalyi was a small town and there wasn't a big enough community to sustain *essen taig,* so there was a dormitory where the boys lived and had full meals provided for them.

8. The Great Dame of the Castle

I SAT AT THE TABLE FINISHING LUNCH. I WAS TEN YEARS old and school finished for the day at one in the afternoon. I ate the last of my soup, wondering which of my friends would be playing outside.

My mother's arm, gently wrapped around my shoulder, stopped me. "Goldele zisse," she said, "please bring water for our neighbor." As usual in those days, we didn't have our own sink and running water. There was one sink for all the tenants in our building located in the courtyard and I would have to go and carry it in pails. Two of our neighbors were elderly people, and another was Maame's sister Rochel Braun. She had many children, and it seemed like she was always before or after birth.

I can still feel my mother's hand stroking my cheek, her voice caressing my name and always adding a "sweetie" to it, as she asked me to help our neighbors. I was one of the youngest of seven, with four older sisters who would do all the work around the house.

When I was younger, the most I ever had a chance to do was hold a dustpan while my sister swept the floor. So Maame would send me to the neighbors with a rag, a shmatte, to dust

the furniture. "She can't bend down," Maame would say about our elderly neighbor. "You can do it for her."

She took me from my books and games and kept me busy helping others. "You should earn for yourself Oilom Habbah," she'd say. What did I know of Oilom Habbah? At the age of ten I didn't dwell on those lofty matters. I loved my mother and couldn't refuse her requests. It was impossible to say no to her. In my mind, I guess, her voice somehow became associated with the Oilom Habbah, the voice of angels beckoning the souls in. I am convinced they do it gently, calling out names as if kissing them.

She loved us children, and despite the fact that physical punishments were very much a norm in those days, she never hit us, always gentle and kind.

Main street wasn't too far off from us. The street was lined with the city's regular small businesses – shoe repair, pharmacist, textile shops, dry goods, and two grocery stores. The fresh produce could only be bought in the outdoor market, quite a long walk. Twice a week we'd walk to the market to buy the perishable groceries that couldn't be stored. We had no refrigerator, which was an unheard-of novelty in those days. We only cooked enough for each day. Before we went, Maame would ask each neighbor, "What can I bring you from the market?"

She bought for us and for our neighbors, and we walked all the way home carrying our purchases in baskets. Oh, the ache by the time we got home. My hand still hurts only recalling it!

She'd give me the produce we bought for our neighbors and tell me how much I should tell them it cost. I did the shopping with her, so I quickly did the math and easily figured

out the real number in my head. Maame must have seen on my face that I knew the truth.

"Don't tell them," she said. "They'll feel so much better if they believe they got a bargain."

Once, a neighbor came in and asked to borrow a parsnip. "Of course," Maame said. She went to our pot where she had just washed and cleaned the parsnip for our soup, took it out, rinsed it off in cold water so it wouldn't be hot and the neighbor wouldn't realize that it was already on the fire, and handed it over. She did it all deftly and quickly, her back blocking the neighbor's view, so that the neighbor wouldn't feel terrible had she realized the truth.

My aunt Rochel Braun, Maame's sister, lived next door to us, in another unit in our building. When she had a baby, she stayed in bed for six weeks as was the custom in Europe. Back then, births were a precarious and unpredictable affair, both mother's and baby's life hanging on a thread. As one historian put it, "A woman could be delivered on Monday, happy and well with her newborn baby on Tuesday, feverish and ill by Wednesday evening, delirious and in agony with peritonitis on Thursday, and dead on Friday or Saturday." Therefore, childbirth traditionally spelled danger, and convalescence would be agonizingly long and fraught with unpredictability.

Before her last baby was born, Rochel's husband was drafted into the Hungarian labor force and she had no one to take care of her and her other five small children. My mother brought me with her to take care of my small cousins while she ran the house and nursed her sister back to health. Later, after the Germans came, Maame always gave her portion of food to her sister.

A small story that illustrates our lives back then. In those days the Ujhely Yeshiva was run by Reb Hersh Dick, a wonderful person. He was an older widower and had no one to look after him. My mother's brother, Avrum Yankel, was very close to him. He made sure the Rosh Yeshiva had someone every day to cook for him, but Friday was the most difficult day to elicit help. Avrum Yankel turned to Maame for help.

"Everyone is so busy on Friday, and I can't find anyone to cook breakfast for him. Can you help?" My mother was as busy as everyone else, but she couldn't say no. Every Friday since then, she made him the same breakfast, a Friday special. Little squares of potatoes fried with sour cream and eggs. Sour cream was expensive and hard to come by, so Maame made exactly enough for one portion. I only dreamed of eating such a mouthwatering breakfast! A few times I managed a lick from the empty pan, and it was delicious. Maame gave her heart and soul when she prepared breakfast for this wonderful, lonely, and brilliant man.

Maame wasn't interested in superficial things. Her only desire was to help another person in need.

She was pretty, with a petite frame and brown hair covered with a synthetic wig. Lots of women in our community dressed fashionably with stylish wigs, but she couldn't care less about what she wore. She had one dress for Shabbos that we joked was from the times of Mesushailach. We sisters decided she needed a new dress. My sister Shifra was an excellent seamstress so we only needed to come up with the money for material. We saved and counted our pennies all year. If Maame gave us a penny for ice cream or as a reward for good behavior, we put it away. Penny by penny we saved, until we had enough to buy a nice batch of material. We wrapped it with a bow and

gave it to her on Purim. How she thanked us! She kissed all of us and exclaimed over the lovely material. "You couldn't make me happier," she said. "This was such a wonderful thing that you all did. It's going to be such a nice dress."

Less than half an hour later, she called me over. "Goldele," she said. "Take this material two streets over. Give it to the widow who lives there."

I was always her errand girl and usually fulfilled her requests with no protestations. But now I cried. "Maame, we bought it for you!" I said. "We want YOU to have a new dress." I am not sure if I was hurt because I wanted so much to see her in a new beautiful dress, or because it made me feel that she discarded our hard-won present, but it really made me feel sore inside.

"Goldele," she said gently. "I have my children who make me so happy. I already enjoyed the gift. I don't need the dress to be happier. But this lonely widow will enjoy the new material so much." The widow accepted our gift, that much I knew, but we had to settle seeing our mother in the same simple dress as the day before. The only beauty she was concerned about was the beauty of the soul, and she had plenty of that.

There were no psychologists in those days, but Maame was the unofficial town psychologist. I'd often see female neighbors knocking on our door, "Klein *Neni* (Aunt), Klein *Neni*, we have a lot of fighting, please help us."

I remember there was a childless couple on the Munkatcher gaas (street) who always fought. Sometimes it was so loud the neighbors could hear the shouts coming from their house and Maame would go over to their house to help calm things down. I was afraid for her to intervene, and begged her not to go. "Don't worry," she told me. "When I come in they

both quiet down right away." She would sit and listen to them and talk to them until she cleared things up. They weren't the only couple that she helped with their marriage either.

Was she a happy person? I think you have to be happy to find it in yourself to do good for everyone. She always seemed fulfilled, content with the life she had, never fantasizing about the life she didn't have.

One day, I saw three elegantly dressed gentlemen coming to the door of our building while I played outside. We were used to schnorrers coming constantly from the suburbs, poor people looking to collect a few pennies from townspeople. But these men were in a different category altogether – they certainly weren't collecting money.

"Where is Mrs. Klein?" they asked me.

I showed them to my door and remained outside. We didn't have any extra rooms inside for me to listen in on the conversation, so curiosity bubbled up inside me as I played outside with my friends, waiting for them to come out.

After a long time they finally emerged. I ran inside. "Maame, Maame, what did they want from you?"

"They wanted to make a Bais Yaakov here," she said. "So they came to ask my opinion."

That's the kind of respect Maame commanded. She never went to school or seminary, but she was very smart, well-versed in Hungarian, Yiddish and a lot of Loshon Hakodesh. She was a walking encyclopedia – I always knew I could ask her just about anything and get an answer. Maame was always teaching us informally and there was a lot of learning that went on in our house, even if it didn't happen through books or in a classroom.

They never started a Bais Yaakov school in our town. We

had a lot of girls and Maame knew all their friends, so she was a good source of information of how many girls might be interested and how much it might cost to set up such a school. I'm guessing Maame explained how the girls needed to attend a government-approved school until the early afternoon, and afterwards most of them were needed to help at home. The water needed to be drawn, vegetables needed to be purchased from quite a distance away, wood needed to be gathered and splintered for the stove, and all the food needed to be cooked from scratch every single day.

I imagine Maame liked the idea but knew that sending their daughters to Bais Yaakov was a luxury most mothers couldn't afford. Although many communities in Poland had adopted this creation of Sara Schenirer, and thousands of girls had been transformed as a result, most of the Rebbeim in Hungary did not approve of schools for girls. Maame must have thought that plunging Ujhely into a machloikes with the Hungarian Rebbes was not going to benefit the community, so she advised against it. Knowing her, I can't imagine it was an easy decision for her.

9. The Intertwined Vines

I WAS NINE YEARS OLD WHEN MY SISTER ESTHER MARried R. Eliezer Frankel in 1936. She was very intelligent and embroidered beautifully. I remember standing near the curtains she embroidered, almost hidden within the folds, when I heard Eliezer talking to Esther before they got married. "Your father wants to know if I'll wear a shtreimel," he said. "My father doesn't wear one. I hope you don't agree..."

"What do you mean?" she said. "No way would I take a boy without a shtreimel."

He was shocked because Esther had a reputation for being more worldly. In the end they agreed that he'd wear a shtreimel inside the house, and a hat outside.

Perhaps it was that Maame was so often alone and needed someone to talk to, or perhaps it was her nature, but she shared information freely with us children. When father would send us money, she told us how much he sent. When my sisters were talking shidduchim, I was never sent out of the room. When my brother-in-law joined the family, he was amazed at the openness in communication. There were no secrets in our family.

Esther sewed her own wedding gown and all her sisters' dresses

for the wedding. She was very capable and responsible, and helped run the house and take care of her younger siblings. While she was preparing for her wedding, the doctor told my mother that Yidel, Leah and I needed our tonsils removed as we constantly had sore throats and got sick. In those days it was a brutal procedure. The hospital didn't have anesthesia. They tied your hands and feet together so you couldn't move and took them out. My mother couldn't bring herself to let us undergo such a traumatic procedure. So, two or three weeks before she got married, Esther waited until Maame left on an errand, got us dressed, and brought us to the hospital. Before the surgeon took out our tonsils, he turned to Leah, who at four years old was an adorable little girl. "Little girl, you'll be so good to Magda [my English name] afterwards, right?" She didn't miss a beat. "If you hurt me, I'll be bad. If you don't, I'll be good!"

Leah and Yidel were both fine after the surgery. Yidel was even singing the next day. I didn't fare as well. I swallowed blood during the surgery and got an infection in my lungs. There was no penicillin and I developed high fever, slipping into unconsciousness. My mother came to visit me and held my hand, crying and crying. Esther couldn't bear the thought of what she had done. "I brought three healthy children to the hospital and we only left with two," she bemoaned.

No one thought I'd survive the infection. In the days before penicillin, surviving such a severe lung infection was tantamount to a miracle. But the miracle did occur, as so many of them would during the following years, and I came out of the hospital only days before the wedding.

I remember that wedding so clearly. Taate was there, we all wore beautiful dresses, and ate delicious foods catered by Eisenberger's in their hall. I don't remember what we were

served, but I can almost conjure up the smell of the baked chicken and fresh rolls served to the poor people in the room next door. My parents had the caterer prepare a full meal for the poor of the city, perhaps forty or fifty people. I don't think they were ever treated to such a meal. It smelled so good I wanted to join them!

Esther's husband Eliezer was an exceptional human being. I never met anyone like him. He was a mensch, genuinely friendly to everyone, so quick to run and bring a chair for my mother to sit when he saw her standing.

I'm surrounded by Talmidei Chachomim, but he was in a class of his own. His davening was a sight to behold. Had he sat at the front of the shul, it would have moved many hearts, and the community's davening would have been different. But he was too humble for that and insisted on occupying his regular seat in a corner. Six months after they were married, he was offered the position of Rosh Yeshiva in Salgotarjan, and they moved there. He'd often be called to the local Bais Din to help arbitrate more difficult cases.

Esther had one baby after another, and each summer they came to visit us for a few days. When I was thirteen, they took me back with them to help babysit. We traveled all night, and when we got to the house I was amazed to discover that homesickness is a real sickness. I felt physically ill, and cried and cried all morning, hiding in the backyard where no one could see me. Later in the afternoon, when my brother-in-law came home, he saw my red eyes and instantly knew why I cried.

"Goldele," he said. "Come, let's go to Main Street and I'll buy you an ice cream."

A year later, I went again, and saw something truly unusual. One time, my sister's helper didn't show up. Eliezer, the Rosh Yeshiva, put on an apron and washed the soiled cloth diapers

by hand. It was in the days when a man helping around the house was unheard of, let alone a man of higher standing, a scholar. He could have easily walked away and closed the door behind him and immersed himself in the books he loved so much. Instead, he took on the role of a gentile helper, to make his wife's life a little bit easier on that difficult day.

These small tales of unseen humaneness make one believe that goodness is possible, even in a tiny little village lost in the midst of Hungary seething with hatred and despair. Just a couple more stories about Eliezer, a beautiful humble soul that came to this world straight from Hashem.

One night I was having trouble sleeping because of my cough. He didn't deem himself too important to make me tea with honey and bring it to my bed and tell me that I shouldn't hesitate to ask for whatever I needed.

The door was made of glass, so I could see him sitting and learning until five o'clock in the morning. That's when he would close the sefer, go outside for a pail of coal, build a fire in the stove and boil water for a coffee for Esther.

There were a lot of non-Jewish tenants in the building and when he went outside, he'd bend his head slightly to each one and wish them a good morning. Every creation of Hashem deserved his acknowledgement.

10. And the Great Ocean Lay Between Us

In 1939, Taate left for a fundraising trip to America. He planned to go for six months, and we hugged him and waved goodbye as we always did, knowing he'd be back soon. Maame wanted Taate to have a picture of us, so after he left, we all went to the little studio in our hometown, a very rare occurrence. My beautiful mother isn't smiling in the picture. As the photographer was ready to snap the picture, she noticed my brother was wearing unpolished shoes and was upset. It was at that moment he snapped the picture. But that picture didn't capture her essence. Her essence was pure and sweet and good, and filled with light.

The ship left from Germany, so he traveled to Bremerhaven, a port city in Western Germany where the Wesser River spilled into the Atlantic Ocean. There he boarded the SS *Bremen* on August 22. This German-built ocean liner was one of a pair of the fastest ships in the world when it was first designed, unparalleled for both speed and comfort. It often sailed to New York, and when it docked, the Bremen's pier was often the site of anti-Nazi demonstrations.



MY FAMILY: *Top row:* Yidel, Chaya, Sara, Shifra, Golde.
Bottom row: nephews Yisroel Duvid and Shmuel, Esther, Maame, Leah.

Now, too, the Bremen was heading toward New York with 1,220 passengers on board, most of them U.S. nationals trying to outrun the war everyone knew was fast approaching Europe.

For Taate it was business as usual. I was twelve years old when Taate sailed for America. I wouldn't see him again for the six longest years of my life, the years of severe judgment that ravaged Europe and the entire world. Maame and my sisters Esther, Sara, Shifra and Leah would never see him again...

On the evening of August 25, three days into the sail, the commander of SS *Bremen*, Captain Adolf Ahrens, received a

telegram from the German Naval Ministry. All ships on high seas should return to port before the outbreak of war. Captain Ahrens, a righteous gentile, chose to ignore the unequivocal order, sticking to a procedural caveat in international laws of naval navigation. The law stated that in times of war, a ship should be steered to the closest shore, and he was only two days from New York. Technically, Captain Adolf Ahrens was dead wrong. At that moment Germany wasn't in a state of war yet, and he was obliged to heed orders given to him by his high command. He almost certainly risked being court martialed upon return, and most probably executed by a firing squad for high treason. But the lives of so many were at stake. He knew full well that turning the ship around and returning to Germany would be a death sentence for most of his passengers, and by the law and spirit of a naval officer, it was his moral and professional duty to protect those on the board of his ship from any adversity. He chose his code of honor, and singlehandedly saved the lives of over a thousand people. The very air rippled with their collective sigh of relief as they landed safely in the New York port.

Only two days later, on September 1, 1939, the fateful day that World War II broke out, Taate heard the news being broadcasted everywhere. Germany declared war and invaded Poland.

Taate remained in America, sending us frequent letters as Hungary was not yet occupied. He continued wiring us money but made no plans to bring us to America. He wasn't happy with the Yiddishkeit in America and didn't think it would be a good place to raise our family. It was a struggle to remain religious there, where you were fired from your job if you didn't show up to work on Shabbos, kosher food of a high standard wasn't easily accessible, and the youth were exposed to far more than in our little sheltered city.

Taate lived mostly on fruit, vegetables, nuts and fish, never touching meat, chicken or dairy in all the years he was away from home.

Nobody ever dreamed how far Germany would take this war. Soon, he could no longer send us money from America. But fortunately, Shomrey Hachoimois had an office in Budapest; they diverted Taate's salary to my mother, and we had what to live on as the world got darker and darker.

Maame couldn't hold onto money, however – as soon as she received money from Taate's job, she immediately spent it, giving generously to everyone who needed. When she ran out of funds, as she inevitably did, some of her wealthy relatives would bank on the fact that Taate was earning American dollars. The dollar had skyrocketed during the war. Before, you only needed ten penga for a dollar. Now, the number climbed inexorably by the day. So they'd give Maame pengas and write down the amount. After the war, Taate paid back every last dollar to whoever survived.



The ss *Bremen*: ship that Taate traveled on to the U.S.

11. Message in the Bottle

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN MAAME AND TAATE WAS very frequent in the beginning. A letter would come from Taate and she'd read us the parts where he told us about his day-to-day life and sent his love to us. She never waited too long before writing him back. Like I said, they had a wonderful marriage, even if they had to sacrifice so much for it and make such tremendous efforts to maintain it long distance. There was no such thing as picking up the phone or hopping on a plane and paying a surprise visit. Letters traveling in cargo for weeks and then loaded on trains and horse-driven coaches, and delivered by a postman, were the only channel of communication, slow and unreliable as it was. Shechina rests between a happily married couple, and they were a perfect example.

May 21, 1941

To my dear husband shlit"a,

I received your letter from three months ago... Now you understand [my surprise] that a letter should take three months with airmail? You wish me a Kosher Pesach and next week is already Shavuos...

Over here they think that he who is in America is the lucky person. In my eyes it's not so; everyone eats with

one spoon, I also eat, the difference is I am at home and you are away from home. Just thanks to Hashem you are not in Paris.[1]

Believe me too, everything we need to be satisfied, everything is driven by Hashem. Blessed is He forever.

Sátoraljaújhely, 11/20/1941

My dear husband,

I let you know that we all feel good. Last week I received a letter that made us really happy, since it is six weeks that I didn't receive a post.... I wrote to you the last time that they offered for Sara several marriage offers. They don't even ask for a dowry, so much everybody likes her. Please write to me what should I do. Should I engage her off? Also Shifra is asked about, she is also liked...

My dear father!

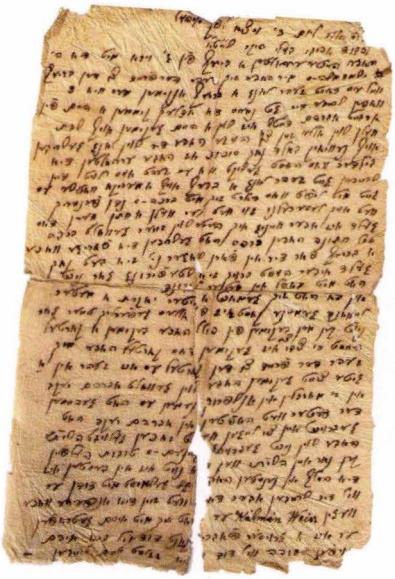
I also write a few lines to the father. Chaya travelled to Salgótarján. Yidel to Opalyi, to the yeshiva. I am grieving about father very much. When will you come home finally? And how do you feel? We, thank the Almighty, feel good. Lots of kisses, and I wish every good, your faithful child, who wants to see his father in joy, as soon as possible,

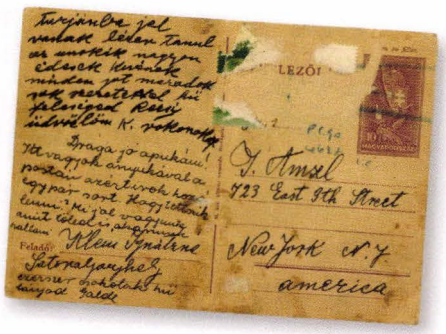
Goldy

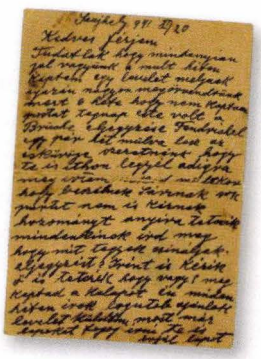
I kiss the dear father with lots of love, and I wish every good, your faithful child,

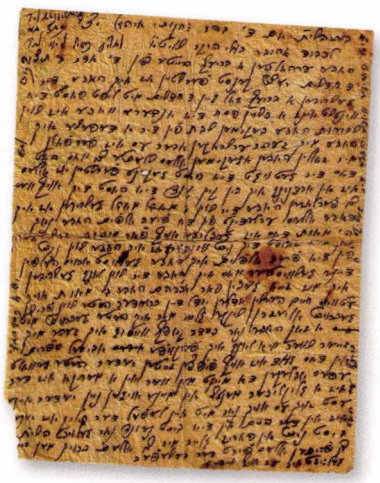
Shifra

1. Taate went many times to Paris, and at the time of this letter, Paris was under German Control.









Letters Maame sent Taate before the war.

My beloved, dear, good father!

I also add to the letter. Even though mother already wrote everything. How are you? We thank to the Almighty, feel good, now I wish to hear also from father. Yidel travelled to the yeshiva, Chaya to Salgótarján.

I kiss your hands many times, your faithful daughter,

Leah

Sunday night *vayaitza*, Ujhely

To my dear and beloved husband *Shlit"a*,

We received your letter from Tuesday *Vayaira*. We were very happy with your letter, because it takes very long for a letter to arrive, over 3 weeks. I'm writing good news, the Jews are coming home from work [camps]. Avrum Deutch already came home, for Shabbos they will all come home. I wrote to you long ago, right after *Sukkoth*, that I received the pictures that you sent. From (the dates of) your letters, it looks like it takes a long time for a letter to arrive to America, even though we sent it with Air Mail.

What's doing with the dowry for...? She wrote a letter to you and our brother-in-law,[2] asking for money. She really needs money for clothing, she has nothing, not even a meter of fabric, and the prices have risen tremendously here; a meter of cheap fabric costs 2.5 penga. Everything is very expensive, it is hard to get anything.

From the *Kollel*[3] I received a postcard [with money] and I was very happy to receive it. Thanks to Hashem that I did not have to take any favors from anyone. Help can

2. Rabbi Yitzchok Amsel.

3. Reb Meir Baal Haness, where Taate worked, would send his commission directly to Maame.

only come from the one G-D. When the need is at its most the help is at the nearest.... .[4]

In the meantime, the World War unraveled at an accelerated pace.

In June 1941, Hungary joined Germany in war against the Soviet Union, and merely five months later, on December 7, 1941, America entered the war and joined the Allied Forces. Geographically, we found ourselves on opposite sides of this epic war, and we could no longer get mail from Taate. For six months we heard not a word from him. Then one day we got a letter postmarked from Portugal. Portugal maintained its neutrality, so he sent his friend Shia Chaim Greesgut[5] a letter and added a greeting in tiny letters, asking him to forward it to us. We were so happy with that tiny postscript! The letter sat on the table for days and Maame made no move to write back. "*Nu* Maame, are you going to write already?" I finally asked.

"Why should I write if it will take six months for him to get the letter?" she said.

Perhaps, like so many others, she was hoping against all odds that the war would be over in six months. Or maybe she didn't have the time to write. She had so much to juggle, taking care of the children alone, trying to find enough food for us all, as food was so scarce and tightly rationed. The military alliance between Germany and Hungary stipulated that

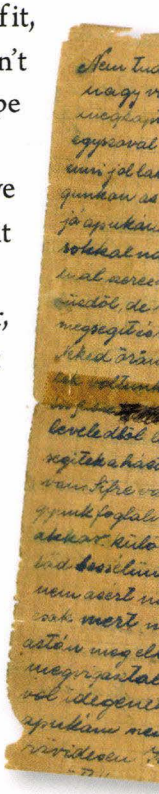
4. געלויבט השי"ת האבע איך ניכט געברויכט קיינעם-ס טובות, העלפען קען נאר איין השי"ת, וועו דיא נייט איז אין בעסטען איז דיא הילף אין נענסטען.

5. As hashgochah protis would have it, two generations later, my son Naftuli's son and Shia Chaim Greesgut's great-granddaughter made a shidduch together.

in exchange for military protection, Hungary would supply Germany with massive quotas of ammunition, clothing and food. It wasn't just Jews who suffered from the scarcity – all of Hungary faced extreme shortages. We hardly had clothing or food and it was an impossible situation.

The Hungarians had closed our schools in 1942, so I had plenty of time. "I'll write the letter," I said.

And here it was, a letter to my dear Taate that survived a horrific war, a letter that became the last communication before the great silence befell us. Reading the letter now, one cannot escape the irony of it. Here I was, worried about Taate being all alone in America, which in reality was a safe haven, while we were about to face one of the worst genocides in history. But I was a typical thirteen-year-old who sorely missed her father and felt with every fiber of her soul how lonely he was, despite the fact that he was safe – or maybe because of it, knowing what we in the deep Hungarian countryside didn't know. The fire of Nazism that licked the earth of Europe was about to consume Hungary and its Jews.



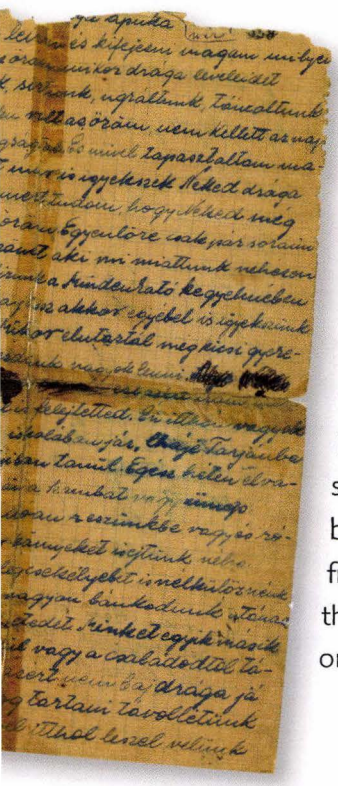
We sent the letter back to Portugal but it felt like we were throwing it into the gusting wind, to see if it might land where it should.

Here it is, a little message of love of a girl to her father, as she is standing on the precipice of gehenem, and didn't yet know it.

Dear Father,

I couldn't put down on paper and express myself how great the joy was when we received your precious letter. We laughed, we cried, we jumped, we danced, in brief, the joy was unimaginable. That day we didn't have to eat, since we were satiated by

the pleasure. And since I experienced the joy, therefore I hasten to reply to you immediately, my dear, good father, because I knew that for you the pleasure will be even greater. For the time being I can please you with my few lines, to you, who struggle hard for us, but we hope and trust in the mercy of the Almighty, that He helps and you come home soon. When you departed, we were still small children, now we are on the way to grow up. I write this because from your letter I see that you have already forgotten. I am at home, I help in the household, Leah attends school, Chaya is in Tarján, Shifra sews, Yidel learns in Opályi. We are busy during the whole week, but when Shabbos or other holidays come, then especially, constantly, you are on our minds, and we talk about you. Sometimes we even drop some tears. Not because we are missing anything to the smallest extent, just because we are grieving for you. And then we imagine your situation. By us, one can comfort the other, but you are alone away, far from the family, between strangers. But don't worry, my dear, good father, our absence won't last too long, soon, with the help of God, you will be at home, with us. I sat down to write a letter of eight pages, to write everything, as it fits for a father. Dear Father! I know I will grant you pleasure by writing that Shifra and Chaya are being educated according to your taste from a respect of religiosity.... And we, the small ones, of course, are proceeding on the pathways of the more elderly, and



this is all the deed of the dear Mother, furthermore, your daughters are striving to fulfill the will of their parents at any price. And also, about your only son, Yidel, I can write only good. He was at home during the holidays, and on the holiday of Chanukah, he learns diligently, as a good boy, from all respects. Father, sweet, please, try to come home as soon as possible, since Shifra doesn't want to get married, only when you are at home. I don't write anymore, I want to leave some space for Mother, as well.

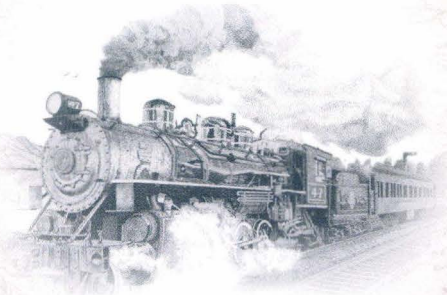
A lot of warm love, I kiss you, your faithful daughter, who wants to see you very much,

Goldy

Only after the war did I find out that Taate received my letter and treasured it during the long years of silence. He showed it to everybody he met on the Lower East Side. So many had family members trapped in Europe and no one got mail. So everyone wanted to see this letter that miraculously, so it seemed, came from the dark side of the moon, from a war-torn Europe.

Taate thought we were safe in Hungary for the time being. Just like the fascist Spain of General Francisco Franco, an ally in the Nazi Axis, the Hungarian government also sheltered its Jews, even as they collaborated with the Germans, for five long years, until 1944, when the 800,000 Hungarian Jews were sent to the ovens. As it happened to so many, including world leaders in those days, he also hoped and believed that the political and military conflict would be resolved sooner than later. But things got worse, and by the time he was ready

to return to Hungary, he couldn't. All the borders were sealed – he couldn't come back, and we couldn't leave. World War II became the new reality, an indescribable horror that was about to get worse beyond anyone's imagination.



Part Two:

"And he poured upon us the Fury of His Anger"

12. The Precipice

THE WAR STARTED FOR ME THE DAY MY FATHER couldn't come home.

The Germans didn't come until 1944, but the hatred of the Hungarian people toward the Jews and state institutionalized anti-Semitism took their hold in public life long before. In 1938, Hungarian racial laws were passed, reversing our equal citizenship status, and as time went on, they adopted more and more anti-Jewish laws and measures. It wasn't only the official line. It became a mundane reality of constant, daily torment. Throwing a Jew off a moving train, throwing stones at Jewish stores, was typical for an average Hungarian. I was always scared stiff to walk alone on the streets. We had a strict curfew and weren't allowed to leave the house after 5 pm, starting in about 1941. We were confined to our towns and villages and weren't allowed to travel anywhere. Jewish businesses were confiscated or forced to close. Jews in Hungary lived on borrowed time.

It didn't take much to fan up hatred against the Jews. I remember my mother taking me to listen to the radio in someone's basement shortly before the war started. I was still a young girl and didn't understand German. But I knew Yiddish. And I understood what it meant when I heard Hitler screaming

on the radio, "We're going to fight until not a single Jew is left alive." I shivered when I heard that screeching metallic voice, those vile words, and then the roars of tens of thousands of his followers, awash with hatred. These terrible sounds of human depravity lay dormant, pushed deep inside, until the day I fell into the hands of his henchmen. It was a cruel voice, an evil voice, one that meant every word he said... It was the voice of a horrific fate, of history itself that turned its ugly, ruthless face to the Jewish people. No one could believe this would ever become reality.

I knew the Hungarians were listening as well, nodding along, feeling elated because their most base dark instincts found a voice. Once again, we were "the stranger," and they felt threatened by our very existence. Just like at the time of the Black Death that ravaged Europe and Asia in the 14th century and took lives of 200 million people, the Jews were blamed for the catastrophe and entire communities in Germany and France were burnt to the ground. The same fear of the unknown and the different woke up their animal soul. They blamed us for our prosperity, and somehow told themselves that we were successful at their expense. Because of us, so the reasoning went, they were poor, and if they only could get rid of the people they envied and feared, their lives somehow would get better. They'd inherit our homes, our businesses, our very lives. It wasn't just greed – anti-Semitism was woven into the very fabric of their existence.

We heard stories from Jews who managed to escape Poland. Blood-curdling stories most of us refused to acknowledge or believe. We were six sisters, so our family was often approached by refugees who needed papers to legally remain in Hungary. My mother, good-hearted as always, gave our birth certificates

to girls who escaped Poland and they used them to register and get documents to stay legally. They'd tell Maame stories about terrible things happening in Poland, stories that a human being simply could not believe were possible.

One day, I heard Maame crying unstoppably. A relative of ours got a letter from another town. The letter told the story of his daughter who was married to a Polish Jew. They, together with their six children, lived in Munkacs, a Hungarian town with a prominent Jewish population. The Hungarians forced them to return to Poland where they were lined up and shot. The oldest girl Sorale was twelve years old and managed to escape into hiding, watching her entire family executed. She ran and ran through the forest, until, exhausted and starving, she was picked up by kind peasants who put her on a train back to Hungary. It took her a week or two to reach her grandfather.

This story struck deeply. It was someone we knew, someone related to us, who confirmed that the rumors of Nazi atrocities were real. I was twelve years old then, the same age as Sorale. I remember my mother's face, red and tear stained, with horror etched in her every feature. In my heart I didn't believe the story. I just couldn't fathom that things like this could really happen. "You're crying for nothing," I told Maame. "This letter isn't true. It didn't happen."[1]

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1. After the war, when I was married with three children and living in Crown Heights, I took a bus one Sunday to bring my kids to Prospect Park. A woman sitting next to me kept staring at me until she finally said, "You look so familiar. What's your name?"

"Goldy Hager," I said. "Oh," she responded. "I guess I mixed you up with someone else."

But then we got off at the same stop. "Where were you during

I was a naive twelve-year-old, but even adults couldn't believe the horror. There were entire towns and villages filled with Jews who never attempted to flee and stayed till the bitter end just because they couldn't wrap their heads around the fact that entire nations and their governments could act in such a diabolical and utterly insane manner.

But Maame believed every word. Only she felt with her whole heart that Hungary was safe. Poland was a savage country where they killed Jews, but it couldn't happen in Hungary. Just couldn't...

She wasn't alone in her belief, and at the moment it felt like there was a rationale behind it. We read in the news that Hitler was invading country after country, murdering people wherever he went. It was always bad news. But in the beginning, Hungary was aligned with Germany, joining the Tripartite Pact (the alliance with Germany, Italy and Japan). There was an agreement of sorts. Germany wouldn't invade Hungary – they'd be allowed to self-govern as long as they showed their loyalty by supplying food, ammunition and labor force. Hungary oppressed the Jews but at the same time sheltered them from execution, so at that point there was no danger of being dragged off to concentration camps. Little did we know that Germans, notorious for their methodical and cold-blooded thinking, knew full well that the Hungarian Jews had nowhere

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the war?" She asked. "Perhaps I recognize you from then. Were you in Feldafing?"

"I wasn't, but my uncle Shia Katz was," I said.

"That's my first cousin!" A little more name-swapping and I realized it was Sorale, the twelve-year-old girl who saw her parents shot. We embraced, and I felt so much love for her. We were family, and we both survived an inferno. We stayed in touch after that until she passed away.

to go, and the Germans could afford to leave them to the last phase of their demonic Final Solution.

In the meantime, men lived in constant danger of being taken to the Munktabor, the Hungarian labor force, a brutal unit where not many returned home alive. By law, all Hungarian citizens over the age of 21 deemed unfit for armed service were liable for compulsory conscription to labor battalions. Jews were considered politically unreliable and almost 100,000 men were sent to forced labor camps. They followed the Hungarian army to the front, where they were denied food and proper clothing during the extraordinarily harsh winters. They were often the targets of blackmail, robbery, torture and murder, and between 25,000–40,000 Jewish men perished.

Their wives were left alone with the children and often no income, without any assistance. We were all struggling with most of the men gone, or in hiding.

My uncles, Shia and Avrum Yankel, would come discuss the situation and latest news with Maame. She was keenly involved in everything, with her finger on the pulse of the developments as they were unraveling at neck-breaking speed.

Sadly, the evil madness of our enemies outpaced us...

13. Feter Shia

MAAME WAS DEVASTATED WHEN HER BROTHER SHIA was drafted into the Munkatabor.

Maame had several brothers but her relationship with her youngest brother Yehoshua, our Feter Shia as we called him, thirteen years her junior, was special. He was lively and fun to be around, a prankster but in a kind way.

I remember the time he played a trick on us. He had a sweet tooth and loved to share his weakness for sweets. He'd always give out chocolate and candies to children. Once, he came to visit Maame and all the kids crowded around him.

"Line up, close your eyes and stick out your hand," he commanded. We obliged, kept our eyes closed and palms outstretched. Little did we know that Feter Shia was long gone... It's hard to believe but we fell for it time and time again.

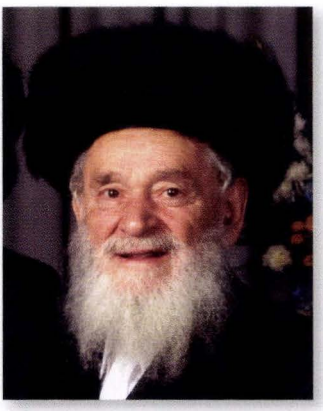
Feter Shia was the baker from the fairytales: always enjoying a good joke and laugh, and like my mother, giving out bread from his bakery shop to every starving homeless person, even if they didn't have a dime on their soul. He and Maame were very close and they'd do anything for each other.

When he was taken by the Hungarians to work in the Munkatabor, his wife Chana had to care for all the children alone, as well as run the bakery. Feter Shia's son was away in

yeshiva and Maame knew how important it was for yeshiva bochurim to get packages of goodies. She mailed him packages through the post office along with a brief letter that said just this:

Meir, learn well. Your mother is working hard, alone, to support your family while your father is away in forced labor. See to it that she should have naches from you!

It was as simple as it was compelling. Not a single word that shouldn't be there. The plain truth of life: Your father is breaking his back as a slave, your mother puts her life on the line to save her family, and you need to do your share, to make all this sacrifice worthwhile: Learn Torah!


My uncle, Feter Shia Katz.

But then came a letter that was even shorter, a postcard from Feter Shia. It was chilling in its crude simplicity. It wasn't even a cry for help or a desperate plea. It was a testimony, horrifying in its brutal mundanity, as the reality itself:

Please pray for me, he wrote. *They shoot people every day. Which minute they'll shoot me, I don't know...*

Maame collapsed on the floor wailing. The Veiditchker Rav passed by at that moment.

"Who is crying so heartbroken?" he wondered. They told him about the letter to which he responded, "He will come back. Such tears cannot go to waste. *'Zee hut eim yetz oisgepoilt.'"*

Sure enough, Feter Shia was sent to Auschwitz but came back alive. His wife and five of his children perished. The other

two survived with him. I wonder if it was Maame's tears that saved him or the blessing of the Veiditchker Rav. Or maybe like in hatovas chaloym, a rav needed to interpret her tears in a good way for them to make the difference up in heaven. *Tzaddik goyzer ve'Hakodosh Boruch Hu makayem.*

After the war, Feter Shia moved to America, remarried, had two more children and lived to the age of 94. Despite the horrors he went through and the pain of losing so many people he loved, he never gave up on his laughter, on his jokes, insisted on bringing joy to our family, and seeing the bright side of life, laughing tragic fate in the face.

14. Sara

My sister Sara was tall, slim and beautiful, and always made sure to dress well. She was a wonderful cook and could knit practically anything. Sara married Shalom Laufer in 1943. She was already 25 but she kept pushing off the wedding because she didn't want to go to her chuppa without Taate at her side. It was already wartime so they had a simple wedding, and as was common in those days had the chuppa on Friday afternoon, and the seuda on Shabbos in our house and in Yankel Klein's house next door.

As was customary in those days, Sara and Shalom moved in to live with us, and in due time they had a beautiful little girl, Shifra Tzivia. Shalom was very good hearted, always doing chesed for others.

He was young and healthy, and the Hungarians wanted to draft him to the Munkatabor. Every week they would come at night pounding on our door, and I would wake up shaking in fright.

It was always the same Hungarian detective, called Hanyagi. He was a very short, fat, evil man, and on top of everything a virulent anti-Semite. As the pounding would resume, Shalom would climb into the chimney of the large oven we used for heating. The ceramic tiles reached almost to the ceiling,

and he'd use a ladder to lower himself into it, landing with a thump inside. Maame would quickly remove the ladder. All the while they'd be banging so hard we thought the door would break down. They'd burst inside when we opened the door, checking everywhere, under the beds, inside the closets, behind the furniture. I'd lie in bed, shivering from cold and fear, paralyzed by their shouting while they searched. Had they found him they'd shoot on the spot, and our fate would be anyone's guess. This went on, week after week. We thought things couldn't get worse.

Only they did.

15. Esther

At the end of 1943, when Esther was pregnant with her fifth child, her doctor sent her to Budapest. Because of the complications, she was told she needed to remain on bedrest until the birth. At that time the Belzer Rebbe was hiding in Budapest after escaping Poland. Very few people stayed with him, to keep his hiding place a secret. My brother-in-law was able to approach him for a bracha. He wanted to be near his wife, but Budapest was dangerous for him. The threat of Munkatbor was hanging over his head.

"Stay with me in my hideout," the Rebbe said. "And from time to time you can check on your wife."

Their four children came to stay with us, the youngest only a year and half.

I imagined Esther, all alone in the hospital, missing her children, and I had an idea. What if we took them to be photographed and send their picture to Esther? It was a big deal – no one had a personal camera, and a professional one was extremely cumbersome and expensive. What today is a simple click of a camera or a phone, back then was once-in-a-lifetime event, booking time with the photographing studio, washing, dressing in your best clothes, doing your hair and then coming to the studio, struggling to get everyone settled in the right

positions. It was a day-long affair, and a topic of conversation for many more weeks and months. We had done it only once, to send a picture to Taate in America.

"I'll take care of everything," I said. "I'll wash them up, get them dressed and bring them there."

Maame agreed and I pulled it off, and mailed the photo to Esther. I wish I still had the four-page letter she wrote me.

Goldele. You have no idea what you've done. It's techiyas hamaisim. I started living again. I sleep with the pictures, eat with the pictures, look at them hour after hour.

She blessed me again and again. Sometimes I wonder. I was the last person you'd expect to survive Auschwitz. I was petite, skinny and prone to illness. Maybe it was my sister's blessing that kept me alive. We never know what the real consequences are of our deeds. Sometimes they extend far beyond what we could ever imagine, for better and for worse. As the chachomim say, maybe the entire world is hanging in balance, and our small act is going to tip the scales.

Esther gave birth to a little boy, Avraham. Maame and Chaya brought the children back, but Esther was so weak that Chaya stayed to help her. The two oldest, Yisroel Duvid and Shmuel, didn't go home and stayed with us until Esther would recover. Maame always said that Hashem gave her six girls so that all of us together could do mitzvos, and Chaya was happy to help out.

It would be the last time Chaya saw her home. And Maame, and Leah, and Shifra, and Sara.

16. Boots on the Ground

IT WAS THE LAST DAY OF PESACH, AND I WOKE UP TO the singing of Hallel, led by my Feter Shia. Our house, I discovered, became a shul. My bedroom was right near the hallway and I couldn't get out, so I lay there, in the bed I shared with my sister, the songs of Hallel filling the room through the closed door, and wondered, why are they here? Only later I heard the terrible news. The Germans came! And the Hungarian mobs cheered. Our apartment was small, but we had a large foyer, and everyone from adjacent streets came to daven. They were afraid to walk the streets to the shul.

Mr. Chezkel Samet, a man from our neighborhood appointed by the Germans to be on the Judenrat, the Jewish council, as a liaison to our community, sent out the message that a curfew had been imposed, and no one should leave their houses. The war brought out the best and the worst in people. Some sold out to the Nazis, hoping, in vain, that by betraying their brothers and sisters they and theirs would survive. Mr. Samet was not one of them. He always knew what was right and what was wrong. In those times of trial, retaining your conscience would take no less than being a truly righteous man, a tzaddik gomur.

A mournful crackle to the usually joyful songs, the break in their voices, the tears held back, all disclosed the fear of the unknown. What followed was even more terrifying than anything we could imagine on that deceptively quiet morning.

Everyone left, and I was free to get up and start my day. "Nobody can leave their house," we were informed.

But after a few hours of calm passed, in the early afternoon, Maame called out. "It's quiet," she said. "No one is on the street. Let's go quickly to visit Feter Shia and see what he has to say."

He was the kind of person that knew all the latest news and Maame often sought his advice.

Feter Shia lived only two blocks away and we walked briskly through the dead streets with not a soul out. He and Maame whispered words I couldn't hear. I could only guess from the ominous look on their faces that these were words of alarm. We slipped through the deathly still streets back into our yard. We made it just in time.

Moments later, we heard the sound of marching drums. Maame, Sara, Shifra, Leah, and I poured out to the yard, peeking through the cracks in the fence. SS men dressed in black, tall, toned, marching in immaculate rows, legs stiffly locked in goosestep rising and falling in unison, as a huge, perfectly attuned machine stomping out everything human in its way, a sea of darkness drowning out the light on this Pesach afternoon.

Fear drilled a hole through my stomach and rumbled there. I had never been so scared. We slipped back into the house. Everyone was quiet. I lay on the maroon velvet couch and tears of despair just found their way out, pouring uncontrollably. I cried my soul out, in terror, a sixteen-year-old girl who knew just one thing: that my world was being trampled under the

high leather boots of people who suffered from one of the most tragic cases of mass paranoia, who were told that my people were their greatest existential threat and only our collective unnatural death would allow them to continue living.

"She'll worry herself sick," my older sister Shifra complained to Maame. "You can't let her cry."

And my mother, who never let us cry, who always cheered us up and taught us to be resilient and optimistic and happy at all costs, didn't stop me now. To this day, it's a mystery to me why she allowed me to cry.

"Let her cry," she told Shifra. "Let her."

And I did. Crying, shaking, sobbing, all through the afternoon, until finally I simply couldn't, exhausted, lying there, vaguely aware of voices talking, probably drifting in and out of consciousness, people coming and going, until the night fell. On the brink of my awareness I registered a whisper maybe to put away the Pesach dishes back to the cellar, but they stayed. There was something in the air, a foreboding. No one would need them again.

My mother didn't cry. My sisters didn't cry. I frequently think about it. About my tears and their silence. Was there something in my gut that knew the horrors that awaited us, knew that I would remain living, with the terrible pain of loss? Were they silent because death was waiting for them?

Pesach, the holy day of our liberty, was over. I was fast asleep.

I woke up early to the sound of a horse and buggy rattling on the cobblestone road. I jumped up, looking out of the window. There were hundreds of them, horses and buggies flooding the street, some of them carrying on in a slow pace, some stopping and discharging a group of haggard women and children and then moving on.

"Get dressed," my mother said. "They're here!"

"They" turned out to be Jews from nearby small villages. They'd been woken in the dead eye of the night, hastily packed a scarce few belongings, and were transferred to the Jewish part of Ujhely, which overnight turned into a ghetto, on April 15, 1944.

Most of the men had already been taken away by the Hungarians for forced labor in terrible, inhumane conditions. Old women, middle-aged women, teenagers, children of all ages, swarmed the area that instantly became so tiny, overflowing in an ocean of despondency and despair.

Our apartment was within the boundaries of the ghetto. SS officers stomped into our house. They scanned the rooms quickly, rifling through our two bedrooms, our small kitchen and dining room, the large entrance hall.

"Forty," they said and left just as quickly as they came. Forty people were going to be crammed into the small apartment that already housed nine. They wanted us to be dehumanized before they'd exterminate us. The way Nazi propaganda worked, they first painted us as demons and a menace to human race, then by submitting us to inhumane conditions they tried to turn us into a horde of subhuman creatures that would squabble and fight and trample over each other in their desperate struggle for survival. If the Germans could have orchestrated the theatrics of our infighting by cramming us in intolerable conditions and pitting us against our own, the mass murder of historically unparalleled proportions would feel less ominous to all those who took part.

But they were dead wrong. This was the last thing they succeeded to do. Dignity and generosity were all we had, and this is what saved our greatest gift of all – our Jewish G-dly soul, shining like a gemstone in the dust and ashes of Europe.

As I was watching total strangers pour into our home, I comforted myself thinking, "at least I have my bed." I couldn't be more mistaken. In that group of forty that were packed into our home, two old women needed it more than I did, at least in Maame 's eyes. "We're going to give your bed to them," Maame whispered to me. "We'll find a spot for you on the floor." As I was clinging to my little illusory desire for privacy, she was saving lives.

There was a family by the name of Pasternack who slept on the floor with the others. They'd been very wealthy, but even the money they managed to bring with them was useless. There was nothing to buy, and they struggled just like everyone else. As usual in dire situations of life and death, money was devaluing by the minute, and only the real stuff mattered: compassion, resilience, and courage.

We wanted to help these people, share the little food that we had, but how do you feed forty people?

My sister Shifra cued in very fast. She was her mother's daughter, and her intuition told her that this tragedy was not going to be a survival of the fittest. It was a survival of the human soul in a Nazi dystopia, an epic war between angels with clipped wings and demons with bared claws. She took the side of the angels. The Judenrat set up a soup kitchen in the central part of the ghetto, and Shifra volunteered to cook and distribute soup to the endless lines of starving, dispossessed shells of human beings squatting on the streets of the Ujhely ghetto. It was only a matter of time until we too joined the line for the thin, bland, watery liquid that in those desperate days passed for soup.

My mother was completely selfless. Her world was never about her, but about the other, her children, neighbors, or total strangers whom she instantly knew needed help. This

total devotion, transcendence of one soul for the sake of other living souls without even a slightest thought of "where am I in all this," manifested spectacularly in the darkest hours of the ghetto. If we were hungry, she split her meager portion. If we were cold, she gave us her blanket. She'd take her plate of food and give it to her sister Rochel and her children, or anyone who needed it more than she did, and there was never a shortage of those who vied for salvation. "I've been tasting the food all day as I cooked," she'd say. Naive as we were, we couldn't help but believe her. We always did...

But that behavior you would expect from a mother, except it wasn't just her children that she helped. She went out of her way to help total strangers, just because they needed help. Helping others sustained her.

Her name was Yitta Rivka, but the Lagmitzer Rav (the rav in our town who originally lived in a suburb of Ujhely) nicknamed her Gita Rivka, for all the goodness she was and had done.

17. The Trains Rattling Into the Night

THE GHETTO LASTED SEVEN WEEKS – THE SEVEN weeks of Sefiras Haomer, of counting the days from Pesach to Shavuos. The war had already been going on for five long years – it was already 1944 – and the German offensive stalled in the face of the tenacious military effort of the Allied Forces. The trajectory of war reversed, and Nazis were racing against the clock to make an indelible ugly mark on human history, even if they were to concede defeat. The worst was yet to come.

Twelve thousand people crammed into a few city streets with minimal food and hygiene caused diseases to spread like wildfire. My memories of the ghetto are vague – eclipsed perhaps by the enormity of what came later.

I had friends in the ghetto, but I didn't go out to see them. There was no fun or laughter during those few weeks of paralyzing fear; just waiting, like a death row inmate, for their execution date. I stayed home all that time, nowhere to go. The ghetto was overcrowded, people spilling out of every nook and cranny, and disease starting to take lives. But I had not a minute to get bored. With six other families sharing such tight quarters we had our hands full. I spent time babysitting

my sister Sara's child Shifra Tzivia. She was a year and half old, and Sara was pregnant with her second one. I also helped my Aunt Rochel who had six small children. We were busy trying to survive, with an axe hanging over our heads.

The details of the ghetto period are blurred in my memory. There were seven weeks, seven Shabboses. Did we have challah? Did we make kiddush? It is all a fog for me. I wonder, when you have a sense of impending doom, does your brain shut down in a state of emotional paralysis, and you become oblivious? I can't tell. I only know that despite all my efforts, my brain simply refuses to bring back the details of that period, and there is no one left to ask.

The transports to Poland started almost immediately.

They were taking us to work, they said, as the first batch of three thousand people was selected for departure. My Uncle Duvid, Aunt Perel and their children, and some of the people living in our house, were all taken. Shifra was helping in the soup kitchen near the train station when she saw the train pull out. She came home crying. "Maame, they loaded them on wagons. Small children, sick people, old people. They put them on plain wooden cattle cars with no windows or seats."

Then a second transport left not long after that, and hauled its human cargo into the unknown. Our apartment started to empty out, but we didn't have time to spread out in the space. The Germans evicted us and turned our home into a hospital. This sight still remains in front of my eyes, a symbol of those days: German soldiers throwing our furniture out, tables, chairs, couch, beds breaking as they hit the ground, our lives literally shattered to smithereens.

My grandfather's house was next door. He'd long passed away and his son, my uncle Avrum Yankel, had inherited it.

My cousin Shifra, whom I'd always played with as a child, still lived there. Their house was overflowing with refugees, and there was no space for us. So after we were evicted, we moved into the Sukkah in the yard. It was a cabin made of a thin plywood, with a stone floor and retractable roof for the schach. It offered basic shelter from winds but was too tiny for so many people, sleeping on the cold stone floor, with no protection from the chilly evenings.

We stayed there together, Maame, my sister Sara with her baby and husband, Yidel, me, Leah, and Esther's two sons, Yisrael Duvid and Shmuel. They ended up staying with us after the ban on transportation was placed whereas Chaya was stuck in Salgotarjan helping Esther after the birth.

I never met children as sweet and as good as Esther's two boys. They were respectful and loving, and recited keser in shul with their melodic voices, like two nightingales at dawn in the heart of an enchanted garden.



My oldest sister Esther, with her sons Shmuel, Yisroel Duvid, and Sara (Surela) on her lap.

We had one hope sustaining us in the ghetto. Taate was in America and saw how the Germans were conquering country after country and killing the Jews. No one knew the extent of what was happening, but quite a few knew enough, and he was one of them. He was desperate to get us out of Europe and he worked day and night trying to get us a visa. It was too late. America was at war and completely closed its borders. However, Palestine was still a remote possibility. Taate turned over heaven and earth, using every ounce of connection he could muster, until he finally obtained the papers we needed. It was a miracle of sorts.

Britain had succumbed to the political pressure of Nazi-sympathizing Arab powers and published the infamous White Papers, greatly restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine, and literally tens of thousands of petitioners were fighting to get their loved ones out; the odds of obtaining those precious certificates were infinitely low. It was a huge triumph for Taate when he finally got us the papers and sent them to us. By the time they arrived, however, we were already locked up in the ghetto. The Judenrat received the papers for us and petitioned on our behalf to the Germans.

"When everyone leaves the ghetto," the German officer said. "Then they can leave."

They could've told us simply "no," but they entertained themselves with this little cynical ploy, like a cat playing with a mouse, making us believe for a moment that we stood a chance to live...

Everyone was ordered to pack a bag with enough food to last three days, and a dress that was durable enough to get wet. They made it sound like we were packing for a trip to the beach.

That's when I cut my braids.

Several months prior, on the fourth of Teves, two days after Chanukah, when I turned sixteen, I wanted to get rid of my long braids. To me it was a symbol of being a grown up. My mother didn't like the idea. "I already have two big girls," she said. "I don't need another one." As the world went crazy, she wanted to preserve my childhood for as long as possible, as if to protect me from the world of the adults that was unraveling.

Reluctantly, I conceded. As I said, you don't refuse my mother anything. "Maybe Pesach then?" I asked.

"Ok." she said. "Maybe."

Pesach came, and I asked again. "No," she said. "Not yet."

But right after Pesach she cut off my braids. It was time for me to grow up.

I wasn't the only one who cut my hair short. We knew we were being sent to a work camp where it would be hard to keep our hair clean.

Two transports had already left the ghetto when Mr. Samet came rushing to our home.

"They are putting together a new group for the new transport," he said. "They are only one person short and searching to pick up whoever comes their way. They're around the corner now. Quickly hide if you want your family to stay together."

He promised us we could stay together until the end, in the hope we could use our papers. But he'd be powerless if the Germans took one of us to fill their quota.

My mother sent my sisters to hide in the backyard, some in the bushes, some in the Sukkah in the backyard. She put my sister Sara's baby in a carriage which she told me to push.

She lay down on the couch. "They're not going to take an old lady," she said. "And they won't take you if you're babysitting. You'll tell them that your sister is pregnant so you are watching her."

Perhaps she was afraid that if we all hid together with the baby, her cries would give us all away. This way we had a chance.

Moments later, a German soldier accompanied by a Hungarian came inside. "Take your bag and come," he told me.

"I can't. I'm babysitting."

"I'll give you a slap so hard you'll fly," the Hungarian hollered. "Come now."

I was filled with an intense and profound fear that I had never experienced before. What scared me the most was not just their savage shouts, the awful screaming; I was being taken alone.

At that moment, my mother lifted her head where she was lying on the couch. "Go, Goldele," she said. "I'll go after you."

I left the baby in the carriage and followed them, sleepwalking as if in a night terror, to a house at the end of our street, to a giant yard at the back of our neighbor Mandel's house. The yard was filled with people, families huddled together. Except for me. I was alone. True, my mother said she'd come, but how would she know where to go? What would I do if she didn't come? And who would let her in if the quota was filled?

And then I saw her, approaching the house, walking into the lion's den, just for me. An unspeakable sense of relief rushed through my body. I never doubted my mother's love. But she had to make a choice, leave everyone back home in order to come for me as she promised. As improbable as it may sound now, considering the sheer horror of that moment, a

flock of terrified people huddled together on their way to be sent to death, it was an amazingly good feeling. A confirmation of her total love, her decision to choose me, to go and save her little girl, to give her a minuscule scrap of encouragement as I stood there lost, terrified for the future. When you have nothing, when even your life is no longer yours, it was a lot, all she could give me, the knowledge that she never let me go, never let go of me, however little it mattered in the world of quotas, trains, and gas chambers.

Even if she dies, she won't ever let her girl feel that she let go of her. This tiny moment in time shapes and transforms entire lives, and I can never forget that, and no one ever should, because only pure, unflinching love defeats machines of death, even at the cost of life.

After we were all gathered together, they marched us through the streets, accompanied by Hungarian soldiers, like a gang of criminals paraded through town, to the train station. While walking, my mother suddenly fainted and fell to the ground. The soldiers picked her up and placed her on a wagon for the infirm and allowed me to ride along.

"I'm ok," my mother whispered. "I pretended to faint." She hoped that they'd allow both of us to remain behind if she fainted. Thinking back, it was so hopelessly naive and so beautifully determined, to try every last resort, to never give up. When we arrived at the station, they divided us up into train cars, only these were no trains for people – they were cattle cars, and we were crammed inside in a way that no animals could travel, more and more people pushed in, 75 per car.

Meanwhile, back at home, my thirteen-year-old sister Leah'la came out of hiding, only to discover that Maame was gone. She started crying hysterically, demanding to know where Maame was. Someone finally told her that Maame left

to the station. Leah'la took off at a run. By the time she got there we were already squeezed into the cattle wagons. She lay down on the ground near the trains and started hollering and kicking, "I want my mother, I want my mother."

I guess they wanted the transports to have a decorum of decency and order, in true German style. Their other consideration must have been that they wanted to avoid incidents that might cause commotion and possibly evoke mass resistance. Compliance and crowd control was their key. They preferred to shut her up by fulfilling her death wish of joining her family on their last ride. It wasn't long before they knocked on our wagon door.

"Klein? Is there a Klein here?" My heart jumped. The certificates! They were finally bringing us the documents so that we could travel to safety. Looking back, one would wonder, how naive could we be. But people grasp at straws, holding on to the very last vestiges of hope that somehow everything would turn out fine. We hoped and prayed, because when the entire world turned their backs on us, faith was the only option.

"Maame," I said. "They're calling our name. Maybe... the papers." Somehow I made it to the door, stepping over people and their little packages. The heavy wooden door slided, grating with a rusty metallic sound, and opened a crack, and there stood my little sister. You've never seen anything like it – tarred black face, disheveled dirty hair, red-rimmed eyes. She looked like a mess.

"Leah'la, Leah'la, why did you do this?" This was the first time Maame lost her courage. She cried out in despair, "Why did you come here?"

Having heard all the horror stories and deducing that Germans never ran mass extermination schemes outside of Poland, Maame came to believe that as long as our feet were

standing on Hungarian soil we were safe, but once we boarded the transport, our fate was sealed. Which brings me back to that moment in our neighbor's backyard. Unlike me, Maame knew she was walking into the valley of death, but she wouldn't let her girl walk there alone. And she joined me on that journey with her eyes wide open.

Leah'la was never short on answers. "What did you think, Maame? They'll take you away and I will stay home?"

She didn't have time to take her bag, which in a German factory of murder and mathematical precision turned out to be lucky, in a macabre way. We were 75 people in our car, with just enough space for us to sit on our bags, squashed like sardines. In their pursuit to maximize the efficiency of their killing machine, the Germans had calculated the space with such sinister precision, there was no space for an extra person, even if it was a petite thirteen-year-old girl. So for the entirety of our longest journey we alternated sitting on our bags and standing.

That cattle train rumbled over the tracks for three days and nights, sealed away from the world, rolling down a tunnel that was taking us to the belly of the German wild, the nightmarish world of primitive fantasy crossed with sophisticated technology. But we had a flicker of light. The Veiditchker Rav and his Rebbetzin were also there. We left on Thursday, and late Friday, at the time for *licht bentching*, someone produced a candle. The rav looked at my mother and said, "Frau Klein." He handed her the candle and match. "Light this candle for us all," he said.

One candle can dispel a lot of darkness. This was a darkness so thick and deep as if coming down directly from Olam Hatohu, the World of Chaos, that the flame cowered in its own shadow and flickered, just like our lives. This candle celebrated

Shabbos, Creation of the world, a world in which Jewish souls were racing across Hungary in a cattle car, on their way to G-d's Throne, from which they were carved.

The three days and nights that we were locked in the cattle car were filled with crying. Not fear or heartbreak, but babies and children crying for food. My sister Chaya came on a different transport with my sister Esther and her three small children, one of them an infant. She later told me they only had one small thermos filled with milk. It quickly ran out, the children got thirsty and hungry, and cried and cried. It was heartbreaking. Those cries followed her for decades, nightmares of babies crying and screaming and not a drop of milk.

Instead of a water closet we were given a single bucket. People took turns, passing the bucket from person to person as it was gradually filling up, careful not to spill the contents, until it would reach the person who was lucky to have a spot under the skylight. He would dump it out the window, trying hard to make sure the gusts of the wind wouldn't sprinkle it back into the car. And then the process started again. I needed to use the bucket, but there was a boy, Chanote, from my class, sitting right near me and I just couldn't make myself. "You must," my mother said. I'm sure he wasn't even looking, but my body refused to comply. I suffered terribly, but the shame was greater than the physical torment.

The boys dumping the waste out the window gave us periodic reports as they saw the names of towns flash by. We believed the Germans that we were going to work – and as long as we remained in Hungary, we continued to hope.

But then they couldn't read the signs any longer. "No more Hungarian," they shouted. "It's Polish."

What happened next shreds my heart to this day. Maame

turned to me and said, plain and simple, "Goldele, they're going to kill us." My mother, who was always optimistic, who trusted Hashem, who reminded us again and again, "*Yeshuas Hashem k'heref Ayin* – Hashem's salvation can come in the blink of an eye," who every day would tell us, "Moshiach is coming," she broke. She cried so bitterly that I felt physical pain in my heart.

"Maame," I said. "Hashem will save us. Who knows what can happen? The conductor can get a message to turn back to Hungary. *Yeshuas Hashem k'heref Ayin.*"

I was surrounded by many people in that car; some were swept in sheer terror while others were cursing Hashem. But they didn't bother me.

I believed what I said with all my heart. I wasn't naive. I was sixteen and a half and knew things weren't good, but I really and truly meant what I said. I knew without a doubt that Hashem could save us. I yearn for that faith today. Never before, and never after, even with years of learning, with my Bais Yaakov education, with all the books I read, did I have so much faith, so much emunah, as I did at that moment, in that cattle car flying into the abyss, soaked with stench and packed with dozens of people crazed with fear, that Hashem's salvation could come in the blink of an eye.

But she just looked at me. Didn't say a word. She didn't have any words left. She was simply crying, and crying, and crying. She was crying out all the years of dogged determination, decades of pure faith in the face of so much suffering, an entire lifetime of hope that the day would come and she and Taate would grow old together, in grace and serenity. She was stricken with grief for Moshiach that was running late. She was mourning her life, and her own untimely, brutal death.

I'll never forgive the Germans for what they did. They broke her. Hitler and his cowardly people broke my Maame.

18. Death Came Up Into Our Windows: Auschwitz

THE CARS RUMBLED TO A HALT. WAGONS CLACKING, dogs barking, harsh voices yelling. "All out, leave everything in the wagon, don't touch anything, just get going."

Those bags we packed so carefully, sewing in the little valuables we had, food, clothes, pictures of loved ones, all were abandoned. It was another hoax the Germans came up with to feed the monster they erected to cannibalize us. They made us believe that we should take with us everything of value, and then they killed us, and robbed us while doing it.

Doors opened, the pre-dawn light shone weakly in the dark car and we stumbled out, more dead than alive. The noise, the screaming, the barks, the scraping of metal, the floodlights on the ramp, overwhelmed and subdued us.

I pulled my jacket tightly around me. Maame stuffed cookies in my pocket. "Another cookie Goldele, take another cookie."

Cookies rich with butter and milk, she'd put her whole heart into baking them so we'd have something nourishing

when we'd be put to work. Amid the noise and confusion, for a tiny moment I was back in our kitchen, near the stove, with that homey sweet scent saturating the air. She held on to these precious cookies for the entire ride, a momentary thought crossed my mind, for the worst to come...

Some of the Jews that arrived in our transport didn't understand a word of the commands that the SS officers, the infamous Totenkopf-Standarten, the Death Heads, were barking at us. But Maame always insisted we speak Yiddish. If I asked her something in Hungarian, she'd cover her ears. "What do you want? I can't hear you," she'd say in Yiddish.

Now my Yiddish was enough to understand most of the German I heard, to avoid the wooden butt of a Karabiner 98k cracking on my head and back for not responding to their commands.

"Get in line, five people to a row. Fast, fast."

We got into a line, and they made us run until we arrived at the selection place. For them, we were cattle, a faceless mass of subhumans they needed to process as fast they could, and go to sleep. Speed was also intended to overwhelm us so that no delays would be allowed.

Leah'la held onto Maame's right arm; I stuck closely on her left. The line moved quickly. A man stood in front of us; we'd later find out this was the infamous Mengele. I never knew that the Angel of Death had such a nice face and could be so charming. Only later did I find out that he performed horrific experiments on children, torturing and maiming them, dispensing of them as biological waste. The only reason he volunteered to do the selection, which was way beneath his rank, was to find specimens for what he called "scientific research." But outside his torture chamber he was adored. He'd give the children lollipops and caress their heads, and

they called him Uncle Pepi. When he'd take them into his lab, there they'd discover his real sadistic, perverted, identity of a serial killer.

"How old are you?" he asked with his enticing paternal smile. I don't know why, but I said I was fourteen. Did I think that a younger child would evoke more pity?

But Leah'la called out, "No, she's not! She's sixteen and a half."

She always liked to pipe up, to be noticed. I always thought that was adorable, this quality of my beloved little sister.

As days and weeks and months passed by, I didn't know what to feel about what she did. She saved my life, as anyone under sixteen years old was automatically sent to the gas chambers. But she sentenced me to a torment that so many times I felt was beyond my ability to bear. There were moments when I envied Maame and Leah'la for not having to endure what I had to go through. But now, more than seventy years later, all I am left with is gratitude – she saved my life, and I am grateful for the life she gifted me with. A life she didn't get a chance to live...

Mengele's smirk instantly disappeared. He roughly pulled my arm off my mother's and punched me with such ferocity that I found myself rolling down, down, down on the concrete ramp, gravity pushing me to the ground, until I reached the bottom. I didn't know what happened. Did I pass out? How long did it take? A moment? An hour? I looked up. I could see nothing. Maame, Leah'la, they were gone.

The sky gradually brightened, and I found myself standing with the group of women and girls who had been separated from the rest. Germans milled around us.

"Take off your clothes," they screamed. "All of them."

It was horrible. The shame, the degradation of that moment... until that moment I'd been a young girl. With all the travails we had endured, even in the train, the sense of personal dignity, of privacy of my body, was reserved for me. There, on a ramp in Auschwitz, it was taken from me.

I don't know what they did with that jacket of mine. But I never had a chance to taste Maame's cookies. We arrived in Auschwitz on May 28, 1944, the first day of Shavuos, and many years later, in preparations for a milchik Shavuos meal, I'd be leafing through a glossy magazine filled with luscious recipes of every type of cheesecake you could imagine, and my heart was repulsed by them all. I'd give anything to taste those butter cookies, so full of Maame's love, her last gift to me before they took her away.

The Germans escorted us into an antechamber with low ceilings, shaved us bald, inspected our bodies for any hidden valuables, and shoved us into showers. Later we'd realize how lucky we were that what came out of that shower was water, but then we had no clue...

We were given a dress and a pair of shoes each. It didn't matter if it fit or not, you took what you got. They ordered us outside, where the sun had climbed in the sky and shone down, hot and bright. There was no shade, just a wide expanse and there we stood for hours on end, without a drop of food or water, faltering in exhaustion after more than 72 of the most terrible hours of our lives.

When night fell, the Germans marched us to a huge empty room with no bunks. It was a transition space, with just a bare earthen floor for us to lie on at night, with hundreds of girls already sleeping there. All together, we were close to a thousand girls in that large space that looked more like a warehouse for broken machinery. They gave us neither food nor water.

A Polish girl came into the room and stood up on a chair. She was the kapo, a prisoner appointed by the Germans as an overseer of the barrack. Many kapos lost their human face and became as cruel as their captors, but she wasn't one of them. She was trying to give us a chance to survive, even if it was the slightest one. This was all she could do.

"Listen to me," she said. "Do you want to live? Then from now on you have to be healthy. No headaches, no stomachaches."

She pointed outside. "Do you see that chimney with black smoke coming out of it? That's where your parents, your siblings, your children, the sick people are. That smoke is all that remains of them."

This was a terrible, cruel, impossible thing to say. I didn't believe her. No one did. She was trying to scare us, to drive us mad. But very soon I knew she was right. I wasn't going to see Maame and Leah'la again. They were gone, separated at the moment Mengele sent me flying down that ramp.

To this day I lose sleep because I didn't get to bid them farewell...

19. Shifra

My first night in Auschwitz. I was about to collapse and longed for nothing more than to lie down on the hard earthen floor, close my eyes, and block out the whole horrific day. I didn't even have the mental capacity to think about Maame and Leah'la. Or maybe something in me put up a high fence, sort of denial, with a sign on it, "no trespassing." Had I crossed that line into thinking about their fate, most probably I would have collapsed and never got up from the floor again. In Auschwitz, I learned, you live in denial and you die in oblivion.

Then I saw her. She'd been taken on the same transport as me. She was herded into a different car, and with all the commotion, the fatigue and the loss of any sense of reality, it didn't even cross our mind to attempt to find each other.

"Shifra," I yelled! "Shifra!"

We hugged and kissed, crying for the first time that day.

"I am alone here," I said. She didn't need to ask what I meant. She knew. That black smoke from the tall chimney was too oppressive and too omnipresent to need any words to speak the unspeakable.

Shifra practically lived in our house. She only had one older sister who was married, and we were like sisters growing

up. She lay next to me, we each put our shoes under our heads as a pillow, and slept.

Next day we were taken to C Lager 19. It was a new extension of a sprawling Auschwitz concentration camp, haphazardly built, designed as a "processing plant" of sorts for the 289,357 Hungarian Jews, as per meticulous German records, that were transported here for extermination. The entire purpose of hauling almost three hundred thousand Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz was what one would call, as terrible as it may sound, "waste disposal." All the Germans wanted to do with us was wipe us off the face of earth, as efficiently and quickly as possible. So determined were the Germans with their plans that they even deviated from their bureaucratic obsession with record-keeping, and upon arrival we weren't even tattooed on our forearms with the famous Auschwitz 6-digit numbers.

Our barrack had wooden planks we called bridges, fourteen girls on each. We had no blankets or sheets or pillows, but at least we didn't have to lie on the floor. We were crammed so tightly together that if one of us wanted to toss to another side, we had to turn in unison, all of us together.

Every morning, we were awoken early, before dawn, struggling to wake up from our horror dreams to our horror reality. We stood for hours for *tzeil appel*, the daily counting. Mornings were frigid cold, and we'd stand there shivering, in thin linen dresses, unable to move a muscle. We would go numb from cold and fatigue, drifting into a semiconscious state. Only one thought stayed with us: If I fall, it's either infirmary or Block 11. These were two more gory ways to die. In the infirmary, German physicians were torturing patients or administering a lethal injection to them. Block 11, known as The Death Block, was a torture chamber where prisoners would eventually die, but not before they suffered so much physical pain that death was a salvation for them.

Keeping us out in the cold, standing in a formation, motionless, fearing that the smallest infraction will cost us our life, was an entertainment particularly favored by the Germans. You'd think we were worth a million dollars the way they counted us again and again and again. For reasons known only to depraved German souls, mental torment combined with physical torture gave them special pleasure. Aside from making us suffer, they wanted us to stop feeling like human beings any longer, thus justifying their race theory that deemed our nation inferior. They wanted us to give up on our sense of self and succumb to their insane idea that we were not people, but merely numbers.

In the afternoon, we'd be counted again. By now, the sun burned like a tropical country and many collapsed and fainted from the hours spent boiling under the sun. A little water was splashed on those that fainted. If they didn't respond, they were taken away to the infirmary, a place of no return. Every day, less and less people stood with us for the daily roll call. After the counting, we were finally given our bread. There were five girls to each row and we were given a piece of bread about two inches thick to share. I don't remember how we cut it – perhaps we were given a knife. All I remember is the bickering, the girls complaining that everyone else got a bigger piece than them. The bread was sliced thin to stretch to five girls. It was a big job and kept us very busy. This also was part of a mind game that the Germans played with us. By pitting us against each other over such a basic necessity as a slice of bread, they attempted to further deprive us of our sense of humanness. They wanted us to grovel like hungry animals, to fight each other, to learn to hate and betray. It was one gigantic social experiment that the Germans were conducting, using us as lab mice that would be culled after the research was over.

One afternoon, the whole lager was under curfew. You had

to stay in bed during curfew and weren't allowed to leave for any reason. We were never given enough water and on this particular day, we hadn't gotten any at all. Shifra was desperately thirsty. "I'm going to look for water," she said. "I need water."

"You can't go, Shifra," I said. "The Germans will shoot you." I was just as thirsty but wouldn't dare break the curfew.

She just looked at me. "Goldy, I don't care. Either I die from thirst or they shoot me. A bullet is quicker."

She walked a long distance through the deserted camp, searching for water. She finally found a bucket of water and drank as much as she could to quench her thirst. And then she did something I will never forget. Until today, I have hakaras hatov. She cupped her hands, filled them with water, and carefully walked back so as not to spill a drop. Instead of cowering and sneaking back as fast she could, she decided to walk, as slow as it takes, just for the slim chance she would make it back alive and bring me a mouthful of water. Life was worth nothing in Auschwitz. Self-sacrifice was worth everything.

That water revived me. I lapped up all that water, licking her fingers to get every last drop.

The men's lager was right across the fence next to our barrack, and they had pity on us. Whenever the Germans weren't looking, they'd throw bread over the fence to the women's lager. Many went to that fence, fighting for those scraps of bread, but I never did. The thought of a revolver pointing at me, a bullet to the head, was stronger than my hunger. But Shifra, she'd run and fight for the bread and bring it back to the barracks and share it with me. She always shared it with me. I cannot be grateful enough for her courage and compassion. Sometimes it's all that stands between life and death.

20. His Angels He Will Assign to You, to Protect You in All Your Ways

My sister Chaya arrived in Auschwitz three weeks after I did. She came with the transport from Salgotarjan, where she'd been helping my sister Esther with her new baby. She was placed in Lager A, quite a distance from my Lager C. By that point, we had wooden bunks and outdoor latrines – holes dug in the ground with wooden planks over them to be used as outhouses – a few feet away from our barracks. That was a lot more than what Chaya had. They slept just as we did when we first arrived, on the earthen floor. And they didn't have a latrine. Each morning several girls had the job to shovel the waste onto a cart and pull it to our lager to dump in the latrine there. There were no horses. Just a few girls, pulling and dragging that wagon.

One day Chaya was chosen for the job. "Anyone here from Ujhely?" she asked the girls she saw near the latrine. "Yes," someone told her. "There are a few people from Ujhely in 19."

Chaya couldn't let go of the wagon full of waste. They needed one girl on each corner to hold it steady. "Please," she begged the girl. "Hold this for a few minutes so I can see if anyone in my family is there."

She ran to look for me. I was lying on my bunk in the lager when I heard a familiar voice calling out. "Klein, Ujhely, Ujhely, Klein."

I jumped off the bunk and straggled to the entrance. There stood my sister Chaya. We couldn't stop hugging and kissing each other, crying all the while. And I will never forget how she pulled out a small piece of bread and put it in my hand. "Here," she said. "I saved this from breakfast. I was hoping I would find you today."

The bread she held was wet from our tears.

Chaya talked quickly. She didn't have much time before she'd be noticed. "Listen," she said. "Every morning they carry the sick women from C Lager to the infirmary in A Lager where I am. There are always four girls to each sick person, carrying them on a blanket."

I nodded. I'd seen the half dead carried to the infirmary each morning. "Try to be the one that carries that blanket," she said. "After that, we'll figure out a way for you to stay."

I tried to convince Shifra to join me so that all three of us will stay together, but she declined. She was happy for me, but conditions in Lager C were better than where Chaya was. She chose not to take the risk.

It took a few days for me to position myself in exactly the right place to be chosen for the job. They always carried off the sick in early morning, after *tzeil appel*, the daily counting. Chaya was waiting for me the morning I helped carry a sick girl to the infirmary. She motioned to me after I finished. "Come, come," she said. I slipped away and joined her group in their

lager. There were nine girls who'd banded together: Raizy and Miriam Rosenthal, Ella and Judith Schwartz, Muncie Weisel, Goldy Freidlander, Ella and Gittel Hertik, and Chaya. They formed a tight-knit group, looking after each other like family. They welcomed me in, the tenth and last to join the group.

I was terrified when the evening count drew closer. When we first arrived in Auschwitz our heads were shaven clean, but in the weeks that elapsed, little black roots poked through and covered my head, whereas my sister and her friends were still completely bald. I could just imagine the Nazis seeing my black fuzz standing out amid all those white skulls and shooting me on the spot. My heart beat so fast I was afraid the SS officer could hear it from afar.

But nothing happened. They counted and counted again. They noticed an extra inmate, but just sent an older woman to the C Lager where I had been, where the accommodations were slightly better. I don't know why, but she kept coming back. So each time it was the same thing. They'd count, find an extra person and send this older woman away. I don't know if I could have lived with myself had they shot her for being so confused as to return every time with no permission. But they didn't. G-d had mercy on me.

I didn't care that I had to sleep on the floor. I had my sister. I had family.

Did I tell Chaya about Maame and Leah'la? I don't think I had to. She saw it in my eyes, the same way I saw it in hers. Esther, her husband, and their three beautiful children, Sarah, Shlomo and Avraham, were gone. Most of our family had to give their souls to ascend in flames and add their sparks to Hashem's Throne, and we had to remain down here, lie on the hard land of Poland, and try to keep our souls flickering inside our bodies. We lived, one minute at a time, because we

had to, and we had to never give up. And we didn't, for as long as we physically could.

Only later did we find out from my cousin what happened to the rest of our family. They arrived in the fourth and last transport to Auschwitz shortly after us. Yidel spent time in Auschwitz before being transferred to Dachau.

Sara had been sent straight to the left with her child and unborn baby.

My sister Shifra had held tightly to the hands of my two nephews, Yisrael Duvid, and Shmuel, aged seven and eight. She was a young healthy girl. The Nazi guard told her to drop the hands of the boys and come to the right. "They're not yours," he said. "Come here."

"Oh no," she said. "I'm responsible for them."

"Don't be silly. Don't you want to live?"

But she held onto them even when they shouted at her and tried to take the children away.

They finally allowed her to move to the left with those sweet innocent nephews of mine.

I couldn't help but think how things could have been different. What if Chaya hadn't gone to Salgotarjan and the boys would have stayed home with Esther? Or what if our family hadn't been separated on the transport? Maame surely would have held onto my nephews and Shifra would have lived.

Even seventy-five years later, these thoughts torture me. I feel like screaming – Shifra could have lived. She could have lived! Human lives, real lives of real people, were falling prey to such insignificant circumstances. As it says, when a permission is given to the Angel of Death to kill, he kills indiscriminately. The Holocaust is one of those moments in history when nothing made sense. Weak, frail, timid people survived, and

the healthy and courageous perished. We have to accept that this is what Hashem wanted.

I can't help but think that Shifra was too good for this world. She was a dressmaker, a talented one, working her deft hands all day. Maame thought she was banking her money, until the day she met someone on the street. "Oh, Mrs. Klein," she said. "Do you know how many families live from your daughter?"

Shifra had been discreetly distributing her earnings to families in need.

My sisters and I loved to dress in modern, nice clothing, but not Shifra. She could have sewed the most exquisite creations for herself but was satisfied with a simple dress and nondescript black shoes and pocketbook.

When we were all put into the ghetto, it was Shifra again, quietly and without fanfare, serving soup to the poor and the downtrodden, mending clothes and creating clothing from scraps for those who had none.

Hashem knows His divine plans, He came down to gather the most beautiful flowers from His garden. Shlomo and Avraham sing keser to Him and Shifra sews clothes of radiant light made of mitzvos for all the souls that ascend to the Garden of Eden.

But all this came later. At that time, every atom in our body focused on survival. I never acknowledged that my sisters, my mother, had perished. I had to live. For them, for myself, for my future unborn children, for this story that I have to tell.

I clung to Chaya, with only one hope in my heart. Ribono Shel Olam, help me make it through another day.

21. Escaping the Slaughterhouse: Run, Goldele, Run

IT WAS AUGUST, EIGHT WEEKS SINCE WE HAD ARRIVED at Auschwitz, and the Nazis decided to do a selection. As I mentioned before, we were too transient for the Germans so they never had numbers tattooed on our arms. Instead we had cloth with a number sewn to our clothing. Our group was taken to a big empty field and ordered to strip. Once again, Joseph Mengele stood there, together with two other officers and vicious dogs. The selection went quickly, and before I knew it, I was on one side of the field, and my sister and our friends on the other, about eight hundred girls in total. Chaya was tall and strong and looked capable of hard work. I was younger, thin, and petite, and put with the group of several hundred women and girls who looked frail and weak. I didn't know where our group was headed, although I surely guessed.

I'd always been timid by nature and I wasn't the type for courageous feats. Chaya was the daring one and I always chickened out. When the Germans first arrived, it only took

one look of them marching down the street to send me into a paroxysm of tears and fear.

I only knew one thing. I needed to be with my sister. That memory of sitting on that cellar floor listening to Hitler shouting that he wouldn't stop until he killed every last Jew had stayed with me all those years. I didn't hold out hope of survival – he was going to get me in the end, I thought, he will get us all, but if I had to walk the valley of death, I didn't want to do it alone. I wanted to share my fate with a kindred soul, my flesh and blood, a person whom I could look in the eyes in my last living moment and tell her with my eyes "I love you."

I'd been alone during my first days in Auschwitz, and it was unbearable. I couldn't go on living without her, or dying without her, or letting her die without me, for that matter. I had been torn from Maame and Leah'la once. I simply wouldn't let it happen again, even if I were to die trying. It was easier to die from a bullet or a pack of dogs than wither into oblivion alone, separated from the only soul that was close to me. I could see her group receding across the field and I took off at a run.

Her group was on one side, mine on the other, dogs and Germans in the middle. My sister later told me that when she saw me streaking across that big empty field in plain view of the Germans, she almost fainted. She was sure I'd be shot dead any second or torn apart by the dogs. She covered her face unable to watch what she was sure would happen next. But the *Basheffer* wanted me to live. The group I'd been assigned to most certainly went straight to the gas chambers. Hashem gave me the courage for such a daring move that not only reunited me with my sister, it saved my life.

When He came down to gather His flowers, He almost picked me, but then He said, I want her here, in this garden. And I lived another day.

22. The Ghost Slaves of Bremen

We were transferred to a port city called Bremen, a commercial and industrial town in northwestern Germany on the River Weser. Bremen is one of the most spectacular cities in Germany, with stunning architecture and ancient traditions. It is part of the Bremen/Oldenburg Metropolitan Region, inhabited by 2.4 million people who pride themselves on living in the cultural hub of Northern Germany, with dozens of museums and art galleries. The musicians of Bremen are a part of German lore. But we lived in a parallel universe, victims to the most infernal forms of human depravity and madness. We didn't belong with museums; we were the ones that were designated for eradication from the books of history.

I recognized the name at once – it was the same name as the ship that carried my father to America. The head commander of our camp was not an evil person, and considering that any intelligent man would understand that the war was nearing its end and German defeat was only a matter of time, no one was too eager to perpetrate more crimes against humanity than they already had. He did his job, but didn't set out to kill us.

But it was a work camp, and the work was brutal. They'd wake us each morning at four o'clock, so they could count us for several hours before work started at eight o'clock. The guards, mostly illiterate and ignorant, were cruel, waking us up with rapid banging on the door and yelling *"aufshtein, aufshtein!* Get up, get up!"

But there were one or two good ones, who'd politely knock on the door and say, *"aufshtein bitte, manne dammen,* please wake up, my ladies."

Imagine hearing that from a German!

Sometimes we had wagons or trucks bringing us to work. But more often we'd have to walk the four kilometers to the center of the city to clean up the ruins after the aerial bombardments of the Allied forces that were incessantly pounding Germany into submission. Rain, ice, snow or heat, we'd walk in our thin dresses and clunky wooden shoes. The Germans were always in a rush and they'd push us, hurrying us along faster and faster, until inevitably our shoes fell off. Once, when we were walking through the snow, my shoes fell off. I tried to bend down to pick them up, but instantly there was a revolver pressing into my back and shouts to move forward. Naturally, I left it behind. The next morning, I tried to wrap my feet in rags but it hardly offered any relief. Most of us ended up walking barefoot through the snow.

Our food ration was miniscule, hardly enough to survive the backbreaking labor over the next ten months. We were there in the summer and all through the winter of 1944, going into 1945.

We could see German civilians in the streets when we walked, but none came anywhere near us, guarded as we were by SS. I want to believe that after five years of brutal war, and witnessing the madness Hitler had plunged them into, many

of them had a change of heart about Nazi ideology, the Jews, and what this entire war was about. But they themselves must have been too afraid.

However, there was one lady who made eye contact with my sister whenever she saw us marching by. Chaya would watch her carefully, and when the guards' backs were turned for a moment, she'd go to where the lady had last stood. There was always something hidden for her. A little cotton cloth, a needle, grains of salt wrapped in a scrap of a newspaper. And always a letter that we'd read together when we returned to the lager. This anonymous woman would tell us not to get discouraged because we'd surely get freed. The Americans and the British were coming closer, she wrote, and freedom wasn't far off. That letter always gave us a little boost, a tiny ray of goodness in a world gone dark. She risked her life just to instill hope in total strangers who had nothing but a faint thread of hope. I am sure that in the world of darkness that the Nazi Germany had brought upon Europe, there were even more examples of human courage and goodness, and this is what ultimately won that terrible war.

The allies bombed Germany non-stop, England alone dropping almost 29 million pounds of bombs on Bremen, destroying sixty percent of the city.

The air raid siren would blare whenever the squadrons of Allied bombers approached Bremen. The soldiers didn't want to die and they couldn't leave us alone. So they'd bring us to a shelter and we'd sit on the floor, grateful for a few moments of rest. We had mixed feelings – we were so glad they were bombing Germany, but scared for our lives...

One day, Chaya and I were sitting in the shelter, near one of the four entrances. Suddenly, a bomb fell right near the entrance and exploded with an ear blasting crash. I held onto

my sister. We both cried "Shema Yisrael" over and over. The dust settled and we realized to our surprise that we were still alive. We thought we were really going to die this time.

When the bombing ceased, our job was to pick up the rubble and dismantle the shaking walls of houses and buildings. We'd create a chain, passing the good undamaged bricks down the chain to be reused elsewhere. The guards stayed a good distance away from these faltering buildings, watching us from afar.

One day we were working as usual and my good friend Miriam Rosenthal stood near me. She was twenty years old and beautiful, with blue eyes and blonde hair. It took only a second for a wall to fall on her, crushing her to death on impact. Her older sister Raizy was standing right there, saw it happen in front of her eyes. Only half an hour earlier, Miriam had been singing, the way we sometimes did, if there was a kind guard on duty. "Here is dark and there is light," she'd sang. Miriam left the darkness behind and went into the world of light, her body crushed but her soul set free, and we mourned for her.

We worked so hard, you can't imagine. I didn't stop working for even a moment because if I did, I'd get punished – slammed on the back with a rifle or made to kneel all day. Sometimes the guards would shave our head as a punishment, shaving off the little fuzz that was finally growing back.

It hurt Chaya to see me working so hard. She was like a mother to me, very protective. "Goldy," she'd say. "Take a breath, stop for a moment, the guards are talking to each other. They don't see you." But I didn't have a daring personality. I kept working.

Sometimes one of the three guards watching us had a softer side, and then we could work a little slower. It was very rare to

have all three of them lenient, but it was good enough if you stood near a nicer one.

Chaya worried that I didn't have enough to eat – none of us did – and she'd save some of her bread to give me. I didn't want to take it from her but she'd insist. Sometimes, when we cleaned a street that had been bombed, we'd come across a burned-out store with cans rolling about on the floor. Nobody touched them. The Germans told us never to touch the food because the smoke and debris from the bombs made it poisonous. Chaya would sneak some cans back to the lager anyway, and share it with our group. Those burnt cans of vegetables and sometimes fruit tasted like the finest rib steak, temporarily blunting our constant, unrelenting hunger.

We never got sick from eating the food, but if the Germans would have caught Chaya taking the cans they would have punished her terribly. There was another set of sisters in our little group and the younger one was always crying to her sister. "I'm hungry," she said. "I'm so hungry."

One day, this sister pointed to me. "Look at *kish* Goldy," she said. "She never cries to her sister."

They called me *kish* which means "small" in Hungarian, as I was the shortest in the group.

It had never occurred to me to cry. If Chaya didn't have food, why would I cry to her? And if she did have, she would share it with me. The truth is, I never was a big eater, and my sister was probably hungrier than I was. Still, she shared whatever she had with me. She was like a mother to me in every sense of the word.

23. The Great Ascent of The Soul: Yom Kippur in Bremen

ONE DAY, ONE OF THE GIRLS IN OUR LAGER MENtioned that according to her calculations, yesterday was Rosh Hashanah. After the war, I read about people who managed to keep a siddur, somehow bake some matzah for Pesach, even in Auschwitz, but we had none of that. We were 800 girls selected to work, and we had nothing. Looking for food occupied all our attention and we were grateful if we had a moment to breathe. But this girl came from a different part of Hungary, where the girls had more of an education in davening and learning than I did, and somehow she kept track. But it wouldn't have made a difference to me if I'd known in advance that Rosh Hashanah was coming. I didn't have challah or honey, we didn't have a shofar and couldn't even imagine blowing it anyway, and I had to work just like any other day. But, I thought to myself, if I counted nine more days, then we'd reach Yom Kippur. I didn't have the option not to work – that would mean a bullet in the back of my head – but fasting was something I could do.

But I worried that if I skipped the meal on Yom Kippur,

the tiny rations that barely kept us alive, I wouldn't be able to do the arduous physical work we were assigned to do. So for the next nine days, every morning, I hid a tiny piece of bread inside a crack in my bed, hoping it would escape detection when the Germans inspected our room. My plan was to eat those pieces of bread right after work, before the dawn of Yom Kippur.

The day before Yom Kippur, we drank our "breakfast" of bitter black coffee and marched the four kilometers to work, cold and tired as usual, the Germans hurrying us along. We broke our backs for long hours, as every day, and before dawn returned in trucks. As we turned the last corner, we were aghast at the orange halo and the sight of flames licking the sky. Our barracks were crackling and sizzling as the fire was devouring them, turning charred black and crumpling like a house of cards. A bomb had struck while we were out. We were stuck in the back of the open truck, squeezed like sardines, because the Nazis refused to let us off for fear we'd take advantage of the chaos and escape. We didn't leave the truck until the wee hours of the morning. This was the time of Kol Nidrei, of a chazzan asking forgiveness for all the mistaken souls, and in the name of the Bais Din in Heaven and Bais Din down below, allowing them to come and pray with all the Jewish people, asking for atonement.

I looked up at the black sky, the sparks of fire reaching up and disappearing into the bottomless infinite night of the universe that has remained silent for all these long years, and the Jewish people, G-d's chosen children, were being sacrificed, millions of us, to atone for this dark, broken world. These sparks melted the ice that encased my heart, and for the first time since we were taken away, I thought of Maame and Taate. Memories flooded my entire being. Until that moment we

were so exhausted, always working, our every thought focused solely on survival, on foraging for scraps of food, like a stray dog hunted down on the streets of a city. Somehow, you look at the sky and you're hit by a thought that you don't know who you are, or what you are, what has happened, and what will happen. For so long, I was devoid of emotion, as most of us were. Somehow we sensed that in order to survive mentally, to recruit all our emotional power for the struggle to simply be, we needed to suppress all memories. We couldn't think about what once was, and was now no more.

Suddenly, my armor of mindless apathy was stripped away, and I felt so alone, a soul lost in infinity, under the ink black and fiery red sky. It wasn't about physical survival any longer. My soul was pleading for an answer, to a question it didn't know to ask. But somehow I knew, deep inside, that my very existence, in this world and in all the worlds, my immortal soul that found refuge in the body I called "I," Goldele, Goldy Klein, depended on this question and on this answer. G-d, what is this all about? What am I about?

Without realizing it, I was crying, talking to all those who were far away, across the ocean, across the universe, living on this earth and living high above. We were all one on that Yom Kippur night that was ascending in fire. "Maame, Taate, I'm a Jewish girl. It's Yom Kippur. Where am I? What has become of everyone I loved?" The enormity of my loss hit me for the first time.

Memories flooded my mind. Yom Kippur in Ujhely. We didn't have a Bais Yaakov school, we didn't always know how to daven, but we lived our Yiddishkeit. On Erev Yom Kippur, we'd stay home cooking, instead of meeting with friends. We were so careful to not talk lashon hara. Maame would bring my brother Yidel to Feter Meir to bentch him, and we would

stand there and cry, because we knew it was a day when we stood before Hashem.

Then Yom Kippur arrived and the women went to shul and the older girls babysat. I remember how afraid I was to be alone babysitting at night – the non-Jews knew all the adults were in shul and often took advantage of that to ransack or burn the houses. Strong fear filled me every Yom Kippur. Sometimes, when I didn't babysit, my older sister would make sure I davened, and took the day as seriously as it deserved.

Now, my chance to fast dissipated as the bread I'd hidden burned in the barrack, and the night of Yom Kippur fell. They finally took us to an abandoned warehouse. It was filthy with dust several inches high. They locked the door on us and told us to sleep, without distributing the evening meal. In the morning, they still hadn't given us food or water, so we ended up fasting through the night and half the day.

They gave us brooms, rags and water to clean the warehouse and make it somewhat livable. They told us where to fetch discarded boards of wood, gave us hammers and nails, and we spent the day building beds to make this warehouse our new barracks.

Only then did they give us a little food and water.

Many Yom Kippurs have come and gone since. Yet that Yom Kippur in Bremen remains forever etched in my heart. Every Yom Kippur I look into the candles I light, and the flames grow on me, the walls of the barracks collapse, and the night, that endless Yom Kippur night, shines again in my soul, bright and pure as only G-d's endless mercy can.

24. The Valley of Death

AFTER TEN MONTHS IN BREMEN, THE RUMORS STARTED spreading that the Allies were gaining ground. They were advancing into Germany. Not that it encouraged us. Even if that were true, common sense told us, they won't leave us to live anyway. Either way, we were on a death watch. Looking back, it astonishes me every time. It was a month before the end of war, when it was not a question of if Germany would be defeated but when. But we, a bunch of broken, utterly devastated girls, didn't even have the courage to hope that we had a chance. As Maame said, before that fateful train, "*Yeshuas Hashem Keheref Ayin*," but I didn't have the courage to believe.

In April 1945, in the midst of a beautiful spring, when tender green leaves were sprouting and earth smelled of life, the Germans rounded us up, the 800 bone-weary prisoner workers in the camp, and told us to start moving. They gave every girl a whole loaf of bread, a treasure, but we didn't even have time to eat. The guards kept shouting and pushing us in the backs with rifle stocks to run faster and faster. Many Germans also fled Bremen, ahead of the oncoming British troops, and they were desperate to detonate the bridge behind us.

For two days we mostly ran, only at times herded into a

passing cargo train or into trucks. When we arrived at a camp, no guards were to be seen. We had no clue where we were or what was the name of the place. We were pushed into a windowless pitch dark room already filled to capacity with people. Despite the stench of hundreds of bodies, they could smell our bread. Hunger sharpens your sense of smell and, unless you have something in you that is stronger than the primitive survival instinct, it also blunts your sense of moral principle. Suddenly, I heard the screaming. The older inmates had knives and all they cared about was their lives, at all costs. Every minute we heard another girl scream, "they're cutting me, they're cutting me." They were trying to get to the leftovers of the bread we were given before the escape from Bremen.

"They're going to kill us," Chaya whispered. "We have to get out." We stumbled over people, trying to find our way. Finally we found a door, pushed it open, and staggered into the night. We were on the run for two days non-stop and we were too fatigued to stand on our feet or even keep our eyes open. We collapsed right where we stood. Something soft cushioned our fall, and we were asleep before we knew it. In the morning we woke up, only to realize that we were sleeping in a pile of dead bodies.

We rose quickly and moved off. Were we horrified? I don't think we were. When you spend months of your life, every single moment of it, in immediate proximity to death, awake, asleep, barely conscious, walking as if in a never-ending nightmare, not knowing if you're dead already or going to be dead in a second, realizing that we were comforted by the remains of those poor people who didn't survive while we did so far wasn't even surprising to us. And that was the shocking truth of that time...

Our mind immediately moved forward to ask the questions – where were we and where were the Germans?

We were in Bergen Belsen, and the Germans were gone. We thought Auschwitz or Bremen was bad. At Bergen Belsen we peered into the bottomless pit of evil, to see right before our eyes the gehenem on this earth. Thousands and thousands of people left to die, slowly and agonizingly by hunger, thirst and disease. Typhus, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and dysentery were ravaging bodies and devouring souls, fifty thousand in total.

Everywhere we looked, we saw bodies. Countless piles of corpses deformed by disease and decomposing in the warm days of spring. The stench was unbearable. A day or two went by. We were aimlessly sitting, my sister and our friends, outside the barracks, in confusion, drifting in and out of consciousness, unsure whether we were awake or asleep, under the deep blue, silent sky. Somewhere in the back of our minds we knew that it was the end. Only we didn't know if we would live to see the day after.

Suddenly we saw white signals flashing.

"We're free!" A friend said. "The Germans fled."

The camp was empty of guards.

It was April 15, 1945.

It wasn't long before we saw British soldiers driving into the camp. They had a truck with a loudspeaker.

"You're free," they said. "But the war isn't over. Help yourself to whatever you want from the German supplies."

They threw us chocolate, tuna, cans of meat, and moved on.

We were left alone again with food to eat and the freedom we still couldn't comprehend. Many around us had survived the torture and the famine and inhumane conditions for so

long only to die when their stomachs couldn't handle the sudden abundance of food.

Captivity didn't kill them; freedom did.

So many others were so weak with starvation, their bodies crawling with lice, they had no energy to even open their mouths to eat. They were lying there dying of starvation, with food right next to them. For them it was too late.

Germany wouldn't surrender for another few weeks, on May 8, 1945, but for us, the war was over.

We found piles of SS uniforms and used them as bedding instead of the bare floor we slept on. Our group of nine, Raizy Rosenthal, Ella and Judith Schwartz, Muncie Weisel, Goldy Freidlander, Ella and Gittel Hertik, and Chaya and I stayed together. We'd remained like family through everything. We found food and water in the kitchen and sat and waited until the British would return. We had no home, no families, nowhere to go. We were waiting for the death to end, and our lives to begin again. Would we have enough life left in us to simply wait?

25. Angel of Life in the Valley of Death

CHAYA WANTED TO WALK AROUND THE CAMP. MAYBE we will find someone from our hometown, she insisted. We had nothing better to do, so we wandered around. Later that day we found a girl we knew from Ujhely.

She looked like the walking dead, so famished she was. "Yes," she said. "Your cousin Shifra was here. I saw her a few weeks ago. She was foraging through scraps of garbage. But she's certainly dead. Everyone in that block is dead."

"Please tell me the number of the block anyway," we said.

"You got nothing there," she said. "She was pretty much dead weeks ago."

But Chaya wouldn't relent, and we were told where to go. When we got there, we physically couldn't force our way in. Piles and piles of dead bodies blocked the doors. We walked around to see if we could get in through the windows and there too, bodies were piled up, but not as many. We looked through the windows and saw more corpses lying on the bunks, rows and rows of motionless bodies. It was a kingdom of death in its most gory form.

Chaya hollered, "Sátoraljaújhely, Shifra Katz, Shifra Katz, Sátoraljaújhely." No response. Everyone was dead. I pulled

at Chaya. "Let's go," I said. "She's not here, and if she is here, she's gone."

Chaya didn't move. "If she's dead, we will carry her out and dig a grave and bury her," she said.

"But how will you know if she's there?" I asked. "We can't even get in."

Chaya started hollering again. "Ujhely, Shifra. Ujhely, Shifra." And then we saw a slight movement, a barely noticeable stir, a head listlessly tilting off the wooden bunk. In our past lives, Shifra had beautiful brown eyes, and those eyes were staring at us out of a skeletal face.

"It's Shifra," Chaya screamed. "That's her!" She jumped over the bodies and crawled inside the barrack. "Shifra, Shifra," she called out, but the girl on the bunk just stared back. She couldn't speak. And she certainly couldn't walk.

"Goldele, come on in," Chaya said. "Come help me." I was afraid to make my way inside. It stank so badly near that room of horror, filled with so many people who died in so many unimaginably cruel ways. But how could I say no to Shifra? Shifra who walked across Auschwitz to bring me water in her cupped hands, who broke her bread with me, my cousin and my best friend.

I had to step over many bodies, climb on top of them to get inside and carry her out, drag her with our shaking, weak hands to the place we set up camp. The other girls didn't want her around. "She's full of lice and disease," they said. "And she's not going to survive anyway." Survival was a ruthless affair, and they were not prepared to risk their lives for Shifra. We had to make our choice.

We took a few SS uniforms to a different corner and made Shifra a bed. First we stripped her down. Her body and clothes were full of lice and dirt, and her flesh was literally rotting

away, like a putrid pear. Chaya washed her. It must have hurt a lot, scraping off layers of dead flesh, but Shifra was too weak to even show any sign of pain. Only her eyelids fluttered, and we knew she felt the agony of her rotting body being scraped. But Chaya had to do this, to give Shifra a fighting chance to not succumb to gangrenous wounds. After that torturous wash, we dressed Shifra in a clean German uniform. She just lay there, unable to walk, move, or even talk, a ghost of a human being.

We got a little milk and managed to dribble two spoonfuls into her mouth. She wasn't capable of taking more. After a few hours, Chaya gave her another two spoonfuls, slowly building up her capacity to take in food. After a day, she was able to nod yes or no to our questions. A couple of days later she was able to whisper, then sit up, then slowly walk around. Day to day, we could see her coming back from the dead, in front of our eyes.

The angel who carried the dead body from the killing field and gave her back her life had a name. How befitting, the name of that angel was Chaya, the living.

It made me realize that thousands more probably could have been saved in the same way, but no one was there to do it.

We found another cousin in Bergen Belsen, Zisu Goldenberg. She wasn't as bad off as Shifra – she was walking on her own two feet. But we didn't recognize her. She was a year younger than I, and had the face of a young girl, but her stomach was distended to such an extent that she looked like she was nine months pregnant. She laughed when she saw we didn't recognize her. "This is me," she said. "Your cousin."

26. Liberation

By the time the British finally came back, Chaya and I had contracted typhus. It wasn't just from caring for Shifra – the entire camp was infected so badly with typhus that after the British shoveled the corpses into mass graves, they burned down the camp after we were all evacuated. The British took us to a makeshift hospital. We were lying there, burning with fever, unable to eat. Shifra recovered quicker than we did, and she walked around the hospital with a pail, eating the food the patients were too sick to eat. It didn't take long before she was blooming, with a full face, like a baby. She couldn't eat enough. Soon after, Shifra and Zisu were transferred to Sweden to recuperate further. Many Jews were transferred there after the war and given refugee status.

In the hospital, I was separated from Chaya and shared a room with another girl. My condition was rapidly deteriorating. I remember seeing a girl in the other bed who wasn't my sister, and then all went black.

The protocol was that every evening, the Hungarian and English doctors would do rounds. They'd go from room to room to see who was still alive, and mark down the names of people who didn't survive the day, and in the morning, the corpses would be carried out. That evening, when they took

my vitals I probably drifted into a coma. My body temperature had plummeted to room temperature, and they couldn't find a pulse. They made a check on my forehead and another on the clipboard. "Take her out tomorrow," the doctor said.

In the middle of the night, I woke up. I looked around the room and said something to my roommate. She screamed so loud, she thought I'd come back from the dead. I started screaming as well, because when I heard her screaming, I thought something terrible was happening.

"You're lucky you woke up," she said when she calmed down. "They were going to take you out in the morning."

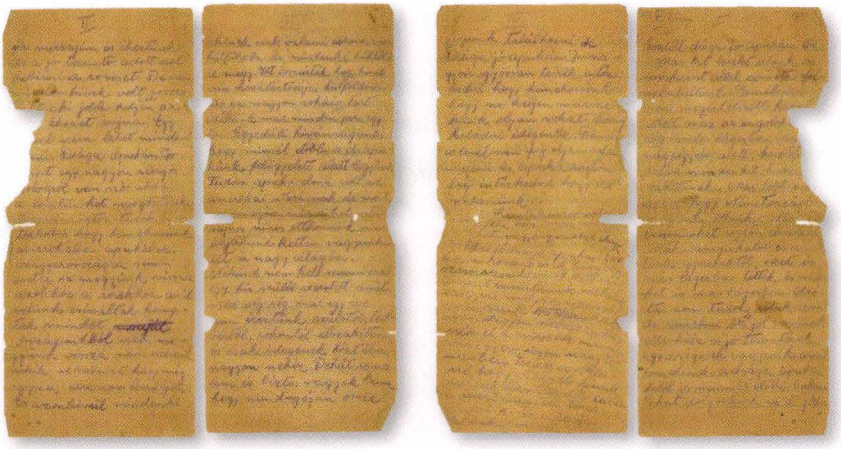
By morning, I was already feeling much better. The crisis was over. The doctors came back into my room, taking my temperature again and again, shaking their heads in disbelief that I could be awake and talking. They called it a medical miracle. But I just thought that after everything I'd been through, anything could happen.

When I got better and was no longer contagious, and didn't require intensive care, I was moved to a room next to Chaya.

A British soldier sent by a Jewish Chaplain named Rabbi Shlomo Baumgarten came to the hospital asking if we had relatives outside of Bergen Belsen. They were trying to match up survivors with their families wherever possible. He had a Hungarian soldier with him to translate. Sick as I was, I still remembered my father's address in America. "313 East 10th Street," I said. "That's his address. He lives on the Lower East Side in Manhattan."

Chaya looked at me in amazement. "How do you know?"

I'd written that last letter to Taate three years ago, and I was so proud to write and address that letter that his address got ingrained in my memory.



My first letter to Taate when lying in bed with typhus in 1945.

Chaya and I wrote him a letter in our native Hungarian. "I'm sorry to write such a sad letter," I wrote. "I feel like we are the only two people left in the whole world," Chaya wrote.

We were surrounded by thousands of people, but we felt all alone in the world. And they were as alone as we were, broken vessels washed up at a shore after a deadly tsunami.

When we were discharged from the hospital, the British authorities placed us in a makeshift transit camp for displaced persons, which served in the past as a German military school near Bergen Belsen.

The chaplain must have used his connections in the army because just a few days later we got a letter. The place was very large and there was no way to call someone, so when our letter arrived, Rabbi Baumgarten asked someone to find us and tell us he had a letter from America for us. There were thousands of people in the lager and the news spread like fire through the camp. We were the girls who had a father in America. People would point to us; we were the celebrities of Bergen Belsen. And of course they were envious. We had something no one had. It was like winning the lottery. We had a chance.

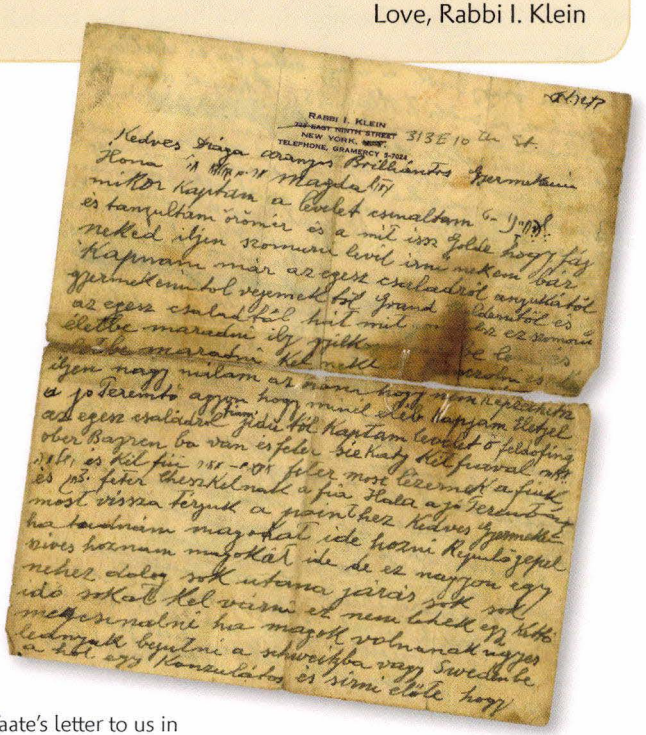
Chaya and I ripped open the letter.

My darling, beloved, treasured children. When I received your letter I made a "sheheyanu" blessing and danced with joy. Goldy, you're saying in your letter that it is very painful for you to write such a letter. I wish I got word from mother, from the rest of the children, from my sons-in-law, grandchildren, the whole family. You're saying you're sad to have survived after suffering by the hand of such cruel murderers. I say you should dance. My joy is so enormous you can't imagine. The good G-d should grant us that I may soon receive signs of life from the entire family. I got a letter from my son Yidel, he's in Feldafing ober Bazren and also Uncle Shia Katz with his two sons and Yitzchok, Uncle Cheskel's son. Thanks to the Almighty. Getting back to the point, my dear children, if I could bring you here by airplane I would be glad to do so but this is a very difficult process. It takes a lot of effort, it will take a considerable amount of time, this is not a quick one-two matter. If only you could manage over there to get into the Swiss or Swedish consulate and cry in front of them. Say that it's just the two of you alone in the whole wide world.... You must emphasize that you have to be reunited with your father, Rabbi Klein 313 E. 10 St. New York. It is most important to cry in front of them, which should make it work. I am giving you a name and address. This person was the Consul General at the American Consulate in Budapest. Now he's in an even higher position. He speaks Hungarian. Write to him and tell him that you desperately want to reunite with your father. Most important. Write him a nice letter, make it legible, in the Hungarian language.

Mr. Howard Travers
Chief of Visa Division
Department of State, Washington D.C.

Write to Mr. Travers a good Hungarian letter. He should help you come out right away, very soon, since you are like two girls on the sea, in a big world.[1] *He should search for mother and the other children. I would want that he should take care of everyone (to come out) at once. Don't worry loved, dear Kinderlach. It will still be very, very good for you. If you need money, write, and I will send you all as much as you want.*

Love, Rabbi I. Klein



Taate's letter to us in Bergen Belsen in 1945

1. This was a Yiddish expression they used in their letter to their father saying they are "Tzveire oifen velt," meaning, all alone in the world.

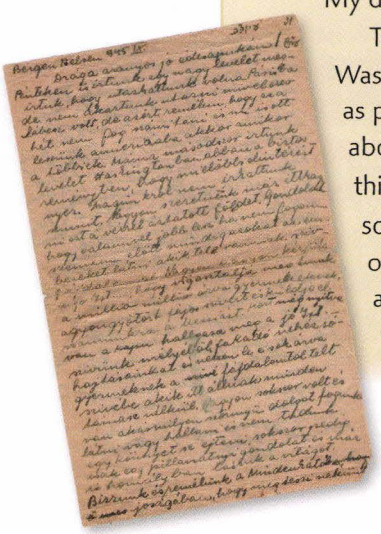
I've always been the first to catch any illness that passed through the family and I was a short, skinny girl, a picky eater who hardly ate. So much so that when my father was on the Bremen ship he wrote a letter to my mother, suggesting she give me beer because it would help fatten me up.

Now, of all the daughters he least expected to survive, here I was, alive.

From then on, I wrote to Taate every day. When I read the letters again, they were filled with the trivialities of our daily routine – we slept, we ate, we got mail and his packages – but these details seemed like a miracle. We were alive. We survived. We did what human beings do. We lived. The triviality of it was the miracle.

Bergen Belsen, September 6, 1945

...I write that they should let me in to the ship. Sorry for expressing myself this way, but I would gladly even be a toilet cleaner on the ship, just that they should let us in. Just give us enough place that our feet should fit there. For 1–2 weeks it is possible to bear any situation, even more so by the knowledge that we will be near father...

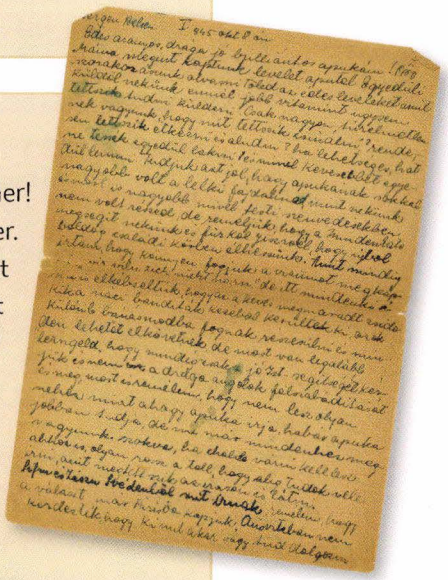


Bergen Belsen, September 1945

My dear, beloved, good father,

Today we wrote a letter for the second time to Washington, hoping that it will be solved as soon as possible. We weren't allowed to write anything about us, how much we want to leave behind this land soaked with blood. I assume it will be somewhat better when I won't always see in front of my eyes those people who are full of heart-ache. We are pleading for the Almighty very-very much that He should console the tortured,

aching hearts of these million orphaned children and send Moshiach for us. Now the gate is still open, now the Almighty should listen to our heavy sighs, stemming from the depths of our hearts, and He should look down to the hearts, full of pain, of these many orphaned children, who stand here without any support. It occurred and occurs a lot of times that no matter how terrible are things we see or hear, we are unable to drop a tear, while other times it takes but just a moment, and suddenly we see the whole world blurred. We trust and hope in the goodness of the Almighty, that after so much terror we should find finally joy in life.



Bergen Belsen, 8 October, 1945

My sweet, lovely, dear, good, brilliant father!

Today we received a letter from father. Our only enjoyment is to read the sweet letters that you send to us. You could not send a vitamin that is better than this. Just that we are very worried about what you are doing? Maybe you are not eating and sleeping? If possible, please, do not live alone, and be alone as little as possible.

We know that father had much more agony than we had, and now it's more, as well, since you did not have part of bodily afflictions, but we hope that the Almighty will help us and all Israel, so that we can live again in a happy family together.

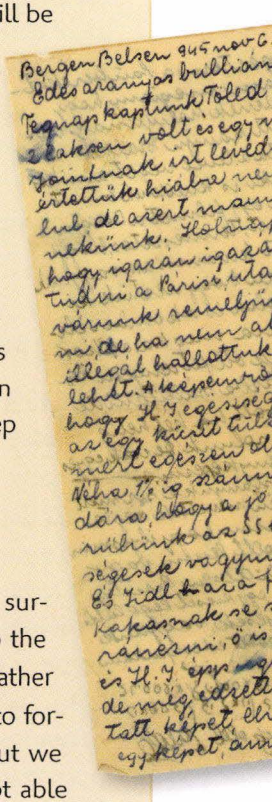
What I always wrote was that we will get the visa easily, but here everybody, including us, imagined that those few remaining Jews who escaped from the hands of the Nazi banditry, will experience a special treatment, and they will do everything in their abilities…

Bergen Belsen,

My dear, sweet, cute, brilliant, nice father!

I let you know that we, thank to the Almighty, are in the best health, which is what we yearn to hear about you and the dear relatives as well, until 100 years. We are after the holy days, we hope that our prayers will be heard. Yesterday it was Simchas Torah, and the simchah was very big by us... now, we can return to the synagogue, as everybody is dancing with the holy Torah.

...We are eating and sleeping, and sleeping and eating, the whole day. I am now writing the letter and in the meantime I eat. Although I am bored by it a bit, this is also good for us, that this is what we are bored of. It was one year ago, this time, when I said that I will be the happiest, when I won't feel the pain from hunger, or I can sleep however much I want...

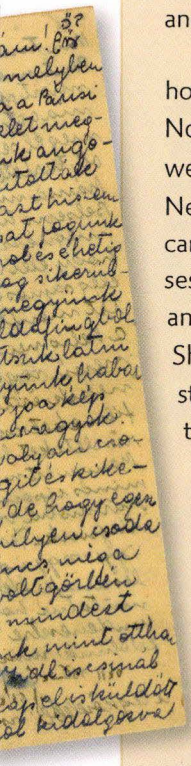


Bergen Belsen, October 27, 1945

Feter Shia was here and I can say that he was surprised, since he heard that we were not yet to the cinema. What's more, he said that he will ask father for permission, since now it is very important to forget about our tzaros every once in a while. But we don't need permission, since the cinema is not able to ease our suffering, not even for a minute. Rather, what feels really good is when we read in a letter *"meine Kinderlech."*

With lots of love, hugs and kisses,

Goldy



Bergen Belsen, 1 November 1945

...As a side point, I write to you that our house was hit by a bomb, which I am happy about, that at least the goyim cannot enjoy the sweet home in which I have spent 15 years with our dear beloved ones and happy, content family life, and that cannot be anymore...

Chaya travelled to make a photo, Yidel I also expect home tonight, so next time all three of us will write א"ו"ח. Now we received your letter from Canada and last week we received one already from when you travelled back to New York. Eleven packages have arrived and everything came very, very in handy. Since Yidel is here, our Shabboses are very pleasant: raisins, wine, white challah, sardines, and he is singing zmirot. I will write to you once about our Shabboses in the lager, when even with the Germans, we struggled to make a difference between the Shabbos and the weekdays.

Bergen Belsen, 6 November 1945

My sweet, dear, brilliant father!

Yesterday we have received a letter from you which contained two lokshen[2] and a copy of your letter written to the Joint in Paris. We understood the letter, even though we do not know English, but anyway today they translated it for us. Tomorrow I believe that with Hashem's help really-really we will know something sure about our journey to Paris, and we wait until this week. We hope that it will succeed, but if not, then we will leave illegally. We heard that it is possible from Feldafing.

From my picture you can see that thank G-d we are healthy, although it is of a bit of an exaggeration, the picture is not good, because I am not really like that. Sometimes,

2. The family's code word for money during the war.

we hoped for such a miracle, that if the Merciful One would help us to escape the hands of SS, but that we are healthy, is another kind of a miracle. And Yidel, the cherished treasure, who not even the rooster was allowed to look at him in a crooked way, he also survived all that. And, thank G-d we are exactly the same as at home, just even more tough...

Today they showed a movie, about the death lager in Bergen Belsen. Obviously we will watch it, because we are curious... Unfortunately, the English could have saved the lives of a lot of people if they wouldn't leave us to wallow and bring us to the hospital immediately, but for them it was more interesting to shoot movies about us. But it was possible to shoot only some details.

Please, be patient, either one way or another, we will shortly be in Paris... At any rate, be calm about us, my father, everything is very good.

Until the nearest reencounter, hugs to you,

Goldy

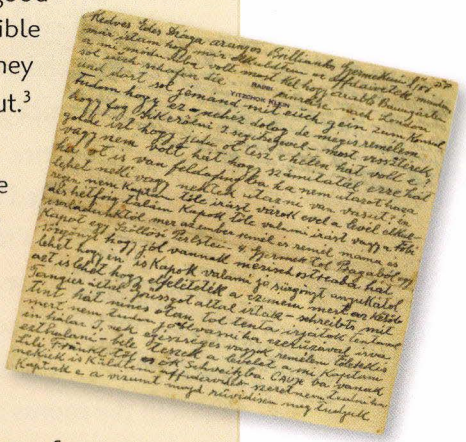
Dear Father!

To your question, if you were on our minds when we were sick, there is no word and no expression. Who else could be on our minds? When we were hungry, tired, sleepy, when we were cold, when they hit us, when the bombs were falling, when the cars were turning upside down, when we were working near the unstable walls, we always just asked for the Merciful One that He should grant for our dear parents that they should see a lot of joy in us. Besides this, when we were in the hospital, and in my greatest pain, once an English woman entered, I was even unconscious, and I told her that my father is in America.

My lovely, sweet, dear, beloved, brilliant children!

I wrote already that I sent the affidavit and everything I could. I know it is a difficult thing, but I hope anyway that it will succeed, with the help of G-d.

Goldy wrote that Yidel will be there this week. Was he or not? How did you expect this? Maybe he is also there in Feldafing, if he did not travel home. Is it possible for him or for you to travel? Is there a railway? I have not received a letter from him for so long. I will wait until Monday to send this letter, perhaps I will receive some writing, from him or from other members of our family. Because one hopes and hopes... maybe I will receive a good telegram from mother. It is also possible that they forgot my address, because they wrote through Tangier, through Greesgut.[3]



I sent ... an affidavit as well. I would like to know if they received a visa, soon we will know.

Please write with a pen, maybe there is no pen there, because I cannot read well if it is written by a pencil. I am healthy, thank G-d, I hope to hear the same from you.

I ask you once again to write the names of boys and girls who have a relative in America. It is a big mitzvah. I will let know their family know immediately who is living...

I have written a lot of letters to you through General Post Office London, and I wonder if you received them also, or only those by the rabbi. I wrote already, that if you would ask for money, I will send it immediately with air mail, however much you are asking for.

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3. During the war they communicated with letters sent through neutral countries.

Rabbi Baumgarten made sure Taate got our letters, and that we got Taate's letters and packages. He also gave us a siddur and a mezuza. He set up a kosher kitchen and made sure we had good, wholesome food. He occasionally spoke to us about yiddishkeit and the weekly portion of the Torah, which we loved listening to. A long time had passed since anyone spoke to us about things that were not the crude matters of survival, but spoke to our souls. The last person who did it was Maame, and now Rabbi Baumgarten did all he could to help two lost girls find their way home, physically and spiritually.

When Taate wrote to us that our brother Yidel was alive, that he was placed in a camp nearby called Feldafing, Chaya got a ride on a truck going there. There were no running trains or buses; the entire infrastructure of Germany was lying in ruins. If you wanted to get anywhere, you hitched a ride on a passing wagon or a truck.

At the same time, my father wrote to Yidel telling him we were in Bergen Belsen. So Yidel came to find us, and Chaya wasn't there. He waited a few days until she returned and stayed in the rooms nearby for a while.

Taate continued to write to us. In each letter he'd ask us who we found that was alive. He knew many people in New York who had family back in Europe, and they weren't getting mail. They were anxious to know if anyone in their family had survived. Just as we were Bergen Belsen celebrities for having a father in the US, so was he a celebrity, having family that survived in Europe.

In one case we happened to make a shidduch. We told my father that one woman here had a distant relative in America, but she couldn't trace him. Taate found the man, and she started corresponding with him. Eventually he got her the documents to immigrate to America, and they got married.

In my letters to Taate, I'd report on the number of packages that arrived. *Today we got eleven packages, today we got six packages,* and so on. These packages weren't all for us. As soon as he'd hear a name of someone he knew, even if they were a slight acquaintance, he'd send them packages full of clothing, food and cigarettes. Cigarettes were the most valuable commodity after the war in Europe. Nobody had money but cigarettes you could exchange for just about anything. I chose a couple of light pullover blue sweaters from one of the packages, and Chaya sewed me a skirt from a blanket. That was all I needed. I wore them until I came to America. I had my life, and after all we had been through, it was not a self-evident thing any longer. Besides for that, I didn't need much of anything in those days.



Taate dancing the mitzvah tantz at cousin Zisu Goldenberg's wedding.

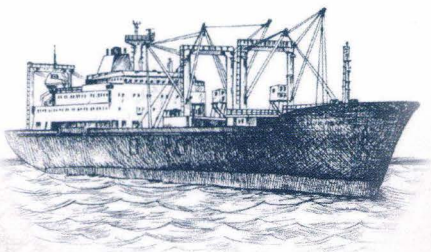
Then Taate found out that many orphaned girls and boys were sent to Sweden to recuperate. I only found out later, but a man who lives nearby today, named Yanky Moskowitz, told us that my father sent $20 to each boy, quite a lot of money in those days. He always jokes that he owes us a lot of interest on that twenty-dollar bill. I don't know if Taate also sent money to the girls, but I do know that he didn't work after the war. Every second was spent trying to send necessities to survivors of the war. He also sent as many affidavits as he could. You couldn't come to America without someone vouching to support you financially if necessary, so those affidavits were a treasure of unfathomable value.

And Taate didn't stop at that. After the war, his home was

a magnet for relatives from both sides of the family, seeking emotional and physical support. He helped them all. Where did he get the money from? The answer was tragically simple. He'd been saving up for years for the dowries of his six daughters. Now he only needed two...



My journey through Europe



Part Three:

After the Deluge

27. Does My Father Yet Live? The Reunion

IT TOOK SIX LONG MONTHS AFTER THE LIBERATION for the ten of us – Chaya, eight other girls, and myself – to be transferred from the internment camp near Bergen Belsen, halfway between Hanover and Hamburg, smack in the heart of Germany, to France. Europe was drowning in chaos and ruin, filled with millions of refugees who wanted to get out, to go to America, to Palestine, to Canada, anywhere that didn't have the stench of death and destruction in its earth. Embassies were overwhelmed with applications, and getting a visa was extremely difficult. Taate found out that it would be easier to have immigration visas to America issued for us if we applied in the American embassy in Paris.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or simply Joint, was a Jewish relief organization headquartered in New York City, active in helping refugees in Europe after the war. They arranged for a van to take us to Paris. A 520-mile trip would take nine hours on today's highways, but back then, on bombed out winding one lane roads of postwar Europe flooded with displaced people moving in every direction, it took two long days, with a stop in Brussels overnight. At times it looked like a moon landscape, everything wiped out

by aerial and artillery bombardments, and then some villages and lonely homesteads were left totally intact, surrounded by groves and meadows, as if the bloodiest and most destructive war in human history had not taken place just steps away.

When we arrived in Paris, we were taken to a shelter for the homeless. It was a big room, housing fifty women. Forty of them were from the dregs of society – the homeless, the drunk, the prostitutes. And then there were us – ten girls from the lager in Bergen Belsen. For all intents and purposes, we were just like them. Destitute, displaced, dispossessed. Some of the refugees, having lost any faith in themselves, in life and in humanity, joined the ranks of those miserable souls. We fought hard not to lose the only thing we had, hope.

After one night there, Chaya and I had a visitor. A tall beautiful lady, dressed in a fur coat approached us, looking for the Klein girls. She introduced herself as Madame Lilling. She was related to us, she said. My father had contacted her, sending her money to take care of us. The Lilling family was very wealthy before the war, and they survived the war in hiding.

She was horrified at our living conditions. "This is where you are?" she said. "Pack up and come with me."

"We don't have anything to pack up," we said.

"So come as you are."

She brought us to a beautiful Paris hotel. "If you want coffee, pick up the telephone and say *'café s'il vous plaît,'*" she said and took her leave.

Chaya and I lay down on the beds made with fine linen, but we couldn't sleep. We ordered coffee and cautiously sipped it from delicate porcelain cups.

Still we couldn't sleep. "I miss the girls," Chaya said, almost apologetically. "What are we doing here? I look at you, you look at me, and we got nothing to say."

We got dressed and sneaked out of the hotel. We couldn't leave a message with the concierge for our relative because we didn't speak a word of French. We hailed a taxi back to the shelter and joined the girls. "What are you doing here?" our friends laughed at us. "Who wants to live in a hotel?" we fired back. "We want to be with you."

We simply didn't know how to survive in a fancy hotel in Paris, the two of us.

Madame Lilling was shocked to realize that we traded the hotel for the shelter for the homeless where our friends were. But she was kind and understanding, and didn't take it personally. She realized that after all we had been through, the ten of us, staying together felt more secure for us than damask linen and petite porcelain cups. This time she took us all to a different hotel, one the Joint had arranged for the refugees. It was clean and nice, and best of all, Chaya and I shared a room and our friends were in the rooms next door.

We didn't have much food. The hotel gave us black coffee, and we'd buy some French baguettes and herring and that's what we pretty much lived on for the next five months. At some point we discovered there was a kosher eatery where you could eat for free. I guess it was a soup kitchen of sorts, and the food tasted accordingly, but it was heaven compared to what we subsisted on for so many years. Sometimes we went to the Lillings for Shabbos meals, but we felt awkward and out of place, and preferred to stay with the girls.

My brother Yidel also made his way to France. He stayed in a yeshiva and studied until he boarded a ship to America, a few weeks before we did.

Unlike Yidel who didn't waste a minute and went right back to learning Torah, we didn't manage to do much during those five months. We mostly stayed in our beds, dreaming



Chaya and I in France after the war was over, November, 1945. We were stuck in a hotel room all day with nothing kosher to eat except long Italian bread and herring, which made me gain weight.

about America. We didn't let ourselves think about the past at all. Something inside us closed a door on everything that had happened. One single track played in our mind, and that was America. America was a dream one could hardly believe even existed. But we had Taate there, which meant there really was such a wonderful place called America. America was going to be our ultimate salvation. That's where everything would be made good. Like after a deadly disease, we were convalescing – and trying to forget.

We could have come to America on an airplane many months earlier than we did, but air travel was still relatively new and risky. "My children survived the war," my father said. "I'm not going to risk putting them on an airplane."

So we took a ship to America, the SS *George Washington*, in March of 1946. It was a military ship bringing the soldiers back

home. They could only take a limited amount of civilians and there was only one room for them. Two weeks earlier, Yidel went on the boat that carried the fifty male civilians along with the soldiers.

There were four thousand soldiers on our ship that shared one massive open space, and there was another compartment for the fifty civilians. This time they assigned it for women. Chaya and I were the only survivors. All the rest were French women who married American servicemen and now relocated from war-ravaged Europe to the promised land of America. These were the war brides. I'd lie on the top bunk bed and watch them laughing, putting on makeup in bright colors, and think, didn't they see the cattle cars, the black smoke from the chimney of the crematorium, the mounds of cut hair, the piles of bodies strewn across Bergen Belsen? Have we been through a different war? Did we live in different worlds? Was it opportunism or optimism? Were they happy to live or they didn't care for the dead? The ostensible normalcy of it all struck me as grotesque.

I felt more or less OK on that ship, but it was bad enough that I promised myself that if I ever saw earth again, I'd stay put. Chaya didn't fare well at all. She was terribly seasick, vomited everything she ate, and couldn't leave her bed for the duration of the ten-day voyage. The weather on the high seas of the Atlantic Ocean was terrible, the sky dark, heavy and gray, the waves were also gray and rolling high. I went on the deck for some fresh air, and it was so windy I could barely keep myself on my feet. The American soldiers were lying on the deck and laughing. I didn't understand what they were saying, but I saw one of them pointing at me and holding his thumb and pointer finger an inch apart and shouting something to his comrades into the howling wind. I could only guess he was

showing how small I was and saying, "look how tiny she is." They seemed quite amused watching me tread the deck, bent over, struggling against the wind.

An hour before the boat entered the New York harbor, the soldiers erupted into a frenzy of throwing all the furniture, practically anything not nailed down, into the ocean. It struck me as odd, and I can't explain what happened. Were they drunk, or just so happy that they made it home from the slaughterhouse of Europe well and alive, and couldn't believe their luck until they entered the sovereign waters of their home country? Whatever their reason, I had my own reasons for my barely contained joy. I was going to see Taate again. The last time I saw him, I was twelve years old...

Taate waited at the pier. His sister, Rochel Amsel, wanted to come along. Not every day you see souls emerge back to this world from the darkest domains. She came to the States before the war and became quite wealthy, even bought a nice house. But Taate after seven long years, wanted to be there alone, to see us come off the ship – and sense like a kick in the gut the gnawing absence of those who didn't come.

We held tight as if we never wanted to let go. We gave Taate a gift, a silver becher we bought in France. Our cousins in France, the Lilling family, told us it was the right thing to buy Taate a gift from the money he sent us. He cherished that plain becher for the rest of his life and used it every single Shabbos. After he passed away, the becher came back to me. It reminds me of the humble gratitude for what we had, and acceptance of what we lost.

We went to my aunt for dinner and then Taate brought us to the home he had recently purchased. Aunt Rochel Amsel chipped in with the furniture. Chaya looked around

in wonderment and said, "I feel so rich. I have a father, a fully furnished home, when so many others have absolutely nothing."

The house boasted two floors – a parlor floor and a basement. Chaya and I slept on the parlor floor, and Taate and Yidel in the basement. That first night we got into bed and cried and cried all night. We just couldn't stop. This is all the family we have left? Even though the kapo had shown me the smoldering smoke rising from the chimney in Auschwitz, all these years my heart refused to believe it was true. A miracle must have happened and they were all transferred elsewhere and their tracks got lost. In the utter chaos of Europe torn by a war, with millions of people moving around, most improbable things could happen, and we fancied a small miracle of our own and things would go back to the way they had been before. Only late at night, in a bed that for the first time in so many years we could call our own, the finality of the loss hit us with blunt force, and all the grief and the terror of their cruel fate caught up with us.

Taate couldn't accept what we knew to be true that first night in America. Every day he'd go to the mailbox, and that hopeful look on his face as he opened it hurt so much. I knew that a letter from Maame wasn't coming, that day or the day after, or any other day on earth.

He wrote to the Satmar Rebbe who was staying in Switzerland at that time, asking him if he could help find out where his wife was. The Rebbe didn't respond. When he arrived in New York, Taate asked why he didn't respond. "What could I have told you?" was his simple answer that said it all.

Two years after the war, Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl zt"l visited him. He'd been one of the driving forces in desperate attempts to save the Hungarian and Slovakian Jews. Many

attribute the delayed deportations of the Hungarian Jews until 1944 due to his ongoing negotiations. Ultimately lack of funds ended the negotiations, but not before quite a few lives were saved. He begged the allies to bomb the rails leading to Auschwitz, to no avail. He made available to the world the "Auschwitz Report" which revealed the horrors of the concentration camp. He'd seen it all firsthand and there was no one better to talk to Taate. They remained closeted in the room for a long time. When they came out, tears streaked Taate's face. He never spoke about getting a letter from Maame again.

We cherished the small family we had left, Taate, Chaya, Yidel and me.

My brother Yidel was a very kind and generous man, just like my father. After the war, he sent out affidavits to all his friends and acquaintances who had survived the concentration camps but didn't have anyone to bail them out of the ongoing misery of internment camps spattered across the ruins of Europe, and bring them to the States. Every day he'd go to Yeshiva Chasam Sofer on the Lower East Side and bring the two nephews of the Bobover Rebbe with him back and forth. They lived in Williamsburg as well, and the Rebbe didn't want them to travel alone. Today these nephews are well known – Rabbi Yacov Yosef and Rabbi Burech Duvid Halberstam of Boro Park.

After so many years of being apart from Taate, and after all his long absences even before that, I finally got to live under the same roof with him and see what a special person he was, not just as a rare and mysterious visitor or a faraway dream living somewhere behind the dark mountains and great oceans in what felt like a parallel universe. I saw him day in and day out and witnessed his greatness.

He helped everybody in any way he could and was scrupulous with halocha in such meaningful ways as only a select few would be. He didn't put his money into banks because they pay interest, and when he sold his house he didn't try to make a profit on it by receiving interest on the mortgage.

During all the years he spent in America, Taate tried to fight the apathy so many Jews had toward Torah and mitzvos. He printed big signs that said "Shabbos Kodesh" and hung them in the streets and in every shul in Williamsburg to remind people about Shabbos.



Taate would hang these signs everywhere to remind people about Shabbos.

When we saw Taate wasn't eating meat, we refused to eat it as well. "You need to eat it," he said. "Your health is so poor. Besides, the kashrus has improved."

When he saw we still wouldn't eat it, he ate a little meat


THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ORIGINAL
TO BE GIVEN TO THE PERSON NATURALIZED

No. 6984430

CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION

Petition No. 486575

Personal description of holder as of date of naturalization. Date of birth September 28, 1893 sex Male complexion Dark color of eyes Grey color of hair Brown height 5 feet 7 inches weight 160 pounds visible distinctive marks None Marital status Married former nationality Hungarian

I certify that the description above given is true, and that the photograph affixed hereto is a likeness of me.

Ignatz Klein
(Complete and true signature of holder)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
EASTERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK } ss:

Be it known that at a term of the The United States District Court of Brooklyn held pursuant to law at Brooklyn on March 13, 1952 the Court having found that

IGNATZ KLEIN

then residing at 146 Wilson Street, Brooklyn, N.Y.

intends to reside permanently in the United States (when so required by the Naturalization Laws of the United States) had in all other respects complied with the applicable provisions of such naturalization laws, and was entitled to be admitted to citizenship, thereupon ordered that such person be and (s)he was admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.

In testimony whereof the seal of the court is hereunto affixed this 18th day of March in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and fifty two and of our Independence the one hundred and seventy sixth

Seal

Clerk of the U. S. District Court

By Deputy Clerk

It is a violation of the U. S. Code and punishable as such, to copy, print, photograph, or otherwise illegally use this certificate.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Taate's citizenship certificate, 1952.

for the first time in years, so we would eat it as well. I don't know what it felt like to him to eat that piece of chicken, but he ate it despite his qualms, because he decided that our health was on the line. Merely a sofek of a pikuach nefesh of another person mattered more to him than his personal misgivings about kashrus.

28. Mime Leah Gitel

OUR HOME WAS ALWAYS BURSTING WITH PEOPLE. Taate's home was *the* address for friends and relatives who arrived in America without home or family.

One day, who should knock on our door, but my beloved aunt Mime Leah Gitel, my mother's sister. She'd moved to America a number of years before the war. Her husband, R. Yaakov Moshe Horowitz, couldn't make a living in Europe and left for America to earn some money. After a while he saved enough to bring over his wife and children. But she didn't want to leave Europe. She was afraid her family would be lost to Yiddishkeit. So she came to Ujhely to her father, my Zaida, and asked him what to do. "*Mit ah mahn geyt mehn iber deeYam*, With a husband, you cross the ocean," he told her. So she went, and they settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where they had four more children. She didn't let America change her. She was the only one in her neighborhood who wore a shaitel and she would regularly travel with a bus to the farm near Scranton, to get Cholov Yisroel. Their home was large, and everyone who needed a place to stay had a home away from home with them.

And here she was, at our door. Turned out her husband insisted she take money and go to a resort in Silver Springs

for two weeks, to take a break from the toils of her daily life. Instead, she traveled to New York to us. "If my husband calls, don't tell him I'm here," she said.

"And what are your plans here in New York?" I was curious.

"I know exactly what I'll do!" She used the money she took for the resort to give a true respite to her soul. She went around and helped yet more people financially.



Mime Leah Gittel Horowitz, Maame's sister.

After Mime Leah Gittel's husband passed away, she moved to Israel. Her children would send her money and she asked them to also send her a coat and sweaters to keep warm during winter. They couldn't figure out why she asked for more winter clothing again and again. When they went to visit her, they found her wearing only a thin summer dress, and the coats and sweaters they shipped to her were nowhere to be found – she distributed them among the needy. She lost weight as she wasn't eating enough, giving away most of her food. She was simply unable to eat when so many were hungry. Her children found her a new apartment and hired a person to cook for her and made sure she stayed warm enough. Many years later, when she passed away, my son who studied in yeshiva in Israel attended her levaya. Someone got up to speak. "The poor will cry after her," he said.

29. But My Desire Is in the Learning

We came to America shortly before Pesach. Immediately after Pesach was over, Taate took me to his friend who owned a necktie factory. The man offered me a job and I started working there during the day. At night I went to evening school to learn English. When summer arrived, Chaya found out that Camp Bnos in Connecticut had a program for Holocaust survivors. I was eighteen years old, a grown up by the standards of those days, but I had missed so much of my childhood. It was a wonderful opportunity to relax, to breathe the pristine air of the countryside, and enjoy the company of my cousin Shifra. It was such a far cry from a bunk we shared in Auschwitz. Who'd have believed we would live to breathe the air of freedom and serenity, without fearing the death of starvation, without the long shadow of the smoldering chimney...

On Shabbos, I saw other campers sitting and learning parshas hashavua. I watched them with jealousy. In Hungary, it was taboo for girls to learn chumash. I'd grown up thinking chumash and Rashi were for boys. I wanted to learn like they did so badly!

The girls told me they attended Bais Yaakov.

I wrote a letter to Chaya, who stayed behind in the city for work. "I don't want to work anymore," I wrote. "I want to go to Bais Yaakov."

I begged her to speak to Taate, to convince him that I should attend.

To my surprise, Chaya wrote back that my father didn't need any convincing. I could start in September. Shifra also decided to attend. She was one of the many my father welcomed into our home with open arms.

After the summer, I went to inform my boss that I could no longer work at his factory. "Bais Yaakov?" he sputtered. "That's mashuga. I was going to make you the forelady. You could make a fortune."

"I don't want to make a fortune," I said. "I want to learn."

His daughter worked there as well, and sure enough we became friendly before I left for the summer camp. She was a good soul and very kind to me. She used to take me out on her shopping expeditions. "But won't it be nice that you can earn enough to buy yourself a nice pocketbook or a new dress?"

But I made up my mind, I told her. Pocketbooks and dresses didn't mean enough for me. I was hungry for learning.

Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, the principal of the school, asked Shifra and I which class we'd like to join. My knowledge, based on the weekly one-hour class I took in Ujhely, was so negligible that I opted for the mechina, the beginners level. After the war Shifra spent a few months in Sweden where she took classes, and asked to join her age level, the "daled" class. I'll never forget the class Rebbetzin Kaplan gave when I first joined. The very experience of sitting at a desk together with other girls, and studying, listening to new information, taking in the knowledge that I craved so much, was an eye-opener, a

true revelation – and gave me pure, unadulterated joy. After a short while, I excelled enough to be transferred to "daled," and Shifra and I were reunited again.

Sometimes I'd ask Taate questions on the topics I was learning in chumash and navi, and I could see how much nachas he got from watching me learn.

I couldn't get enough. My thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and I often stayed after class to ask the teacher more questions. We also had secular subjects, and three months after starting school, I wrote a book report in English on *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Ravelor,* by George Eliot. Ironically, "George Eliot" was not the real name of the author, but a pen-name that Mary Anne Evans, an English writer from the 19th century, took so that her novels would be taken seriously by the readers.

The day I came off the boat to America, I decided that I wasn't going to speak Hungarian ever again. It didn't take me long to become fluent in English, but then as the months passed, relatives and friends who'd survived the war came to America. They didn't speak any English, and I didn't want to seem as if I was embarrassed of my past, so I started speaking Hungarian again, to the detriment of my English.

After one year of full-time learning, my father said I should start working again, and attend evening classes from 6–10 at night. It was regular practice in those times of hardship. People had to work hard for their living, and everyone had to contribute.

I worked until five and it didn't matter how tired I was after a day at work – I never missed a class. I was a diligent student, and the night before the test everyone wanted my notes. That's when I would be popular! Girls wanted to study with me, and I would find myself spending half the night studying

with them, only to come to school and have other girls pull at me from all sides, asking me last-minute questions. One time they even tore my blouse vying for my attention! The truth is, I didn't really have to study. As long as I was there every day and listened to the teacher with my heart and soul, I had no need to review, and the tests were easy. Despite my good grades, however, I always had this feeling that I never knew enough, only a little bit here and there, never the whole thing. I missed so much of the foundational level of education that I never had a sense of having learned the subjects in a systematic manner and knowing them in their entirety. When the classes were over, at 10pm, I wished the teacher would forget about the clock and keep talking. It was never enough.

Even though I was eventually with girls my age, they seemed so much younger than me. They were happy, naive, so untainted with the abysses of despair and darkness we European refugees carried in our hearts. And the American style of learning, where you were free to interrupt the teacher and ask questions, was a true culture shock for me. In Hungary, we had to sit quietly and never open our mouths while the teacher taught. If you had a question, you were left to break your own head finding an answer, unless a teacher would be unusually kind to bother hearing out your question and generous enough to answer it. Accessibility of learning and a dialogue with the teacher were truly gifts I cherished and felt genuinely grateful for.

I became friendly with my classmates, but on a certain level we couldn't relate. They never asked what happened to me during the war, and I never volunteered the information. It was too horrific to tell, and too horrific to hear. I think that subconsciously we knew that if I started telling them the horrors of my past, our relationship would be ruined. Casual

friendships have a hard time surviving the burden of pain, and they'd start avoiding my company. An unspoken rule was laid down: Don't ask, don't tell.

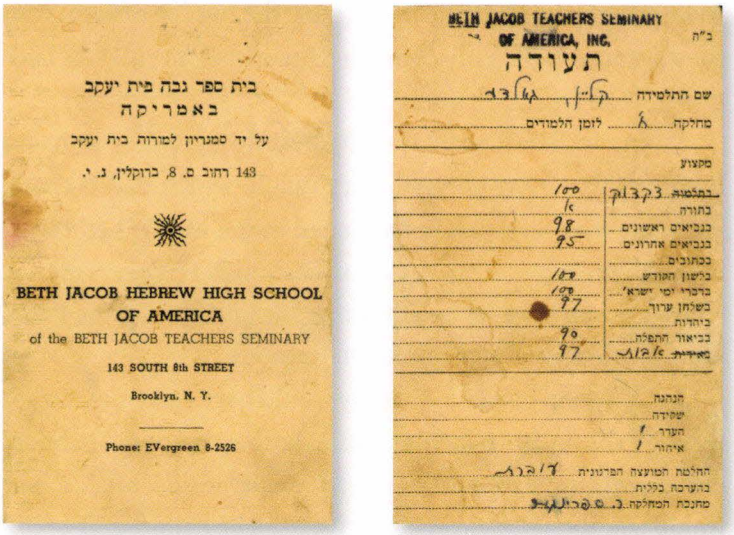
Going to Bais Yaakov was the best decision I ever made. It strengthened my emunah very much, which had taken a battering with all that had happened in the war. When I was in the lager there were many who questioned Hashem's mercy, who spoke up in anger and bitterness against the Divine Providence, and it was hard to remain immune.

I was a good girl and probably would have continued to go through the motions by rote, eating kosher, keeping Shabbos, and everything else. But I'd have felt empty inside. My teacher would talk about Dovid Hamelech and all he endured. Despite that, he still sang Hallel to Hashem. I'd tell myself, Goldy, it's not just you who had questions. You still have to thank Hashem for whatever you have.

Bais Yaakov made my Torah, my life, real again.

After two years, I graduated. Rebbetzin Springer approached me and asked me to be valedictorian, but I spoke English with an accent, and even my Hungarische Yiddish was different than most of the girls whose parents came from Poland. I turned the offer down. Instead, they presented me with a gold medal at graduation, in recognition of what I'd accomplished during those two years.

Until today I thirst for knowledge. I love going to shiurim, and for many years I'd call my sons and recount to them what I had just learned. It may have not been such a revelation for them, but still, I felt so replete with what I had heard that I had to share the joy.



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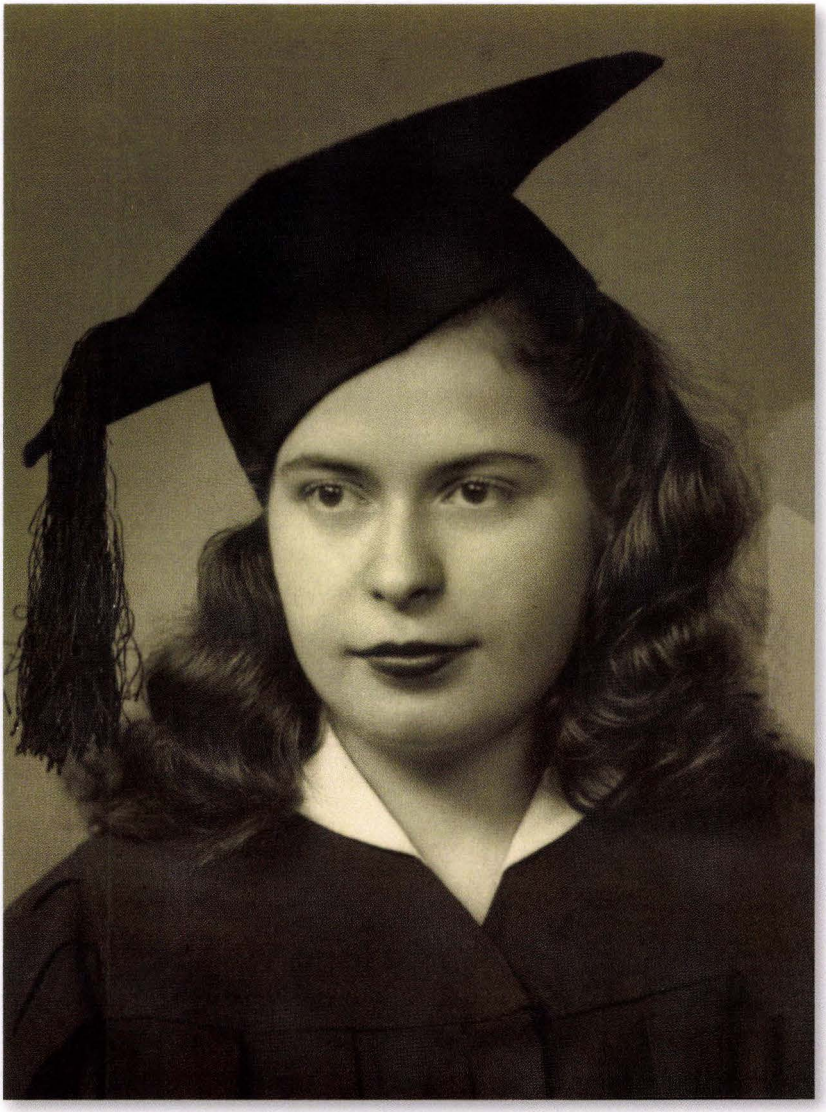
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בנביאים ראשונים	98
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בלשון המודש	100
בדברי ימי ישראל	100
בשלחן ערוך	97
ביהדות	
בהבאור התפלה	90
באידית	97

תנהגה
שתידה
העדר 1
איחור 1
החלטת הפועצה הפרטנית
בהערכת בללית
מתנכת הפחלקה

My report card from Bais Yaakov.



My graduation medal.



My graduation from Bais Yaakov, 1948, at age 21.

30. The Perfect Thunderstorm

THREE YEARS AFTER THE WAR, IN 1948, CHAYA GOT married to Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Landau, a Lubavitcher. He learned in the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Pinsk before the war. When the war broke out, he evacuated together with the Tomchei Temimim Yeshiva to Shanghai, China. After the war he emigrated to America.



Hershy and Chaya Landa at their wedding, December 22, 1948.



At Chaya's wedding with my cousin Shifra Katz-Weiser on the left.

As Chaya was making her preparations for the wedding and about to move out, she urged my father to remarry. She even had a prospect for him, my mother's sister Esther Hentsha. She knew I was into learning, and that cooking and cleaning weren't my two favorite pastimes. I ate little, only when I was hungry, and didn't care for preparing food. Chaya thought it would be a good idea if my father had someone to take care of him once she left the house. She was persuasive, and he agreed.

I wasn't rushing to date and get married. I wanted to finish seminary and continue my education. But after my father remarried and Chaya left the house, I rethought my decision. Our home was the landing spot for close and distant relatives and friends who came from Europe. My stepmother cooked for them and by the time I got home late at night, after a full day of work and night school, the whole house was dirty, and I'd need to clean everything. I felt like I couldn't please anyone – my father wanted me to work and make money, my stepmother wanted me to chip in with the upkeep of the house, and all I wanted was to learn in Bais Yaakov. When I realized how much time I ended up spending on cleaning, I figured I may as well start listening to the shidduchim propositions, and move on with life and take care of my own house.

A young man, Luzer Hager, was suggested. We met in our house, as was the custom, and talked a while. All he spoke about was the Holocaust, which was exactly the subject I felt so ambivalent about. All I wanted to do was bury those terrible memories and move on with life. It was bad enough that any time any of us survivors got together, the talk inevitably would wind up being about the war.

"He's not for me," I told Taate after our initial meeting.

Taate didn't question my decision. But then he overheard me complaining to Chaya that all Luzer talked about was the Holocaust.

He called me aside. "Goldy," he said. "I'll never push you to marry a person you don't want, but I'm your father and I want you to do me a favor. Give him one more chance. He made a mistake. He spoke about the Holocaust. Different people do different things with their pain. Some speak about out, some bury it, and he wasn't careful enough to ask if it was ok with you. He won't make this mistake again."

I acquiesced. We met and he apologized for the previous time. He must have been briefed on his "infraction." Instead, he spoke about Bais Yaakov. Now he spoke my language.

In the Chassidish world, we go out two or three times before a shidduch is finalized. We were ready for our third date, but I wasn't rushing. I thought I liked him, but I knew I was making a commitment of a lifetime and wasn't ready to say yes. My father was very happy with the family – the Hagers were descendants of the great Viznitzer dynasty – and the young man was learning diligently in the Klausenburger Yeshiva. "As far as I am concerned, you have my blessing for this shidduch to go through," Taate told me. "But I'll never push you." He was very loyal to me, but in a way I needed the push. I couldn't bring myself to say yes. I was apprehensive, and needed someone to give me a little push.

We met again, and again, a total of seven times, a thing unheard of in our circles. He was patient – or maybe he was a bit too shy to ask the hard question? Either way, he was gracious to give me all the time in the world. But then Luzer's Rebbe, the Klausenberger Rebbe, stepped in. He told him he needed a decision either way. So he came to see me at my home. He was wistful. "We can't see each other anymore," he said. "When you're ready, tell me."

Oh yeah, I thought to myself. You will wait for my call?

He turned to go and I knew it was over.

Then the skies opened up and unleashed a flood of water. Thunder crackled and lighting lit up the sky. Luzer stood hesitantly at the door. He was wearing what was probably his only good suit, and obviously no raincoat or umbrella.

"You can't go out in that rain," I told him. "Wait until the storm is over."

He had nowhere to go, and we talked. And talked and talked, long past the rain stopped.

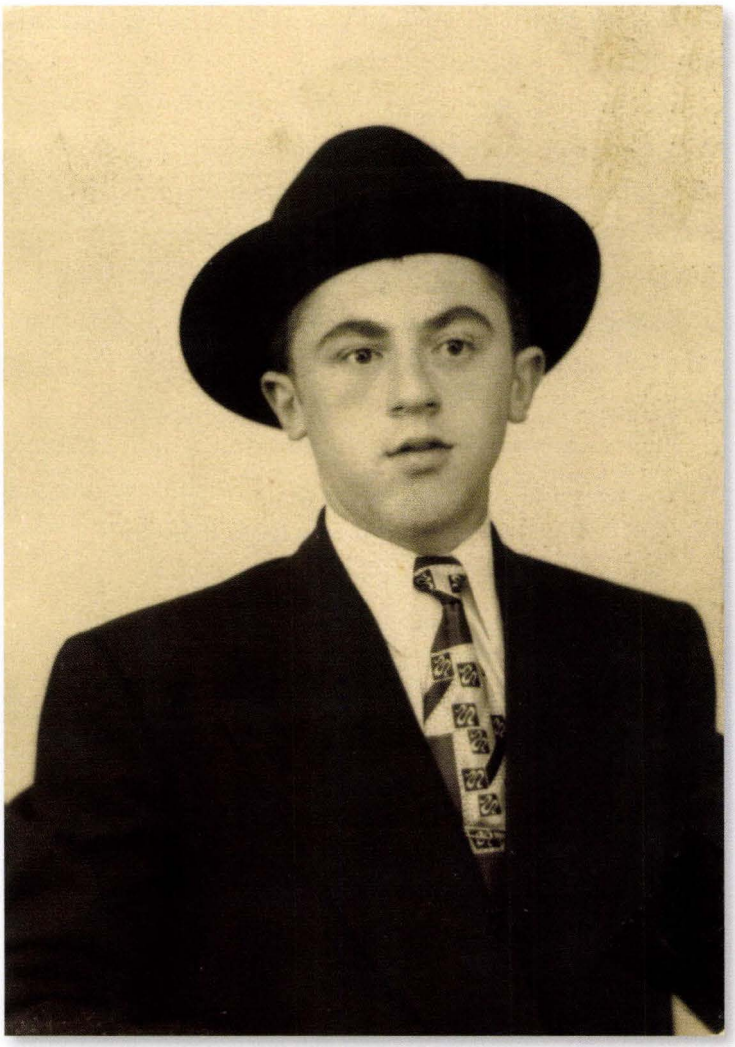
That April downpour saved the engagement. It is something I am eternally grateful for. I never would have found anyone better than my husband. He treated me like a china doll, always so careful about my feelings and needs. He always thought I was so smart, and it felt so good to believe him.

We got engaged in April 1949, and I was twenty-two years old when we got married on the night of Chof Beis Elul, September 15, 1949.

Taate didn't believe in big fancy weddings, and I wanted to make him happy. "I don't care where I have my wedding," I told him. "Wherever is good for you is good for me."

I thought he'd have the wedding at the hall his friend owned, but I guess he took me on my word, and our wedding took place in some small local shul in the neighborhood.

Chaya had beautiful pictures from her wedding that took place nine months prior to mine. When she and her husband heard I was engaged, they wanted to book their photographer for our wedding as well. But the American girls in Bais Yaakov told me that the groom's side pays for the photographer. I knew that my orphaned chassan, who came alone from the Holocaust and spent the last four years learning in the Klausenburg yeshiva, didn't have a penny to his name. My father had the money and could easily pay for it, but I didn't want to embarrass my chassan by taking on his expenses. At that time these little petty things didn't bother me. I was young and idealistic and happy to make my father happy with a simple wedding. But today, I regret that I don't have nice pictures marking the day on which the word "happiness" returned to my life to stay.



Totty by our tenoyim.

When Chaya got married, I was so happy for her, but at the same time, I felt dizzy as I walked her to the chuppah, holding a candle in my hand. It felt surreal. I was so close to fainting, I looked down, making sure I'd have space to fall down, wondering what would happen to the candle when I fell. It was Maame's job to walk Chaya down the aisle. Where



Our tenoyim.

was Maame? Where were my sisters? Their loss was crushing me at that moment, and I barely was able to put one foot in front of the other. Now our roles reversed, and Chaya was walking me to the chuppah, and again, the same unbearable, unthinkable loss ravished me from inside. This is what Chaya must have felt too, I thought.



Rabbi & Mrs. J. Klein

request the honor of your presence at the

marriage of their daughter

Goldie

to

L. Hager

Thursday September Fifteenth

at 8 o'clock

at Royal Manor 175 Hart St.

Brooklyn, N.Y.

Bride's Residence

146 Wilson St.

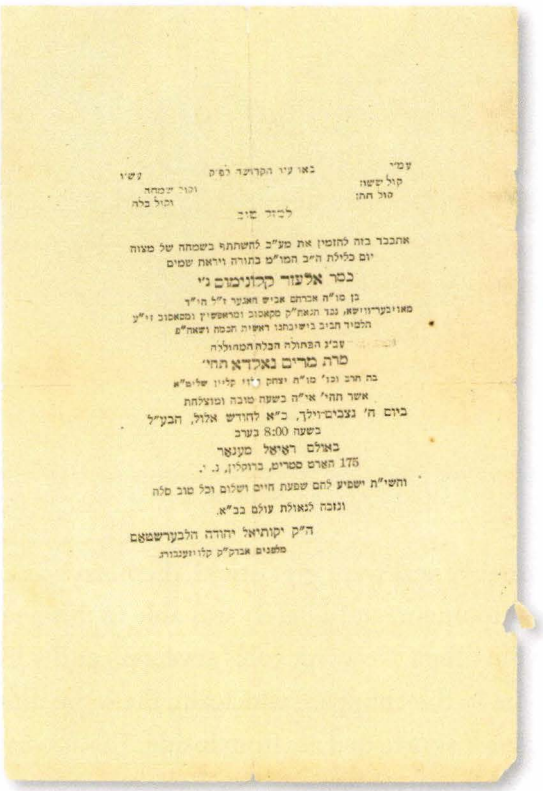
Brooklyn, N.Y.

עמי עוד ישמע בערי יהודה ובחוצות ירושלם עשיר
קול ששון וקול שמחה
קול חתן וקול כלה

לכזל שוב

ברוך שהחיינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה, יום התונת בתי תחי'
ואומרין בזה את הרובינו וירידנו שימחלו לבוא ליחה חבל
בשמחה של מצוה, יום כלילת בתי היקרה
הבתולה הבלה המהולללת
פרת מרים נאלדא תחי'
ע"ב הב' החתן המו"מ בתורה ויר"ש בנש"ק
כסר אלעזר קלונימום נ"י
בן מו"ה אברהם אביש האכזר ז"ל חי"ר
תלמיד חבוב בישיבת תומאכ"ם אבר"ק קלויזענבורג שליט"א
אשר תחי' אי"ה בשעה טובה ומוצלחת
ביום ה' נצבים-וילך, כ"א לחודש אלול, הבע"ל
(ולממפרם 15טען סעפטעמבער)
בשעה 8:00 בערב
באולם ראיאל מענאר
175 הארט סטריט, ברוקלין, נ. י.
סיום'ן שמחוכנם כאם עז מפאמען ווילשבי קוינקנו
ואי"ה בשמחת צאצאיהם נשוב נמולכם בתורה.
ה"ק יצחק הלוי קלין חותנו

Our wedding invitation.



באו עיו הקדוקה ר"ס עשיר
וקול שמחה
וקול כלה

עמי
קול ששון
קול חתן

לכזד שוב

אתכבר בזה להזמין את מע"כ להשתתף בשמחה של מצוה
יום כלילת ה"ב המו"מ בתורה ויראת שמים

כמר אלעזר קלונימום נ"י

בן מו"ה אברהם אביש האכזר ז"ל חי"ר
מאוסערוויטש, נגד תואת"ק מקאמוב ומראפשוין ומסאמוב זי"ע
תלמיד חבוב בישיבתנו ראשית חכמה ושאת"ם

שבע הבתולה הבלה המהוללה

פרת מרים נאלדא תחי'

בת חרב וכו' מו"ה יצחק ן"ו קלין שליט"א

אשר תחי' אי"ה בשעה טובה ומוצלחת

ביום ה' נצבים-וילך, כ"א לחודש אלול, הבע"ל
בשעה 8:00 בערב

באולם ראיאל מענאר

175 הארט סטריט, ברוקלין, נ. י.

וחשי"ת ישמיע לחם שמעת חיים ושלום וכל טוב סלה

ונזכה לגאולת עולם בב"א.

ה"ק יקותיאל יהודה הלבערשטאם
מלובין אבדק"ק קלויזענבורג.

Our wedding invitation. Notice the Klausenberger Rebbe's name on the bottom of the invitation.



Our wedding on September 16, 1949 (22 Elul 5709) in the Royal Manor, a local shul. We didn't have a photographer but my cousin Moshe Klein had a small camera and snapped this picture.



Chaya at my wedding

The Klausenburg Rebbe was the mesader kiddushin at the wedding. I was happy of course, and so was my new husband, my father, and the Klausenberger Rebbe, for a new Jewish home was rising from the ruins. But there was so much loss mixed in. We all had been through so much and lost so

many. The Klausenberger Rebbe and I and my husband shared Auschwitz. I lost Maame and my sisters, and so did Taate and Chaya. My husband lost his entire family except for one sister. The Rebbe lost twelve children and a wife. Everyone in the room had their hearts slashed and scarred, and the souls of the departed were packed in that tiny Williamsburg shul. They all must have been there with us at the wedding, happy to see Am Yisroel rise back from the ashes. And we had to be happy for them.

As the years passed, I learned how to be happy again. When I hear music I like to dance, especially when I go to weddings. I still don't laugh full-heartedly – that scar on my heart is my legacy from the Holocaust. But if you cry, you cry alone, and I was determined not be alone again. I've worked hard to be happy, as happy as I can be.

31. For Whom the Candles Burn

A YEAR OR TWO AFTER WE MARRIED, MY HUSBAND and I were both lighting yahrzeit candles on Shavuos. I lit for my mother and sisters and he lit for his father. I wasn't able to listen to his story when we were dating, but now I was ready.

Totty[1] was born in Vishiva (Vişeu de Sus) Romania, on November 8, 1926[2] to Abish and Elka Hager. Abish was a direct descendant of Reb Menachem Mendel of Kosiv, the first Rebbe of the Viznitzer dynasty. He was a great talmid chacham and supported his family comfortably from his textile business. He was also a close confidant to the illustrious Visheva Ruv and Rosh Yeshiva, the son of the great Ahavas Yisroel, the Viznitzer Rebbe.

Elka, Luzer's mother, was the daughter of Reb Hersh Weiss of Chust, a chosid of Belz. Reb Hersh was a wealthy businessman who sold vinegar wholesale. He was a great baal chesed; every day he had 30–40 poor people at his table. Erev Shabbos,

1. From this point on, Totty refers to my husband Luzer.
2. ב כסלו תרפז.

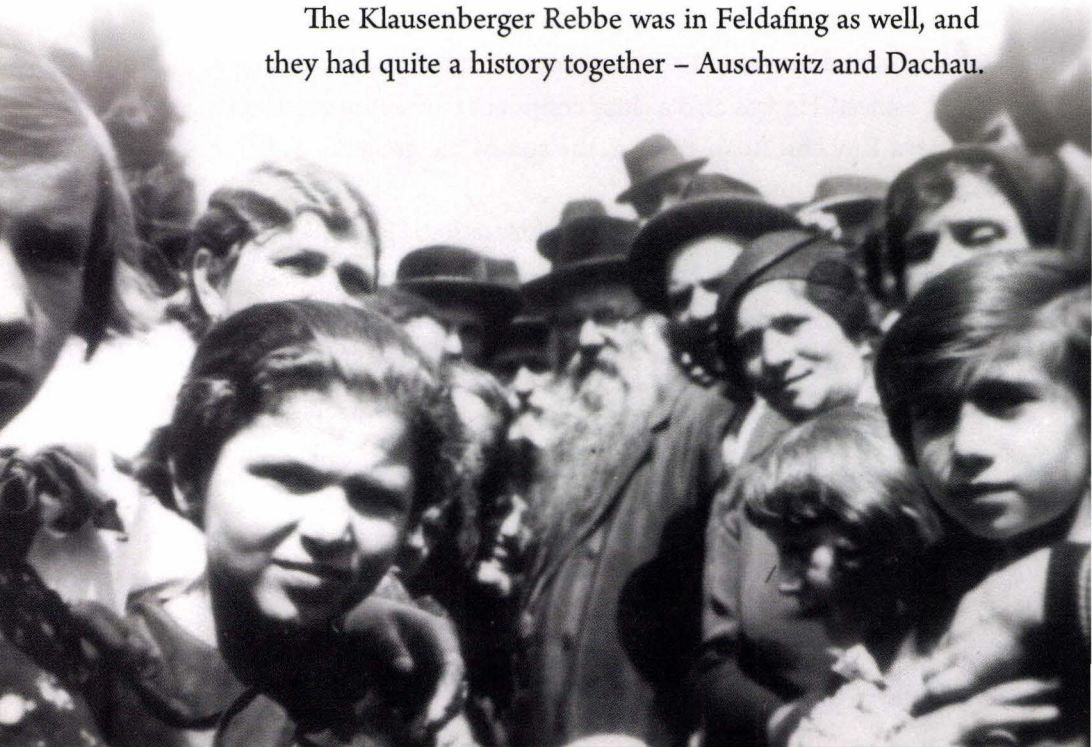
he'd lay out tables of Shabbos food in his large foyer for all the poor people to come eat or take home food.

In 1932, Abish's father, Reb Naftuli, left Romania to live in Eretz Yisroel. Abish wanted to join him but the Rebbe advised him against it, fearing his children wouldn't remain frum.

Totty's mother Elka, his older brother Duvid, and young sister Fraida Rivka, were all killed upon arriving in Auschwitz. Only his sister Pessi survived. Totty had two aunts and three uncles from his mother's side who survived the war and we became very close to them.

It wasn't so terrible in the beginning, Totty told me. He and his father were taken from Vişeu de Sus to a work camp, and he was assigned to the kitchen where he had access to food leftovers, which kept him and his father alive. When he left the kitchen, he always hid a piece of potato, or a small piece of bread, whatever he could find, and brought it to his father at night. They survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald and Dachau, survived the war, and after the liberation were sent to Feldafing, a displaced persons' camp.

The Klausenberger Rebbe was in Feldafing as well, and they had quite a history together – Auschwitz and Dachau.





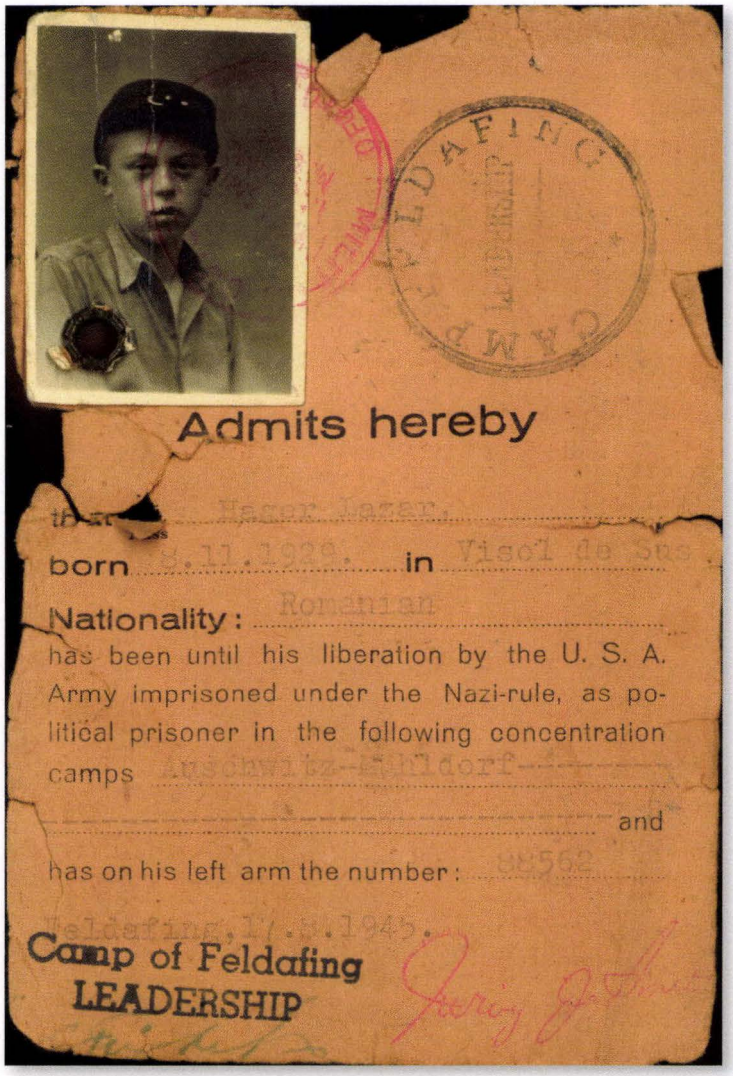
The family gathers together shortly before Totty's grandfather Naftuli moves to Israel, 1932.
Top row: Moshe Hager (son of Dudya) from Tel Aviv, wife of Dudya, wife of Moshe Leib, Grandmother Elka, Duvid (Totty's older brother)
Middle row: Dudya Hager (son-in-law of Naftuli) / Moshe Leib, son, / Naftuli / Mendel, son / Abish, son*Bottom row:* Perel, Raizel (daughters of Moshe Leib), Pessy, Luzer



Totty's family: his father Abish, Duvid, his mother Elka, Pessi, and Totty.

OPPOSITE: Totty's grandfather Naftuli leaving to Eretz Yisroel in 1932. Pictured in front is his cousin Reizy.

My father-in-law was a big talmid chacham and people were always turning to him for advice. He was always active in the community, which made him a natural choice for the Rebbe to turn to and ask his help in burying the dead. Even after the



Totty post-war in Feldafing DP Camp. This was his identification and information.


The Klausenberg Rebbe.

war was over, untold scores of famished survivors succumbed to typhus, their ravaged immune system too weak to withstand the disease.

"We'll be the chevra kadisha, to bury the meisi mitzvah," he said.

They worked tirelessly, but then both caught typhus from handling the disease-ridden bodies. Totty's father was taken to the hospital and Totty walked many miles every day to visit him. On Shavuos, he arrived at the hospital and went straight to his father's room as usual. He wasn't there. A passing nurse just shrugged when he asked about his father. Totty started frantically searching for his father, scouring rooms, buttonholing every nurse he saw. They all refused to give him any answer. Finally he asked for the supervisor.

"He's in the hall," the nurse said. "Go find him."

The supervisor was standing in the hall, in front of a heavy wooden table. Totty was desperate at this point. "You see this table?" he said. "If you don't tell me where my father is, I'll throw it at you."

"Go outside," the supervisor said. "There's a shed there. Inside you'll find your father."

Totty ran outside, opened the shed and recoiled. It was full of dead bodies, piled one on top of the other. He turned over one corpse. It was a young man. Then another corpse, and another.

I got the chills as he told me this story. It was so horrible envisioning this young kid, a teenager, picking through dead bodies on Shavuos afternoon, until after what seemed like forever, he finally found his father. His father, who survived Auschwitz, survived Buchenwald, survived Allach, the largest subsidiary-camp of Dachau, who had made it through the war,



Matzeiva of Abish Hager, Totty's father. He lived from 1892–1945, niftar at age 53 on the second day of Shavuos (5705) right after the war was over. Buried in Germany and brought to Eretz Yisroel in June, 1970 (28 Iyar 5730).

and then succumbed to typhus doing holy work, *chessed shel emes.* Totty buried his father in the Feldafing camp, and in 1970 with the permission of the Viznitzer Rebbe (the Imrei Chaim) and the Klausenberger Rebbe, he reinterred him in Yerushalayim on Har-haZeitim, where his father Naftuli was buried.

Totty felt all alone in the world. His mother, sister and brother had all perished in the war. He wouldn't find out until later that his sister Pessy survived. Eventually, they met up in the D.P. camp, where she married Reb Mordechai Weinberger. Totty received papers for America through the Klausenberger Yeshiva and moved to America. Pessy and her husband and their newborn baby were granted the right of entry to America about a year later. When she finally arrived in America, she could barely recognize her brother. His growth had been stunted in the lager. He was very short, with a face looking too young for his age. During the time he was in America, he shot up.

We sat in front of those flickering candles for a long time that night, my body absorbing the anguish my husband endured. Now I understood so much. I understood why the Klausenberger Rebbe had signed his name on our wedding invitation. Totty's father gave his life on behest of the Klausenberger Rebbe, and the Rebbe took upon himself to be a father to an orphaned son. At the wedding, he danced the mitzvah tantz for half an hour, and inscribed a long note on a sefer he gave Totty as a gift. Totty was the best student at the Klausenberg yeshiva, and the Rebbe treated him with much affection, bonds of common tragedy and shared fate having tied them together, and they stayed very close for many years to come.

Interestingly enough, Totty never once talked about the Holocaust with our children. Was it because he wanted to protect them from the horrors we both endured? Was he afraid they could never understand? Or he took it as a sign that our marriage almost never happened because of him speaking the unspeakable, and decided not to divulge the darkness again?

32. Sow With Tears, Reap With Joy

I NEVER STOPPED THINKING ABOUT MAAME, BUT WHEN I became a mother myself, I thought about her all the time. My daughter Yitta Rivka was born in 1950, Avraham Abish in 1952, Naftuli in 1954, and Yaakov Menachem (Yanky) in 1962.

Maame was never cold or hungry when it came to others. She gave us her food and the clothes off her back to keep us warm. That I could imagine doing – I'd do anything for my children. It was the way she lived for helping others. Neni (Auntie) Klein was the address everyone turned to, friend and stranger alike.

I wanted so much to be like my mother but I never even came close. I did get cold and hungry. She managed all by herself for years while her husband was away, caring for all seven of us, and did so much chessed as well. Chaya took me in for a week after I had a baby, and Totty helped as much as he could, but I still struggled. Maame lived her life by doing for others and I couldn't see myself being like that.

I knew I could never have been like her under the same circumstances. Sometimes, in the dead hour of the night, I would ask myself, pained inside, "Had it been me on that day of the transport in Ujhely, would I have walked of my own

accord into that courtyard, to share the fate with my daughter, so that she wouldn't be left there alone?" The thought of me not being fully confident with my answer terrified me.

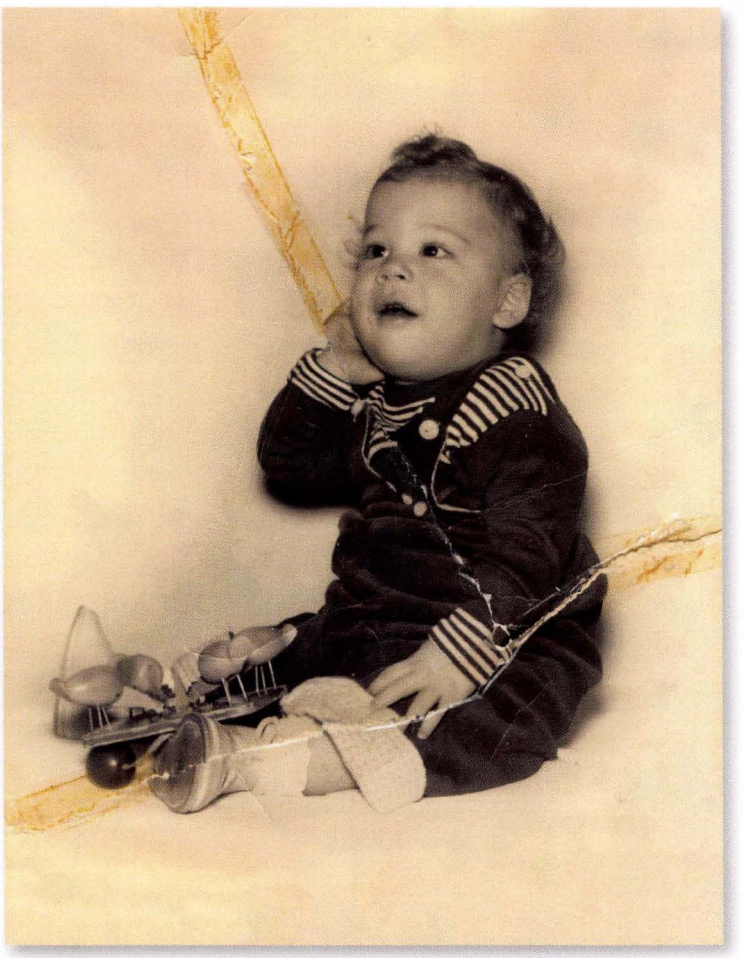
I kept these feelings inside, not daring to share them even with Totty. I worked on myself, trying to console myself with



My children Rivky and Abish.

the thought that I lived in a different country, in a different situation, and people are different today as well. Finally, I made a pact with myself that if I could be even ten percent as good as my mother, I'd be happy. But even that goal seemed so hard to reach...

Today I feel differently. I gave my whole life to my children and I look at them, and at my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and see how beautifully they've all turned out.



My son Naftuli as a baby.

They are all true blessings in my life, all of them exceptional human beings. And I look inside my soul and say, "Maame, I know you love me, you followed me into the lion's den only because I was your daughter. But I don't know if I make you proud. I only hope you are proud of them, my precious children and their children."

But the early years were very difficult. My pregnancies were so hard, and although the doctor told me to eat more, I had no



My son Yanky as a baby.

appetite. My husband was constantly working at the laundry we owned, struggling to make a living. Raising three children that came in quick succession wasn't easy.

My ancestors were renowned for their hachnasos orchim and while I can never compare myself to them, I did try to emulate them as much as I could. Our apartment was small but it was always open for guests, and my children often slept on our pull-out couch so the guests could take their room.

My husband helped as much as he could. Every day he'd take all the dirty clothing and diapers to work at the laundry. There were no disposable diapers, and most people had a diaper service to pick up the dirty diapers and deliver clean ones. We couldn't afford the service, so Totty would wash everything at work, and bring it home clean and folded. It was an immense help, and I was always very grateful to him for that. When he came home he'd do the dishes or bathe the children. Then he'd go to shul to learn. Totty knew how to fix washing machines, so he got this idea that maybe he should supplement our income by moonlighting, fixing people's machines on the side.

"No," I told him. "We'll have what to eat and we'll make do. The children need a father who learns."

But sometimes, as much as Totty was there for me, I felt alone, again, carrying the burden of raising a family, wishing for my mother's sweet embrace, knowing she would have helped me with all I needed, had she only been here with me. I cried for her often, missing her desperately.

And there were the nightmares.

I never had them during the war. Even afterwards, I managed to keep what happened, repressed, buried deep inside me. I lost my mother, my sisters, but I still had my father, my sister and brother. I survived. It should be enough, and it was

enough, and I was grateful for what I had, and let go of what I lost. Or so I thought.

Then I had children. And the nightmares started. Each time, the same thing. The Germans prowling, reaching to snatch my children out of my arms and send them to the gas chambers. "No, no, you can't take them!" I screamed louder than I ever did in real life, holding onto them for dear life. Those dreams were unbearable. I cannot even tell you how broken I felt when I woke up. I couldn't face life if they took my children. To top it off I felt guilty. Why did I only have the nightmares now? Why didn't I feel this way when they killed my mother and sisters?

I used to feel guilty that I didn't dream about my mother. But I realized that's the way of the world. Parents feel more for their children than children do for their parents. But then I understood something else. I didn't have nightmares about my mother because something deep inside me simply knew that if I would, I'd die of sheer horror. Of pain. Of fear. Of survivor's guilt, why I lived and she died. I couldn't relive it again and again. Something inside me shielded me from those abysmal, terrible, intolerable memories. But I still had my nightmares and my doubts, long nights of emotional torture and regret. These nightmares made those early years of parenting very hard.

And if there was a night I didn't scream, my husband screamed. He had his own hefty share of nightmares.

During the day, we were too busy to think, between raising children and working. We each knew what the other was going through, but we loathed talking about it. Needing to deal with the past at nights was bad enough, and we grasped at days as moments of respite, of brief relief. But then the night would fall, and we would return to our nightmares like souls condemned to the netherworld.

33. In His Law He Meditates Day and Night

TODAY, LOOKING BACK, IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE how far a young couple can go in their efforts to nickel and dime every tiny expense, to make each dollar last longer, but we really tried to get by with as little as conceivably possible. When we first got married, I wanted Totty to go to kollel. After all, I came straight from Bais Yaakov, where the lifestyle of sacrifice for the Torah was emphasized. I am grateful for having had an education that put the spiritual above the material, and focused us as a young couple on things that truly matter. But sometimes I may have taken it a bit too far. Here are just a few stories, sometimes verging on the comical.

When my father gave me a dowry for my marriage, I could have used part of it to furnish our home. Everyone bought furniture on installment plans, and you didn't need much for that initial payment. But I wanted to save every penny we could, because it was an absolute priority that my husband learn. We bought the bare minimum, just a kitchen table and four chairs, and mattresses with a frame.

Everyone lived in the middle of Williamsburg paying $50 a month in rent. I wanted Totty to have a clear head to

learn so I found an apartment for $20 a month in a rundown neighborhood populated by Puerto Ricans. We lived in that apartment for five years with minimal furniture. By the time we had three children, we had absolutely no place even for the bare minimum we did have.

The shades. In our first apartment we had only five windows, and we needed five shades, which Macy's sold for $3.99 apiece. I didn't want to ask Totty for $15 for shades, so I'd ask him for the $3.99, take a subway to Manhattan for a nickel, and buy one set of shades. The following month I once again dragged another one home on the subway, doing this for five months until I had all the windows covered. It was like paying in installments, but really, really cheap.

Stockings were similar, but different. Sometimes money was so tight, I didn't have enough money to buy them, so I simply wouldn't leave my house for a week at a time. When we had a couple of dollars, I would buy a box of three pairs of stockings.

We didn't have chicken often, but when we did, I gave my portion to the children, to stretch our rations just a little bit further.

Today, I would advise my children not to do such things. I was young and a bit immature, and most of all, I didn't have a mother to stop me from doing such things. I insisted on doing everything by myself.

I wish I could go back in time and speak to my younger self. But at least today I'm different. I try to make sure I keep things in balance.

I don't regret what I have done. Actually, I am proud of the end result of our efforts. I did my hishtadlus, doing everything I could to enable Totty to learn. Had I been slightly more experienced, or had the guidance of a mother, I would have

probably done things a bit differently, so that they wouldn't have taken such a toll on me.

When Totty turned sixty-five, he said, "Let's make Aliya. Now's the time for me to finally go back to full-time learning."

Several years before, when Totty wanted to sign a contract on a home a block away from my son in Israel, I first said no. I always wanted to live in Eretz Yisroel but didn't want to leave my family.

"Don't worry," Totty said. "It doesn't mean we're moving there tomorrow. Every Jew should have a home in Eretz Yisroel."

Then we furnished it, because what can you do with an empty apartment? And so it came to pass that when Totty suggested we should move, we had everything we needed to just pick up and get on the plane and go.

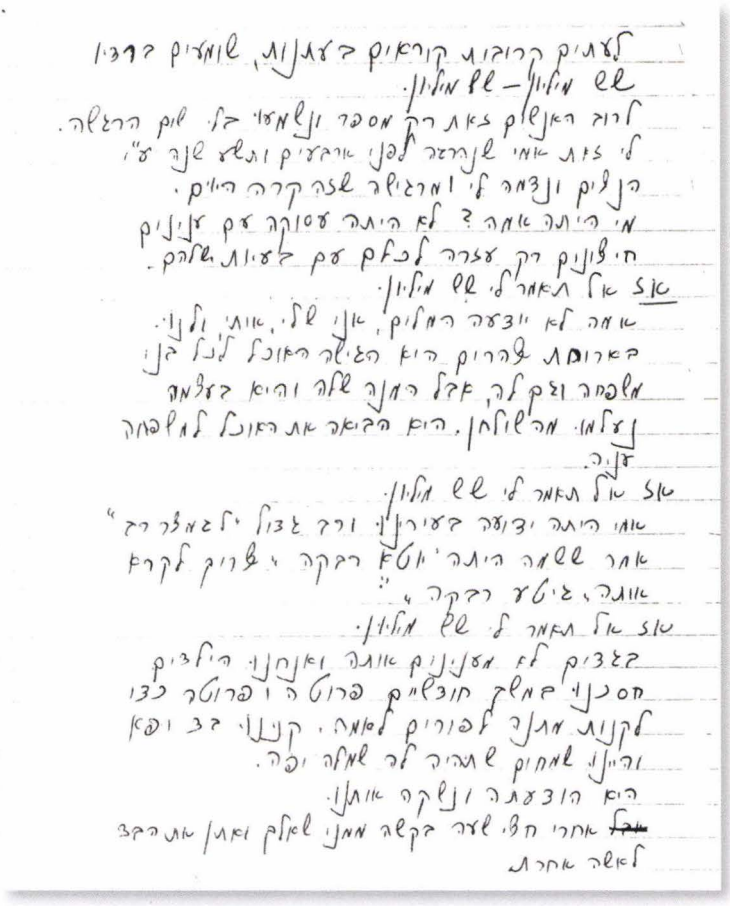
"When you miss the children, we'll travel back to Brooklyn," Totty promised.

Totty settled into full-time learning, and I went to Ulpan to learn Hebrew. If I wanted to go on a tiyul, a trip, I went with my grandchildren. I never bothered my husband. He was fulfilling his – and my – lifelong dream of being fully immersed in learning Torah day and night. Every evening we'd go for a walk and then he'd sit down again and learn. I'd see his eyes closing over his sefer. "It's late," I'd say. "You learned enough." But he kept going. He promised me long ago that he would be a man of learning all his life, and he was a man of his word.

We kept our home in Boro Park, and during the years in Israel, always came home for a few weeks each year. I continued attending Ulpan and for one of my assignments, wrote the story "Yom Kippur in Bremen." Without my knowledge, the teacher submitted it to *Yated Ne'eman*, and they published

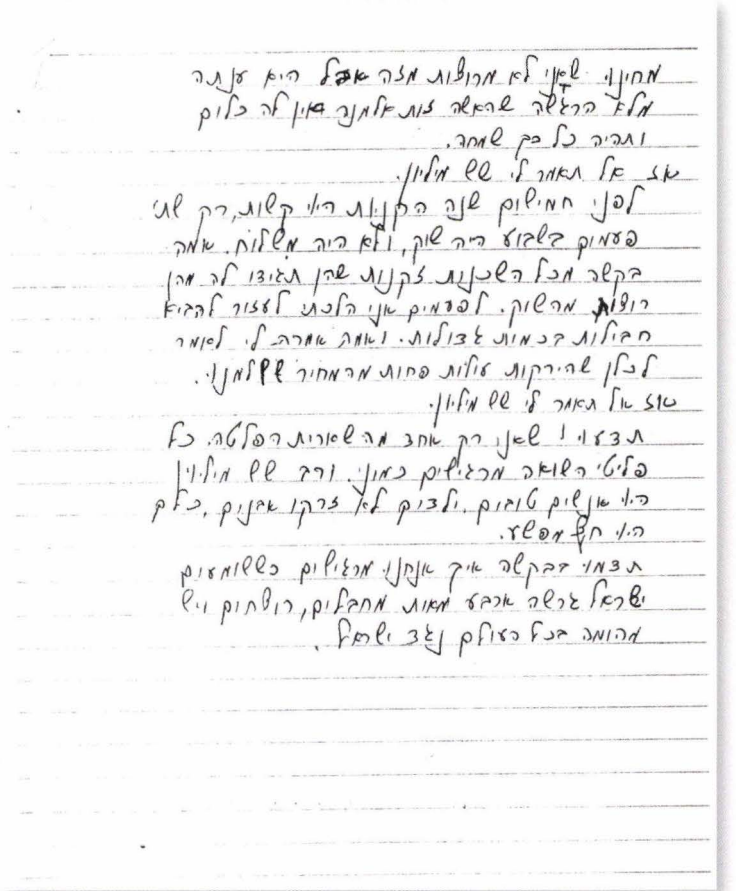
it. I also wrote a poem about my mother for the class. I sent it to my son Yanky, and he wrote a poetic response to my poem. Our short poetic correspondence was also published in the Yated, which, comically, made me a published Hebrew writer of sorts.

I enjoyed Israel but missed my children and grandchildren in America very much. Friday night, I'd light candles and Totty would go to shul, and that hour or so until Totty would come back, was lonely for me, making me remember the losses and those who are gone and not here anymore. Then my grand-



The poem I wrote in Ulpan and published in Yated Ne'eman, c. 1993.

children started a new tradition. Friday afternoon they'd come home from school and quickly sit down and write me letters and have them faxed to me. After I lit the candles, I'd wait for my fax machine to come to life and start sputtering page after page, letters of love, so much love that my floor was covered in a sea of white faxed letters. And I'd sit there and read the faxes, and it would fill me with joy, and I couldn't wait for Totty to come home so that I could share with him all this joy, flowing to us from our beautiful grandchildren.





Totty and I spent two days at the Banyas, Israel. It was our first time away together to relax. 1991.

My son worried that it wasn't OK to be receiving faxes on Shabbos. Although they were sent from America when it wasn't yet Shabbos, they were arriving in my house when it was Shabbos for me. Totty assured him it was fine halachically, but my son brought it up the next time he visited the renowned posek, Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Wosner, in Brei Brak.

"It's absolutely allowed," the posek reassured him. My son's surprise showed on his face.

"One day, when you're a grandfather and your children are far away, you'll see how much it's allowed!" he said.

34. Return to Ujhely: The Undefeated

AND THEN CAME THE DAY I FACED UJHELY AGAIN. I dreaded that moment. I thought – or maybe hoped – we had parted ways forever and knew if I found myself on that soil again, I'd fall to the ground and never get up.

I couldn't bear to return to the place that bore the memories of all I had lost, that was the town of the happiness of my childhood, and then turned its ugly, cruel face to me.

But life is more unpredictable than our wildest imagination.

Forty-five years after the war, I finally felt ready to go back and confront my distant past. It was the early nineties. The communist regime in Hungary collapsed, and foreigners were allowed in.

Together with my husband and daughter we traveled to Ujhely. To my surprise, I didn't fall to the ground in tears. The city seemed entirely different, as if I stepped out of a time machine in the wrong place. Only the name was the same. Ujhely didn't grow big, but I couldn't find my house. The Communists had changed all the names of the streets when they took over, and took great pains to erase any reference

to the Hungarian monarchy. Károlyi Utca, "King Street" in Hungarian, was no more.

Someone I knew in my youth still lived in Ujhely and she recognized me. "I don't see my house," I said. "Where is it?"

"Come, I'll show you. It's good you came because they are tearing it down."

When I saw my old apartment again, that's when the emotions started flooding me.

We knocked on the door, but the man who opened didn't want to let us in. Like so many others throughout the post-Holocaust Europe who took over abandoned Jewish properties, he thought I was coming to reclaim my property.

"I have nothing to do with the people who took your place," he said. "I'm only here for fifteen years."

"I don't want anything from you," I said. "I just want to show my husband where I was born."

Reluctantly, he let us in. There was a guy lying on a cot in the room, different pictures on the wall...it bore no resem-



The front of our home in Ujhely. The Russians changed our address, but Rivkchu, a woman who lived in Ujhely after the war, showed us the way.

blance to the house of my childhood. It felt alien, apathetic, devoid of joy, defiled of its pure, Jewish, holy air that imbued the house that my parents created. Our souls fill our homes, and make our walls speak up.

"Please," I asked the owner, "let us go down to the basement." I had a strong memory of taking all my things to the basement after the Nazis came. My report cards, my papers, a thick book of poems I got as a reward for my scholastic achievements. That was all I wanted from the house. I wanted those books and papers from my past.

"You can't go down," he said. "The basement is flooded. And it's not the first time. Whatever was down there got ruined long ago."

So I left. There was nothing there for me.

A retired policeman we met told us that there were no Jews left in Ujhely.

We went to the cemetery to pay tribute to my grandfathers, to Yaakov Klein, Yisroel Duvid Katz, Shlomo Chechowitz. We



Revisiting Ujhuly in the 1990s, we remember the long walk to get water from the sink near our house.

also visited the kever of the Yismach Moshe, the founder of Satmar Chassidus. He was a great tzaddik. Every night he'd take his cane to bed so when Moshiach came, he'd be ready. Before the war, there was a constant flow of visitors coming to daven and ask for divine help at his gravesite. But that day, when my husband, my daughter and I were standing at his kever, the place was desolate. The Hungarian Jews were gone. Nothing was the same anymore.

When I returned three years ago with two of my sons and their wives, my house was gone. And the high-rise projects took its place. The beautiful Diana Park, half a block from my home, where I had spent so many happy afternoons, was gone as well, flattened and turned into a nondescript complex of buildings and asphalt, bare, bereft of soul and joy of the past.

All I have left are the memories.



The outhouse near our home. We didn't have toilet paper in those days; we used whatever paper we found lying around the house.

35. Maame: Angels of G-d Ascending and Descending

I DIDN'T OFTEN THINK ABOUT THE PAST. DURING THE year, I was busy with my children, with my life. But come Shavuos, I'd light that yahrzeit candle and memories flooded me. Most of all I remembered my mother, watching her walk into that courtyard, the agony of not saying goodbye. One moment she was here, the next moment gone forever. I knew she died Al Kiddush Hashem, that she was in a good place. But it pained me greatly that I could no longer picture her, I didn't dream of her, I couldn't feel her presence.

People told me she's in Gan Eden, but what did that mean? I wanted a sign that she's existing in a place where she still sees me.

It was just me, down here, alone, crying, wanting, hurting, and getting not a word, not a hint, from her, from a realm beyond ours.

Last year, Shabbos led directly into Shavuos. There is a shiur I always attend in the Hilman Plaza around the corner from me. That Shabbos was a record heatwave. I came to the shiur to see forty women standing outside waiting for some-

one to open the doors. The speaker arrived and she didn't have the key. The women still stood there, baking in relentless sun. I was standing near the speaker and I heard her mention a dining room. "If it's a dining room you want, I can offer my place," I said. "I live right around the corner. And we have air conditioning."

The women all piled in, I took every chair I had in the house, and put out some water.

Since it was a consecutive three days of Shabbos and then Yom Tov, I already lit the yahrzeit licht on the table. "I have yahrzeit for my mother tomorrow," I told the speaker. "Her name was Yitta Rivka."

"So let's dedicate our study today l'iluy nishmas Yitta Rivka," she said.

When the shiur was over, I started putting away the chairs. I passed the candles and all of a sudden, I felt my heart go all soft inside, a buttery feeling I can't quite describe. And there she was. My mother. For the first time in seventy-two years I saw her. And she looked so happy! It wasn't like a hazy dream at night. It was in the broad light of day, and her face looked as clear as if I were looking in the mirror and suddenly saw her reflection, standing next to me. I can't even begin to describe this feeling. For the first time in seventy-two years I finally had a mother again. It felt like a miracle. Not only that, she was happy with me and I was happy with her!

I never felt so happy and so at peace with myself. Maame goes on living in the World of Truth, and in that place, where nothing is hidden, she is happy with the life I have led and the family I have raised.

I was planning on eating home myself that Shabbos, because my son Yanky was in Monsey with the Rebbe, and his wife was home with the children. But I couldn't hold myself

back. I had to go tell them now about this experience. I felt like a new person, and on an impulse, I decided to join my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren for a Shabbos meal.

After Yom Tov, my son Yanky called me as he was driving home from Monsey. His wife called him to tell how excited I was on Shabbos. "Yanky," I said. "I saw my mother, and she was so happy with me, and I was so happy with her!"

"Mommy," Yanky said. "Bobbe sent angels to you to make you happy. She wanted you to stop crying."

My son Abish marveled at the hashgochah protis. "It's a mitzvah to spread the word," he said.

The next day, I called the speaker and told her what happened. "Next year call me, and we will come again," she said.

This year, I had more time to prepare. Usually they don't make a shiur on Shavuos but the organizer printed flyers that there would be a class in my house. There was no way of knowing how many people would come, but I rented extra chairs and made sure all the furniture was removed from the dining room except for the table. Fifty women showed up, and I was so happy to have them all come in honor of my mother. Many people were inspired by that shiur, and some took on an extra mitzvah in their daily lives.

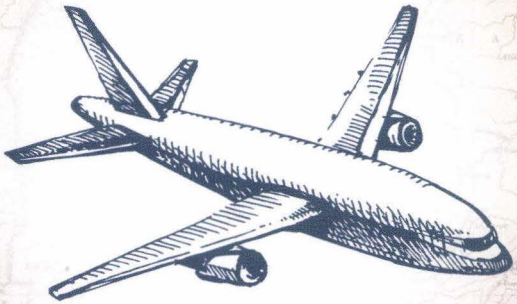
Secretly I was hoping for a repeat appearance, but it was a one-time thing.

This experience changed my life. I became much more upbeat, much more open. I know that somewhere in this universe that Hashem created, my mother's soul goes on living, and those who have left us see us and rejoice with us. The goodness we do in our lives matters a lot to them, because here, down on this earth, in this world, Hashem's will is done.

"You're a good soul," Maame told me. "I am happy I walked the path of life with you, Goldele, hand in hand."



The only photo I have of Maame (zoomed in from the family picture).



Part Four:

Without the Past, there is no Future

36. Mesirus Nefesh for a Jew: A Lifestyle Not a Mitzvah

MY BUBBE SHIFRA TZIVIA WAS THE DAUGHTER OF Reb Shlomo Friedman. His nickname was Chechovitzer after his hometown. He came to Ujhely as an orphan, after learning in the yeshiva of Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Teitelbaum, the Rebbe of Sighet, and of Gaon Reb Meir Perls in Krula, one of the greatest talmidim of the Chasam Sofer.

Reb Shlomo, it turned out, was an extraordinary scholar who excelled in learning, and it didn't take long before he was taken as a son-in-law by R. Yaakov Yehuda Hakohen Kleinman, who was well known in the city.[1] Reb Shlomo didn't come

1. Fascinating story: One Erev Yom Kippur, Reb Yaakov brought his machzor and reading glasses to shul and left them there as there was no Eruv and he wouldn't be allowed to carry anything on the holiday. When he returned for Kol Nidrei, he noticed that his glasses went missing. He realized that a gang of mischievous kids had snatched them, and tried to chase them, to no avail. The Yismach Moshe, the Great Rebbe of Ujhely, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, came to shul and noticed the commotion. When he was told that children took Reb Yaakov's reading glasses, the Yismach Moshe mused, "Who says you can't read without glasses?" With

from a chassidish upbringing, but he adopted the customs of his father-in-law.

Everyone in Ujhely knew Reb Shlomo. Ujhely was a border town, with one side in Hungary and other side in Bohemia, which became Czechoslovakia after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the wake of World War I. They called the Czech side little America because there was abundance and riches there. Our Hungarian side was very poor, and many people would make a meager living by buying merchandise on the Czech side where everything was in abundance, and smuggling it over the border to resell. It was a risky business, and often they'd run afoul the border officials, be caught, and imprisoned.

My great-grandfather, R. Shlomo Friedman, was always the first person they turned to for help. Even the police knew to come to him whenever they caught someone and he'd pay for them to be released. R. Shlomo would go to the station and the police would stand up when he walked in, out of respect. No one really cared for the law. The border that cut the town in half was an arbitrary decision of statesmen and politicians who waged wars and sent countless scores of people to die. On a local level, everyone understood it was a game, an enrichment scheme for the cynical authorities who abused the suffering of jobless, destitute people for their personal enrichment. Poor Jews were guilty for wanting to live, for doing all they could to put food on the table, for trying to keep their families alive.

Sometimes these poor, hapless smugglers were arrested on Shabbos. R. Shlomo would go to the station to negotiate, and the police knew him well enough to release the prisoners

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no further ado, Reb Yaakov went to his seat, opened his machzor, and never needed reading glasses again.

without immediate payment. It was an ongoing business relationship for them, and they knew he'd come with the money after Shabbos. In this well-tuned state-run extortion machine, R. Shlomo took it upon himself to rescue his neighbors who were down on their luck, time and time again.

Reb Shlomo always made sure to have poor people at his table, particularly on Yom Tov. One Purim, it was already late in the afternoon, the time for the seuda was getting close, and there were no poor people to be found. Reb Shlomo went out the streets to search for a guest. A beggar passed him in the street and he immediately invited him. "I'm going to eat at Reb Leibish's house," he said. "He gives 10 pengo (Hungarian currency at the time) to each poor person who eats at his table." Reb Leibush Teitelbaum was a grandson of the Yismach Moshe and a wealthy man.

"I can't match that," said Reb Shlomo. "But I can offer you one pengo."

The beggar laughed at him and continued on his way. Reb Shlomo ran after him, offering him two, then three, then five pengo. He finally gave up and returned home. Shortly afterwards, there was a knock on the door. It was the police who came to inform that they picked up a vagabond without proper documents and "offered" Reb Shlomo to come to the precinct and bail him out. In other words, they made it known that they were open for business.

Reb Shlomo dashed to the police station, only to find the poor beggar who rejected his invitation. Reb Shlomo bailed him out and then turned to him. "Well, now you have no choice," he said. "You need to come eat at my home!"

His home was always a go-to place for all the poor people collecting money, all the itinerants who had no roof over their

heads and needed a place to put their head down for the night. He'd meet people in shul and bring them home to give them food and shelter. My grandmother, Shifra Tzivia, was one of five daughters, and they all spent most of their time cooking and taking care of the guests. It was a family affair.

Once, in the days leading up to Pesach, the girls had spent all day cleaning, scrubbing and washing the white linen. It was a physically exhausting and time-consuming job, and after they were done for the day all they wanted was to collapse into bed. But then their father came home with five Jews who needed a place to sleep. They were dressed in worn, dirty clothing and muddy boots.

"They'll sleep in your beds," he told his daughters. They made an attempt to protest against their father's decision. They dreaded the thought that the beautiful linen they worked so hard, scrubbing and beating and rinsing and hanging and drying and folding, would become dirty all over again.

But R. Shlomo had a whole different perspective on the matter. "You should be happy that I brought the guests to you, and you didn't need to go out and find them," he retorted. In his mind, finding someone to help was almost a basic necessity. If you had no one to share the goodness of your life with, you had to scout the streets to find those less fortunate and make their lives better.

In those days, everyone worked very hard, to the very edge of their physical ability, and putting your ego or your comfort or even needs aside for the sake of the other was a simple truth of life his family abided by. But on that particular night on the eve of Pesach, R. Shlomo's daughters were not happy. No, they didn't feel their father didn't care. They knew how dedicated he was to his family and how hard he worked every waking moment of his life. All he did was share with them his passion

for the needs of others, to the point of self-sacrifice, and that erev Pesach night was not going to be any different.

Little did they know that this unique ethos, this life philosophy that he instilled in them, of total devotion, of generosity and resolve, would save lives in the long night of horror that was about to descend on Europe... Only on that night, they were simply too tired to give it much thought. But they did get up and take care of their destitute guests, the poor souls their father found roaming the dark streets in the little corner of this world.

Reb Shlomo Friedman, Maame's grandfather, didn't act alone in his many acts of kindness. His wife, Sara, was an ezer kenegdo, sharing in his life mission of being a beacon of generosity, cooking and caring for all the guests that found their way to her doorstep. Reb Shlomo wouldn't have been able to do all the good he did without having her as his same-minded companion, and he was always grateful for it. He never took her efforts for granted.

Years later, R. Shlomo's son-in-law, Reb Meir Klein, Maame's uncle, wrote a sefer. In the introduction, he thanked R. Shlomo and Sara Friedman, his late father- and mother-in-law, for supporting him for eleven years, from the time he married their daughter until their passing, so that he could completely devote himself to Torah, not needing to worry about making a living.

Often repeated was the story of when R. Shlomo spent Shabbos with the Shinever Rebbe, Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam. The Shinever Rebbe, as one of his sons attested in his sefer, would not speak "unless he weighed his words on a scale of truth, in solitude of his sacred thought and in great

and solemn devotion, and it was well known that he wouldn't utter even a word of Torah unless it was bestowed on him from the heaven, only from Hashem alone."

On Friday night, the Shinever Rebbe Reb Yechezkel Shaga asked R. Shlomo how he was doing financially, and R. Shlomo responded that it was Shabbos. The Shinever Rebbe asked him again on Shabbos morning and then again during Shalosh Seudos, but R. Shlomo kept to his original response. He declined to talk about business on Shabbos, even if the "Rebbe of Rebbes," as the Shinever Rebbe was known, was asking.

On Motzei Shabbos, the Shinever Rebbe told R. Shlomo that the Gates of Heaven were open all Shabbos long. He could have asked for anything. Why did he insist on keeping quiet?

"I too saw that the gates were open," he said. "But I feared for my children and grandchildren to have to pass the test of the wealthy."

The Shinever Rebbe gave him a bracha that his children will be even better than he, and his grandchildren even better, and so on... "*Zei velen zein guhr git*!"

He was over 90 years old when he got very sick on Erev Sukkos. "This is it," the doctor said. "You don't have much time left."

His children all lived in Ujhely. It took only minutes for them all to descend on the house. They stood at his bedside, all grown men and women with children and grandchildren of their own, weeping like little children.

He smiled at them. "Children, you can go home to your families," he said. "I promise you, I won't spoil your Yom Tov."

He kept his promise, even summoning all his willpower to make kiddush. He fought to live for the entire Chag of

Sukkos, and for Shemini Atzeres, and for Simchas Torah. On the finishing line of his long life, he was not going to ruin a Yom Tov for his children and their families.

Only after the Yomim Tovim were over did he call for his children. "I'm going in the way of all living," he said. "I don't want you to cry. There is nothing to cry about. I did a lot of good in my life, and I'm not afraid. You children are very good, and your children will be better, and their children will be even better." He secretly carried the words of the Shinever Rebbe with him his entire life, and now came the time to share that amazing promise with his children...

Reb Shlomo Friedman passed away the next day and was laid to rest in Ujhely on September 30, 1918.[2] May his righteous soul be blessed.

2. כ"ד תשרי תרע"ט.

37. Maame's Great-Grandparents

MAAME'S PATERNAL GRANDFATHER WAS REB YOSEF Tzvi, a sofer and talmid chochom, recognized as a tzadik by all who knew him. Her grandmother, Sara Miriam, was the daughter of Esther Hentcha and Reb Aron Tzvi Taub, the well-known Brider Rebbe. The sefer, *Kanfei Yonah,* by Reb Yida Arye Tessler, writes his biography at length.

Maame would tell us stories about her great-grandfather, the Brider Rebbe. These were wondrous stories of miracles but also stories of his good heart. She told us how his daughter Rochel had a son whose left arm was covered with red sores the doctors could not heal.

Several times during his childhood, she went to her father and showed him her son's arm. "Taate," she said. "Look at this. How will he put on tefillin? Nobody can help him!"

"Don't worry," he said. "It's going to be good."

When nothing changed, she brought her son again. "It's still not good," she said.

Her father didn't seem to be perturbed. "It's going to be good," he repeated. "It's going to be good."

Shortly before her son turned thirteen, he asked to see his arm. The sores were red and oozing, excruciating to the touch.

The Brider Rebbe lightly ran his hand over the boy's in a downward motion, without actually touching the arm. When his hand came to rest at the bottom, the sores were completely gone. It was just one small story out of countless others.

When Maame's father, R. Yisroel Duvid Hakohen Katz married Shifra Tzivia Friedman, the mechutanim, R. Yosef Tzvi and R. Shlomo, enjoyed each other's company greatly. So much so that at some point, R. Shlomo said to R. Yosef Hersh in Yiddish, "Mechutan, I like you very much. Let us go together."

No one understood what these two tzaddikim were saying to each other, but they understood each other well. R. Yosef Tzvi passed away on כ"ד תשרי תרפ"ה, six years after R. Shlomo. They share the same yahrzeit and it wouldn't be surprising if they also shared the same place in Gan Eden....

38. America: Tidbits of a Different Life

In Good Faith

For a while, I worked in the office of Kollel Shomrei Hachomos, for which my father fundraised all those years. My job was to mail and address letters asking for charity for the organization. I got paid per letter, and I was scrupulous in counting how many I did. Two rabbis who worked in the office knew my father. "Your daughter is working *b'emunah*, in good faith," they'd say.

I worked for a while teaching in school but it was very draining and I would need to take two aspirins every day when I came home from work.

Totty put his foot down. "That's it," he said. "If you want to work, go ahead and work, but don't do work that's so hard you need to take aspirin."

Then, when I had three children at home, I decided I would teach my children. The boys started cheder at three years old. They didn't learn yet, but neither did they have toys. The Rebbe gave them a lot of candy and I didn't want that for my children. I kept them at home until they were four and a half. We didn't have the abundance of toys children have today, but I used whatever we had. Some puzzles, some Yom Tov Ehrlich tapes, some Jewish songs from the radio, a few games. They

were never bored, and when they started school, they were way ahead academically than their peers.

When the children were all in school for a full day, I got a job as a bookkeeper. Most of the staff weren't religious, and one Friday morning a coworker told me that she was up all night playing bingo. "I was up all night preparing for Shabbos," I said.

My supervisor overheard our conversation. "Goldy, were you really up all night?" she asked.

When I answered in affirmative, she spoke to the boss and then told me I didn't have to come in on Fridays anymore. "Don't worry, we won't touch your wages," they assured me.

When we bought our house I was worried whether we'd be able to pay our high mortgage.

"Goldy, what are you worried about?" the supervisor said to me. "Even when you're eighty and walk with a cane, you'll still have a place here."

It was wonderful working in a place that I loved and felt appreciated. A few years later, the partners had a fight and decided to liquidate their business. They asked me to stay on until all the money finished coming in from prior business. When I told them I didn't want to work in an office a long commute away, they allowed me to work from home.

Honesty as Best Business Practice

When we first got married, Totty was offered a job in the diamond district by one of our relatives who worked there. But Totty had one major drawback that disqualified him from this lucrative business. He was too honest which was a terrible quality for the diamond industry. He went to the Klausenberger Rebbe for his advice. "Go home and ask your wife," the Rebbe said.

So he did. "You signed the kesubah and need to make a parnassah. It's something you're going to have to do every day," I said. "So you need to be happy doing your job. I think you should work wherever you feel best."

Taate had given me a dowry and Totty asked if we could use the money to buy a laundry together with his friend. Learning had always been a serious priority for him, and this way he could spend half the day learning while his friend ran the laundry, and he'd be there for the other half.

But it didn't work out that way. His partner always came late, and the business was suffering. So we bought out his partner, and Totty had to be there from five in the morning until seven at night. He was only able to learn at night.

To make matters worse, we bought the laundry at a time when almost no one had a washing machine in their house. Only a few months later, an affordable home model came out to the market, and we lost a huge part of our customer base. It was always a struggle. One time two thugs came into the laundry and ordered him to empty the cash register. Totty was very brave and refused. By sheer luck he came out of it unscathed, but I was shaking when I pictured the scene and realized that his life was in mortal danger.

For sixteen years, Totty worked at our laundry business, until we had our fourth child, Yanky. The pressure built up. We simply didn't have enough to pay rent, tuition and food. Still, we hesitated to make the plunge to give up the laundry and start a new business.

Then Totty had a car accident. For two weeks he lay in the hospital. By the time he returned to work, all the machines were rusted and unusable. Probably the water remained in the

drums and the metal corroded. Hashem had sent us a clear sign to close the business.

He looked around for a while for a different job when someone offered him a piece of real estate to manage. It was in the real slums of the city and incredibly dangerous to go there each month to collect rent from the tenants. The buildings he managed had a superintendent, who was supposed to take care of the technical maintenance of the property. One Motzei Shabbos in the winter, the super called. "The steam broke," he said. "The tenants are cold. You need to come down here."

Totty took his jacket. "Please don't go," I begged. "They'll kill you."

I was terrified for him to go late at night to these slums. "Don't worry," he reassured me. "They won't kill me. They know I want to help." It didn't matter if the tenants were a different race, a different socioeconomic status, a different culture, or even looked at him as an alien, an enemy, someone who looked different and wanted their money, they needed help and he was going to help them. These calls were increasingly common over the years, and each time I'd practically hold my breath in fear until he came home safely. As it turned out, it wasn't the tenants he needed to fear. One night he was in a building collecting the rent when a gang of armed robbers tracked him down, knowing that he was collecting pay and must be carrying a substantial amount of money on him, and tried to stab him. They cut his scalp, and it was one of his tenants who dragged him into his apartment and called for an ambulance. From this incident I realized that his tenants trusted him and liked him, which was an unusual testimony to his good-hearted and kind nature.

Totty soon got a reputation for being scrupulously honest, which was a rarity in this gritty industry. In all his years, he

never had a fight with anyone, never was brought to a din Torah or a court. In fact, if other landlords had issues, the judge would say, "Let's call Mr. Hager," and he'd weigh in on the decision.

He was highly respected by the judges in Housing Court and Tenant-Landlord Disputes. Once, a tenant produced a false receipt of rent paid. Totty realized right away the receipt was a forgery, but how could he prove it? Finally it dawned on him that the date on the receipt had been a Shabbos. He turned to the judge and said, "Your honor, this date fell on Sabbath. Do you think I would collect rent and write a receipt on Sabbath?"

The judge smiled and immediately awarded the decision in his favor.

Over the years, my husband built up the property management business, eventually taking in our son Naftuli and then Yanky as partners.

39. Viznitz

My husband's family is related to the Viznitzer Rebbes, and Totty, his father, his grandfather and beyond, were all devout chassidim. Totty was a close talmid of the Klausenberger Rebbe and a chosid of the Vitznitzer Rebbe.

After the war, his Rebbe Chaim Meir'l, the Imrei Chaim of Viznitz, lived in Bnei Brak. Totty visited him when he came to America twice, and occasionally went to Israel to spend time with him there. In 1967, the time arrived for me to join my husband, take off, and go to the Rebbe for the month of Tishrei. The Rebbe was a phenomenal Baal Tefillah and although I wasn't yet familiar with the Viznitz nusach, I was overtaken by the beautiful tefillos. After Yom Tov, I went to the Rebbe. I was sure I would burst into tears while relating all our hardships. But as soon as I entered the room and told the Rebbe who I was, he turned to me with a smile. "Tell me if your husband behaves nicely to you. If not, I can talk to him because I'm his cousin!"

He said it very sarcastically, and his words changed my mood and the tone of the entire visit. He must have felt the pain very close to the surface inside me, ready to pour out, an indelible pain of a Holocaust survivor, and he wanted to

give me the remedy before I even started complaining about the illness.

After the Rebbe passed away in 1972, he left two sons. The Yeshuas Moshe took his place in Bnei Brak, and Reb Mordechai Hager Shlita became the Rebbe in Monsey. Totty was close to both brothers. When we were in Yerushalayim we went to Bnei Brak, and when we were in New York, we went to Monsey.

We never missed being in Monsey for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Shavuos, as well as many other special occasions. The women's section is on the balcony, and I always had a seat that was right over where the Rebbe sat. I still continue to go every Rosh Hashanah.

Totty was a very close confidant to the Rebbe in Monsey, who consulted with him a lot on many issues. At one point the Boro Park Vizhnitz Mosdos were in dire financial trouble. The Rebbe called Totty and appointed him as president of the Mosdos. The Rebbe gave him a sizable loan for the Mosdos and told him privately that this was only the initial installment, and if Totty saw that he needed more cash flow to help resolve the financial crisis, he should come to the Rebbe. My husband never went back for more money. He used to sit in the office every Sunday with other roshai kehilla and they worked it out. The chassidim knew that if the Rebbe needed something, you ask Luzer Hager.

One of my husband's clients, a wealthy older woman, once approached him and asked him to manage a building she owned. My husband declined the job. "So just buy it," she said. "I'll give it to you for half price."

I didn't understand why my husband refused the offer. "We could have used the money," I said. "Why not?"

"It's far from New York," Totty said. "I don't want to travel.

And the tenants aren't good, the building hasn't been kept up, and it's not worth the trouble."

Some time later, the woman approached him again. "You're an honest man," she said. "I want to give you the building to donate to a charity of your choice."

Totty didn't have to think twice. He went to the Vizhnitzer Rebbe and offered the building for his yeshiva. Everyone was happy with the situation. Except me, that is. For who do you think felt it was worth the trouble to travel and manage the building now that it was a yeshiva? Totty refused the commission for the deal, and worked on that project for two years, without taking any payment.

40. To the End of the Earth

THERE IS NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT IN THIS WORLD than family. Relationships, love, is what matters most in this world. Even in the darkest moments, when everything is clouded in a thick fog of despair and confusion, only the love for the other person gives our life in this world meaning. If you look for true love of Hashem, find it in the love for Hashem's soul that is in the one close to you. From the depths of my heart, I beg my children and children of my children, until Moshiach comes, to always live in peace with their families and love one another, because we all are one soul and come from one root.

I Miss You, Chaya

Chaya was all I had during the war, and we stayed close in the many decades since. In her last years she didn't remember our past. She passed away on December 27, 2017.[1] I miss her so much, and I do remember, for as long as I live, for both of us.

Chaya's husband, a big talmid chochom, always with a sefer

1. ט' טבת תשע"ח.

in his hand, devoted his life in her last few years to care for her. For many years he davened in the same shul as my husband during the week, where he had a shiur in Tanya and Ein Yaakov. He is the essence of a true chossid, davening with deep thought and kavana and abstaining from a pursuit of worldly taavos. He doesn't utter an extra word and has merited old age and a clear mind.



Hershy and Chaya Landa in later years.

So many times, I want to pick up the phone to call Chaya, to talk to her, my link between my past and my present. She was like a mother to me, a backbone of my entire life. In the beginning she lived in Boro Park and I lived in Crown Heights. Once she moved to Boro Park, I'd visit her every Shabbos, and we'd talk on the phone two or three times a day. We were completely different in looks, personality and taste, but that never mattered. We were sisters. We were family. We shared times of great adversity, and I believe with all my heart that I owe my life to her, many times over. For family, Chaya would have gone to the ends of the earth and back, and so would I, for there's nothing I cherish more. Maybe we inherited this value from Taate and Maame, and I hope this heritage remains in our families in generations to come.

Yidel, A Soul of Joy

My brother Yidel was a cheerful, happy person, full of life, always happy to do mitzvos and give tzedaka. He worked in diamonds and was always collecting and sending money to Israel. He married Leah Brody, a very kind woman who used



Sisters together. (Chaya is on the left)

to help feed the elderly in nursing homes and they had five lovely children and many grandchildren. When he passed away last year, I wanted to take the first plane to Florida to sit shiva with his family. I was in the airport, when all the flights were canceled because of a snowstorm. I was heartbroken that I couldn't go. We'd been so close as children. Challenges of life tore us apart and for years we didn't know who was alive and who wasn't, and it was an indescribable joy to meet again, a true resurrection from the dead. Ever since, we made sure to never lose sight of each other. I hope he still sees me from above, just as my heart is with him to this day.

Remembering Pessy

Pessy, Totty's sister, taught fourth grade for forty years in the Satmar school. Her classrooms were crowded, but she managed to give all the girls the attention they needed, staying longer after school with girls who needed more, sometimes even taking them to her home. Sometimes she rented a tiny



In the country with my first three children Rivky, Naftuli and Abish, before Yanky was born.

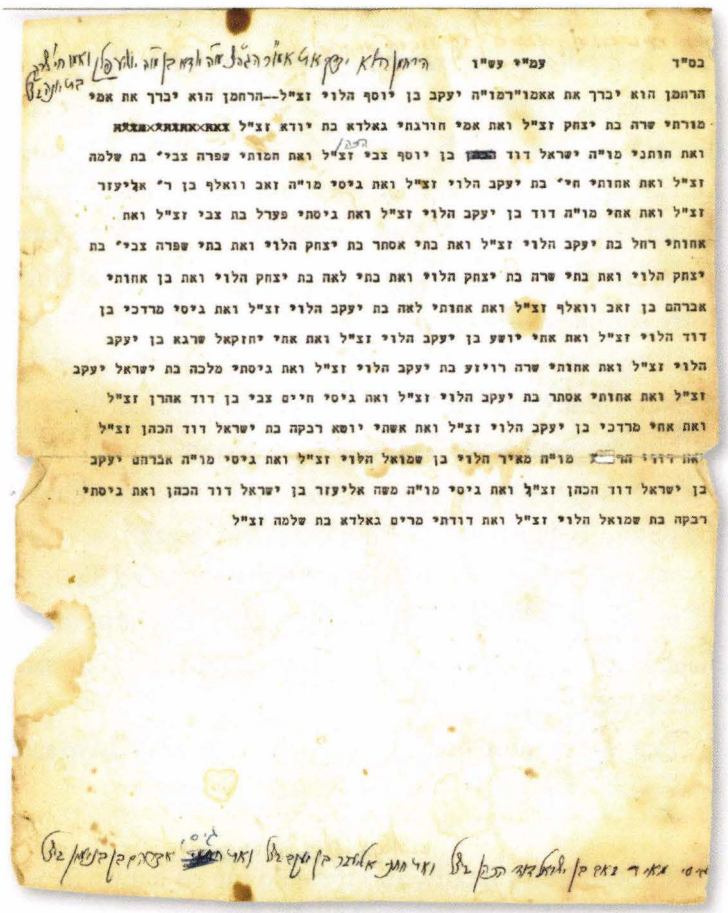
bungalow in the summer and invited my children to stay with her for a few weeks despite the lack of space.

She and her husband had a beautiful family. Their first child Elka was born in the Displaced Persons Camp in Germany, and their other children, Esther, Abish, and Fraida Rivka, were born in America.

Her husband Reb Mordechai Weinberger was very special, learning every possible moment after working a full day in Manhattan. He was a great talmid chochom and rabbinical personality, part of the faculty of the Klausenberger Rebbe's yeshiva, She'erith Haplaita, in Fuerenwald. Reb Mordechai was a Munkatcher chosid and printed a siddur with the Munkatcher nusach. Eventually, he became a Satmar Chosid.

Taate: A Soul Awake at Night

Taate always told me how proud he was of me, and it gave me a lot of pleasure when he'd ask me to do things for him. Every Friday night, after the children were asleep, I'd walk to visit Taate. We lived in a bad neighborhood, far from his home, but I missed him and wanted to pay him a visit. Often other family members, cousins and friends would drop in as well, and I really enjoyed those impromptu occasions of an



When Taate would say Birchas Hamazon, he'd say all the names of his loved ones (listed here) by Harachaman.

extended family get-together. We went to Taate every year for Pesach, even when it got hard for us, as he didn't have space for us to sleep.

I would often send my children to be with Taate at his Shabbos table. His Friday night tisch was something special. The preliminary zemiros before kiddush would take over an hour, and the song and zemiros during the seuda would continue long into the night. He sang the songs with so much warmth, neighbors would listen in from the windows.

I called Taate every day to check in, and when I was pregnant, he'd call daily on me to see how I was doing. One of my births was very difficult – the baby's cord was wrapped around his neck, and I was in labor all night. Our doctor was a wonderful, caring person. In those days, a family doctor was not just a doctor, but also family. He knew we didn't have family to leave our other children with, so he drove me to the hospital while Totty stayed with the children. When after a very difficult and long labor the baby was delivered in the wee hours of the night, he didn't hesitate to pick up a phone and call Totty to tell him the good news. "I know your husband," he said. "He's not sleeping, like some other fathers would. He is standing at the phone, holding his breath, waiting for the call."

When Totty got the call, he immediately called Taate to tell him the good news. Taate also answered the phone immediately. "I was up all night saying tehillim for Goldy," he said. "I just finished."

That meant more to me than anything he could have said or done.

Taate loved Totty dearly, and it made me so happy to see how much my husband and father got along, up until the day Taate passed away at the age of 83, in 1978. He spent the last

six months of his life with us, his daughters – three months at Chaya and three months at me. Yidel would also come and visit all the time, keeping Taate company. Totty welcomed my father with open arms and helped me take care of all his needs. We were so happy to have the opportunity to give back to him as he had always cared for us. Caring for him in the last months of his life was a true privilege. Knowing that I could make his last days be filled with the comfort and love that he so much deserved gave me great consolation.



Taate's matzeiva. He lived from 1894–1978 and was niftar at age 84 and buried on Har Hazeisim (28 Adar II 5738).

41. He Was My Everything

MOST IMPORTANT TO ME WAS THE PEACE BETWEEN me and my husband. We were married for 59 years. How can I write about him in only a few sentences? I'll never forget how when we were first married, we lived on the third floor in a building without an elevator. "I'll take down the garbage on the way to shul," he'd tell me. "And on the way home, I'll buy all you need for breakfast." This was not what husbands were used to doing in those days. House chores were a woman's job, and they took it for granted that someone was taking care of all the daily needs. Totty never believed in it. He was a full partner in every sense of the word.

Every single day, for 55 years, until he got sick, he brought down the garbage and stopped at the grocery. He never ever failed to do that for me. I know it may sound trivial and not fitting to be mentioned when we remember a life lived, but anyone who has a discerning eye for fine detail will appreciate this as a small testament to the amazing person he was. Because love, a big word, is expressed in multitudes of small things, in forgettable trivialities of a daily life, and together they build this edifice called "love."

Totty always wanted me to be happy. In the early years, we hardly had money, and I didn't want to ask him for anything.



Our 50th wedding anniversary in 1999.



Plaque from my children for our 50th wedding anniversary.

Once, before Yom Tov, Totty gave me ten dollars to go to the department store and buy a dress for Yom Tov. But then he seemed stressed out and I realized he probably gave me the money even though he couldn't afford it.

I gave it back to him. "Here," I said. "I don't need a new dress."

"What happened?" he was baffled. "You seemed so happy just a minute ago, when I gave it to you."

"I see you're nervous," I said. "I heard you talking loudly to the children."

He reassured me that he was not nervous and convinced me to go buy the dress. I did, and bought a lovely off-white dress.

Totty had a strong and robust voice and naturally spoke loudly. When we first got married, I started crying the first time he spoke in a raised voice. Surprised, he asked me what was wrong. "You hollered at me," I wept. He rushed to apologize. "It's just my voice," he said. "It's my fault. Of course I'm not hollering at you."

From that day on, Totty never raised his voice when talking to me. He spoke to me gently and sweetly. I always appreciated that he was willing to work so hard to change his nature for me. He made me feel like I was his queen, and he was my king.

People often tell me that I should be proud of my family. I agree, and I know who made our family so special. It was their amazing father. He was strong. I always had backaches, and aches and pains all over my body, as if the memories of the Holocaust, like scars, were incised into me, and he was so patient with me. Without him, I had nothing, I was nothing. He was my everything.

Totty had problems with his heart, but his heart condition was under control. He lived with it for years, and was diligent to go



Totty

in for annual checkups. In 2003, Yanky's oldest daughter Ruchy got married, and we came to Brooklyn for the wedding. At the wedding, someone mentioned that Totty seemed unusually pale. We paid a visit to his doctor. The doctor thoroughly examined him. "You need an operation," he said. "You have three serious conditions, but we are only going to operate on one of them. Tell the surgeon not to touch the other two."

The surgeon didn't listen. He operated on all three, and Totty never recovered. My husband, always so strong, never a complainer, was now in constant pain.

Totty needed the best care possible, so we moved back permanently to America. For the next five years, I didn't leave his side. For the first two years, I took care of him myself. Then my neighbor saw me schlepping something. "You need help," she said. "You can't do it alone." She was right. I suffered from arthritis and the constant lifting and bending was crippling me.

We got good help, but even when my husband sat on his recliner, the aide next to him, I'd jump up every time I heard my husband talk. I rarely left the house on Shabbos or weekday.

I once asked the doctor, "How will I be able to tell when there's an emergency?"

I don't know if the doctor was trying to be coy or he was being serious, but what he said was, "If you see that his pajamas are not moving, call the ambulance."

How could I sleep after that? I'd lie in bed, fighting exhaus-



My three sons dancing at Yisroel Duvid Hager's wedding, not long after Totty was niftar in 2008.

tion, watching him constantly, waiting to see the slight ripple in his clothing that would tell me he was still breathing.

We were very happy together, Totty and I. He knew what I wanted, and I knew what he wanted. He was proud of me, and I was proud of him. We knew how we felt about each other. If you want to be close and love the one you're with, ask yourself, do I know what we feel about each other, do I know what the other person wants?

Totty passed away on July 10, 2008[1] and was buried in the Vizhnitzer cemetery in Monsey.

When I was sitting Shiva, my grandson, Yanky Itzkowitz came over to me and shared something that made my heart smile even when I think about it now.

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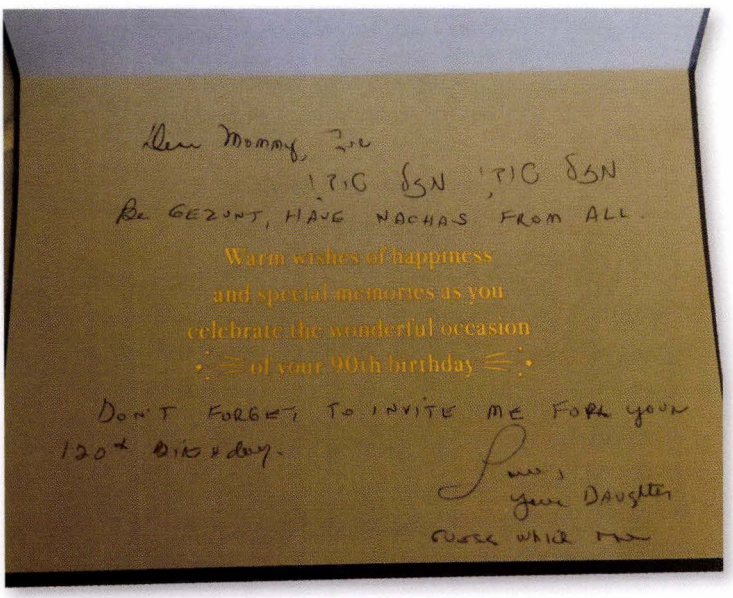
1. ז' תמוז תשס"ח.

"Bobby," he said. "When I got engaged, Zaidy held my hand and said, 'Hashem should help that your wife should be as good to you as Bobby is to me.'"

It was a great comfort to my heart, aching with loneliness. I knew how he felt. But hearing that he shared his feelings with others, with our grandchild, that was a very special moment, as if he whispered to me from the World of Truth, I cherish you.

My Extended Family Celebrates My 90th Birthday.





A necklace of pearls so rare
Pristine and gently glowing
Strung with devotion and care
It graces you soft and flowing

Mother of pearl, so regal and dear
You have strung together a dynasty with love and care
Each pearl so close to your heart
Of your family we are honored to be a part

Wear it with joy and pride
'עד מאה ועשרים' – we are always by your side

באבי dear
we feel your warmth and care
With your loving embrace to everyone
through your תפילות and tears, we each feel, to you, like an only one

מזל טוב! מזל טוב!
May ה' give you many more געזונטע יארן
with lots of אידיש נחת
From your dear family –א גוט שבת !

On this special occasion – a time to reflect
Bobby, there's so much we admire and respect.
A beautiful home, your parents did build
Their hopes and aspirations, you certainly fulfilled.
מעשים טובים & חסד; your mother's legacy
Will live on, through you, to eternity.
Who can forget all those years that Zeidy was unwell?
On your own needs, you did not dwell.
Without any fanfare or commotion
You took care of Zeidy with utmost devotion.
It's not easy being on your own
Yet, much שמחת החיים you've always shown.
Always eager to learn and grow
And share with us all that you know.
Your תפילות certainly Hashem holds dear
Forty days at the Kosel made that abundantly clear.
In our ,שמחות you take part
Always rejoicing, with a very full heart
With an open hand, you generously give
Your mantra is . . . "After all, for this I live."
Your belief that family should always stick together
Will have an impact on us forever and ever.
אילן אילן במה אברכך?
שכל נטיעות שנוטעין ממך יהיו כמותך
You set an example; you are our guide
We hope you'll always be able to point at us with pride.
Bobby, on this momentous occasion – your 90th birthday
Our heartfelt ברכות we'd like to convey.
May health and good fortune always come your way,
נחת and happiness every single day!

Your loving family

To Mr + Mrs. Meir Klein

from Goldie Koger

לזכר עולם