

Autobiographical Essay

by Ray (Raytse) Abugoff Kagan

Born: 1900 Mezherich (Jewish Colony #4, "Fertter Numer"), Ukraine

Immigrated to the US in 1923 from Constantinople

Died: 1977 Bronx, New York

Apparently written in the 1970s

Edited and Annotated by Michael Rotenfeld in May 2021 for

Project Zikaron

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All footnotes and comments in square brackets were added to the original.

The land was divided in colonies by numbers, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc., totaling 18 colonies.¹ After the 4th colony, they were given different names. My great-grandfather settled in the 4th colony.... I don't know how many children he had, but to his dismay only two sons and four daughters survived. One of those sons was my father. Grandfather died at the age of 50... Father, being the older of the sons, had to take over the responsibilities and to be the head of the house.² He did not have the makings of a peasant and did not like to toil the land. He needed help, which was easy to find because there were so many homeless peasants wandering around pleading for work... Father needed more land... To rent some land was no trouble, as there was a cobbler, a tailor, a soap maker, and a Hebrew teacher who were happy to give their land just for the taxes to be paid. The whole colony consisted of 100 families, half of which did not work the land for various reasons. Some of these families were headed by widows whose children were too small to work the land. Some widows had no sons to take over. Some able men lacked horses with which to work.

Now that the land which Father owned and rented was being properly cared for by hired hands, he ventured on to a new business: butchery. The colony had plenty of dairy products, fruit, and vegetables, but no kosher meat. Plenty of poultry was available, but there was no red meat. He started to buy cattle from the more well-to-do neighboring peasant towns, as he had plenty of land where they could graze. He had a cow slaughtered every Thursday and supplied the town with meat for the Sabbath. In accordance with Jewish law, an animal must be slaughtered by a man knowledgeable in Jewish law. He is called the *sheichet*.³ There was always one such knowledgeable man who would follow the flock of the Jews because there were so many children, specifically boys, who had to be circumcised, and also he would specialize in teaching the children the religion.⁴ He had many children of his own, who would toil the land, while he was involved in his own professions.

¹ In the 1840s and 1850s, the Tsarist government established 17 Jewish agricultural colonies (not 18 as the author writes below) in the *guberniya* (governorate) of Yekaterinoslav. Colonies 1,3, and 4 were commonly called by their numbers: Perver Numer (*pervyi* means "first" in Russian), Driter Numer, and Fertter Numer. All the other colonies were referred to by either their formal names or nicknames not derived from their colonies' numbers. Moving from the city of Mogilev (now Mahilyou, Belarus) in 1845 to the Ukraine, the author's paternal grandfather Dov "Ber" Abugov (ca. 1830 - ca. 1880), not her great-grandfather as she writes below, was one of the original settlers of Jewish Colony #4, whose official name was Mezherich and was called Fertter Numer in Yiddish.

² The author's father was Tsvi-Yehuda "Hirshl-Leyb" Abugov (ca. 1860 - 1910). Though pronounced Abugov in Russian, their name was pronounced Abuhov (אבוהוב) in Yiddish.

³ The *shoykhet* (*sheykhet* in Northeastern Yiddish), one who slaughters animals according to Jewish law, in Fertter Numer was Yoel Grunin, from 1897 until at least 1915.

⁴ The author means to say that their *shoykhet* was also a trained *mohel*, one who circumcises children according to Jewish law. In addition, he also was a *melamed* who taught the children about Judaism.

To slaughter a chicken or any bird, we would bring it to the *sheicher's* yard. But for a cow, he would have to come to our backyard. Of course, there was a rabbi. The community supported him by providing a small house and produce. He was old with a long, grey beard, with very tired eyes, which were almost closed as though he never slept. He had a long, black coat, which was brown already from age. He was quiet, not talkative; he only talked to the point. When a chicken or any bird was slain, if a suspicious spot was found in its cleaning, it was taken to the rabbi. He would examine it thoroughly, then look through the books and decide if the bird was sick and could not be used. With a cow, it was the same procedure. After the slaughtering, when it was opened, if any suspicions were found, the rabbi was called. Only he could determine if the animal had been sick and was not kosher and could not be used. If a bird was not kosher, it was no big deal; another could be fetched. But a cow rendered non-kosher was a big disappointment. It meant observing the Sabbath without a meat meal.

The women would gather early with their baskets, before the slaughtering, to wait. It provided a good excuse to be together and gossip a little. Only the more well-to-do families could afford meat. Those with families who did not have the money would come later and would get meat anyway. It was considered one of the good deeds.⁵ Regarding the ones who had too much pride to come, Mother would load baskets with meat, white bread [i.e., *challah*], and cake and have us children make the rounds to all of them, which included widows, the sick, and the crippled. It was the only chore I was terrified to do. They all had big vicious dogs. It was frightening to come near their yards. You could not tell Mother “No” or give any excuse. So, I had to do the best I could—I just waited from afar and stayed around until someone came out of the house so that I could hand over the basket.

Not all the meat could be sold, and then there was half a cow which was non-kosher.⁶ So every Friday before sunrise, Father would start out to the neighboring Christian towns to sell the non-kosher meat and then proceed to the other colonies of the Jewish settlers to sell the remaining kosher meat.

In one of these other colonies was a general store with fine material, ribbons, needles, and thread, so his sisters gave him a list of items to buy. Behind the counter was a beautiful girl who served him. At first glance, he decided that this girl would be his wife. Of course, it was my mother. After a few stopovers, they were madly in love. My grandfather was very much against the match. He was considered a rich man and looked at Father as a poor boy with a mother and four sisters to support. But Mother's life at home was not a pleasant one either. She had a stepmother. There were four children from her mother and five from the stepmother. She was the oldest, which was not easy because my grandfather, even with means, did not believe in servants—everyone had to work.⁷ She had already completed her education. An education only

⁵ The community made sure that even the poorer families had at least some meat for the Sabbath.

⁶ According to the Bible, Jews are forbidden from eating certain fats in the back half of a kosher animal. Since they are difficult to remove, the rear half is generally sold to non-Jews.

⁷ The author's mother was named Dina Leah Abugov. Her maiden name was Svidler, according to the notes of her great-granddaughter Jill (Moroson) Blumenthal. Ray writes that her mother Dina Leah was from a neighboring Jewish colony and that her mother's father had nine children from two different wives, with Dina Leah being the oldest. The only Svidler listed by L. Uleinikov in his survey of these colonies entitled *Yevreiskaya zemledielcheskiya koloniya Yekaterinoslavskoy Guberniy v 1890 g.* ... (St. Petersburg, 1891) to whom Dina Leah (born ca. 1867) could have been the oldest child would have been Shlema son of Neukh Svidler of Zelenopol, who is listed as having 10 children, including young children. Neukh is listed as 16 years of age in the 1858 revision (Family #13) list of Zelenopol. In addition, Ray mentions that Dina Leah had a sister name Raytse (an uncommon given name), and Shlema had a sister named Raytse. Furthermore, Dina Leah's oldest surviving son was named Noakh, and Shlema's father's name was Neukh (a variant spelling of Noakh). Although Uleinikov notes that Shlema had 10 children, he is known not to have been precise regarding such matters.

consisted of Hebrew. If a girl came as far as to study the scripture of the Torah, this was when her education was completed. And how much more so if she could read and write in Russian. After she completed her education, she was to take care of the store.

Being in love was the greatest thing in her life. In those years, marriages were not based on love but came about by matchmaking. Or if two fathers were friends and one had a boy and the other a girl, with just a handshake, a marriage was arranged between their children. Their philosophy was that love comes after marriage. Here, Mother had found a man on her own, and Grandfather could not stop her. For her marriage, Grandfather gave her all that was promised: fine silks, satin dresses, linens with laces, sterling silver, feather cushions—all a girl needed—and a few hundred rubles in cash. Father promised that he would buy her the finest gold jewelry. Gold jewelry was required then—the same as a diamond engagement ring now. A boy who could not afford to buy jewelry could not be too poor after all. One fine day, Father started out to the big city in a wagon and two horses. With the exciting purchases of a heavy chain with a [illegible word] watch, earrings, brooch, rings, and bracelets, it was a happy day. But now that he was ready to go home, he could not find the wagon. Of course, it had been stolen. It was a tragedy because he really could not afford to lose the horses. But when you are young and in love, it makes things less tragic. The jewelry was beautiful. I remember it well.

After the wedding, Father brought the bride home with all her trunks of riches and goodies. When she walked into the house, she was shocked and had to steady herself. There was hardly any furniture. The house was small for four grown sisters (two older than Father) and a mother, the boss over them all. The girls were dressed very poorly, hardly any with shoes, although they were good looking. She decided to first marry off the sisters. One by one, she dressed them up in her silks and satins with velvet capes and sent them out on dates and to socialize more. In no time, she married them off. I remember my uncles. I doubt if any of my aunts married for love. They were as anxious to get out of the house as Mother had been. Grandmother was no problem. She was a very clever, clean, and quiet woman. To make her son happy, she gave the household over to his wife, as long as she had a bed to sleep in and was welcome in the house.

My Uncle Zema,⁸ Father's only brother, was in the army. By law, every male, at age 21, had to serve three years in the army. Father did not have to serve because he was the provider for a family. When Uncle came home from the service, he was very pleased with his brother's bride. A short while after, a sister of Mother's (Rae) came for a visit. (I am named after her.)⁹ The young soldier met the beautiful girl, and they fell in love. It did not take long before they were married. Only one year later, the first tragedy struck Mother. Her sister died during the delivery of her first baby, who also died.¹⁰ Mother took it very hard, because by this time she herself had lost her first-born son. It did not take long for Uncle Zema, being so [illegible word] and handsome, to find a girl in the colony. After one year, he married again. By now, the inheritance from Grandfather, which consisted of the house and a few acres of land, belonged to the two sons. But Mother would not have another woman taking the place of her sister to live in the same house. So Father bought a few acres of land across the street, built a house, gave half of the land which Grandfather left, and Uncle set up house for himself. Being in love with Father and to please him, Mother would go out of her way to be good and nice to her new sister-in-law. Uncle was a very good and learned man. He was more suited to be a rabbi than a land worker. He had no business ability, so all his life they lived in poverty, with seven children to support. But we were a very close family, so Father and Mother would help as much as was needed.

⁸ His proper name was Shneur-Zalman Abugov, who was born ca. 1862, according to this account. Zema is probably a poor transliteration of the common Yiddish nickname of Zhamel for Zalman.

⁹ Of course, Ray is a name in English. The author's Yiddish name was Raytse, as noted in the Hebrew inscription on her tombstone in the New Mt Lebanon Cemetery in Islin, New Jersey.

¹⁰ Raytse and the baby evidently died ca. 1886.

It was the same with Aunt Leah. She was Father's older sister, who settled next to our house, past the garden. She had no sons, only three daughters; therefore, she had no land, only a few acres to grow vegetables and fruit. The older daughter Manya became a dressmaker and to make a few rubles had to work from sunrise with the only light being a small kerosene lamp. Her youngest daughter was Vera, who in her adolescent years left for the big city to become a milliner and earned just enough to support herself. The middle daughter, Rose, had to help Aunt Leah with the household chores because Aunt Leah had been a sick woman for as long as I can remember. Her husband, Uncle Nison, was a professional man.¹¹ He was a very skilled upholsterer. But there was no upholstery to be done in our colony or nearby farms; therefore, he had to go to the city or, most of the time, to the very rich landowners. Their estates were huge, and he was allowed to work on the premises. His work was done to such perfection that one landowner would recommend him to another, and he had work all year round. But the pay was very meager. They were so used to slavery that they would state the price for his work. Mostly, they were all Germans, and the food was also a problem. All week long he lived on dairy products since there was no kosher food to be gotten. Every Friday before sundown, he would come home, and he would leave on Sunday morning.

All of us children loved Aunt Leah dearly. If there is such a thing as a saint, she was one. When she looked at you, you could feel her love penetrating and making you feel so warm that you wanted to hug and kiss her. But in those years, children were not allowed to come too close to their elders so as not to annoy them. They all had their problems and hardships and could not be bothered with children. Children had to be only seen, not heard. I was a very shy, timid child, and more often did not want to be seen for fear that my presence might disturb not only my parents but any elder. Everyone around was an elder. A man or woman of 35 with their looks and behavior appeared to be an old person. Only Grandma did not seem to be too old, because I slept with her.¹² She would hug me, kiss me, cover me, and tell me all sorts of stories. Until one evening, Mother told me I could not sleep with Grandma for she did not feel well. My bed was made on a wooden bench in the dining room. It did not disturb me one bit because there was not one person in the whole community who was considered well. A woman would go about her chores with a woolen stocking around her neck because she had a sore throat. Another one had a wet cloth around her forehead because he had a headache. Another with a cloth from under her chin covering her cheek and jawbone because she had a toothache. And all worked from sunrise to sundown. There was no doctor or dentist, only a midwife to deliver the babies. Even then, only the healthy survived. If there was any complication, mother and child would die. This was the Will of G-d, and it was taken as such. After a few days, Grandma did not get better.

Then it happened on a summer morning while I was playing with other children in the garden. Our play was simple. We never had any toys, and we had to create games ourselves. I liked hide-and-seek best, because no one could find me for hours and I could be by myself. On this morning, I could hear Mother calling me with a very excited tone of voice. My first thought was, "Did I do anything wrong? I must have or else why would she be angry." As I approached her, she instructed me to run as fast as I could to Avrom Meyshe the grocer and ask for a dozen candles, the largest he had.¹³

We had two grocery stores, one on each end of town. One was more of a general store. Avrom Meyshe had only one arm. He always wore a wrinkled, soiled jacket with one sleeve tucked in his pocket. His livelihood

¹¹ Nison Khain (later Hine in America) (ca. 1857 – 1944) emigrated in 1915 and died in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

¹² The author's paternal grandmother was Genye (Krasik) Abugov (ca. 1830 - ca. 1906).

¹³ This might be referring to Avrom Meyshe Polyakov, the older brother of Hanan (Elkhonon) Poliacoff (1873-1956). Hanan was married to the author's oldest sister Bryna (1890-1974). In about 1914, they left the town of Polohy, Ukraine for Constantinople, where he started a restaurant which was frequented by diplomats including Mustafa Atatürk. In 1931, they immigrated to Manhattan, where they reopened their restaurant, Poliacoff's, at 121 W. 45th St. It became one of the most well-known kosher restaurants in New York City.

consisted of a few essential items he kept in the house: kerosene, oil, sugar, candles, molasses, and hard candy. On the candy, he never made a profit. He gave candy to whomever would come to the house. The children running around the house contributed to the foul smells already lingering in the air from the cooking and open barrels of kerosene and oil.

As I was running, I was thinking, "Why does Mama need candles today? It's not Friday. And why large ones? What will I say to Avrom Meyshe if he asks me?" But I had to run. Sure enough, as I asked him to please hurry, he replied, "Today is not Friday. Why did your mother send you for large candles?" The best thing was not to answer. Right then, a woman walked in, gently hugged me, and said, "Poor child, you lost your Grandma." Then Avrom Meyshe's wife came to me, but I shied away from her to avoid contact. She smelled of the odor of kerosene. Avrom Meyshe handed me the candles and with a hasty tone of voice told me to run as fast as I could and not to stop on the way. I was puzzled. How can Grandma get lost? She hardly could, and, besides, she did not feel well and was in bed all the time.

When I came into the house, it was full of people, mostly women busy sewing, measuring, and cutting white linen.¹⁴ Father, Mother, uncles, and aunts were crying. I never saw older people cry so much, so I went out of the house to the yard where a carpenter was making a box from boards. I went over to watch, and he assured me, "I'll make a fine box for your Grandma. She was a fine, religious woman, and she deserves the best." In the Jewish tradition, nails are not allowed in a casket, so he was gluing and fitting together the boards. Only then did I realize that Grandma had died. I never saw older people die—only children being carried away in little boxes.

All night long, the men and women were sitting around and praying. In the morning, the men put the box on their shoulders and carried her away. We did not need a wagon and horses, because the cemetery was just across the field, and it seemed more respectful to carry the body to its rest.

It was March 3, 1907. I was seven years old. We never had a birthday party as very few people—older or children—knew their right age. The only thing mother would do is give a lecture, "Today, you are seven years old, so act your age. You are not a child anymore," which meant respect the elders, obey, listen, and do what you were told to do. I was told that I have to learn how to make lace. She started to teach me. She needed hundreds of yards of lace. All the linens, underwear, towels—everything—was edged with narrow or wide lace. And back then, every girl had to accumulate laces for her dowry. I was happy to do it, because I was not bothered with anything else. Just do it and watch the world go by.

The colony of one hundred families was my whole world. The best were the evenings on cold winter nights when all the friends of my older sisters, Braina and Manya, would come with their own work: feathers to pluck for pillows and featherbeds, all for their dowries. The feathers had to be from geese—snowy white and soft. This was how the young people socialized. I was allowed to sit with them, because I was working on laces, but I could not ask any questions or talk—just listen. I did find it at times boring and meaningless. The dining room was big and had two kerosene lamps which provided enough light; the samovar with plenty of hot water and tea; all sorts of goodies on the table; and so much contentment around.

On other evenings, we had to sit in another room, when Father had a meeting. There were only menfolk attending. You could hear discussions, complaints, hardship, terror, poverty, and misery. There I would have liked to have sat, but it was not allowed. They would come to Father for advice. He would advise them the best he could, but that was not enough around the time when taxes had to be paid. When the representative from the government was sent to collect taxes, half of the town did not have the money. And without any questions asked, these representatives would take anything they could lay their hands on: a

¹⁴ They were preparing *takhrikhim* (a burial shroud) for the deceased.

sewing machine; a samovar, or even a featherbed. This was when the meetings became more frequent and were sometimes held at the synagogue or in our house.

At one point, the menfolk decided it was time to have our own elected sheriff to represent them, to collect taxes, and to listen to all their grievances.¹⁵ After many discussions, arguments, and dissensions, a few men were nominated, but Father won by the majority of votes. A deputy was chosen, and then Father had to go to the government district center to get the authorization. When he came back with all the books, ledgers, stamps, and seals, he set up office in the house. He was a good sheriff, because in no time the town acquired a new face of dignity and respect. Father was a simple, quiet, good-natured man, always with a pleasant smile. He had little education but was honest and trustworthy, by showing fairness to all, and was highly respected. But, as the saying goes, "Behind every successful man is a woman"—that surely goes for my mother. She was clever, highly educated—mostly in Hebrew—and knew the Jewish Bible and all the laws and bylaws. She was very religious, immaculate, and a systematic perfectionist without a flaw, fault, or error. She always strived for the finer things in life, not only for herself but for the whole community. Everything and everyone belonging to her had to be the best: the household, the children, the family, and, above all, the town.

The first thing she suggested to Father was to build a public bathhouse. There were families and children who only had a bath perhaps twice a year before some holidays in a sawed-off wooden barrel. The water was heated in pots and pans. We had a regular tub made from zinc and a built-in huge kettle to heat the water. Every Thursday, it was tended by the servants for the relatives and neighbors; on Fridays for the family. Mother always felt sorry for those who could not afford such a luxury. To build a bathhouse requires money. Meetings were called only with the more well-to-do families. After all the oppositions, arguments, and persuasions, a secretary and a treasurer were appointed, money was collected, and in no time the town had a bathhouse. It was serviced only on Fridays, and it was a sight to see all the older and younger children standing in line. It was free, so there was no excuse not to indulge.

The next thing Father did was to proclaim a law to beautify the town. Every house had to be whitewashed and have fences erected and painted. Flowers had to be planted in every garden and near the houses. It was done only on Sundays, because the hired hands were peasants, and Sunday was their day off. They would dress up in their colorful, gay Sunday clothes, play their harmonicas, sing, and go off to church in a neighboring Christian town. Here the Jewish men would get together and help one another fix, mend, and paint their homes. Now it would be called a commune. I believe communes have existed since mankind came into being, only with a different meaning and purpose, especially for Jews in an oppressed, tyrannized country. Representatives from the government would come periodically for an inspection of the town and to collect taxes. They were amazed at the town's appearance. Father received great praise and admiration for his good work. (In reality, Father did not do any work at all—just gave the instructions.) The taxes were paid, and the families which could not pay were not afraid or harassed anymore because the colony's treasury would pay for them.

Father's ego was flourishing, and he decided that it was time to build a new synagogue—not just an ordinary synagogue but from real brick.¹⁶ It would be the biggest, the finest, to surpass all the 18 colonies. A meeting

¹⁵ "Sheriff" is the author's translation of the Russian word *starosta*, which is often translated as mayor or headman.

¹⁶ In his autobiography entitled *Hayim kemo she-hem (avtobiografiyah meforetet) helakim 1-3: sudar mehadash...*, Avraham Shlomoh Melamed (1862-1952) writes in chapter 76 that during his last visit to his home town of Ferter Numer in 1915 he was told that the person who built the beautiful, new synagogue there was the grandson of his former teacher Meyer Krasik, who Melamed describes at length in chapter 6. Of course, he is referring to Ray's father Hirshl-Leyb Abugov. Melamed writes that Abugov was informed upon to the government, which caused his early death.

was called, and Father laid forth his ambition, desire, and dream. I have never seen so many angry men. Their arguments and shouts could be heard all over town. The money had to come from donations. There were not many well-to-do families. Very few had hired hands. They and their children toiled from sunrise to very late into the night. (Especially our neighbor Neach Morosoff, Evsey's father.¹⁷ You could hear his machinery going all night. I think he was the hardest-working man in the whole town. As a matter of fact, I have never seen such a hardworking man in all of my life, and I have lived a long life.) Their arguments were just: there were so many essentials to pay for, including supporting the rabbi, a cantor for the holidays, the caretaker of the synagogue, and the Hebrew teacher for the children, and maintaining the bathhouse. There was not much left over to give. But Father did not give up. He was a very persuasive man, a patient listener. After a number of meetings, all the opposition, except for a few, agreed. I, as a child, could not understand any of it. Only at the dinner table when Father used to talk to Mother and discuss it from every angle did it become crystal clear even to a child. This is how I very well remember it all. Not long afterward, an architect was brought in from the big city. The plans were drawn, and a gala event was held—the laying of the foundation.

The few men from the opposition did not stop. Late one evening, a big fire broke out in our yard! The barn had been set on fire. Lucky there was no wind, otherwise the whole town would have gone up in flames, because we did not have any firefighters or equipment—only a human chain with pails of water from the well to the fire. It took a whole night to put it out. This outrageous episode angered Father, and he was more determined than ever to finish the construction of the synagogue and make it as elaborate as possible. The interior was beautiful, especially when the crystal chandelier was delivered. When hung up, it was gleaming bright.

After a few days, in the early morning, the caretaker came running to inform Father that during the night someone had broken in and smashed the crystals. Father had an idea who was capable of doing such a thing. He calmly went and gathered the bits and pieces. And of course, he would not make an arrest or press charges, even if he was the sheriff. It was not befitting for a Jew to arrest a Jew. The man had a family with small children. Furthermore, Father was used to getting menfolk out of more severe mischief: theft, assaults, and battery. Instead, a meeting was called. A few arbitrators were selected, and it was a very orderly, quiet, peaceful meeting. Father accepted the perpetrator's apologies. They shook hands. The feud was over. The chandelier was taken back to the city and mended, after which it hung as beautifully as ever. The synagogue became the pride of their town, and they all worshiped in harmony and devotion to G-d. I remember that after the meeting Father told Mother that everyone has a temper, anger, or goes in a rage. Only a few can control it; therefore, they should not be punished. They are punished enough. I can never forget those words and still abide by them. Looking back, I am more so convinced that people can live in harmony if they only had more understanding, honesty, devotion, and a little compassion for their fellowman.

My parents were strong believers in the afterlife. In order to go to Heaven, you must please G-d. You have to acquire credits (like in college), but there was no set amount; therefore, it has to be all through life. There was no limit to their good deeds.

Every Friday evening, Father would bring home one or two beggars from the synagogue to observe the Shabbat with us. They were dirty, filthy, and probably had a bath once a year, but they had to be seated at the head of the table because they were guests. Mother did not look at them as beggars but as unfortunate men with families to support, though they did not possess any land or skills. They would walk from town to town with a sack over their shoulders. They mostly wanted flour for bread. They really seemed to be nice,

¹⁷ Evsey is referring to Ray's sister Manya's husband, Joseph (Yehoshua) Morosoff (1895-1968), who immigrated to New York City in the 1920s. Neach is the Northeastern Yiddish pronunciation of Noahk. Called Naum in Russian. Noahk Morozov (ca. 1868 – 1932-33) lived his entire life in Ferter Numer.

quiet men, who calmly and silently accepted life as a matter of fact. After dinner, their bedding was brought in from the barn. Their bedding was kept there, because every weekend were different men, so it was set aside specially for this kind of guests. They would stay two nights: Friday and Saturday. On Sunday morning, they would leave with a blessing. Mother and Father were happy that they had pleased G-d and their own souls. This was the fulfillment of their lives. Mother had a motto of her own: no one shall be hungry as long as she had enough to share. Most of all, the Shabbat had to be conducted in full tradition for all, or she could not rest.

Every Thursday, she would fill up baskets with meat, fish, bread, fruit, and instructed Hymie and me to make the rounds to the jobless, the sick, and widows with children.¹⁸ I can still feel the terror when I think of it. Every yard had big watchdogs, vicious dogs, and I was panic-stricken to see them even from afar. No matter how much I would plead, cry of my fears, it did not help, and she would insist on teaching me even more that I must overcome all my fears and that fear is the worst enemy a person possesses. To myself, I would think, "I'm not a person, only a child who has to obey." I used to stand for hours and wait until somebody would come out of the house, call out, and I would just hand over the basket.

On Friday was another chore against my liking. I had to go the rabbi's house and help the *rebbetzin* prepare for the Shabbat, mostly clean the house. The rabbi's wife wanted for the Shabbat to be perfect. My reward was that when all was finished, the rabbi would put his hand on my head and bless me. I felt that a good deed had been done. This was Mother's teaching: never live only for yourself because you have to give of yourself wherever needed and to whomever needs you. I was too young to know where I was needed, so I just trusted Mother.

After my seventh birthday, it was time to register for school. The elementary school consisted of four grades: a whole year a grade. After four years, if you passed the exams and received a diploma, you were eligible to attend high school (*gimmaziya*), which was out of town; few had the means to send their children to live in the city. As long as you were taught to read and write, it was considered sufficient. Besides, there was a very small quota for Jewish children to be granted admittance, unless they were very bright and had very high marks of proficiency. The school was in the middle of town. At that time, it seemed to me to be such a big building. Actually, it consisted of merely a long corridor with two large rooms, one opposite the other. One room was for the first and third grades, the other for the second and fourth. On each side of the building were apartments for the two male teachers and their families. It had a big yard, a beautiful garden, and two outhouses, one on each side of the yard, one for boys and one for girls. In the corridor were long, wooden tables with benches attached to have our lunches. On a little bench in the corner was always a pail of drinking water with a copper cup tied to the pail. All the children drank from the same cup, if it was ever washed.

The course of study at the school was frightening.¹⁹ I did want to learn and more so to wear the uniform. The uniform gave you a sense of distinction. It was bottle-green, woolen, ankle length, with a high collar with white edging. It had long, tight-fitting sleeves, and a white linen, long apron with three pleats on each side. Shoulder straps crisscrossed in the back. The uniform included black stockings and black, high-buttoned shoes. To keep the apron snowy white a whole week, you had to conduct yourself in a ladylike fashion—no playing or fooling around. To behave was easy for me, because I was very shy and timid. When I was let alone, no one would know I was there. But with so many children and male teachers, it was more than I could comprehend. There was only one thing going for me—I was taught to obey and when you obey you will never be punished. In all of my childhood, I was only punished once—just for not playing

¹⁸ Hyman "Hymie" Abugoff (1898-1981) is referring to the author's brother, originally named Khaim.

¹⁹ It is not clear why the course of study was frightening.

in the right manner or respectably. A married cousin, Itzik Dommue, came to visit.²⁰ He was a friendly, likeable man. He kissed and hugged me and played with me. To be funny, I took off his hat and threw it away. From the look on Mother's face, I knew I had done something wrong. She made me pick up the hat, kiss his hand, and apologize.

²⁰ Originally named Itsik Domye (1880-1955), Isaac Dommue was married to Mary {Merl "Manyu"} (1893-1966), the daughter of Aunt Leah and Uncle Nissan Hine (Khain), mentioned earlier. It seems that he was visiting from his home in Yevpatoriya, Crimea.