

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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- **Ivansker Tales – A Memoir *by Sidney Freedman***

Sidney Freedman was born in Ivansk and immigrated with his family to Toronto when he was about 1 year old. Although he has no direct memories of the shtetl, his parents spoke from time to time of their lives in Poland. Sidney was a keen listener and documented many of their tales. His family's courage, faith and resilience in the face of impossible odds underscore Sidney's pride in his heritage. Luckily, the family left Poland before World War II. But the memory of what happened to left-behind relatives who were destroyed during the Shoah haunts his soul.

- **What did the Gate of the Ivansker Cemetery Look Like?**

We have recently acquired a drawing of what the cemetery gate might have looked like. However, thus far we have not been able to confirm whether the drawing reflects an accurate representation of the entrance to our ancestor's burial ground.

- **Progress Report on the Cemetery Restoration Project**

May was a terrific month in the campaign to fund the cemetery restoration. We received over \$8,000.00 in gifts from individual Ivanskers. That means that we are only \$12,000.00 shy of reaching our goal of \$50,000.

We are about to start building the wall that will surround the cemetery. We have come a long way, but your gift is still needed to complete the project.

Please join your fellow Ivanskers in supporting this important undertaking. Instructions on how to donate to the campaign are found at the end of this e-Newsletter.

The dedication of the restored cemetery will take place in 2006, probably in the spring or summer. Originally, we had planned to hold the ceremony this year, but time has run out to publicize and make suitable arrangements to accommodate the travel needs of those wishing to attend. We hope to offer a package tour that will attract Landsman from around the world to meet in Poland to honor our people who once lived in Ivansk. We will keep you posted on new developments.

Ivansker Tales – A Memoir

by Sidney Freedman Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The Writer

I was born Yehoshua Ben Eleazar Zev in the shtetl *Ivansk* (Iwaniska). The blessed event took place on the fifth day of September in the year 1928 in a house shared by many relatives. It was located on the main road south to *Stashev* (Staszow), not far from the communal well that guarded the memory of all those who drank from it's sources. The day before, my father Lazar Wolf, having landed in Halifax on the good ship SS Polonia wired home to what telegraph office I couldn't know, that he had at last arrived in the land of endless resources.

My mother took my father's providential arrival in Canada at the time of my birth as an omen that her newborn son Shia was already a Canadian, not tainted by the godforsaken world of Poland, and Ivansk in particular. She looked up from the birth bed and saw the bearer of the cable standing in the room, as one would greet an angelic messenger from another realm. According to my mother I was further blessed in that I was a born Jew. It seems I didn't need a circumcision. "They only scraped it a little" As you can see dear reader I was already a marked man even although I was yet but a helpless infant.

There is no record as to whether my ancient namesake Yehoshua Hanotzri had also been a born Jew in my mother's terms. Although I had been cast as my mother's personal savior, as the years went by and I learned what had happened to my illustrious predecessor, I resigned from the savior business opting to become a lawyer instead. My mother hoped that I would be a *Talmud chochim* (Talmud scholar) or a sainted interpreter of Torah, but as we were soon to leave for Canada where *pilpuling* (scholarly interpretations of Rabbinic texts) wasn't much of an occupation, her hopes for me were soon to be dashed.

I was told that I was a little late in coming into this troubled world. Perhaps I had had a foretaste of what was yet to come and was in no hurry to confront life in Ivansk. My mother, sounding off to the heavens in her birthing pains, told my eldest sister Dvoira to run to the Rabbi, and have a hopefully quick consultation as to how to encourage me into the world. The Rabbi thought for a moment, and advised her to run back home and open all the drawers in the house, of which there were three. No sooner had she done so, than my mother's birthing pains ceased and I popped out fatherless into the two-room structure that was home. I believe that the Rabbi's admonition to open all the drawers in such circumstances ought to be written up in some medical journal. It ought to result in all maternity wards being generously equipped with a plethora of drawers.

I am not sure just who was minding the other kids at the blessed moment of my birth. They were my brother Benyamin, not quite two, Lyuba my sister age four, Moshe age nine and Yecheil age eleven. Dvoira age thirteen was usually saddled with onerous adult duties and could perhaps have been considered an alternate mother in her own right. There had been another brother Chamul who had died of possibly cholera, diphtheria or what other disease the current plague had to offer. Had he lived he might have been about five at the time of my birth. Whether in those poverty stricken years it might have been impolitic to splurge on excess, neither of Lyuba, Benyamin nor I ever enjoyed the regal status afforded those with multiple second and third names. Our Yiddish names were respectively Leibale, Binim, and Shia. In Canada we became

Libby, Ben, and Sidney. How I got to be named after an obscure English poet of the 16th century, I'll never know. In the New World anything became possible.

By the end of September the older kids were already wearing the only shoes that they owned. These were not as a rule worn in the summer months to ensure their durability past a normal shoe lifespan. This economy had its dubious return in that most people walking barefoot, especially near the convenient dumps of excrement managed to acquire and be host to intestinal worms. On the other hand all was not lost in the exchange; the excretion of worms could give rise to some entertainment in provoking a contest as to who's was the longer. I believe that there was no doctor in Ivansk. People consulted a *feltsher* (a person with some medical experience) who I doubt connected the ailment to the issue of barefoot economics.

My Father Lazar Wolf

My father Eleazar Zev ben Yecheil Leibish (Frymerman) was born in the nearby town of *Lagov* (Lagow) I believe on or about the year 1885 (Zev is translated as Wolf in Yiddish, Velvel is Little Wolf). He had three brothers and two sisters. His father, Yecheil Leibish did not earn much, his major skill being the begetting of offspring. He bought and resold things like cheese and butter, but not having refrigeration, had a difficult time earning a profit. On the other hand, you could always eat cheese especially if it was going to spoil if you didn't. I know that my father became a blacksmith at the tender age of thirteen and was obliged to support his father, and presumably his younger two sisters and two brothers.

Yecheil Leibish suffered from epilepsy. Not normally a fatal disease, it nevertheless managed to do him in. Sometime prior to 1917, he had an attack when no one was near and apparently drowned in a puddle of water. My eldest brother Harry is named after him.

My father's elder brother Gutkind became a tailor and eventually moved to the big city Radom where he married Frandel. His two kid brothers were Itche who married Mindel, and the youngest was Avrom who married Aidel from the big town of Ostrowec–Swietokrzyski (*Ostroftseh*). Pa's sisters were Becky who married Chaim Waldman a haberdasher in Winnipeg, and Baila who married the inimitable Rumanian Scharia Gryfe the original founder of Gryfe's Bakery located in a lane called Fitzroy Terrace in Kensington, a fashionable area in London, but a dump in Toronto.

When someone married, it would be best that the bride or groom did not have the same name as his or her mother or father-in-law. A sensitive mother or father-in-law confronted by a younger person with the same name might have taken it as a hint that perhaps it were time for him or her to move on to *yener velt* (the world to come).

My father's mother, the only grandparent that I was destined to meet was named Chaia Surah. My mother's name was Chaia Leiya, which did not sit well with her mother in law, prompting many colorful exchanges between them of less than mutual esteem. To add insult to injury, I married another Chaia namely Chaia Ratza. In the latter two cases, Chaia became Helen in English though my own sweet Helen's first name was Dawn. I'm not sure what my mother's feelings were on this series of generational Chaias, because she was unusually quiet on the subject of names after my nuptials.

My paternal grandmother was the only one I knew because she managed to come to Canada before we did and thereby patient reader hangs an interesting tale of which more later. Chaia Surah had lived in Winnipeg and only came to Toronto in the late thirties where she died in 1940 not long after we met. She died at the age of eighty-two. At the time, this was considered a challenge to the record of Methuselah. All the mourners

wondered at the fact that before her death she could thread a needle without wearing the glasses that she didn't own. As you will see later in the narrative, all of Pa's siblings and his mother managed to immigrate to Canada.

Pa (as we called him) left home at the age of six to apprentice to a blacksmith. It is told that Pa was ever interested in doing things better. At the age of twelve he decided that there was a better way to transport his mom's laundry to the river. He built a wagon on which he sat my resilient grandmother Chaia Surah. She hung on for dear life as Pa trundled her and the bundle of wash held tightly on her lap on a mean course to the water. Apparently, Chaia Surah thought better of this mode of transport, which was likely to elicit amused comment from her neighbors. The laundry still went by wagon, but Chaia Surah secure in her dignity and her *shaitel*, (a wig worn by orthodox Jewish women after they marry) traveled afoot.

You should know that Jews were born traders. When asked what one did, the answer more often than not was "*Ich hob gehandelt*" ("I was a trader"). This trading term not easily translated, reflected the exchange of goods and services in an economy where cash was not always the medium of exchange, there being an incipient shortage of hard currency.

Pa was an enterprising ten year old and an up and coming handler when, already the man in the house, he went to market to try his hand in trade. There, a gentile vendor convinced him that every family needed a goat. Goat's milk was a superior product. Cheese made from goat milk was valuable. Pa brought the goat home on a leash and proudly presented it to his mom to milk. Consternation! No milk was forthcoming because the she was actually a he! No one had managed to milk a male goat previously, and this particular he goat was no exception.

Pa hustled the goat back to the marketplace where he luckily found the vendor. After much to-ing and frow-ing, amid imprecations and curses, with diverse opinions of bystanders freely thrown in to the mix, the purchase price was refunded; and so started the concept carried to the New World of the slogan- "goods satisfactory or your money back". In Poland, it obviously became the precedent for the maxim that a contract was not enforceable as against a minor. This episode provided much merriment to the community for many a year thereafter.

Pa's story now suffers a long hiatus of which I know little. He was employed as a blacksmith in a number of local towns such as *Chmielow* (Cmielow) and Ofstrotseh. He as did others, had a sideline of buying and selling cows in the market places of the area villages. Mondays were market days.

We pick up Pa's story when his esteemed majesty, the father of his people, Czar of all the Russias and of our corner of Poland to boot, decided that the empire could not be defended without the assistance of our own Lazar Wolf. As background to the enlistment of Lazer Wolf, you should know that Russia had been torn by an aborted revolution in 1905 after a disastrous military loss to Japan in 1904. Russia's defeat was prompted in the destruction of the Imperial Russian navy in the classic battle of the Tsushima straits.

The defeat of the mighty Russian forces by the Japanese admiral Togo, so astonished the Russian people, akin to Mexico today defeating the United States, that revolution was in the air and expected surely in outlying provinces like Chechnia.

1907 found Pa conscripted, trained, and sent to the city of Grozny in Chechnia a place dear reader which is so currently in the news, and which hadn't changed since Tolstoy served there as correspondent almost one hundred years earlier.

I don't know how the Chechens greeted my father's arrival. It depended on whether the Chechens wanted protection from the Japanese who were located thousands of kilometers to the east. I suppose that that is how the Russian authorities explained the expanded presence of the military. I do know that he was apparently a "*fehiger soldat*" (capable soldier) even though he was but five foot five. I also know that soldiers carried a wooden spoon in their boots, ate out of a common pot, and licked the spoon clean before putting it back in the boot. I never asked whether the common pot was kosher. Soldiers then as now were interested in the finer things in life, so much so that my father never trusted his daughters to their care.

There must have been lots of Jews in Chechnia, because Pa told of wondrous sights and of strange eastern customs among the Jews of Grozny. They and their compatriots smoked hookahs, the smoke bubbling up through a water bowl attached to the long tube that one puffed on. I also know that Pa was recognized as a bona fide *davener* (someone who leads religious services). In this capacity, he presided over Passover *seders*, having been invited to do so in families where the patriarch was dead, not in attendance, or otherwise disqualified to conduct the seder.

Did I tell you that my father was a super davener? His davening is a major feature in his story of which more you will hear later. I am not sure how he became such a super davener because he told me that he hated to go to *cheder* (religious school). Gutkind his elder brother had to carry Pa to his studies protesting all the way.

Pa served the required three or so years in the Czar's army and was discharged in time for the First World War an entertainment that he managed somehow to miss. Pa's missus (not my mother) of whom more later, frustrated the team of army recruiters. She sat on the floor spreading her skirts as a signal to Pa to leave out the back door. By such ingenious strategies, Pa managed to dupe those sent to find him. He managed to hang on until the Germans (Austrians) chased out his tormentors who thought it better to save their own skins than to further try to enlist his.

But Pa also had a narrow escape from the Germans (Austrians). One day after an ambush, or after a local defeat attributed to Polish spying, the Germans (Austrians) took revenge by hanging Poles. At the last moment a German officer took exception to hanging a Jew. He pulled Pa out of the hanging line with the observation that as a Jew he couldn't be classed as a Pole and so not being qualified, was accordingly not considered proper material for the hangman.

We still talk of Jews and Poles today as though Jews were not also Poles. I wonder if my father's near death at the end of a rope somehow gave rise to the distinction that has stuck ever since. Jews who lived in Poland for almost one thousand years somehow never managed to be Poles. Yet my father served in the Polish army as a subject of the Czar of Russia so I guess it was all right for a Jew to die for Poland even if he wasn't considered a Pole.

The Cossacks were a little hard to take. They demanded food of which there was little or none threatening to shoot anyone who attempted to hide any. When they found some salt they greedily licked it up. The Czar wasn't much of a father to his troops after all. Was it a wonder dear reader that the Jews welcomed the German (Austrian army).

Germans were considered to be friendlier to Jews than were the Cossacks who loved to play sports such as football with Jews enlisted as the football. Cossacks also were of the mistaken notion that Jews were not Poles but were somehow allied to the German enemy. Sometimes their love of sport got carried away, the sport escalating to rapine, murder, and the odd pogrom but no doubt all in good fun.

Germans were also thought to be more orderly and civilized. Pa told the story of *Feter* (uncle) Gershon, his brother in law, who when the Germans occupied Ivansk, was put in the stockades because he had urinated in public. When my father questioned as to what he was doing in the stockade (*kosa*), his reply was “ *Voss kikst doo oif mir. Ich been kein ganif. Ich zits du phar a pish*” (“What are you looking at? I’m not a thief. I sit here for a piss”).

But let me go back a bit. As I said Pa came home from Chechnia in I believe 1910, apparently ready to settle down. Pa must have been twenty-six or seven at the time. He never much rushed into anything. His favorite expression was “lot’s of time”.

I’m not sure when he married, but I am guessing that it was late 1913 or early 1914. A *schadchun* (marriage broker) or perhaps an interested party told him of a prospect in Ivansk, a lady called Leibe Tzutel who’s father Chaim Pepe was an established citizen. He had cattle, land and some buildings. He also helped people who were beggars and had no place to sleep. Chaim Pepe’s first wife Dvoira (my eldest sister is named after her) was a comely lady.

Chaim Pepe however kindly to beggars could not allow unalloyed access to all of his worldly goods. One of the beggars decided to warm himself at the side of the mistress of the house. In the dark, Dvoira mumbled “Chaim is that you?” (one wonders whom else she may have been expecting.) The ungrateful ingrate grunted his best Chaim imitation to no avail. Chaim hearing the exchange caught the interloper by the neck (hopefully before he could do much damage) and banished him to a corner across the room. He could not put another Jew out in the cold, so he guarded the beggar till morning, and only then threw the man out. I’m not sure whether this episode cooled Chaim’s charitable impulses.

Once married, Pa dug a basement under his father-in-law’s house possibly in breach of the zoning by-laws designed to separate industrial uses from residential, and there installed his *kishna*, (blacksmith shop) forge and all. Although there were three openings in the walls to ventilate the shop, smoke from Pa’s *kishna* permeated the upper floor and was a constant reminder of his industry, especially when he worked and hammered all night.

The house was a one-story building with several divisions within. Chaim and his wife and children lived in one section off the main hall that went the length of the house. There was a front door at one end of the hall, and a back door at the other end. There were a series of rooms on either side of the central hall. Pa and Leibe Tzutel and their family occupied two rooms across the hall. Other rooms on either side of the hall were made available to Chaim’s other children and their families. Some people slept on benches that were converted to other uses during the day. Others slept on straw pallets, which were removed by day and rebuilt for sleeping by night. Beggars slept on straw pallets in the hall.

After Dvoira had passed on, the house was tenanted by Chaim, his second wife Vishula and Dvoira and Chaim’s children. They were - Gershon, Channa Gitel, Leibe Tzutel. Channah Gitel later died in childbirth. Pa moved into Chaim’s house after his marriage to Leibe Tzutel. As time went by, the list of occupants included Chaim’s assorted grandchildren including my sister Dvoira, (named after Chaim’s first wife,) my brothers Yechiel Leibis, Moshe Meir, Chamul, and of course the occasional beggar. It was a crowded household.

There is a story told of a widow who lived in a crowded household. She had many children and in despair went to the Rabbi to seek his advice. The Rabbi thought for a moment and advised her to take in a cow. The woman was disbelieving. Rabbi she exclaimed, I have just told you how little room we have to live in- how can I possibly take in a cow? The Rabbi answered- when you drive the cow out, it will seem like you have all the room that you could want. Although Chaim owned cows, they mercifully slept in the stable.

My sister Dvoira was born in October of 1914. The war had started in August so the Russian army must have occupied Ivansk at that time. All the Jews were thrown out of their houses to billet the soldiers. There was a big rock lying in or near the *Zhika*, and it was there, on that rock that Dvoira came in to the world. She came in to the world in the middle of a battle. Her life has been a battle since.

The *Zhika* was a deep gully that ran behind our house. All the citizens came to defecate in the *Zhika* to the delight of the pigs that awaited each new arrival with eager anticipation. Dvoira, (now Doris) told me that she used to hang out at the rock I suppose in a natural longing to rediscover her birth place just as some Torontonians might pause for a nostalgic moment outside Mt Sinai Hospital.

Pa worked very hard. He made farm implements of wood and iron. He made one machine called a *shtatzcarnia*. Straw or hay could be inserted, a big wheel turned, and two knives rotated cutting up the straw or hay. He would take these machines to various market towns and offer them for sale. Although his machines sold well, he must have needed to supplement his income by trading in cattle. It may be that trading in cattle was simply a sideline-something of a hobby. He never clarified the issue. There were consequences.

Pa and a partner set out to buy cattle in *Klimontov* (Klimontow). They found nothing worth buying and made for home on a bitterly cold night. Robbers who had been watching them at the market place, observed that the partners had bought nothing. They waylaid Pa and his partner on their return to Ivansk. The robbers threatened to shoot the partners, made them undress so as better to search their clothing, and then left Pa and his mate naked in the snow. Pa made his way back, went to bed for quite some time and developed asthma which continued to plague him until he landed in Canada- his erstwhile partner died.

It was after Chamul was born that Leibe Tzutel took ill. She struggled with an ongoing swelling of the belly. There were two telephones in Ivansk; one in the post office, and the other in the police station. Pa called the doctor in Apt. The doctor would come only if his payment were set out on the table, failing which he would not treat the patient on arrival. It would seem that the Hippocratic oath didn't travel well when translated into Polish. Despite several attempts to drain the fluids from her abdomen, sadly Leibe Tzutel died and was laid to rest next to her sister Channah Gitel who had died in childbirth. Death was a constant companion in those small Polish towns bereft of medication or the care of real knowledgeable doctors.

My Mother Chaia Leiya

Chia Leiya Adelkop was born in January 1899 in the town of Olesnitza south east of Iwaniska to Ethel (I don't know my grandmother's maiden name) and her deceased husband Velvel. Unfortunately Velvel died possibly of pneumonia when he was about thirty- five years old, prior to my mother's birth and so my mother remained the youngest in her family. She had an elder brother Moshe Chaskel, and two sisters Raizel and Rifka. Moshe had three kids- Tzipe, Tzilke, and Velvel. Rifka's kids were- Lebale, Dovid and Velvel. Both Velvels were named after my mother's father.

Olesnitza was even smaller than Ivansk. My mother's older brother Moshe Chaskel was a tall good-looking shoemaker who had moved to Ivansk. I believe that both Rifke and Reizel and their families also lived in Ivansk. Reizel had married Goldman a baker and Rifke had married the barber Osdaitcher.

I don't know much about my mother's family. Her mother remarried three more times. Unlucky in love is a term tailor made for my grandma, because in each case her husband met a violent death at the hands of her good neighbors. In one case, grandma baked fish to sell in the village. She put the fish out to cool at the open window. A competitor put poison on the fish. When it had cooled, she gave her husband a taste. Soon he felt ill, put on his *tallis* (prayer shawl) and laid himself down to die. I don't know where this took place- probably not in Ivansk, but surely nearby.

My mother left home at the age of six. Her latest stepfather thought she was old enough to earn her keep. She went to work baby sitting and making herself useful in diverse houses and places. I know that she worked in Krakow when she was a bit older. At one time she worked for a German family whom she admired. She remembered that even in such a well off family, all the girls were taught to make the beds and be proper *bulaboostas* (household managers)

My mother told of many near death experiences. Once at the age of nine, she babysat for a family who had to go out. They locked the door from the outside to ensure the safety of their child. Houses were in the main one room affairs heated by a central stove. The stove malfunctioned and was spewing carbon monoxide through the house. After a while my mother felt very sleepy. She tried to get out of the house to call for help, but she could not force the door. She believed that if you lay down on the floor with your feet pointed toward the front door, that you would die. The effort to end her misery probably saved her life. The family returned at the last moment, rescuing both baby and babysitter. Years later my mother told me that it would have been better if they hadn't returned quite so soon. She didn't think much of the life she led and had no prospects for what to her was a dubious future.

My mother was a teenager when the First World War broke out. She was a pretty girl but unprotected by anyone. The boys in her village avoided her because it was agreed that she would be sickly and not live too long considering her father's early demise. She therefore acquired a reputation of being a dubious catch- no father, an absent mother, no money or worldly goods and nothing to recommend her.

She would not speak much of those years even when coaxed. Her standard response to a question was "*Es is besser man redt nisht defin*". ("It's better not to talk about it."). She did tell of one incident. Flour was hard to get. She had heard that some flour was to be available in a nearby town and set out to get some. The way was long, the day hot, and the load heavy. She fell crossing a fallen log and injured her eye, an injury that was to bother her all the rest of her days.

My mother always cursed the lot of women, considering it tragic to be born female. As the fates would have it, she ended in marrying a man considerably older than herself, a man who was recently widowed and who had fathered four children. No one at that time would have understood her instinct for survival. No one would have predicted that she would survive everyone of her generation and live one hundred and two years.

My father's first wife Leibe Tzutel died in February of 1924. My mother must have been living either in Ivansk or nearby. Her mother, my grandma Ethel knew my father from attending at the shul and very much admired his davening. Pa needed to marry and so what better than her old twenty five year old daughter, a woman with no prospects. Moshe Chaskel, my uncle the shoemaker also knew my father and liked him because he was hard working and not a *shiksa kreecher* (a man who chased after gentile girls).

My father and mother were married in March at the end of *shloshim*, the mandatory thirty day mourning period. Ma's honeymoon was to move in to meet her new family above the blacksmith shop. My father was about thirty-nine years old, sixteen years older than my mother. She always told anyone who would listen and many who didn't, that she married Pa to fulfill a deathbed

promise to Leibe Tzutel who particularly wanted Ma to take care of her children. I am not sure that this is a true rendition of the facts but she obviously believed it, or thought it would go down well with her listeners who probably wouldn't understand why any young woman would marry an old guy with four kids.

Rumor has it that Ma wasn't too thrilled in her undertaking, but in no time she became pregnant. At the end of December, when Chanuka candles were being lit, Lyuba my full sister was born guaranteeing that my mother would be stuck in her role for life.

What was my parent's relationship? Well my mother also admired my father's davening and his personal cleanliness. She was as well impressed in the fact that he wasn't a shiksa kreecher but I don't think it was exactly a love match. On her part it were as though fate and her mother made the decision for her. What could an old maid like her expect? Years later I asked my mother whether she hadn't at least liked if not loved a man. She said that there was a soldier who she liked but he went to war and never came back. She also told me that there was a German soldier who wanted to take her home with him. She didn't say whether he was Jewish, but she did say that he had promised to take care of her and love her, and that he would make a good life for her. But she was wary of men generally and so when his troop moved out she hid from him observing him asking for her until he was obliged to leave.

Life in the Shtetl

Ma soon had two children of her own and was responsible for the other four until Chamul died leaving her with five. After Chamul died, I was born, and then there were six. What was life like in Ivansk? You already have some inkling of the day-to-day marginal existence of the Jewish community. The Gentile one was of course just as marginal so it's a tossup as to who had the best time of it.

All was not doom and gloom although I can testify to the fact that I do not recount any tales of Ivansk that were lighthearted. People being what they are, they did try to make an attempt at fun from time to time. There were no radios, but there was a man who owned a wind up gramophone. He would take it out into the street on occasion and play a few well-worn and scratchy records which his neighbors would enjoy. It was not recorded that the Rabbonim excommunicated anyone on the grounds of frivolity.

People knew everyone in town and what they did to earn a meager living (*Parnassah*). Once a man came to town- a stranger. He was taken in, fed, and passed from household to household. Everyone wanted to know, from where he had come, how many kids he had, and what he did for a living. Eventually the questions centered on his children. Yes he had a son. No the son had no trade; he was a poet! " *Voss toot a poet* ("What does a poet do?") he was asked. "Du vaist nisht vos mached a poet?" ("You don't know what a poet does?") the stranger asked in turn. He rhymed the illustration. "*Mendl Mendl, Frest fun fendl*" ("Mendl Mendl eats from a pot".) His astonished and incredulous questioners responded, "*Und phun dos kan man a leben machen?*" ("And from this you can make a living?").

My uncle Moshe Chaskel who you have already met, obtained a Yiddish newspaper from who knows where, and would rent it to successive readers who would contribute to it's cost per reading. Imagine what Moshe Chaskel could have done as an entrepreneur in Canada!

Townpeople would entertain themselves on occasion by paying someone a few groschen for the opportunity to whistle in his ear. This innocent game provoked mounds of laughter in all who observed. Ma considered the whole game a *narishkeit* (foolishness). Being scrupulously honest, Ma always took the opportunity to remind Pa of his real or imagined shortcomings.

The best entertainment I believe was in the general Ivansker social intercourse. One could make fun of anyone seemingly in a status beneath one's own. It was common for many to be given nicknames that stuck with them for the rest of their lives. For instance, A man once got lost and was forever known as *Blongeok* (the lost one). Another man was known as *Yosel vasser trager* (Yosel the water carrier) he would fit two pails at the end of a neck yoke, fill them at our well, and carry them to those too busy to fetch their own water. His nickname stuck long after everyone had forgotten his real name. And so it was with *Mendl Hoiker* (Mendl the hunchback).

Women worked from first daylight until their tasks were done for the day. Some also worked at the stalls during market days, helping their husbands to sell or trade goods. They wore multiple layers of skirts for warmth and security. Money was kept in a pocket of the innermost skirt.

My mother baked, prepared meals for the family, washed and cleaned. She rarely had time to sit at the table at mealtime. She ate in bits and bites while preparing meals for the family. She washed the family clothes in the creek. She tended the stove, which was never allowed to die out. She had little time and little inclination for gossip or for light hearted banter with her neighbors.

Ma was crazy clean. She would take the front door off its hinges and drag it to the creek to wash it down before Passover. I am not sure why she felt it necessary to do this. Maybe it was because Pa was so busy making *shtatzkarnias* that he had no spare time to make a pail. I guess we will never know.

Kids went to school, but it was mostly boys not girls. Daughters were required to help out at home; you know, take the cow out to pasture, fetch the milk and so on. Boys needed to learn their *aleph bais* (the Hebrew alphabet) and so went to cheder starting at tender age of three.

Attending school in Ivansk was not what you may have experienced in Canada. Brother Yecheil Leibish was sent home from school because his pencil wasn't bought in a gentile establishment. The Rabbi made his will be known by regularly beating up on the kids if they were a bit slow. Ma had to go to the *Beis Hamedrish* and yell at the teacher for beating up on an orphan. I guess it was safer for such teachers to beat up a kid at school than to tackle the *goyim* (gentiles) who would follow the Jews all the way home with the sage advice that they would be somewhat better off in Palestine. "*Jidda Palestina*" (go back to Palestine) was the cry. This advice was at times tendered along with rocks thrown for emphasis. If there were a God listening, this would have been advice worth listening to. (I am told that today one can encounter signs in Eastern Europe that advise Jews to get out of Palestine.)

My brother Moshe Meir was not a great student, but he developed his street smarts early in life. As a result he became a very successful businessman in Canada. His teachers didn't quite trust his word. When Moshe threatened to pee on the floor if he wasn't allowed to go to the pissery, the teacher would relent, but for security sent another kid along to guard him. Moshe always managed to dupe the guard and escape through a window or from the rooftop. Ma was always summoned to deal with the diplomatic exchanges that ensued because Pa was doing more important things and couldn't be bothered with such trivialities.

Dvoira had no time for education or sport. Pa would send her out to pasture a cow. At the age of nine she was already an old hand at this profession. Having once been tossed on the horns of a steer, she was cautious, taking a long rope to the cow and wrapping the other end firmly around her arm. The cow was only allowed to eat the grass on the appointed pasture. Sad to say nobody cautioned the cow. This dumb animal having concern only for her belly and having no respect for boundaries sidled over to an adjoining field of clover, dragging our hapless Dvoira through brambles and fences. The Gentile who owned the clover arrested Pa's wandering cow and

belatedly discovered a bleeding and lacerated Dvoira now an appendage to the bloated cow. A trial of sorts ensued and Pa was to pay damages to the Gentile. Dvoira's reward was to be castigated for allowing it all to happen.

Kids more than on occasion were thrown on the firing line. A man who owned an orchard would hire a boy to guard his field against thieves. An apple or two missing, triggered continuing argument as to whether a thief had taken advantage of a drowsing youth, lulling him to sleep while the theft occurred, or whether the guard himself had made off with the goods with the aid of an accomplice. In an uncertain economy, everyone was suspect.

There were other entertainments. I believe that the noble art of cursing was perfected in Ivansk. These curses usually enlisted the cholera as aid to a good will wish directed at someone who offended for the moment. Without here embarking on a bibliography of Ivansker curses, let me say that a national contest would not have shamed Ivanskers.

There were also stories to be told and savored. A woman had to travel to a nearby town. She paid a *balegula* (a wagon master) to convey her there. The balegula en route took advantage of his fare. Mortified, the woman consulted the local Rabbi who exonerated her innocent involvement. He told her to pay eighteen groshen to charity to expiate what sin she might have incurred. The Rabbi was taken aback when she tendered thirty-six groshen, as she logically explained that she had to make a return trip home with the same balegula.

A man had to travel to a nearby town and hired a wagon to transport his goods. The load was heavy. The balegula refused to allow his fare to sit on the wagon because there was a hill to climb. It would stress the horse. As the journey progressed there was always a reason which forbade the fare to mount the wagon until many *vyersts* (a measurement of distance like a kilometer) later, the wagon reached its destination, the man having walked all the way. As he paid the balegula, he questioned as follows. "See here – I needed to come here as did you who were hired to bring me. But why did you have to involve the poor horse?" Stories like these passed from person to person enlightening the burden of their daily lives.

Religion

You may think that every Jew in Ivansk had more or less the same religious training and belief. Women did not in the main have the opportunity and some would have said need for religious instruction. A very few women were exposed to the finer theological distinctions of Hebrew learning. They could read Hebrew and in some cases they were able to delve into a study of scripture. My grandma Ethel made a meager living teaching kids to read.

Our family rabbi was the *Shidlover Rebbe*. I don't know where he was trained, but it appears he was one of the chassids in contrast to the more liberal Rabbi in town. The Shidlover Rebbe was more concerned with the ritual of daily prayer, *kashruth*, the adjudication of disputes, and managing the Olom to be devout and observant. The Rabbi's word was absolute and not subject to appeal. In a social order with a marginal economy, where there was no real enforcement of law for Jews, the rabbi was there to fill the role of adjudicator. There could be little room for dissent.

Rules of cleanliness were strictly observed. Once the Ivansker *Mikva* ("ritual bath") was broken. A woman prevailed on Pa to take her to the Mikva in Lagov. Pa hitched up his horse and wagon (one could not refuse a woman in need) and made his way to Lagov where the Mikva was also out of order. On their return, a man tried to help the woman descend the wagon. She called for him not to touch her because she was still ritually unclean.

Shtetl people knew little or nothing of the outside world- of the revolutionary political movements that swirled about in cities like Lodz and Warsaw. The *Rabbonim* were wary of any belief systems that they thought would draw Jews away from their orthodox religion. While Zionism and socialism were in the main absent from shtetl life, many young people in the 1930's were active in socialist Zionist movements and this interest was kept secret from parents and from the Rabbi. My parents never spoke of Zion. The Jews we knew longed only for "*Das goldener land, Amerika*". Perhaps the Zionist movement was not as much in evidence in the Ivansk of the 1920's. I have heard that Leibe, Garshon's son was a member of a branch of Beitar, Jabotinsky's revisionists. There must have been others.

(After we had emigrated Leib wrote saying that he would marry anyone if that could get him into Canada. Sadly, no one had the money to sponsor him. He married a lady in Lagov. Goldman a survivor said that Leib's wife was shot in her bed by Nazis as she was about to give birth. My sister Doris said that Goldman told her that one of Gershon's sons had escaped with others to the forest during the last days before the evacuation. He was among those betrayed by his compatriots.)

When one's daily energies were committed to basic survival needs, when one's lifetime travel extended to a fifty kilometer walking distance and when life was so insular, a belief in the divine hand of God was the sole comforting element in their lives. Jews believed that God ordered every detail of their daily existence. Pa used to say that "*Uz Got vill, shiesed a basim*" (If God wills it a broom could shoot like a gun.). To renounce one's religious belief, or to move away from its demands was tantamount to giving up life itself. This restraint even extended to the New World and to subsequent generations. It is said that Jewish gangsters in Chicago in the twenties, went to shul religiously and wouldn't kill anyone on the Sabbath. For the average Ivansker the practice of ritual in their daily lives made up for the lack of sophisticated higher Torah study.

The worst ill to befall a family would have been to have a child move away from his religiously inspired behavioral pattern, and so shame his family and his people. Such deviant behavior would cause a family to renounce a child and mourn him or her as having died.

Most *shtetlech* were roughly fifty percent Jewish, the balance were of course a mostly uneducated Catholic near peasant community whose values and patterns of behavior were in some cases opposed to those of their Jewish compatriots. In both cases the communities defined themselves as different from and as against the other who if not admired could only be tolerated.

This is not to say that there were no friendly and in cases more than friendly attachment between individuals from either half of the equation. Friendships extending even to devotion though perhaps rare, could occur. In the main however, poverty and marginal living gave little opportunity for the natural feeling of brotherhood that arises spontaneously even among diverse people, to gain much of a foothold in shtetl life.

Larger towns and cities could support a higher level of learning and study. There were important and famous centers of learning in Poland but not usually in shetlech like Ivansk. A student of promise was considered a good marriage prospect, the bride's family supporting the student who sometimes studied for years on end without the expectation that he would have to make a living. Some enhanced the family's repute by becoming famous Talmudic scholars but I don't know of any such cases in Ivansk. Nevertheless religiosity and communal esteem went hand in hand. Although he wasn't learned people like my Pa were adept at davening and ritual observance and so were considered a good catch.

Religiosity became less of an attraction in the New World where doors were opened to professional classes. This type of opportunity wasn't remotely a possibility in small town Poland.

There were numerous Jewish doctors and lawyers in Warsaw. One third of Lodz was Jewish housing many large Jewish enterprises. For Ivanskers on the whole, Warsaw might as well have been on the moon. For people like my mother, all of Poland was Ivansk.

A lack of opportunity for higher learning dulled the line between religious injunction and belief, and belief based on superstition. Ma once tried to explain the Jesus phenomenon as a Jew gone bad who aspired to God's powers. The Greek myth of Icarus was borrowed to explain Jesus' effort to fly to heaven. His effort was thwarted not by the sun's rays melting his wings but by an angel sent by God to pee on the wings causing Jesus' fall to earth. Such stories told and retold tried to explain the world as small town Jews encountered it.

Religious belief and custom could impact believers in their physical being. An older woman was expecting a grandchild. The child was late in coming. The grandmother was convinced that the child could not be born to take her name because she was still alive. The expectant grandmother laid herself down to die refusing all succor. When her time had almost come she heard a child's cry. The baby had been born. The grandma who had almost departed this world, got up from her bed and now began preparing food for the family. A true case of mind over body.

My people believed that the dead could help in this world because they had already gone to the world beyond. When grandma Chaia Surah died in Toronto in the fall of 1940, Ma tried to drag me to her coffin, instructing me to ask grandma to intercede for me in years to come. This succeeded only in scaring the wits out of a highly imaginative twelve year old. There was an incredible display of grief at funerals with much spontaneous yet practiced sobbing, gnashing of teeth, and unseemly wailing. I suspect that as the dead were presumed to have such other worldly power, this display was as much to convince the dead to withhold their power in revenge at some slight as it was to convince the onlookers of their grief.

Bear in mind dear reader that the original *shiva* process was not to comfort the family of the departed but was rather to guard the corpse so that the soul of the deceased could find it's peace in heaven before it could like a loose cannon, do harm to those left behind.

Pa told of an incident at the cemetery. A man had died whose piety was questionable. It was proposed that he be buried next to a man of exceptional piety. A crowd attended the cemetery to prevent the interment. The funeral could not proceed until a new grave was dug at a location more appropriate to the status of the deceased. The interruption of a burial was forbidden and yet it took place. The event illustrates the extent to which the community treasured a reputation based on learning and piety.

Religion could also govern trade. There was an agreed way of trading. A buyer and a seller of goods would meet. If they were Jews, one might ask the other if he was prepared to deal based on the system. If he was, then the seller would settle in his mind as to what his bottom price would be, no cheating permitted. The purchaser would bargain and when he had offered the vendor's bottom price known only to the vendor, the vendor would be obliged to sell at that mental construct. This system could only have worked when both parties were bound by their religiously sanctioned oath. The fact that such trust governed trade speaks for Jewish religiosity.

There was an admixture of folk tales and superstition as to what might not be considered legitimate religious practice. Pa wouldn't allow us to whistle because it might attract the attention of the "*Shaidim*". These were spirits that wandered looking for trouble. They could inadvertently be summoned and could impact someone adversely.

The dead could be understood to wander the night. They would come to the shul and inhabit the benches or pews. They were to be feared and avoided at all cost. The dead however could be

importuned to be of help. A bad pregnancy, a bad marriage, a potential pogrom, could all be averted if the right spirits could be contacted to intervene. It is said that even today, some peasant Poles still go to a Jewish cemetery (if it still exists) in order to approach the grave of a learned Chassid as they recall their Jewish predecessors did generations ago.

It was their religion and their culture that gave the Jews of Ivansk their identity. It was that identity that bound the community. If life was short and not always rewarding, one could believe that redemption was surely to come.

Family Relationships

The community was bound closely together so that the actions of one often had consequences for many. Though families were close, the very minute involvement in each other's lives sometimes begat fierce quarrels. Shame was the dominant control mechanism as it is for many of such close-knit communities. A brother would be offended by a sibling's words, action or inaction. He would develop a "*broigis*" (a resentment) to the offender real or imagined. They would not speak or walk on the same side of the street. Sometimes this process would involve whole families, and sometimes the "*broigis*" would last for many a year.

Though the giving of charity was a religious requirement, on the whole, families could only rely on sibling aid or the compassion of uncles and cousins. Many tales are told of generosity and self-sacrifice that are the more remarkable in that there was so little money or goods that could be shared. At times a person would go to the Rabbi seeking a ruling that a slaughtered animal was Kosher. The person's economic welfare might depend on the verdict. The Rabbis undoubtedly did their best but could not compromise religious duty.

My father told of a time when he was a small boy. A calf had been slaughtered. It represented much of the family's wealth. A flaw in the carcass mandated a trip to the Rabbi. Was it kosher? The *shalah* (verdict) could impact the family adversely. When the Rabbi sadly announced that it was not kosher, my father spotted a worm within the carcass. At first it was thought that the worm was dead. My father saw that the worm had moved and was very much alive. This observation cancelled the dire verdict and with much celebration, the carcass was pronounced kosher. My father the hero and savior of his family was now seen to have a glorious future.

Alas, the reverse opinion was never slow to dampen spirits. Depression sat closely on the tails of elation. Pa's family was engaged as a sideline in buying bundles of chicken feathers. The family would sit around a table sorting soft feathers from hard. The soft ones could be resold for a higher price. When all the sorting was nearly complete Pa sneezed a mighty sneeze sending feathers flying. His father Yechiel Leibish sadly announced that this son would be the ruin of his family.

A mother would predict a dire future for her child say for a moment of poor performance, or for bad behavior. The child might observe that his mom had always noted that "An apple falt nisht veit fun boim" (An apple doesn't fall far from its parenting tree). The child could only have been following parental example. The mother would sagely explain- "*Narish kind! A mol shteit a boim hoch oif a berg und der apple collet zich veit avec fun boim.*" ("Silly child! Sometimes a stately tree sits on a high hill. When the apple falls, it rolls downhill very far away from its parenting mentor."). You could never no matter how precocious the child, win an argument with mom.

Exodus

Now dear reader let me ask a philosophical question. Does a bad deed lead to good consequences? Before you answer consider the following.

When Pa was in the Russian army, he would send his pay home to his mom Chaia Surah for safekeeping. There being no banks in Lagov, Chaia Surah hid the money as it arrived behind a loose brick. His younger brother introduced to you as Itche was a silent observer to this alternative banking facility. Itche bided his time and executed his plan faultlessly.

One day both Itche and the money were gone! Itche but not the money turned up in Toronto of all places. Did Pa complain when he came home from the service? You bet he did but his complaint did not make it all the way to Canada. But there is a happy sequel to this story. Just as Abraham begat Isaac who begat Jacob, Itche brought his brother Gutkind to Canada in 1921. He later brought Becky (Pa's younger sister,) who on arrival married Chaim Waldman and moved to Winnipeg. He also brought Baila who married Gryfe in Toronto. Later, Becky sponsored the indomitable Chaia Surah who came to Winnipeg as did Avrom the youngest of my paternal uncles. Chaia Surah had second thoughts about Itche's integrity and on her arrival greeted him as a man of wisdom and foresight. Lastly Becky arranged two visas for Pa the first one of which he ignored.

So answer dear reader- did we all get out of Poland because of a felony, or did we escape because Japan defeated Russia leading to Pa's "tour of duty in Chechnia where he couldn't find anything to spend his army pay on? I tend to believe that it was the hubris of the Czar to be the spark that ignited the flame that brought us to Canada. I leave it to you to judge. Obviously to the believer, God does indeed work in strange ways.

This news may shock you but Pa didn't want to leave Poland. His was like the story about the uncle who wants to bring his three nephews Chaim Beryll and Feivel to Canada. Wanting to Canadianize their names, he declares; Chaim, you are now Chuck. Beryll, you are now Buck, and Feivel says "Fetter, ich fore nisht!" (Uncle, I'm not going!)

Pa liked some of his gentile neighbors and they liked him. He had a gentile helper called Fronec. Fronec's mother also liked Pa and favored us with milk, eggs and *pyetrishke* (parsley). It was Fronec who bought the *kishna* (blacksmith shop) when Pa finally relented by preparing to leave when Becky sent the second and final visa available.

It seems Pa didn't know how much he was tempting the fates. Pa argued with Ma who was adamant that he should leave. Pa insisted that he stay at least until I was born. It would be a matter of a month or so. Ma refused to listen. In later years she said that she had "pushed him out." In the summer of 1928, Pa reluctantly packed himself up, told Ma to collect the business receivables, and hit the road north to Apt.

I have already told you of my birth on the day that Pa landed in Halifax. Now Fronec was at work on the *shtatzkarniahs* and on shoeing horses with home made nails and shoes as Pa had taught him to do. Ma was of course left with six kids and some uncollected sums owing. After the first encounter with a gentile debtor, Ma thought it better to abandon these claims, considering that she thought it wiser to remain poorly alive than righteously dead with six kids wailing at the cemetery.

How did she manage? Dvoira was a second mother to the kids, and Moshe Chaskel would lend a hand. Ethel, Ma's mother worked teaching kids to daven. Ma asked her on occasion to help out but after Ethel looked the field over, decided to withhold her services with the observation that Ma

"Hot keshiked aveck ihr man und yetst mached mir in todt." ("She sent her husband away and now wants to be the death of me")

Ma had a hard time of it. The neighbors all had opinions. There were lots of abandoned wives and children. "Your man will leave you here and never come back. What idiot lets her husband leave without her? He will find a young wife. You will never hear from him again." But Ma persevered. She went god knows where and arranged to acquire birth certificates and passports for the family. I recall these official documents all in golden beige with pictures of the candidates inside, the covers emblazoned with the Polish double-headed eagle on the frontispiece.

Finally, sometime in August of 1929, Ma bought a *"coish"* which was a large wicker trunk. At about ten in the morning of the appointed day she unexpectedly announced to the kids that they were about to leave Poland forever. All of our earthly belongings were tossed into the coish. Grandma Ethel who had been tutoring the butcher's kids came to sell Ma a piece of meat that the butcher had given her in payment and discovered for the first time that her youngest daughter was about to leave forever.

Ethel's comment wasn't, "How come I'm just finding out now?" She simply said "Nem mich mit" ("Take me with you.") Ma said that taking her mom along at the eleventh hour wasn't possible, but I did wonder why her mother was not told about our imminent departure. It isn't recorded as to whether Ethel completed her sale of the meat but I don't think it came with us to Canada. Ethel died in Ivansk in the thirties after her son Moshe Chaskel had moved to Lodz.

Dvoira and Yecheil my eldest siblings, hastily ran the two kilometers to the cemetery to say good-bye to their mother Leibe Tzutel. Dvoira pushed Yecheil over the brick wall, the gate being locked. Having paid their respects and made their farewells, they came back in time to mount the wagon taking us north on the fateful road to Apt. Moshe Chaskel accompanied us all the way to Warsaw. I suppose that we were lucky that Ma thought all of Poland to be like Ivansk. If we had had the misfortune to be living in Warsaw, she might never have had the drive to leave.

Ma had an uncle in Apt and so she stopped there to make her farewells. I suppose her relationship to her uncle was somewhat more forthcoming than her relationship to her mother. The uncle had been to Canada and had returned to live in Poland. He admonished her for leaving saying that the very stones in Canada were *"treif"* (Not kosher). *"Vos vilst du machen fun de kinder-Goyim?"* ("Do you want to make your kids gentiles?") He suggested that he would rather see her family dead than to become goyim in Canada. As a helpless infant I was not aware of his admonition, but needless to say I am more than pleased that Ma didn't agree. I don't believe that anyone had a vision of what was to come, but I think that Ma had a strong premonition of a danger to be averted. The day that Ma died she told me that the greatest of her accomplishments was getting her children out of Poland.

We must have made our way through Apt to Ostroftseh, and probably there boarded the train to Warsaw. At the station in Warsaw Ma said goodbye to her beloved Moshe Chaskel who had been such a great help to us. The train proceeded to Gdansk where we boarded the SS Lithuania for the two-week plus crossing. Ma was seasick all the way over as were the older children, the younger ones being less affected. Binim mangled his finger in a door and the wound festered necessitated him being hospitalized in Winnipeg after our arrival there.

We landed at Halifax in October 1929, just in time to welcome the onset of the depression and the closing of Canada's doors. This made us the last to leave our town prior to the war. As we stood at the gates of the New World, utterly unaware of the forthcoming horrors that we had miraculously escaped, we paused to rest. It was here, just after regaining our land legs that we

boarded the train for the four-night, three-day trip to Winnipeg. And it is at this point in our journey that I leave off this narration.

Observations

I wonder at the disability that universally struck the Jews of Iwaniska in the practice of pronouncing Polish names. Most spoke Polish but perversely took some delight in having their unique enunciations of Polish place names. In addressing Poles, it would seem strange if not insulting to refer to their hometown as Ivansk rather than Iwaniska. On the other hand, Poles pronounced Lodz as “Woodge” (meaning boat) while Jews pronounced it as Lodge (meaning Lodz.). Perhaps this affectation if that’s what it was, was a sort of a rapper’s language to be understood among themselves. Clearly it was based on Jews speaking Yiddish rather than Polish in their daily discourse.

Parents generally found it difficult if not impossible to speak of their shtetl years. In the New World, their children were the educated and knowledgeable of the family components. Parents had to rely on their children for information and for direction in opposition to their respective roles in Poland. This bred a reluctance to re-encounter their lives that came more and more to resemble Dogpatch – the cartoonist Al Capp’s revisiting of the shtetl in the guise of hillbilly life in Kentucky or Arkansas. These stories now became something of an embarrassment to our elders who had to learn a new language in a new culture. They were in these circumstances forced to confront information and values that they felt diminished their authority and tied in to the shame construct that so governed their early lives.

I believe that the natural reluctance to revisit what they now considered to be a primitive lifestyle was the cause of our limited knowledge of Shtetl Life. Some scholars have attempted to recapture that culture. (See- Life Is With People-The Culture of The Shtetl by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog.) What I have read is no substitute for an oral tradition passed on by stories told directly to offspring in Yiddish. There is no adequate language substitute. A way of life has accordingly disappeared, never to be recaptured.

Cecil Roth’s book “Essays and Portraits in Anglo Jewish History” published by the Jewish Publications Society is more than worth a look. He tells the tale of Lord George Gordon, the leading advocate of Protestantism in England of the eighteenth century. Lord Gordon was a fiery anti papist and a friend of George III’s wayward sons. He was a fearless critic who had some nasty things to say about the empress of France and about his own sovereign King George. His acerbic tongue landed him in Newgate Prison, where he held court imperiously until his demise.

Before his incarceration, in the early 1787, Gordon paid a mysterious visit to Holland. When he returned, he had converted to Judaism, had grown a long beard, and had adopted the dress of an orthodox Jew. He had learned to speak Hebrew and davened several times daily draped in his *tallis*, his philactories firmly in place.

Notwithstanding the chagrin of his family, he maintained his Judaism, was painfully circumcised and became a learned Talmud Chochim. Politicians, members of the royal family and many Jews came to consult him and to benefit from his philanthropy. He would not admit an unobservant Jew to his presence.

About the year 1792, Kosciusko led a revolt in Poland against the republic, demanding a new constitution to protect the rights of Polish citizenry. A fund to aid his efforts was being promoted in England. Lord Gordon read the proposed constitution and immediately opposed the raising of such funds because Jews were not included in the demand for the protection of rights sought by Kosciusko for other Poles. There were one million Jews in Poland at that time. He fought for their

civil rights from which the reformers sought to exclude them. It doesn't seem that much had changed in Polish attitudes to their Jewish compatriots, attitudes that extended past the post war years, and to some extent, to this very day.

Personal Angst

I have told this story in the only way possible to me. Were I to tell it otherwise I might have drowned these pages in tears. These people - my people, were not cartoon characters. They were people without hope, living impossible lives in impossible times and in an impossible land. Their courage, their faith, their persistence in the face of difficult and daily challenges that would have crushed someone like me are to be marveled at. Their resolve is on the record to be acknowledged. They built better than they knew.

Some years ago, I told my mother a little of the history of the Jews of Poland. I spoke of a golden age in Poland to rival that of the Jewish life in Sephardic Spain prior to the Inquisition. Ma believed none of it. "What do you know?" ("*Vos redst du kind?*") she admonished me. "You were just a babe. I lived there and wouldn't go back in a coffin."

I will perhaps go back to Ivansk. I have wanted to see the place where I was born and have been on the verge of going a number of times. Though I have been to Germany several times, I always put off a trip to Poland. It was as though if I went back I would awaken too many ghosts that will haunt that God forsaken land to eternity. If I go back the deportations will begin again. The trains have a memory. The rails lead to Treblinka - they will draw me north once again. I would have to travel the road we left, the road that led to our salvation but that also led to the horrible death of so many. We, I, could have been among them.

We could have been at the cemetery when Rabbi Rabinowitz raised his tearful visage to a silent sky. I could have been a witness to his plea to a divinity that was not there. I could have moaned in fright, in seeing my distraught elders. I a boy of fourteen, small for my age, might have been plotting the unthinkable; how to escape my fate - how to abandon my mother who had so long ago pronounced me her savior?

A Haunting Vision

No one slept that fateful night, the very last night of the Jewish presence in Ivansk. Yecheil, and Moshe had fled the night before to hide out in the forest. There was nothing more to do but to count the minutes to dawn. Some of our neighbors gathered to pray; perhaps a merciful God would intervene to save the faithful. Some dug pits in the earth to hide what bits of finery that they might have had. Parents comforted children. Older children comforted parents. Slowly, painfully, apologizing and with regret, the sky grew light. It grew light- the light gradually banishing the quiescent protective night.

It is the first blush of daylight. Suddenly, as in an approaching storm, we hear an ominous sound, building to a roar which grows louder by the moment. We are engulfed by a thunderclap of noise, a flurry, a whirlwind of voices, a pounding of running legs clad in hobnailed boots. "Raus Raus ale Juden Raus!!". Our limbs tremble at the sound of hammering on our door. We gather some bits of clothing- a little food to eat along the way. We form up near the well on the Stashover Road. We are ordered to leave our belongings that are to follow us on our march. I manage to hide the blade that I had sharpened like a dagger on the grindstone in the Kishna. We assemble in the square.

I can't believe that all the Jews of Ivansk are gathered in such a small and restricted place. I hear shots fired. Some of us are silent. Others argue or moan through their tears.

I look up at the two-story house where Yanosh lives. For a moment I see his ashen face at the upper window. The curtains have parted and closed: his mother has pulled him away from the windowpane.

Yanosh- my only Catholic friend .

Yanosh- who protected me from the bullies at school.

Yanosh- with whom I wrestled and played games in the forest.

Yanosh- with whom I shared confidences and with whom I had planned a better world.

Yanosh- with whom I pledged undying friendship- against the wishes of my parents, against the wishes of his.

Yanosh who I will never see again in this world, remember me-remember me!

As I look away from the window I speak to Yanosh aloud as though he were standing in front of me. Yanosh I say, Yanoshka mine- when you pray to that Yehoshua you call Jesus, ask him something for me. Ask him why Yanosh- ask him why?

I walk with the others, a long line, the youngest being carted to their fate. I shudder not just because of the cold, but because I am seized by a coldness that pierces my heart. All I have been told is now revealed to be based on meager hope, which can now not be sustained. We are already walking corpses. The memory of the cries in the village square, the shouts, the shots, the rabbi dead as were others, the bloody corpses lying in the mud. The blows, the screams all carried in one's head ready to burst with anxiety, ready to shred with fear.

I see Beryl my cheder classmate limping ahead of me. Beryl has been lame from birth: he cannot keep up the pace. As in a slow motion film I see a German soldier come up behind Beryl. The soldier holds his pistol to Beryl's head and fires. I walk on in shock not comprehending what I have just witnessed.

The road is dusty and long, yet each step takes us closer to our fate. We thirst but receive only threats and blows. We stumble and pass old landmarks, the way of our crucifixion joining a countless mass. As rivulets conjoin in their run to the sea, we join those who died in Jerusalem, those who perished in the crusades, those who were torn in pogroms in *Kishinev*, who died in expulsions and in wars through out the interminable ages.

I am no longer in this world. We are driven to the open doors that receive us, the cattle cars now reserved for those valued less than that for which they were built. We don't know where we are. We are packed so tightly that one cannot breathe. Water! Water- we die of thirst. People have shat themselves for fear. The smell of urine assaults the senses and the mind. This cannot be; people don't do this to each other. It isn't possible. How can anyone live in the world after this?

Suddenly the train comes to a grinding halt. The doors open. We are driven out with shouts and blows. Some are already dead. They lie twisted, unrecognizable in the cars. They have not survived the journey. They are to be envied. We shudder and run as we are driven forward.

I lose sight of my siblings. My glasses fall to the ground in the crush and are trampled underfoot. My pulse pounds in my ears with a beat that grows faster and faster still. It grows to a tsunami roar. It overrides the screams that seem to come to me from another world. The dust chokes my nostrils. We stumble. We cry out in one gigantic collective moan.

The guards scream, "Schnell! Schnell!" The crowd pushes and shoves ever forward in a blind frenzy. I hear myself, my voice choked yet challenging, "*Shema Adonoi!* Hear O God – listen to

the voice of your condemned.” Hear O God, who has created imperfect man and who punishes him for the imperfection He created.

I will not be driven. I will calm myself with a will that is still mine. I will not go forward like a beast to die in fear. To hell with it all. I curse God’s world. I curse this land and it’s now broken history. I curse my birth, and I curse the years that should have been mine but are now stolen from me by imperfect capricious man and by an indifferent or impotent god.

We are pushed forward. Suddenly I see - there, just off to my right- there he is, the butcher who shot Beryl! I reach for my blade and rush up behind the executioner. I trip him up so that we fall to the ground together. His rifle falls clattering to the ground. An overwhelming rage surges up into my chest; it is a rage which engulfs my limbs. It is a rage that cannot be controlled. I roll on top of him and drive my blade deep into his chest. I feel his warm blood flooding on to my hand. I strike again and again, my face close to his. I see the look of fear behind his bulging eyes as the blows rain down on me. His strangely pleading, dying terror stricken face is the last thing that I see.

I return to this place. I return to this village. My spirit returns and will haunt this land to the end of days, to the very end of time. The rest is silence. It is the silence of a people who once lived. It is the silence of a culture that was democratic, life giving, and humane. It is the silence of a culture that had evolved over a period of some nine hundred years. It is the silence of a culture that exists no more.

Epilogue

Of the people noted in this memoir, the Frymerman, (in Canada, “Freedman”) family ie my father’s immediate family all made it here before the doors closed. Abella & Troper’s book “None Is Too Many” details how Canada actively sought to keep us out. My mother’s family all perished.

Of those buried in the Ivansker cemetery, I count the following:

Chaim, the grandfather of my elder half siblings, as well as Dvoira his first wife. They were possibly joined by his second wife Vishula, but since I don’t know her age, it is possible that she died in Treblinka.

Of Chaim’s children, we know that the first Chana Gitel is buried in Ivansk as was her sister Leibe Tzutel, my father’s first wife. Of Garshon’s children, Tovia who later also died in childbirth is buried there, as was Chamul my half brother who had died at the age of about four.

Garshon, his wife, and their remaining children, Moshe, Arjah, Leib, Whochtia, and the second Channah Gitel were probably among those sent to Treblinka. Leib however having married a lady in Lagov was sent to his fate with the Lagover evacuation.

Of my mother’s family - My grandmother Ethel bat Velvel is also buried in Ivansk. There is no evidence that she moved elsewhere after Moshe Chaskel’s departure to Lodz.

Moshe Chaskel had moved to Lodz where he and his family perished. His children were Tzipe. Tzilke and Velvel.

Rifke and her husband, as well as their children Leibale, Dovid and Velvel were transported to Treblinka as was Reizel, her husband and their children who’s names I do not know.



**1939: A Family Gathering in Toronto
(A Long Way From Ivansk)**

1. Harry [*Yecheil*]
2. Morris [*Moshe*]
3. Doris [*Dvoira*]
4. Louis [*Lazer Wolf, my father*]
5. Helen [*Chaia Leiya, my mother*]
6. Sidney [*Shia*]
7. Ben [*Binim*]
8. Libby [*Lyuba*] (kneeling)

This photo was taken shortly after Ben's Bar Mitzvah. Looking at the picture I find it poignant that at that time everyone was still alive in Poland.



**1998: My Family Celebrates the Wedding of my
Daughter Roberta to Avi Shachar**

Adults (left to right):

- Sidney Freedman
- Susan Freedman (3rd child)
- Bonnie Freedman (1st child)
- Avi Shachar
- Roberta (Robbie) Freedman Shachar (4th child)
- David Freedman (2nd child)
- Allison Jacobson Freedman (David's wife)
- Dawn Freedman (Sid's wife)

David and Allison's children are:
Amanda and Jonah.

Robbie and Avi now have two children:
Natali and Shai Shachar (not pictured).



2004: Lake of Bays, Muskoka, Ontario

There's Nothing Like Grandchildren!!

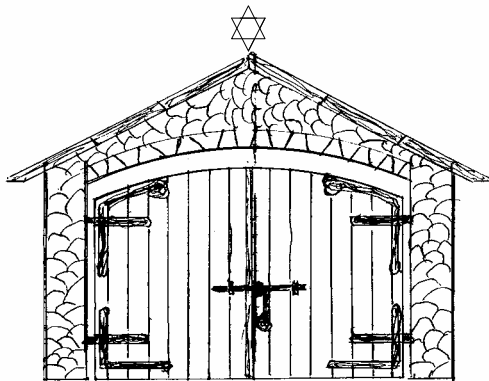
Relaxing at the cottage with Natali (4 years old) and Shai (about 9 months old), Robbie and Avi's children.

Avi's father was born in Benzin, Poland. He was a survivor who came to Israel after the war as a seventeen year old. He was handed a rifle and fought in the War of Independence.

What Did The Gate Of The Ivansker Cemetery Look Like?

During our trip to Iwaniska in April we interviewed a woman who is the “guardian of our cemetery”. All her life she has lived on a farm adjacent to the cemetery, and today she seems to always be on hand when a stranger visits the burial ground. She clearly remembers her Jewish playmates as well as numerous happenings in the cemetery including the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis.

During our conversations we asked her to describe the appearance of the cemetery gate. Based on her description, Paweł Skowron (an English teacher at the local junior high school) has drawn a picture of the gate. We were told that it was made of wood with iron hinges and was locked when not in use by the community.



I showed the image to two 1st generation Ivanskers who were not able to comment on whether it looked like the gate they remembered. If you know any original Ivanskers please show the drawing to them and let us know their response. If possible ask them to draw the gate.

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PLEASE CONTRIBUTE TO THE RESTORATION OF THE IVANSKER CEMETERY

CANADIAN DONORS

Cheques should be payable to:

The United Jewish Welfare Fund of Toronto

Mail to:

c/o Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto

Attention: Angela D'Aversa

4600 Bathurst Street, Toronto, Ontario M2R3V2

In the cheque's memo line, be sure to insert: "for Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project"

- Donations can also be made on VISA or MasterCard. Telephone Janice Benatar at 416-631-5847 or by sending the information in writing including your Name, Card Number, Expiry Date and the amount of your donation.
- You may designate a person you wish to honour, and a card will be sent to this person or the family to acknowledge your gift.
- The Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto will deposit all donations to a special account dedicated to the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project. You will receive a tax receipt from the Foundation.

US DONORS

Checks should be made payable to:

The Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies

PJCRP Account

787 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, New York 14209

In the check's memo line, be sure to insert: "for Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project"

You Can Donate On Line: < www.jewishphilanthropies.org >

- You will be asked to specify which agency and which fund you want to support.
 - **For agency, select Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project.**
 - **For fund, type in "Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project".**

You can honor someone or send a memorial gift via this site, and the funds will be credited to the Ivansk Project. Your donation will be acknowledged by the Foundation and a tax receipt will be forwarded to you.