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OUR TOWN – MICHALISZKI

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I. Introduction:

Our town of Michaliszki was located 53 kilometers (35 miles) east of Vilna, close to the Russian border. It was built around 1700 AD at the Polotzkez Highway that went from Vilna all the way to Polotzk in Russia. It was a unique little "shtetl" which resembled a tree with many branches. The main road through our town was a highway. It was called Vilna Street and about 2 km long. Many smaller streets branched out from the main road. The river Vilia crossed through our town. On Fridays, the town women would bathe in the river and wash their clothes. The men had a separate section. Children enjoyed swimming in the river during the summer. A barge would carry people down the river on logs that would later be sold in Vilna. When the winter came, the river froze over and people could go ice skating. The town was surrounded by woods from which birch and pine would be harvested. Tar and turpentine was made from the sap of pine trees. We would gather mushrooms, blueberries and cranberries in the summer.

The town had a Jewish population of about eight hundred people. We had one synagogue, a Hebrew school, know[n] as Tarbut, and one Polish public school. Most of the non-Jewish people were "White Russian" and attended the Catholic Church.

The town was somewhat unusual in that part of the long road that was the highway, was made up of an almost white sand whereas the other end was made of black sand, which people often took for their gardens. There was also an area west of our town that had a lot of limestone, which was used by a factory to make pottery and bricks.

During the winter we would go up the limestone hill which had frozen over and use our sleds. As in many towns, this town also had their tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, bakers, and other various trades necessary for its citizens. There were peddlers selling their wares from their wagons. There was also a mill so people could bring in their wheat to be made into flour. This mill was a thriving business in the town.

2.1 Surroundings

How the area looked, coming from Vilna.

The first hill on the right side was made of limestone. There lived an older Christian couple that made bricks and pots. After the hill was a large meadow with black soil. The meadow was the property of the Polish government. Therefore it wasn't allowed to take some of the black soil for the gardens, but many people did it anyway. People also used to graze their cattle and their goats there, sometimes also their horses. The grass on the meadow was very good, because of the black soil.

During the winter we children used the meadow for ice-skating until 1941. The people who lived on the main street had gardens in the back of their homes. Those gardens were right next to the gardens of the Christians who lived on Antokol street.

On the left side of the town there were villages, mostly very small, consisting of up to 10 farms (no shtetls). Then came the Polish cemetery and after that a forest with birches and firs, where people used to collect blueberries and mushrooms. Before we reached the forest, we had to cross a little brook that went for miles. It was called "Roy" and ended in the river Vilia.

Between the brook and the forest, part of the land was made of white sand and the other part that went east almost to the river was black soil, which was very suitable for farming. This land belonged to the Catholic Church. All the houses on the left side of the shtetl had small gardens that went up to the brook.

To the east our town ended at the Vilia river. There was a wooden bridge, which was approximately 0.5 km. long, crossing the river. On the other side of the river a large forest started and roads lead to little villages and towns such as Svir, Seincian and Podbrodz. There was also a plant that produced tar and turpentine.

2.2 Life in our town before the war

On Tuesdays we had farmers market. The peasants would bring whatever that had to sell, for example all kinds of animals, eggs, butter, grain and vegetables. In return they would buy whatever they needed for their use. Many of the people who had small stands were Jewish.

In the late 1930s, anti-Semitism was getting worse. Young punks used to vandalize the stands, turn over the tables and shout: "Don't buy from the Jews!" Life was very difficult that time and everybody had to work very hard to make a living. We had a lot of poor people in our town. Also very often poor people from the surrounding area came to beg for food and people gave as much as they could. We also had a poor house, which was called the Hekdes. Beggars

could sleep there and stay as long as they wanted. They came to the synagogue to pray, hoping that people would invite them home for a meal. Many did. The poor house was next to the Jewish cemetery. Also next to it was a mortuary. There they kept a record of all the people who were buried in our town in the last 400 years.

The only hope for young people for a better life was either through emigration to Palestine or the United States or through education. If their parents could afford it, they would send them to Vilna for their studies.

Every morning, two or three buses passed through our town coming from Vilna. The bus stop was at house number 52. In the evening, on their way back to Vilna, they would pass through our town again and stop at the gas station at house number 138. At the same house was a little Inn and a liquor store. Nearby, in house number 142, was a Polish coffee-shop. The daily bus traffic from Vilna stopped coming after the war had started in 1939.

3. Russian Occupation

On Friday, September 1st, 1939, my friends and I went to the woods near the Polish cemetery to pick twigs for the cooking of the Shabbat dinners. When we came back into the town, a lot of women were running around and crying "War!" Everybody went to the Polish school on Antokol street. Its principal was one of the few people in our town, who had a radio. We all stood outside the school and listened to the radio broadcast. The Germans had attacked Poland – the beginning of the Second World War. I was nine years old.

Within one or two days the mobilization started. All young men had to report to the army. For us children it was an exciting time. We did not understand at first the meaning of what was happening. Many of the draftees returned within a few days. Because of disorganization and chaos in large parts of Poland they had not been able to find their units.

After a few weeks, Russian troops arrived and occupied our town together with the whole eastern part of Poland. We were very happy, when we saw soldiers approaching our town from the direction of Minsk (the east), because it meant that it couldn't be the Germ[an]s, who would have had to come from the direction of Vilna. We already heard stories about atrocities that have been committed by the Germans.

On[e] of the first things the Russians did, was abolishing private owned businesses and changing the Polish and Hebrew Schools into White Russian and Russian schools respectively. The Russians tried to convert everybody to become proud citizens of the Soviet Union. Therefore they forbade teachings in Polish or in Hebrew at our schools. We children had to become members of a Russian youth organization – the Pioner [Pioneer?].

In my point of view, at least then, all those changes were not bad. The level of our education at school improved. Many young people had jobs in different factories surrounding our town (for example in Olechufke, 6 km (4 miles) from our town). Also my father worked there. In the factory was one of the few government stores. After the Russians had abolished private businesses, it was the only place to get the things that you needed. Others worked on the construction of the new Russian airfields.

Until the Russian occupation there was a Gut (large farm) about 3 km (2 miles) away from the town, behind the hill, that belonged to the Turler family. The Russians confiscated the Gut and turned it into a flight school with an airfield next to it. More than twenty airplanes were stationed there.

A little farther away the Russians started to build another airfield – the largest one in the area – close to the town of Markun, about 6km (4 miles) away from our town. The Russians called the airfield “Palestine” because of the white sand in that area. Mostly political prisoners from Siberia used to work there. A lot of them were women, who had to live and work under bad conditions. Once a week they were brought to the public bath in our town. I remember how beautiful their faces looked.

The third airfield was located on the north side of our town, right behind the premises that used to belong to the church. It was also still under construction, when the Germans attacked Russia.

With all the construction going on in the surrounding areas, most of the people in our town had a job during the Russian occupation. Especially those, who had horse, or knew a lot about them, helped with the construction of the airfields.

In the short period of Russian occupation, the Jewish community in our town experienced no anti-Semitism. One of the reasons was that everybody, even the local anti-Semites, lived in constant fear of the Russian government.

Some of the wealthy people, who spoke up against the Russian policy, were sent to Siberia. Our family was not wealthy and although my father voiced his opinion against the Russian occupation, he was not on the infamous “black list” of the Russians. In fact only one citizen of our shtetl got sent to Siberia (his name was Leizer Ornstein). The Russians simply had not enough time to fulfill their aims. The reason for that was the surprising German attack on Russian in 1941. There were many Russian soldiers, mostly pilots from the different new airfields, in town.

4. German occupation

On June 22nd, 1941, the Germans double-crossed Stalin and attacked the Soviet Union. The attack came as a total surprise for us. It was a Sunday afternoon, when many airplanes approached our town and started to attack the airfields. We could feel the earth trembling, heard explosions and saw smoke and dust rising up from behind the hill, where the big airfield was.

At first the Russian officials said, there was nothing to worry about. But then I saw the first trucks with wounded soldiers and workers from the airfield driving into our town. They passed by our house and I could see the blood running from the trucks. They were brought to the Gut on the other side of the town, which the Russians had transformed it into a hospital some time ago.

Finally the Russian officials admitted, that there was a war going on, but they were completely disorganized.

A few days later, on the 25th, the Germans came into our town. There was no fighting or resistance, because all the Russian soldiers and officials had left the area a few hours before.

One day (Saturday) before the German attack on Russia, a peddler with a hunchback came to town looking at the airfields. He left again on Monday, only to return on Tuesday with the German troops, as an officer.

Even before the Germans entered Michaliszki, the Polish people burned our temple. The Polish priest didn't say a word although he owed a favor to the Jews; because in 1940, when our town was occupied by the Russians, they wanted to send him to Siberia. Only the intervention of the Jews saved him.

Everybody came to the market place to take a look at the new occupants. One [?buy?], Berl Matz, an old man, who spoke German and remembered the good behavior of the German soldiers from the First World War, approached a German officer to talk to him. Without any reason, the German slapped him in the face. This was our first encounter with the Nazis.

Even before the Germans arrived, anti-Semitism broke out again. Some Poles burned our synagogue, others broke into houses and robbed everything. Also the government stores got robbed.

As soon as the Germans arrived, many Polish people offered their help in identifying who was Jewish and who was not. Most of the nice Jewish houses were taken by the Germans, others by Polish people.

We could stay in our house until the Germans commanded us to move into the Ghetto. As I mentioned before, we already had heard something about the atrocities Germans committed in the western part of Poland. A man came to our town and told us about how the Germans forced Jews into their Synagogue, locked the doors and burned the whole building down, together with the people in it. Although we have heard such stories, we could not believe it.

During the summer months of 1941 some people from other towns, that have been wiped out, came to our shtetl. A family of 7 stayed with us. They came from Potbrotze Swincian.

4.1. Ghetto

The Ghetto in our town was established at the end of September or early October 1941. The conditions there were horrible. They also put people from other towns in, so that approximately five people had to share one room.

On the day they forced us to move into the Ghetto, my father was not in town. He had to work for the Nazis.

One day we all had to go to the market place outside the Ghetto and wait there for hours. The Germans beat us the whole day long. Close to the evening, they selected a certain number of men, about 40 – 60, to stay. Everybody else was sent back to the Ghetto. One of the men that got selected was my father.

Like in Ghettos all over occupied Poland, our Ghetto had to have a Judenrat that had to execute all the commands of the Germans. For example, they had to collect all valuables from the Jews in the Ghetto and give them to the Germans. Our Judenrat had between four and six members. One of their main functions was selecting people for German work commandos.

The commandant of the German forces in our town was call[ed] “Gisi”. He was a very cruel man. One day, a young woman with the name Fejge tried to return to the Ghetto, after she had sneaked out to get some food. She had to cross the market place on her way from her home to the entrance of the Ghetto. Gisi, whose bureau was in the German headquarters in house number 141, right next to the market place, saw her and shot her without a warning.

Another time, a man named Hirshl, who lived in house number 118, was caught smuggling a chicken into the Ghetto. Gisi took him into the stables behind the German headquarters and beat him up all night. Then he took him to the backyard of the building and shot him. Afterwards he gave the chicken to my father, who had to work in the stables, and told him to bring the chicken to the wife of Hirshl.

But there were also good people in town, who tried to help us Jews in many different ways. I remember one Polish man; his name was Gradecki, who had some connections to the Germans. He was very well educated, spoke different languages and was something like the mayor of our town during that time. He provided my mother with a job as a cook at the local police station (house number 24). The police force at that time consisted of two or three Germans and about twelve volunteers from Lithuania.

On another day our Judenrat was told to provide a list of 80-100 people for another German work assignment outside the Ghetto. This time they put my mother on the list. Although we asked them not to take our mother away and leave three children (me and my two little brothers) without care, they refused to change their decision. Not even the intervention of my teacher, Mr. Raiver, a well-respected member of our community, made them change their minds. At this point I find it necessary to mention, that the members of the Judenrat did everything to protect their families. No one of the people on the list was a member of one of their families. Since we [k]new that my two little brothers would not survive without my mother, I took the place of my mother on the list. The Judenrat did not care. I was only twelve years old at that time.

My mother was a very strong woman. She used to sneak out of the Ghetto as often as possible to get us children some extra food. The Judenrat knew that. They also knew that my mother would not let them take me away. She made a plan to smuggle me out of the Ghetto during the same night. But the Judenrat informed the Lithuanian police of her intention, who positioned a guard on the outside of the wall that surrounded our Ghetto. When my mother tried to squeeze me through an opening in a door a policeman was already waiting for me. Fortunately, she could pull me back inside.

So, on the next day, I had to leave my family and my hometown Michaliszki behind. We had to [w]alk about 10 kilometers (7 miles) to the town Gerviat. There we had to spend the night. During the night the Lithuanian guards beat us. Afterwards we went by train from Sol to Vevis in Lithuania and then by truck to a camp called Milegani. Luckily this camp was led and guarded by Germans, not by the more brutal Lithuanian volunteers. The Germans there were also members of the Wehrmacht (the regular German army) and not the SS. So the treatment was by far not as brutal as it had been in the Ghetto or on our way to this camp.

The Ghetto in Michaliszki was liquidated in March 1943. The remaining Jews were sent to Vilna. There they could decide if they wanted to go to the Vilna Ghetto or to the Kovno Ghetto. Most of them decided to go to Vilna, which sealed their death. At the train station in Vilna, the Judenrat of the Ghetto in Vilna was reluctant to take them into the Ghetto. Instead they were taken to Ponar, where they were killed by the SS. Other people were sent to their

families. And after such a long time, all of our family, my mother, my brothers and even my father came to the camp, where I worked. In the summer of 1943 Michaliszki was officially “judenfrei”– free of Jews, although some managed to hide in the surrounding area.

5. Liberation and aftermath

In June of 1944 Michaliszki got liberated by the Russian Army. But because of the strategic importance of the bridge over the river Vilia, our town saw heavy fighting and was a main target for bombing from both sides. Only a few of the remaining population of the town survived those attacks in their basements.

82 Jews of Michaliszki survived. 22 in the forests, hiding with peasants, or in Russia and 60 in different concentration camps. Some came back to Michaliszki, just to find their hometown lying in ruins.

Unfortunately the Jews were not safe after the liberation. The Russians had not enough resources or time to uphold the law in the reconquered territories, because they were still fighting a war against the Germans.

Many Jews were killed by Polish and Russian anti-Semites. For example Yitzak Kac, Dvora Klor and Shloimke Kaplanowicz, who survived the war by hiding in a cave near the town together with two other Jews. When they came back to Michaliszki, all three of them were killed on January 20th 1945. Another Jew, Leibl Gavisser, got killed by a peasant, who didn't want to return the belongings Leibl left with him during the war. Another young Jew, only twenty years old, Chaim Sternblitz, got killed on his way to work. After the war the area was turned into a Kolchos (a collective farm). The Russians flattened Michaliszki, so that today there are only a few buildings left – including the Jewish cemetery. The Polish people went back to Poland.