

SHMUEL DOVID LEVINE : MAYN GEBURT-SHTOT MICHALISHOK
(Town where I was born, Michalishok)

From *Kapitlen fun mayn lebn, zikhroynes* (Chapters from My Life, Memoirs),
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(annotated by R.C. Clarke)

[p.7] In the year I was born [1885] there were several fires, one after another, which destroyed almost the whole town. People started to rebuild when a new fire broke out. It later turned out that the fires were the work of a boy, who, as it became known later, had a great pleasure from looking at the burning houses. He was the first to run out to the street yelling *Fire! Fire!* People were afraid to sleep at home and they stayed at booths or tents they put in the fields around the town. Those fires came to stay in the history of Michalishok.

The first our dwelling which I remember was a room at the Itche Mikhl the Cobbler's house. He loved us kids and liked to tell us the stories of his travels. In the town there were houses with a straw (thatch) roof, without a floor, and some houses did not have chimneys, just a hole through which the smoke went out, and the holes were then covered by rags. We lived in a house with a straw roof, but it did have a chimney. In this old house there was no floor. On the Sabbath eve my mother used to send me for sand from a hill nearby and sprinkled it on the ground [on the dirt floor] to honor the Sabbath. Our house had an iron holder for the kindle wood, coming from the wall, a device with a split into which oblong pieces of kindle were supposed to be put, to be lit and to lighten the room. In my time it already was out of use. We used a kerosene lamp, but that thing remained from the previous years. In the house we used to hold hens --our source of eggs and sometimes meat, as when someone got sick, and the chicken soup was used as a medicine.

The chickens were held at *katukh*¹ [a Slavic word], a space under the oven. They used, though, to get out of their place and wander around the house and often to mess things up, like to jump on the table where my mother used to leave flattened dough to prepare noodles. They also used to make holes in the dirt floor, raking the dirt with their feet. We also had a she-goat that lived in the antechamber of our house. The goat often wanted to get inside the house, especially in the cold months, and she tried to get through the door between the people's legs--and we sometimes saw the scenes of people entering our room while literally mounted on a goat.

The goat milk though was very tasty, and we were delighted with it. My parents were very poor, and they did not have any spare cents to give us for sweets or other things. I remember an occurrence, when a marionette troupe came to town, they put a tent on the market square and put on shows, charging a kopeck for entrance. I wanted to see the marionettes and all the tricks

¹ *katukh* – commonly translated as *chicken coop*, is may also be used for any small enclosure for animals such as a small stall, barn or sheepcote.

they showed, but my mother did not have a single kopeck. She recalled though that at a store where she bought things they owed her a kopeck change, and she sent me for it. But the store lady berated my mother, *She would not trust me a kopeck?* and did not give me the money, and so I did not see the marionettes...

I remember a tragedy, which happened when I was a young boy, a murder. A teacher, Shmuel by name, the son of Rafael the *melamed*, was killed by the son of the town's doctor because of the argument of the parents at the synagogue. The boy struck the teacher over the head with a bottle when we all were returning from the synagogue one evening. This event has shaken the whole town and people talked about it years later.

Another tragedy happened to a young girl, the daughter of Shmuel Kive Dan, an inn-keeper. She burnt in the inn when a kerosene lamp overturned and her dress caught fire. They said that people could have saved her but as a pious girl she did not allow her dress to be torn off as she afraid she will be seen naked. People then composed a song about the pious girl that lost her life in a such a tragic way.

Another story from Michalishok is what happened to two girl friends. So two girls who were ave disappeared, and the town was full with gossip as some said they run to get baptized into Christianity and others that they were kidnapped. It turned out that as it was in winter they were walking in a field and fell into an abandoned well which was not visible under snow. They found one girl drowned and another was hanging by her dress as it was caught on some kind of a nail. It turned out they spent several days in the well, and one girl was holding the other by the hands but then she could not hold her anymore and let go and she drowned. It took some time for the second girl to recover from the incident, and she later went to America.²

In relation to the piety of the Michalishok Jews, different things come to mind. There was a Jew, Abe Kiva, and his son went to St. Petersburg to study, and then came for a visit in a student's uniform. The father, Abe Kiva,³ threw him out of the house and sat *shiva* (seven day mourning period) for his son as for a dead person.

A woman, Ester Ite, went to America and brought for her husband as a gift a pair of *tachrichim* (burial shroud) because in America, she said, they bury people without *tachrichim* or in those which are sewn not according to the law.

In our town they once pronounced an anathema on a Jew who has offended the Rabbi of the town. The man [the anathemised] took it close to heart, and in three days he died. The pious Jews said that God has punished him.

People used to use spells and charms to heal illnesses. They believed that one can get sick from a *bad eye* (*the evil eye – ayin hora*), from a glimpse. The medicine for *the evil eye* was to

² Some twenty years later, Menke Katz also heard this story. He retold it as *Bloomke and Boomke* in his *Forever and Ever and a Wednesday*, a collection of stories which he always referred to as *true fables*.

³ Among the 98 *metsevot* remaining in the Michalishik *beseylem* when catalogued by Dovid Katz in 1991, was a *metsevah* reading *Rabbi Abbo Akivo son of Yehoshua 5671* (1911) numbered as No. 68 on his catalog and map.

get it defused by a professional soothsayer. [p.10] who would murmur a certain magic formula over a kerchief and then put it on the patient, or to murmur an incantation over a drink [and then give it to a patient to drink]. For serious illnesses the solution was to *measure graves*⁴--to go to the cemetery, measure graves with a thread, and then dunk the tread in tallow and make a skein of it (they called it *stotske*)⁵. The ball was then used as a candle at the prayer house, to study Torah, and the light from it was very dim. My father was using these *stotskes* and maybe because of that he went blind.

My father used to talk to me a lot about the Jewish history. [p.11] When I was a small boy he already told me how the Jews were persecuted by the Spanish inquisition. Every Sabbath he reviewed what I have learned during the week. He used to have pleasure of it and was convinced that I will become a rabbi. My mother used to tell me about the times of the Tsar Nicholas the First, when small Jewish kids boys were captured and then given to the Tsar' army to serve for 25 years. And how they took a kid from her family; how women were throwing rocks at the *khapers* (capturers) who had an occupation to capture the kids and then put on wagons and carry to the soldiers' service for 25 years.

In my time, when I was a small boy, in our shtetl there was a *Nicholas' soldier*, one of those who after 25 years did not forget that he is a Jew and who returned as a Jew to his hometown. That soldier's name was Yosl Dovid the Chimney-sweep.⁶ He used to speak with a Russian accent, with an admixture of many Russian words, and he told us kids about his life experiences. Another man in our shtetl was a *khaper* in his young years, and people used to despise him for that.

Tsar Nicholas on the Throne

I remember the time when the Tsar Alexander III died. I was brought with the other *cheder* (elementary school) students to the prayer house and we were reading Psalms when he was sick, so that he would recover. After that, when a new Tsar, Nicholas II, was crowned, they used to put candles in all the windows. A nobleman, who lived at the end of our street, prepared a celebration in honor of the coronation of the new Tsar, with food and liquor, and he called us kids to take part and celebrate. I did not know if I should celebrate or not, but my father told that there was a good Tsar, Alexander II, who was good to the Jews. And the Jews forgot their God and that they are Jews and wanted to become equal to the Goyim (Gentiles, non-Jews). As a punishment God then had sent a bad Tsar, and we cannot reject the deeds of God.

⁴ *keyvermestn* (grave measuring) and *feldmestn* (field measuring, *feld* literally meaning *field* but commonly used as a simple word for *beseylem* or *cemetery*) done by *feldmesterins* (woman who measured graves and/or cemeteries) and *kneytekl leygn* (laying wicks) was an ancient practice most commonly associated with making *soul candles* for Yom Kippur (but also at other times). Basically these were yizkor lights used in the prayer house.

⁵ *stotske* (meaning *to provide lighting*) were *likhts* (candles). The type of candle described herein is a *coil candle*, rarely seen today. The strand of a simple *coil candle* is very much like the strands that are interwoven in a *Havdalah* candle.

⁶ Among the 98 *metsevot* remaining in the Michalishik *beseylem* when catalogued by Dovid Katz in 1991, was a *metsevah* reading *Yosef Dovid son of Reb. Yisoel Yaakov 5679* (1919), numbered as No. 5 on his catalog and map.

Our *shtetl* did not have any large industries. There were timber merchants who used to hire people to cut trees in the neighboring forests and bring them to the river Viliya at the edge of the town. Then they made rafts from the trunks and sent them to be sold to Kovne (Kaunas) and other places. On the rafts the workers used to build huts, in which they lived while transporting the timber to be sold. It was a very hard work, the workers had to stay in water tying the trunks together and making the rafts⁷. It was a seasonal work, as in the wintertime the river Viliya became frozen and the workers had to find another job. Many of them took the bags to collect alms and were begging in the neighboring places to survive the winter. And it was in those times when I began to notice the difference between the rich and the poor and could not understand why there is this difference.

As a boy I loved to skate on the ice of Viliya in winter, to swim in it in the summertime and to watch how they made the rafts. It was also interesting to observe how people used to get from one bank of the Viliya to another. In my time there was no bridge over the river. There was a ferry, a big wooden platform which carried people when they needed to get to the other bank. A thick rope was attached to a wooden pole on the bank. A part of the rope was wound around a rod, and a traveler pulled and twisted the rope around the rod to get the ferry moving, with all the passengers, horses and wagons on it. Sometimes there were accidents when the rope got snapped.

FAMOUS SONS OF MICHALISHOK

We lived near an old Jew, Rafael the *Melamed*. He used to tell me about the great personalities that [p.13] once lived in Michalishok. He remembered the famous Hebrew writer Abraham Dov Levenson, who used to sign his works as *Abraham Hacoheh* and was also known as *Berele Michalishker*. People used to tell jokes about him and about his heresy (freethinking). Daniel Khvolson,⁸ a professor in St. Petersburg, was before a *melamed* in Michalishok, and then got baptized in order to make a career and became a professor. As reb Rafael told me and as it is known now, Khvolson used to say that he got baptized because he considered that it is better to be a professor in St. Petersburg than a *melamed* in Michalishok. When he was a professor, Khvolson wrote books defending Jews.

There was in Michalishok a rabbi who was also the author of a commentary on *Mahzor* (holiday prayers), and in prayerbooks it was written *Nehora Ha-shalom*, a rabbi from the *shtetl* Michalishok.

Dr. Yokhelman, a famous Jewish public figure in Russia, was a Michalishker son-in-law [married into a family in Michalishok]. He used to come to my father to study, he was going to become a

⁷ What is described here is known as *timber rafting*. Timber rafting, considered to safer and more efficient than log driving (but which can only be done on wider waterways,) involved fastening the logs brought by the timber merchants to the river (probably dragged by horses or oxen) into rafts which could then be floated down the river with the use of oars. According to Wikipedia - *raftsmen could enjoy relative comfort of navigation, with cabins built on rafts, steering by means of oars and [the] possibility to make stops*. Timber rafting, to this day *the second cheapest means of transporting timber*, has been done throughout the world for centuries and can, in certain case, allow for the transport of other goods,

⁸ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Chvolson

ritual slaughterer (*shochet*) [get a certificate]. But he did not work in that field, he started a publication called *Wuhin?* (*Where to?*).⁹

My father also told me stories about a famous poet Eliokum Zunzer, for some short time he lived in Michalishok. My father called him “Eliakum Badchen”.

At the beginning of my memoirs, I have mentioned the houses of the poor, and houses without chimneys. But it is not all Michalishok. There were also nice houses, as in Michalishok as well as in other towns there were two classes--rich and poor. And the rich lived in nice houses. There was a wealthy man, a timber merchant called *Dodzie*. He lived in a stone two story house. There also was an inn in a brick building. And there also were good wooden houses where there lived the masters (*balebatim*) of the *shtetl*.

Once there happened something which almost brought my father to punish me which he used to do very seldom. [p.14] My friends, with whom I used to play, got into a neighbor’s garden and started to gather green peas from the vines. I asked them to stop and warned that it is an offense against God and a plain theft, but they continued to fill their pockets with peas. Then the master of the garden came, and he started to grab the caps off the fleeing boys, me included. Afterwards he went with the caps to the boy’s parents to get compensation for the damage, and he came to my father as well. I told [him] that I was not taking the peas, my father was outraged and ready to hit me, but the neighbor said he can’t confirm I took peas. My father then said I can’t go near those other boys anymore.

We boys also loved to watch how they worked on the brick factory (*tsigelnie*). worked two people, a Jewish worker and a peasant woman. Half-naked, they were plodding, stepping upon clay with bare feet, to bring the clay to a condition when it could be formed for bricks. At the *tsigelnie* there was a lot of firewood as it was used in kilns to fire bricks. The *tsigelnie* belonged to a Jew, Fayve der Muler, a middle-aged man with a light color beard. He had a son who also had a light beard and they looked actually as brothers. They both lived in the *shtetl*.

A TUMULT WITH ALTERKE THE THIEF

An interesting thing happened with a notorious type, a young man from our *shtetl*, who was known as *Alterke the Thief* (*Alterke the Gonif*). He had a horse and a wagon, and he used to go to the forest and to [illegally] cut trees and then sell the timber to people. And so once he secretly took the timber to be used as firewood which was piled near *tsigelnie*, put on his wagon and brought it to the house where the boss of *tsigelnie* lived. He sold it to the boss as the timber which he allegedly cut in the forest. Fayve der Muler paid for the wood and then Alterke brought another wagon with wood [unclear if it was a different wagon or a different load of wood or the same wagon/wood brought a second time] and made Fayve pay again, so that he should bring that to *tsigelnie* as well. When Fayve went to take a look at his purchase, there was no new wood to be seen. Thus he realized that Alterke sold him not the wood from the forest but his own wood, that was lying near *tsigelnie*.

⁹ The question mark is part of the name of the publication which has not yet been identified.

And so such were tricks of Alterke. And people got to know about him, so that when something disappeared to somebody, they used to run to Alterke and claim their belongings to be returned. And so it was till the people decided to get rid of Alterke, and collected money for a *shifskarte* (boat ticket) for him to go to America.

And here in America he got himself into a business. How did he behave here I do not know, but once I came across him in a town in Massachusetts, and he was a president of a synagogue, a respected man.

Another interesting type, but of a different kind, was Yeshaye der Pintler (Winkler). When he talked to somebody he used to wink,¹⁰ and so they called him Pintler (Winkler). He used to carry to people the letters from the post office. He used to come and say that you have a letter, and he said from whom. For those who could not read he read the letter aloud. He was not able to provide for the family with this kind of work, and his wife had to carry around apples in a basket, offering people to buy the apples. *The Postman*, as the others called him, used to come to us and talk to my father, they were friends. Yeshaye sometimes brought the post office officials [p.16] during the Jewish holidays to the synagogue, so that they can hear the cantor's and the choir's singing and the prayer which Jews offered for the Tsar, *a prayer for the earthly kings*. He was a frequent guest in our house, our father's friend.

Among other frequent guests were the *melameds*, Shloyme Berl and Avrom Leyb. When they came they talked a lot with our parents, and told stories from the Talmud and other holy books. As a boy I liked to listen to the stories. My father, being proud of me, asked me in turn to tell something that I have learned from the Talmud, to show his friends how much I know about the scholarly books.

HASIDIM AND MITNAGDIM

My father was the only Hasid in Michalishok, a Lyubavicher. He used to pray in two pairs of *tefillim*. All other people in Michalishok were Misnagdim (or Mitnagdim, opponents of Hasidism). My father told me that once there were more Hasidim in the shtetl, and that they even wanted to build a *shtibl*¹¹ [a Hasidic prayer house] but the Mitnagdim did not allow to do that. The Hasidim wanted to use a mitnagdishe synagogue, in order to pray according to their rite, after the Mitnagdim finish their service. The heads of the synagogue locked the *arn-kodesh* (the Holy Arc) with the Torah scrolls, then they stood around the praying Hasidim and laughed, making fun of them and not allowing to pray according to their rite. And so the Hasidim left the shtetl. My father was a good, calm man, he never argued with anyone, and he was left alone. On a wall in our house there were hanging images of the Hasidic rebbes. I was given a name in honor of Rebe Shmuel, a Lyubavitcher Rebbe. My father used to study with me a book *Tanya*, a Hasidic religious work,¹² and I also used to copy the sermons of the Hasidic rebbes. The rebbe did not

¹⁰ The *winking/blinking* of Yeshave was an involuntary action, a *nervous tic*, such as is often observed in those with Tourette syndrome.

¹¹ The root of the word *shtibl* is *shtub* which can mean either a room or a structure such as a house or building. As the word *shtibl* is diminutive, thus a small room or small structure.

¹² Described in Wikipedia as being the main work of Chabad philosophy and the Chadbad approach to Hasidic mysticism.

publish his sermons, and so Hasidim used to write them down and copy, and they went from hand to hand and also were taken to the other towns.

In *cheder* I studied very well, and I had a good memory. All what I have studied remained in my head and in front of my eyes. People in the prayer house used to stop me on the street and to ask about a passage in the Bible or in the Talmud. The page was in front of my eyes and I was able to recite it as if it was really lying in front of me.

My Talmud teacher, Kasriel, an old man with a grey beard, was very pious. I remember that he got a photograph from America of his daughter with the son-in-law. On the image the son-in-law was photographed not wearing a hat. And so my teacher has drawn a hat on the photograph over his son-in-law's head. My brother Gershon patted him on the back told the teacher, when he saw the picture, *It seems that the hatters in America are not very good, the hat is not measured well.*

TWO INTERESTING TYPES IN MICHALISHOK

There were two brothers, Shimen and Leyzer Frades. They both were very tall, Shimen more heavysset, with a wide light beard, and Leyzer more slim, with a small beard. Both were very much involved in the affairs of the community and used to make their opinions known.

Leyzer Frades was known as the philosopher of shtetl. He was a reader of newspapers, and such people were not many in the town. He was subscribing a Hebrew newspapers *Hamelitz*¹³ and *Hatsefirah*,¹⁴ and every morning after the prayer men gathered around the Leyzer's bench and listened to the recent news and to the explanation, which both brothers provided for each piece of news. It was Leyzer who suggested a possibility that the two girls, of whom I have written before, who have disappeared, might have fallen into the abandoned well. So people followed his advice and they found them there.

FIGHTERS AGAINST TSARISM

I did not know about any revolutionary movement in our shtetl. Though later, in 1900 and on, there were young men and women who were disseminating revolutionary literature. They belonged to Bund and to other organizations, but in my time there were no such people.

Once it came to pass that a bookbinder's daughter came from Vilne in the middle of the Sabbath. She went there to take part in a clandestine meeting, which was dispersed by the police. The whole *shtetl* was talking about the bookbinder's daughter, *the Socialist*. There was also a police visit to our relative from another town who stopped in Michalishok. They were looking for illegal literature at a newcomer¹⁵ but did not find anything. [p.

¹³ *HaMelitz* also *Ha-Melitz* was a Hebrew-language newspaper first printed in Odessa in 1860 as a weekly and from 1886 as a daily. From 1871, it was published in St. Petersburg. It was the first Hebrew-language newspaper in the Russian Empire.

¹⁴ *Ha'Tsfira* also *Ha-Tsfira* was a Hebrew-language newspaper first printed in Warsaw in 1862, in Berlin in 1874 and then from 1874-1931 in Warsaw. From 1886, it was a daily publication.

¹⁵ Literally *at a newcomer*, implying at the place where the newcomer stayed.

Then the author describes his study in several *yeshivas*—in Smorgon and in Ilya. After his father died, he was sent to the relatives in Orsha, Mohilew *gubernie*, where he studied in Polyakov's *yeshive*. Later he went to America where his elder brothers and a sister already moved to—Chelsea, Massachusetts. *There the real history of my life has begun* [p.21]