

**ASSORTED MEMORIES:
including Why I Never Became a Rabbi
(This manuscript is untitled)**

Written by Jórek Blocher
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Translated by Vital Zajka
Annotated by Ruth C. Clarke
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Esteemed friend Hirshe Dovid, in truth I wanted to hear from you, and to me it is interesting to know, whom did you meet in Michaleshik. I think that in Israel there remained very small number of our *landslayt* (landspeople, fellow countrymen or fellow immigrants from the same region) alive now. When I was in Israel a couple of years ago, as I asked about that, people looked at me as if I came from the planet Mars. All died long time ago.

Then it came to my memory a story that I read at school, about a man who was called *Honi Hameagl* (Honi the Circle-Drawer)¹ – he was a supplicant before God as there was a drought and dry land and there was no rain. Honi was riding a donkey and he stopped at a tree. He bound the donkey to the tree and made a circle around the tree and then he prayed and said that he will not step out of the circle until God gives

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the rain. And in the meantime, he fell asleep under the tree. When he woke up, he saw that of the donkey he tied to the tree there remained only a skeleton, He then went to the town where he lived, and started to ask about his friends and people looked at him as at an insane person: *All have died.*” Then he found out that he had slept under that tree for seventy years.

And I felt the same way in Israel when I started asking about my friends from the school years, and from our dramatic circle, and from our soccer team, where I played soccer and was an actor in the drama circle, we played in three plays a year. The performance took place at *Bikur Khoylim* (society for sick poor people). [But] I did not see (did not meet) anyone.

And you send me greetings from all Michaleshkers that they have given through you to me. I would like

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to know their names if you have written them down. My wife told me that you promised to Svetsianer *landslayt* (people) that you will come to have a *Pesakh* seder with them. And if you go, I would like to ask you something. I will give you money to hand in the village of Biale

¹ See Wikipedia. Honi HaMe'agel (חוני המעגל) Khoni, Choni, or Ḥoni; lit. Honi the Circle-drawer) was a Jewish scholar of the 1st-century BCE, during the age of the *tannaim*, the scholars from whose teachings the Mishna was derived.

Wode² to a son of the *krist* (Christian) that was hiding me.³ The father is dead. The son did not want [them] to have me [then]. But the father was my friend, and though I was not in correspondence with the son, I sent him things. Now if you go to Sventsyan, you will go from Michaleshik by Biale Wode. The *goy's* name is Vladzimer Yuluk. Though he is not worth.⁴ I want to send through you 50 dollars. In any other way he would not get any dollars, but if you go it is another thing, and he will get dollars.⁵

About what you ask me that I should write about my childhood years—I was a poor orphan with my mother.⁶ My mother wanted me to become a rabbi.

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A mother that had a son who became a rabbi, was like in America a mother having a son a president. Our rabbi had told my mother: *Dos yingl hot a geóynishn kop* (*the boy has the head [mind] of a genius; literally, the boy has a Gaon head [mind]*).⁷ And so, she wanted that I must become a rabbi. I have put a lot into it, but after some time I said that I cannot and I don't want to be a rabbi. That brought a lot of pain to my mother. She wanted to know, why do I want to cause so much pain to her, and I saw that I need to tell her why. Once when she again asked *why*, I have explained to her, that a rabbi must be an example to the people how to be *frum* (pious, religious, devout) and so forth. I explained to her that I think in this regard that how could I tell people that they must be *frum*, when I don't know how to be *frum* myself.

That was the end. She did not ask *why* anymore.

My wife sends you her greetings. I will sit and write describing my childhood years.

U. Blacher

(Page 5 is an envelope addressed to Dovid Katz, postmarked March 14, 1992)

² Biale Wode is located about 5.3 miles NNW of Michalishik and about 17 miles S of Svencionys.

³ Although Dovid Katz remembers that *I used to come with a list of a few dozen errands from America*, he does not remember this particular errand.

⁴ Vital Zajka (translator) Note: As I understand it, there were conflicts with the son while Urke was in hiding. Though Urke considered the son not being worthy of his support, he still sent him things, in the memory of the deceased father, who was Urke's friend.

⁵ According to Dovid Katz, *the Belarusian ruble was then near worthless and could only be used for state shop staples. On the other hand, 50 US dollars would have been a princely sum with which one could buy imports not in the local state shop.* According to Vital Zajka, a native of Belarus, *at that time there was hyperinflation in Belarus, so dollars made more sense to deal with.*

⁶ In the *shtetlach* of eastern Europe, a boy without a father to teach him both how to be a Jew and a vocation, was considered to be an orphan.

⁷ Translator Note re etymology of Hebrew word *gaon*: In Talmudic times, a *gaon* was the head of a Jewish academy, usually an eminent religious scholar and judicial authority so in later times, a rabbi known as a *gaon* (such as the Vilna *Gaon*) was an acknowledged outstanding intellectual and Talmudic scholar. From the Hebrew meaning majesty, excellence, its adjectival form suggests brilliance and genius. For the Michalishker rabbi to say that Urke had a *geóynishn kop* was extremely high praise (perhaps there could be no higher) of Urke's intellectual capability.