

HOLOCAUST MEMORIES:
The Story of Matsey Semashko, the *Shabbos Goy* Turned Hitlerist Collaborator
(the manuscript is untitled)¹

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Personally to Dovid Katz, Southington 19 10/I 92 (10 Jan 1992)

Honorable friend Dovid, I have received the letter from you. I allow you to keep the manuscript for a couple more months, and I give you permission to send it to the *Yizkerbukh* (Yizker-book), if you like what I have written in the preface. I have described all what I have written without professional *beputsungen* (embellishments). Not a word written there has not happened, and not a name I have mixed up writing down of those who helped the murderers to accomplish their diabolical plan to *umtsubreyngen* (annihilate) our people.

So I am sending you a couple of things, incidents, that came to my mind recently. 1. (The first) is about the goyish *shames* (beadle, sexton) of our *shul* (*beys medresh*), Siemashko, and the second about Avrom der Baraner, and his son Zalman, who became a *goyisher kop* (literally, a *goy's head*).² And the third thing is about us, *sheyres-hapleyte* (survivors), that our 6 million holy martyrs urge us that we make sure that it all will not be forgotten what the German murderers with their Polish helpers have done to our people, It is possible that it can be forgotten, as for 40 years we have done nothing about the memorials, and now the museum in Washington is the main thing,

That what I write about publishing only in Yiddish, I have discussed the situation with you. If you think there are readers in Yiddish, it's *olrayt* (all right), and if you can raise the funds to publish it even in

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Yiddish, it's *olrayt*. From the survivors from our *shtetlakh* there remains no more than to be counted on the fingers of several men.

Alzo mayn froy gerusht ikh es kumt undz nit kin dank farn kaboles-ponim vos mir hobn aykh ufgenumen mit ayer muter. Ver es kumt tsu undz nemen mir af gut, es kumt undz nit kin dank (so my wife whispers to me that there comes no thank-you for the reception that we have given you and your mother. Who comes to us, we receive them well, but [then no] to thank-you comes to

¹ Within this letter, Urke refers to three essays being enclosed. The first (included here) is *The Story of Matsey Semashko*.

² Other than for this sentence, there is nothing about Avrom der Baraner or his son Zalman. In his *togbukh*, Urke tells of how Avrom der Baraner and a daughter were murdered at Micháleshik around Christmas 1941. They were betrayed by a Pole named Sukevitch.

us).³ *Azoy iz ba undz givezn in Michaleshik and azoy iz in Amerike.* (And so it was with us in Michaleshik, and so it is in America).

That what you ask that I send you, my autobiography, I will do that in a second letter. I wrote a lot in the diary why did *goyim* hide me without money. They risked their lives and their families. Not far from me one *krist* was hiding 25 people, and one among them was a child. The [other] *goyim* have reported him, and there came the Lithuanian police and they searched the whole house and they have not found the Jews. And they were going out of the house when they heard that the child started to cry. The *goy* was an old man with a wife and a daughter. The Lithuanians came back in, and they found the Jews. They took the Jews on the wagons, and they killed the *goy*, his wife and his daughter with sticks [on site]. And the house with everything in it, they burned down. After this happened, I thought that Dubrovsky will not keep me anymore, but he did not do that. That how *goyim* risked their lives for me,

U. Blakher

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This is the story about Matsey Semashko [Maciej Siemaszko] who worked his whole life at the *Beit Midrash* putting on the lights on Shabbat and burning the stoves [for heating] that were using firewood, and so on. All his life all was connected with Jews. When the Germans came, and when there was no [use of the] *Beit Midrash* anymore,⁴ he went to work on the river, where they used to gather together the rafts [made from the logs] that used to go to the sawmills in Vilne. It happened in a village of Finikle [Pinikle],⁵ 3 kilometers from Michaleshik, on a nice day. On the water there came to the workers two Jewish boys, who run away from the Vilne ghetto. And they asked them about the way to Naroch where there were whole bases of the partisans. Matsieyke [Maciejka] the *shames* of the *Beit Midrash* ordered the other workers that they have to bring the boys to the Germans in Michaleshik. There were workers who said *Leave them alone, let them go.* But Matsieyke has threatened them that he will tell the Germans [about who refused] to hand [over] the boys. So, at the end they bound the boys, and brought them to the Germans in Michaleshik, who then

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shot them right away *afn Kumshe* (on the Kumshe).

³ These two sentences are a straight-forward rebuke to Dovid Katz. Apparently, Urke's wife had reminded him that neither Dovid Katz nor his mother (who had accompanied Dovid) had sent a thank-you note for the reception provided to them by Urke and wife Rochl at the time of the November 1991 interview.

⁴ It is unclear whether Urke meant that the physical building that had housed the *Beit Midresh* was destroyed or whether it was simply repurposed. Urke described the desecration of the *Beit Midresh* in his *togbukh*, how the books and the Torah scrolls were torn up and thrown into the yard and the building repurposed to house Russian soldiers taken prisoner. There also exists an undocumented report that the *Beit Midresh* had yet later been repurposed as a bakery.

⁵ The only populated space within 10 miles of Michaleshik beginning with *F* that can be identified is Folivarki 54°45'N, 25°58'W located 9.3 miles SWW. The only populated spaces within 5 miles of Michaleshik beginning with *P* are Podvarantsy 54°48'N, 26°08'E located 1.7 miles SW; Pil'viny 54°51'N, 26°07'E located 3.1 miles NW; Poboli 54°46'N, 26°08'E located 3.6 miles SW; Padol'tsy 54°52'N, 26°06'E located 4.3 miles NW; Palestina 54°45'N, 26°12'E located 4.4 miles SSW; Podlip'ye 54°52'N, 26°15'E located 4.8 miles NE; Plekhati 54°50'N, 26°03'E located 5 miles W; and Pashkuny 54°51'N, 26°17'E located 5 miles N. Also, possibly Panartsy 54°50'N, 26°01'E located 5.9 miles WNW or Penenishki 54°52'N, 25°51'E 12.9 miles WNW.

After the liberation I was out looking for Matsieyke Siemashko, but he run with the Germans, together with the *andere farbrekher* (other criminals) to some place where people did not know them. And so, they escaped the punishment for their crimes. It was not the only instance when the Poles handed Jews to the Germans. People did not need especially to hide from the Germans as they did not know who is a Jew. The Poles have reported that I was hiding at Dubrovsky's. On Christmas his brother came, and I had to hide from him as he should not have known that I was here. *Bruder hot nit gikent traastn a bruder, aza tsayt iz dos givezen* (a brother cannot trust brother, such a time it was).

When the Germans came to us [when the war broke out], the whole *unterwelt* (underworld; criminals) became policemen, so that they can go robbing the Jews, take property from Jews and so forth. The *goyim* from the village *Markini* [Markuny] went from house to house and robbed everything it was possible to take.

(5) Manila envelope—postmarked Jan 10, 1992