

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY
(This manuscript is undated)

Written by Jórek Blocher
Between 1992-1996

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April 2023

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I was born in 1913¹ in a *dorf* of Zanerits,² where our family then lived. I did not know my father, he died when I was 3 years old. My mother never married again, and I was a *ben-yohid*, the only son. In my childhood years my mother was very poor. With us lived my grandfather, Yehude Leyb, a *lamdan* (scholar), who knew all the Psalms by heart. He was my mentor and *lerer* (teacher). My mother Ester had a *kreml* (small store) and that was from what all of us, the three people, lived. Such was our life. In the third house³ near us lived Shloyme the *Ritener*⁴ Rudnitski. He used to travel around in the *derfer* (villages) and buy pig's bristle, all kinds of animal hides and fur there. Once he brought from Bistriz an old Jew, a *melamed*, and fashioned a *heder* at his house. The *melamed*

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lodged in our house, and providing the lodging and food to him, my mother did not have to pay for my learning at the *heder*.

When they opened a Hebrew school in the *Beit ha-Medresh*, on the women's side, then the *heder* was liquidated and all the students went to that Hebrew school. And they also opened another school in Micháleshik, a Yiddishist one, at Zigler's house. Zigler⁵ was a locksmith that was brought from Germany by *der porets* (the local landlord/*gospodar*) Kotevich,⁶ and he (Zigler) owned 3 houses. Yiddishists opened in one of his houses a class, where all was taught in Yiddish, and in our class at the women's prayerhouse all was taught in Hebrew. The conflicts between the children from the Yiddishist school and the children from the Hebrew school were quite big. The shtetl was also divided, one part was for the

¹ Among the graves at the Michalishik *beysalem* catalogued by Dovid Katz in October 1991, is grave No. 15, *Kasriel son of Reb Uriyoh the Levite 5674* (1914), thought to be the father of Urke. If so, Urke was born ca. 1910.

² Perhaps Zanarocz where Urke's mother also was born and where Urke's maternal grandparents were from.

³ Perhaps third house *over* from house where Urke lived with his mother and maternal grandfather in Micháleshik, although Esther Katz Livingston's annotations of the Berl Klor map show Urke at house no 92 and di Riterner at house no. 88.

⁴ Unclear if *Ritener* refers to an occupation or the place from which Shloyme Rudnitski came. Urke's grandfather's sister Esther was married to an Ovsei Rudnitski b. ca. 1859, son of Zalman. Shloyme Rudnitski was perhaps the Schoma Rudnitski listed in 1897 Census as age 25, son of Ovsei, seller of small goods, b. Svensiany District' living in Michaliskis on Svirankovskai Street in a house owned by Bliakher with wife Ienta-Ifka, age 24, b. Raguva; son Movsha, age 1, b. Michalishik; and mother-in-law Riva Gurwich, age 48, b. Raguva [LVIA 768/1/1 thru 8]. See also 1924 death of Shlome Tsvi Rudnitski, age 52, son of Yehoshoe & Sarah, 1923 marriage of daughter Nehama Freyde to Zusil Weinstein, and 1938 marriage of daughter Elka to Yakov Lapidus. Note: The Vad Vashem Photo Archive contains photographs of both Shoyme Rudnitski and his wife Yente

⁵ Unable to locate in the LitvakSig records.

⁶ Perhaps Kotwicz. In 1823, the *miastecko* of Micháleshik was acquired by Mateusz Kotwicz, and through the remainder of the 19th century, the Kotwicz noble family were *gospodars*

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Hebrew school, and another part was for the Yiddishist school. And thus it was amusing in the shtetl, for several years until the Yiddishist school was closed and all its students came to study with us at the Hebrew school. Then in the shtetl were founded *Hekhalutz* and *Hashoner Hatzair*, to which I belonged. There were organized an adult football (soccer) team, and a junior football league which consisted of our schoolchildren. We used to play on Shabbat and on Sunday on *Kumshe (di Kumse)*, at the side of which we prepared a small football field. When the adult football league people had seen that I and Yitzkhak Gofshteyn (possibly Gopshteyn)⁷ are good players, they got rid of Yitzkhak Kotler who was regularly outrun by Shustov and Hirsh Lapidus,⁸ and so they took me and Yitzkhak Gofshteyn in his place. Taking us away from the junior league

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they have weakened the junior league to which we used to give distinction when we played matches for it. Then they founded in Micháleshik a drama circle, to which I also belonged. When we played *The Dybbuk*⁹ I was performing as Azriel Ben Hodes, the *Rebe* who had performed exorcism on the *dybbuk* and chased it from the body of Leah Bat Chana, Sender Krinitsker's daughter. Also, there were staged *Back from Katorga*¹⁰ and *The Soul of Sorrow* by Osip Dymow,¹¹ "*Di Shkhite*¹² (The Massacre)" by Yaakov Gordin. Our fellow townsman, Faivele Yavitch,¹³ who used to come for the summer, was a very good *rezhiser* (theater director). He was a tailor in Vilne, when *Zaslawska*¹⁴ played in *Tevye der milkhiker* in Vilne 56 times. And all 56 times Faivele was at the theater, and he *hot aropgeshribm* (wrote down) the whole drama from the beginning to the end. He was some kind of an employee at the Jewish theater when he came

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for the summer with his wife to Micháleshik,¹⁵ and we played *Tevye der milkhiker*. The revenue went to him personally, he was a poor man. Faivele played *Tevye*, and I played Menachem Mendel, his cousin. In America they have from it such a piece that when Sholem Aleichem

⁷ Translator Note: *Since Urke does not specify which sound denotes the letter pei/fei (standing for P with a dot, and for F if there is a bar above the letter), it may well be Gopshteyn.* Other records from Micháleshik suggest that he was perhaps the brother of the Zlate Gopshteyn who became Urke's first wife.

⁸ Possibly sons of widow Rochl Lapidus listed in *Michalishki Names* as residing in house no. 18.

⁹ Considered to be a classic of the Yiddish theatre, *The Dybbuk* was written between 1913-1916 by Sholom Ansky, the pseudonym of Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport 1863-1920/

¹⁰ Wikipedia: *Katorga* camps (penal labor camps) were established in the 17th century in Siberia and the Russian Far East by Alexis, Tsar of Russia from 1645-1676.

¹¹ Ossip Dymow/Osip Dymov (1867-1950) was the pseudonym of Yosif (Joseph) Isidorovich Perelman, a Russian-born Yiddish playwright and journalist. See The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe in yiyoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dymov_Osip (2023)

¹² 1899 Yiddish drama by Yaakov (Jacob) Gordin which, although its title refers to the kosher slaughtering of animals, is a protest against arranged marriage. *Shkhite* is an act of slaughter.

¹³ Believed to be Fayvl Yavitsh/Jawicz [later Philip Alwin, a survivor] who contributed over 100 pages to Dovid Katz's *Yizkor Book for Michalishki*, b. Michalishki 1903, the son of Avramham Leyb Yavich of Svezian, son of Yosef; and Rachel Gershater of Michalishki, daughter of Yosef who were married at Michalishki on 27 Feb 1900.

¹⁴ Perhaps actress Wiera Zaslowska,

¹⁵ LitvakSig records show that that Fajwel Jawitz married his first wife Tajba Segal on 24 Nov 1927 and that she died on 20 Apr 1936.

would raise from his grave and look at what they have done to his Tevye here in America, he would have a heart attack.¹⁶ I have played at school at our children's [drama] presentations.

In those times some poor actors used to stay in Micháleshik for the summertime when there were in Micháleshik many vacationers from Vilne. We used to help them doing performances, so that they can make some money. I have performed with them in *Back from Katorge*,¹⁷ and when they came again, I played with them

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in Osip Dymow's *The Soul of Sorrow*. So overall I was a good football player and a good actor, and our fellow townspeople from Micháleshik that remember our performances would attest to that. I was also a good student at the Hebrew school. There came to Micháleshik from Glubok Jew called Moshke, he was a butcher and he supplied meat to the Polish army. He got stranded in Micháleshik with his wife Sore Rive, a very beautiful woman, and their two sons, Abram and Yankev.¹⁸ *Di yinglekh hobn gehat zeyer shlekhte kep tsum lernen* (the boys were not very good at learning, literally *the boys got bad heads for learning*) and the teacher asked me, if I would like to help them prepare for the classes, and I agreed to help them. Moshke, their father, was a rich person, he was not able to write alphabet, but in his head he could make calculations very well. He was a hot-headed brute, and he did not live well with his wife, who was an exact opposite of him. When I stayed in their home for some time, I noticed that he got to

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love me, and that he loved me more than his two children. I became his accountant. He had all the time good horses where he used to go for business to rich farmers, and he took me with him and introduced me as his son from his first wife. And that is how all the *krishtn* (Christians) with whom he did business, have known me. He used to send the stock and meat for sale with me to Vilne. I was then about fourteen years old, and all in Vilne at the *ploschadke* (place) where they used to sell meat, and on the cows' market, they used to call me *der Mikhalishker kluger yingele* (*the Micháleshiker Smart Boy*). *Ikh nob gearbet vi a ferd far em* (I worked as a horse for him), *Un tsoln dos nit ikh hob zikh gevelt etablirn arum em* (and I did not want to establish [ask for] a pay). All in *shtetl* around him asked me, why I work for him so hard and without pay. They did not understand my reasoning that I need to ask for pay after I establish myself in the meat trade. And so it was, as I have reckoned. People said to him:

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Ir hodevet (bringing up, cultivating) a *Haman af ayer kop* (upon your head) [*You are bringing up a Haman on your head* (you are preparing your own trouble)], *the boy is smart and very able*. He knew that I had no money and that there was no bank to borrow from, and without money you cannot do any business in Poland. And he did not heed to the warning which people told him about, and so it was going on until one day I came to the market in Vilne with meat, and I

¹⁶ See *Tevye der milkhiger* (*milchiger*) at The Museum of Yiddish Theatre at Museum of Family History museumoffamilyhistory.com/moyt/pih/teveye-der-milkhiger.htm (Apr 2003) for a description of the drama.

¹⁷ *katorge* is the Yiddish word for the Russian word *katorga*.

¹⁸ Urke gives Moshe's surname as *Aloy* in his *How I Bribe*. . . . Believed to be the Moshe Aloy household listed in *Michaliszki Names* at house no. 141 including Moshe, wife Sorerival, children Avromitze, Jankl and two other children. *He* (Moshe) *used to deal with catttle*. He is also listed in the 1929 Polish Business Directory, <https://www.jri-poland.org/blog/the-1929-polish-business-directory-project/> listing for Micháleshik at pp. 2086-7 as *Aloy M merchand de bestiaux* (cattle dealer) under *Bydlo handel* (cattle trade).

sold it to Yudl Shvarts from Zareche (neighborhood in Vilne) who had a *yatke* (butcher shop, meat stall) and to Velvl Tsaplerski who was a contractor and who supplied meat for the *13 Polk ulaner in Vileyke* [13th Lancers Regiment in Nowa Wilejka].

Both neighbors did not have good relations with each other. When I came to Shvarts for money for the meat which he had bought from me, he says: *Young man, I have a business proposition for you. Next week the 13th Lancers Regiment from Nowa Wilejka, for which Tsaplerski supplies meat, will have an auction for meat provisions for the*

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*next three months, January, February, and March. That person who will give the cheapest price in his bid, gets a contract to supply meat. I want you to come, and I will accompany you. And you will put a sealed envelope with the price that you want for a kilo of meat. If your price will be the cheapest, you get the contract, and if you get the contract you earn a lot of money, and you give a little to me. For me is not much about the money and I don't like taking business from Tsaplerski.*¹⁹ When I heard what Shvarts told me, I say to him: *Reb Yashe, the army would not take me, a young boy, they will laugh at me. And Yashe tells me: I have two businesses, I guarantee that either you or me will be the cheapest bidder, and if we have confidence in each other, let's do this. I will come and we go to the auction in Nowa Wilejka.*

And so, we went to Yashe's and we have prepared an envelope

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with a price (50 groszy per kilo). At eleven o'clock [on the auction day] a colonel comes out and he sits down till twelve, collecting envelopes for the bids. After 12 o'clock they open the envelopes, and see who is the cheapest bidder, that person gets the contract. We with Yashe Shvarts waited till 2 minutes to twelve and then put our envelope, and then the colonel struck his hammer, and it was exactly 12 o'clock when they opened the envelopes and my price was the cheapest, 5 groszy per kilo.²⁰ Tsaplerski *iz aroysgelofn* (run) up to the colonel: *Are you going to give the contract to that boy there?* And then Yashe stands up and says *I operate two businesses in Zareche and I sign a guarantee for this boy that he will follow the contract through much better than your previous contractors*, and he meant Tsaplerski here. The colonel grinned and put a stamp on my bid. We need to come within one day to sign the contract.

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They give ten days to deliver meat, and they pay on eleventh day. So that means that one needs to have money [beforehand] to finance [the purchase of meat]. That means I have less than two weeks. I considered that I will come to Moshke, my boss, with the contract and we become partners in business.

When I came from Vilne and told him about the contract he said that it is excellent, as he thought that I did it just for him. But I told him that my work for him for nothing is over. I want 25% of the profit from the contract. He said he will give me 15% as he would need to finance the supply before the government will pay for the delivered meat. And he expected that I will agree to his

¹⁹ Translator note: *Shvarts did not want to be considered as stealing business from Tsaplerski, that is why he brought Urke into it*

²⁰ The exact winning bid price is unclear. Urke first says 50 groszy per kilo and then 5 groszy per kilo,

conditions, because where else can I get the money to finance the contract. But my mother in Micháleshik had a cousin, Dovid Svirski,²¹ whose daughter was in

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America and sent to Dovid a thousand dollars as a dowry for her crippled sister. There was no bank to put that under percent, (on deposit earning interest) and so they kept it in the house. I went to Dovid and described to him that Moshe wants to give me no more than 15% while he knows that I have no money and would need to agree to his conditions. Dovid had listened to me and said: *Do not agree to it, I will give you the thousand dollars of the cripple's dowry, and I am sure that you are able to do it, and it is better that you give a little money to us and not to Moshke*. When I solved this financing problem, *Bin ikh af ferd, vi men flegt zogn* (I was on the horse above others as they used to say).²² In Micháleshik I right away started to organize helpers who would go over to the fairs and markets in Postev, Kobylnik and Miadel buying up for me calves, and cows I was mostly buying myself. When Moshke saw that this time I am not coming to him, he came to me asking [what he can do for me].

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I told him that it is too late. Thus, I have fulfilled the contract by April 1, and it brought me eleven thousand zlotys. One thousand I gave to Yashe Shvarts, one thousand to Dovid Svirski, and nine thousand I kept for myself. Now I was a rich merchant. It bothered Moshke very much, and when we came to the market, he used to look *onbotn* (warily) at me and I looked *onbotn* at him. At the end he came to us and [said] that we give money away for nothing. He proposed that we become partners and I suggested the share 50-50. He had a butcher shop in the *shtetl*, where his wife Sore Rivke used to sell kosher meat. I did not want to have that ritual condition.

But our business was indeed half by half and so it was all the way till 1939, when the Russians came, and all conditions disappeared.

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The Russians made me a cow buyer for them. For the whole *rayon* (district) of Ostrovets no one but me was authorized to buy stock wholesale. They used to pay me 250 rubles a month before taxes, and after taxes it was enough just for a liter of *samogon* (moonshine) and 2 pounds of kielbasy (sausage). Besides that, they also paid me 7 kopecks (0.07 rubles) per kilo of live weight of the stock which I have bought, and that gave me 3,000 rubles not taxable, per month. When I used to come to a *shtolove*²³ (*canteen*), all the big *nachalniks* (bosses) used to come and eat next to me, and when the time to pay came, they used to say *You pay*. For those who lived in the Soviet Union that much money as I earned per month meant that I have to bribe them and it came from my pocket, but in fact I did not need to do that as they were already *ba mir in keshene* (*in my pocket*). In our store the manager and the director could not live from

²¹ In his *togbukh*, Urke Bliakher refers to a Yosef Swirsky as a cousin. Yosef Swirsky was perhaps the Yosef Swirsky, age 30, son of Dovid, who married Sara Gershater in Micháleshik on 12 Dec 1923. LikvakSig records show the marriage and the births of three daughters. Furthermore, records show two Dovid Switskys residing in Zaranoch in 1888 and the 1897 census shows a Dovid Swirsky household at Micháleshik.

²² The American equivalent of this is perhaps *in the saddle*, meaning *in control*.

²³ Translator note: the Russian word is *stolovaya* (Urke mixes up *s* and *sh*), an inexpensive Soviet restaurant, usually with self-service, like a school cafeteria. The mixing up of the *s* and *sh* is a classic phonetic feature of *Litvish*, the Yiddish dialect of northeastern *Lite* (Lithuania, Poland, Belarus) in what was once the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

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our *skheires* (wares), and they used to borrow money from me, but they never returned them.

Besides the [above] payments they also used to pay me bonuses for fulfilling the plan, and over all it was more than they subsidized funds for the three months of buying up stock. And so it came to pass that Shepsl Katz and Shimen came to the secretary of the communist party, his name was Podshershnik. He once told me that his father is a rabbi, and he is a communist. And so they said to him that they have been poor people in the Polish times, and they remain poor now, while Blakher²⁴ was a large merchant and now they made him even richer. *We were waiting for you that you would liberate us from our poverty, and we ask you to lay off Blakher and make us the buyers*

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of cows for the Soviet Power. And Podshershnik told them that he will do that. And so, in a couple of days he called me to come to the *Raikom* (*Raion* committee) of the Party. When I came to him, he said that he lays me off the job. *Lenin hot gezogt ver es iz geven vos darfn zey makh far gornisht un wer es gevezn gornisht darfn makh far vos* (Lenin has said that those who were made to be nothing will become everything).

And so Shepsl Katz and Shimen Bukin became buyers of cows for the government. And since I had to work too, as had all young people, they gave me a direction document to the local tannery director, Shchapke [Szczapko], who was my friend. And so, I came to work at the tannery, the new cow buyers got a new plan directive on July 1st, that was bigger than the one which I had for July-August-September, to October 1st. The new buyers bought two cows and overpaid 200 rubles,

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while the director and the manager could not deal with them the way they were dealing with me. Every week they had to report by phone to Moscow how much meat they have purchased on that week. They have not purchased nothing for nine weeks, and on the [shipment] *baze* (base) there had been gathered 5,000 cows, of which twenty died each day. They were taken as farmers' taxes since every household was mandated to provide 50 kilos of meat in the live weight each year. Farmers also had to provide additional products depending on the amount of land they owned.

And so that is how the 5,000 cows were collected on the shipment base, and they needed to be shipped to the slaughterhouse in Bryansk (in the pre-1939 USSR territory). In each railway car or in every other car they needed to have people to give animals water and to feed them. The Polish nationalists agitated that people should *nit forn* (not travel) with the cows to Russia because they would not let them back so that they need not pay to them. And so, there were no willing to go

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with the transport, and so there remained 5,000 cows on the base, and many were dying daily. Podshershnik had received a request from Moscow to find out what has happened with the

²⁴ In this Autobiography, the spelling of Urke's surname when he refers to himself in the 3rd person is consistently *Blakher*.

Ostrovets *raion*—that before they were on the first place on the purchases of cows, and now they have not bought anything for nine weeks. The director had sent a letter to Moscow, and he wrote there that Podshershnik laid off a buyer who was buying before, and put in his place two inexperienced people, and that is why the plan is not fulfilled. Right away from Moscow came an order to install me back to the position I occupied before.²⁵

And so, they informed me--right from his office came the chairman of the *Selsoviet* (village council)²⁶ on the street nearby and told me I need promptly to go to Vorniany where there was the secretary of the communist party committee for the *raion*. I said that I will not go as I don't know what is it all about. And so, he went to telephone to the party secretary that I refuse to go. And he [the secretary] said

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that he [the chairman] has to bring me with police. And the chairman came and told me that if I will not go by myself, he would need to use police to bring me there. And I saw that I cannot do anything against them, and so I took my bicycle and went to Vorniany to Podshershnik, who [had] fired me. They called him that I have departed for Vorniany, and he was waiting for me.

When I came his secretary reported to him that I am here. He right away invited me to his office, and we shook hands. He told me that he regrets that he listened to those incompetent people and that he laid me off. Now he has received a directive in which they order to reinstall me on the previous place. I told him that I don't want my job back because I work on the tannery. It has been more than 9 weeks that those buyers bought nothing, and now he wants me in 3 weeks

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to fulfill the plan that is assigned for 12 weeks. And he says: *Ikh vel dir zogn unzere zakones ikh ken vemen ikh vil aropnemen fun zayn arbet un onshteln em vu ikh vil* (I will tell you our laws—I can take anyone whom I wish from the place where he works and put him where I want). And I told him: *Dushtakh mir gizogt az kamrad Lenin hot gizogt az ver es iz givezn vos zol zayn gornish un ver es iz givezn gornisht zol vern vos* (You said to me that Komrade Lenin said that the one who was something must become nothing, and that one who was nothing must become all.) And then he says: *Lenin hot gizogt az men darf a ganef hobn zol men em aropnemen fun der tliye* (Lenin said that if a thief is needed, he must be taken even from the gallows.) When I see that I can't do anything to counter him, I said: *Well* (and it was Friday)--*today is Friday, and on Monday I want to go to Ostrovets and overtake my old position*. And he said *No, right away from there I had to go to Ostrovets to the base. Tell the director that he has to call me upon your arrival. You must fulfill the plan on buying of the cows and you must ship those 5,000 cows from the base to Bryansk. Eybe dushtos ton vest krign a medal af dayn brusht un eybe du vest dos nit ton vet dayn kop zayn in di kustes dos iz a rushshe shpervort* (If you are able to do that, there will be a medal on your breast, if not—your head will be in the bushes), as a Russian saying goes.²⁷

²⁵ This would have been in September 1940.

²⁶ The *selsoviet* (village council) was the rural administrative division of a district, the smallest soviet administration and executive power unit.

²⁷ Translator note: The actual Russian saying is *ili grud' v krestakh ili golova v kustakh* (either [a] breast full of crosses [orders] or the head in the bushes).

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And I said to him: *Eybe du falangt fun mir tsu razgruzeven di baze un afshikn di 5k bheymes tubeser nem sheyn mayn kop in kustakh (If you insist that I have to clear the base and take the 5,000 cows and send them out, then you better take my head already and get it to the bushes.)* He says: *I know you can do it for the Soviet Union, if you now go from here to Ostrovets, to the base and get to work.* I went out from him, took my bicycle and went to the base in Ostrovets. When I came to that base in Ostrovets and I took a look at what was going on there, and it became *dark in my eyes*. The director of the base Panikhin with his wife run up to me: *Save us and our children! See what you can do to clear the base from the 5,000 cows!*

I then sat on my bicycle and went to a *groys dorf* (large village)²⁸ where many of the inhabitants knew me. The village was called Daushishek (Daushishki),²⁹ and I made them to know that I need 100 people to travel with the cows

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on the train, for 20 rubles per day. It was big money. I appointed a *yunger sheigets* (young Christian boy) as a leader. He refused and told me that people say those who travel to Russia will not be allowed to go back, and so no one wanted to go with the cows. I said that this is a big lie! I guarantee them that they will come back and that all that talk is a Fascist propaganda. After my guarantee young men and girls came to me. *Komrade Urke, take us all, yes, all.* I take 120 people and tomorrow, on *Shabbos* at 6 in the morning they have to be at the base, and I then went to the base and it was dark already, and I said to the director Panikhin: *Let us go to the Gudogai station and get 200 large railway cars or 300 smaller railway cars.*

And so, we went to the station, and we came to the manager

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and said that we need by the morning that many cars. He has looked at us on as *meshugeners* (crazies; maniacs). Panikhin remained in the room and I took the station manager outside and I offered him 300 rubles. *Now get to the telephone and call to Molodechno that we need the cars to be sent right away, and it is a great emergency, and it must be provided.* The station manager started to call over the telephone that they need to assemble the cars. He later told me that he called the whole night. When we returned with Panikhin, he told us that if the people will not show up in the morning, then we would need to pay 20 rubles for each car, which amounts to 6,000 rubles, a colossal sum. We went home to sleep, but I could not fall asleep the whole night, and so could not Panikhin.

When it began to dawn, I could see through the window a whole army of people with packs, those were the people who should

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travel with the cows. I got up, put my clothes on and sent for a photographer to make one-minute photos for the documents to travel to Russia. The station manager told me that the railroad cars are here, with three locomotives to pull the train. The photographer came and made

²⁸ Translator note: *Indeed to find right away a hundred young people willing to go somewhere, the village must be very large.*

²⁹ Daūšyški, Davshiski, Daukshiski, Daukshyshki, Astraviecki/Astravetsky Raion, Belarus, 14.7 miles SSW of Astravets, 12.7 miles SSW of Gudogaj.

photographs for everybody, and then I ordered that the cows must be brought from where they were to the cars in Gudogai, a three-kilometer distance. In the pens there were some cows that could not walk, and so the police mobilized the whole *dorf* of *goyim* (gentile peasants) to come with horses and wagons and they loaded the cows that could not move on the wagons and take them to the station. On the station they loaded then those cows into the cars. And then I hopped on my bicycle and rushed to Vorniany to get documents for the people who were going to accompany the cows on the train. When I came to the *rayispolkom* (*raion* executive committee), they

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looked at me as on a *meshugener*. *What am I talking about—make a document for every person and issue entry visas—that can take a month!* I saw that I can't do anything with them and I went to Podshershnik, the secretary of the *raion* communist party committee. I told him that the cows are already in the cars, and the *raion* executive committee does not give passports to the people, as they say that they first need to check and evaluate every person, and it can take a month time. He started to call Minsk, and Minsk called Moscow, and from Moscow there came an order to issue right away one document for all 120 people, and so it was. When I came with the document to the train, all the cars were loaded and the three locomotives were giving whistles. The train started to move. Panikhin embraced me and started to kiss me and

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to cry: *You have saved me from Siberia!* We came from Gudogai to the base, and they sent a telegram to Moscow that the train with the cows is on its way to Bryansk, and that Blakher in one day accomplished what others could not do in three months. But now I have to fulfill the plan on buying up cows that my predecessors did not act to fulfill for 9 weeks. And I think to myself that I could not succeed with this.

On Sunday in the morning I go on the street and I see in the window *dem direktor fun internal revenu* (the director of the internal revenue office)³⁰ Kulik, who has known me well, from the time when I used to work at the base before. He knocked on the window glass, calling me inside. I came inside, and he told me *Give this girl here 100 rubles and she will go and buy us a liter liquor and some sausage*. I gave her 100 rubles and she went in *shtetl* for the liquor. And Kulik says—*I am worrying for you. On a meeting in raikom Podshershnik expressed regret that he laid you off from work*. And I told him that yesterday

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the base was cleared, three locomotives came and they pulled a train and he says *So there is not a single cow on the base?* and I say *Yes, all that were able to walk went to the station and those that could not were taken on peasants' wagons and brought to special cars. But now I have a more difficult task to fulfill in two weeks a plan, on which my predecessors did not do anything for 9 weeks*. And then the girl came and brought the liquor and the food. We drunk some liquor, and Kulik tells me: *I will help you with that. We put big taxes on the peasants. And they have to pay, but where will they get the money? And so, they will get to you as many cows as what you would need to fulfill the plan in time*. As I heard, on Monday tomorrow there is a market [day] in Ostrovets, on Tuesday in Micháleshik, and on Wednesday in Vorniany. I asked him that *er zol*

³⁰ Here, Urke uses English/American words to refer to the Soviet equivalent of the Internal Revenue Service of the United States.

telefonirn in di selsovetssh men zol arushikn reitersh nokh di teksh bilsh un glaykh tsuteyln kdei morgn in Ostrovets afn mark zol men onfirn bheymes a sakh. (that he should make a call to

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selsovet that they send out *reiters* (drivers of animals [drovers]) for the tax bills and divide them up right away because tomorrow they will bring a lot of cows to the market in Ostrovets).³¹ And so it was, Kulik did what I asked. I came to the base and I told to director Panikhin, tomorrow early in the morning he should go to Molodechno, where there was a bank, while in Ostrovets there was no bank, and take 100,000 rubles. He was scared but I told him, that tomorrow by twelve at noon he has to be back with the money. He did what I said. In the morning I called up all my *reiters* (drivers of animals [drovers]) to work, so that we should come to the market. The peasants brought so many cows that all the streets in Ostrovets were full of wagons with cows, oxen and pigs tied to them. In the morning they [the peasants] were asking prices which I could not pay. After twelve at noon Panikhin brought a valise with money from Molodechno, and I started to buy

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the cows for the government prices. One hundred thousand rubles was not enough. We started to issue IOU notes and Kulik was accepting them. By the nighttime, we have driven to the base a one-third of the three-month plan. And then at night we started to send telegrams how many cows Blakher has bought up in Ostrovets, and then on Thursday in Vorniany, and on Tuesday in Micháleshik. So, by October 1 the plan was fulfilled for 110%. And for 18 days I did not collect the cows on the base as was the case with those 5,000 cows, for I shipped them out right away. *Gelt hob ikh gemakht vi blote, dem poypsh in Roym iz nit givezn azoy gut vi mir* (and I made as much money as dirt, the pope in Rome did not have it as good as I.) Afterwards they have taken Podshershnik off his position, and as Kulik later told me, they wanted to put Shepsel Kats and Shimen Bukin on trial, for not fulfilling the plan. I asked Panikhin they should not do that,

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and they followed my advice. Panikhin said: *They wanted to finish you off, to make you to be sent to Siberia as a large merchant, and now you let it pass like this.* They still put them on trial for the negligence and losses and convicted them to prison.

When the Russians run away (after beginning of the war),³² there still remained cows and horses on the base, and the *goyim* came and *hot tsukhapt* (grabbed) them. When I returned home to Micháleshik, there were already German tanks near our house, and twenty German *gendarmes*

³¹ This sentence is unintelligible. It perhaps means: Having learned from Kulik (the tax man) that peasants (in order to meet their tax obligations) would be bringing many cattle to market within the next few days (cattle that Urke needed to buy to fulfill his contract of supplying cattle to the Russian army), Urke asked Kulik to telephone the *selsovet* in Ostrovets, to send out *reiters* (cattle drovers) dividing them (perhaps between the markets in Ostrovets, Micháleshik and Vorniany or simply placing them in strategic spots) to assist Urke in driving the purchased cattle into holding area[s] from which they could later be shipped into Russia.

³² The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 Jun 1941.

were stationed in the house, and to us they left just one room. From that time begins my *togbukh* which I have written, and Dovid Katz has a copy that I have given to him.

U. Blacher

There is a copy (of the *togbukh*) in Yad Vashem on Jerusalem, and in Museum in Washington (USHMM) a copy of my *togbukh Khurbn Michalishek*.

[Sent from Southington to Wales on March 25, 2002] ³³

³³ Although the 10'x12' manila envelope containing these pages is unmistakably written in the hand of Urke, the Southington postmark of 25 Mar 2002 was more than five years after his death. These pages had to have been written after Nov 1991 (when Urke was interviewed by Dovid Katz) and before Urke's death on 08 Nov 1996, perhaps no later than 1994. It is assumed that the unmailed envelope was found among Urke's papers and mailed by some member of his family. Dovid Katz has no additional recollection of this.