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**MY WORK FOR THE STALIN’S STATE:
Providing the Red Army with Meat Until the Attack of Germany on Russia**

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Dovid, I don’t remember if I gave you this writing of mine. If not, and if you like it, it is *ol rayt*, and if you don’t, throw it away.

U. Blakher.

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My Work for the Soviet Government

When the Russian army has marched into Michalishik, a general, Sharnov by name, came to the Michalisher *hoyf* (court) that belonged to Svirskis and Kaplanoviches, [looking] for the cows for meat for the army). Nearby I and my *shutef* (partner) Moshke [Aloy] had rented a farm where e used to keep cows that we bought on the market, before the slaughter or before sending them to Vilne. Yoyne Svirsky told the general: *Why do you need our cows? There are cows that belong to Jews that deal in meat.* The general came to us at home and said that he saw our cows near the Michalishker *hoyf* and that he wants to buy from us the meat from them and asked me what would be the price for a kilo. I don’t want more than the government price, and he said that it is 3 rubles per kilo. On the farm there were 57 *hed* (head) and by the early morning tomorrow the meat must be ready. Through the whole night we were slaughtering the animals, and by the morning the meat was ready. The general came with two *Last vogns* (cargo trucks)¹ and we loaded them the meat on them. After we loaded the meat he came into the house

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and took out 700 rubles and said there was a meeting of the General staff, and it was decided not to pay us anything, because we were large merchants. He had to pay [us] for that weight [of meat] 25,000 rubles, and he kept 24,000 rubles for himself. This was my first deal with the Soviets...

After that a farm that belonged to Yeshaye Baran² from Vilne became a base for the cows that were bought for meat for the government. The manager was a Jew from Vileyka, Noah Norman,³ a former *shofer* (driver, chauffeur) for Zimmerman, a head bookkeeper from Smorgon,

¹ Presumably these were the Russian equivalent of the *Lastkraftwagens* used by the Germans mentioned by Urke in his *togbukh*.
² Possibly Yehoshua/Jehoszua Baran, wood/forest/timber merchant, born 1878/1880 according to two testimonials at Yad Vashem, one of which gives his place of death as Ponar.
³ It is unclear whether the surname given here was Norman or Nakhman. Records of individuals with the surname *Norman* can be found at Vileyka; none can be found of individuals with the surname *Nakhman*.

who had a mill there.⁴ Notl from Ostrovets,⁵ who was a shopkeeper, he was a director. *Er hot gevust fun beheymes un flaysh vi a ku fun shabes* (he knew as much of cows and meat as a cow knows of Shabbat.) That Norman came to me [and suggested] that I must buy up (start dealing with buying up) the cows for the government. I will be the only buyer in the whole Ostrovets *steit*⁶ (*raion*), and my monthly salary will be 250 rubles, and [that I will get] 7 kopecks (0.07 ruble) from each kilo of live weight, which is not taxable. I [agreed to] his proposal and I took to buying

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cows for Stalin, for 250 rubles, which after taxes remained to be 120 rubles. That means a liter of a liquor with a sausage on the black market. But 7 kopecks (for a kilo) brought me 3,000 rubles a month.

The whole *raion* was *hot gegangen af redlakh* (getting crazy) when I used to come to the *shtolove* (canteen) to eat. All the *greyshe natsalnikes* (big shots) used to sit at my table, and when it came to pay they asked me to pay, while I earned more money than Stalin. And so it went, till they have sent from Moscow an old Russian, by the name Ilyin, who was an antisemite. And he found that all were Jews and he had all Jews laid off, except me and a small clerk Katsovich, who once was a *yidish lerer*⁷ (Yiddish teacher). After some time, I asked him [Ilyin], why he did not lay me off from work. And he said to me: *You are no Jew at all, while Jews are looking for easy positions and you work as a horse. And so, I am measuring you up and so far, you are worth the money that the melukhe* (the state or the government) *is paying you. Thanks to your work the Ostrovets raion is on the first place for buying up meat for the government.*

After

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that he went back to Moscow, and they sent from Russia an Uzbek as a manager, and a bookkeeper who knew nothing and was a drunk, and a director of the base, who was also a drunk. They have assumed all the functions and I worked with them, till two Michalishker Jews that were peddlers and used to go around in the villages and collect old things, like rags. They approached the secretary of the communist party, who was the complete boss of the whole *steit* (*raion*). And they told him that they were waiting for the Soviets to liberate them from the Polish yoke, and they finally were able to experience the *geule* (redemption). But it turned out that Blakher, who was a rich cow dealer under Poland, he was made more rich, and we, who waited for you, became more poor. And so we ask of you that you lay Blakher off and put us in his place. The party secretary Podshershnik has agreed with them that I must be taken from my position, and they put in my place. That were Shimen Bukin and Shepsl Katz.

In a couple of days, the secretary has called me to his place and asked me what did I do in the

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⁴ Records (LitvakSig and Vad Vashem) show several Tzimermans at Smorgon.

⁵ Perhaps Notel Vittenberg of Ostrowicz who was murdered by Sokolowski shortly after the Germans came to Ostrowicz mentioned in Urke's *togbukh*.

⁶ Translator Note: Urke uses an English word written by Yiddish letters and thus "state" is rendered "steit", meaning an administrative territorial unit, like a U.S. state; here it means raion, or district.

⁷ A teacher of Yiddish; a teacher in a Jewish school; a Jew who happens to be a teacher.

Polish times. I told him that I was dealing with cows and meat. He told me that Comrade Lenin said that the one who was all must be made nothing, and the one who was nothing must be made all. *And so, I take you off from the work and I appoint on your place Shimen Bukin and Shepsl Katz. My father is a rabbi and I am a communist. It is fair that of those who were nothing we must make mentsn* (upstanding people). Even then I had that much money, that I *hot gidarft zayn arbet af den kapores* (needed that work of his *darfn af kapores* - did not need at all), but I said to him: *You laid me off, and I worked for the government day and night to fulfill more than the plans that you use to give me required to be fulfilled? So that our raion got on the first place in buying up meat for the government.* I thanked him and went out... And so, the *tukhernikes* (rag dealers) have overtaken my position. The bosses on the base were very much distressed that I was laid off, while they all were eating from my pocketbook. At the first buy which they (the *tukhernikes*) made, they overpaid 200 rubles, the sum which they then had to cover from their own means.

That's

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how it was. And for two and a half months they did not buy anything. At that same time the Russians have introduced a meat tax of 50 kilos on each household, and additional proportional amount of meat depending how many hectares of land did a particular household have. And because of that on the base there were gathered 5,000 heads of livestock, and each day 10-15 of them died. And as the *tukhernikes* did not buy anything, telegrams started to come: *What happened to you, you were on the first place in whole Belarus with the meat deliveries, and now you are on the last place. And why don't you send the 5,000 cows that people provided for the taxes?* The manager says that he has to send a person with each railway car to look after the cows. But no one agrees to go, as the Poles agitated that if anyone goes with the cows in a car, he will not be allowed to return back from Russia so that he will not tell what is going on there.

And so, at a meeting in *raikom* (*raion* party committee) it was decided to bring me back to the position I had before. Panikhin (the director of the base) said that they laid off such a buyer as Blakher, that had so much experience in the field of buying cows, that he brought our *raion* on the first place in our *oblast*, and they brought *tukhernikes* that had no experience at all in buying cows for the government.

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And so, he asks the party secretary Podshershnik to bring me back to my old place. Others who knew me have supported him in that. This proposal was accepted. In the morning came the chairman of the village council, Kumishche (Kumiszcze), and said that the secretary Podshershnik calls me to come to him. I knew right away that it is about that meeting and the decision to reinstall me back on my previous position.

I told to Kumishche that I know what is it all about, and that I do not want my job back. He called to Podshershnik and was told: *If he does not want to come by himself, bring him to me with police.* I saw that I cannot argue with him, and so I took my bicycle and went to Vornyan to Podshershnik. The chairman Kumishche called him over the phone that I have gone to him. He already waited for me, and he received me joyfully as if nothing had happened between us before. *I have called you so that you must take your previous position. I made a mistake that I*

listened to the tukhernikes and laid you off from Zagotskot (Livestock Provision, the name of the Soviet meat-buying structure). You must fill

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the plan for the quarter, about 300 cows in the remaining 18 days. And you must unload the base and send all the cows to Bryansk [within the pre-1939 Soviet territory]. I know that you can do it, you just need to want to do it. If you will do it, you get a medal on your chest, and if you will not fill it, your head will be in the bushes, this is a Russian expression.

Hearing what he wants from me that I need to do, I say to him: *I thank you for your trust in me, but I cannot take back my position as now I am a buyer of fel (pelts) for the tannery in Michalishek. And secondly, Comrade Lenin said that who was all must become nothing, and so I cannot take your proposal and go back to work in Zagotskot. He laughed uproariously fun mir (at me) and said: It is said in our laws that we can install our citizens to where we need their work. And Comrade Lenin also said that if you need a criminal, take him from the gallows. And so go right from here to Ostrovets, to the base, and Panikhin should call me that you have come there. And here I will*

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call to the selsovet (village council) that they tell your family you have gone to Ostrovets.

I saw that I cannot do anything about it, and that I must do what he told me to do—this is communism. And so I go and I come to the base in Ostrovets, when I saw what is going on there, my hair *hot gishtelt kapoyer* (stood on the end). Panikhin and his wife run up to me crying: *Save us and our two little children!* He told me the same thing, that he cannot get any people to go with the cows as the people say they will not be allowed to return from Russia, and without people he is not able to send out the cows.

In 10 kilometers from the base there was a large village, and people there knew me. It was called Daushishki.⁸ I went there right away, and I made an announcement: *Who wants to go to Leningrad?*⁹ *I will pay 20 rubles a day, and the young lads and girls run up to me and one of them took me aside and said that they are being told that they should not go because they will not be allowed to come back. I said that this is a lie and I guarantee that they will come back. They even will be able to buy some little things there. And the food they must take with themselves. I appointed one of them on the spot a brigadir (leader) that he must gather a*

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hundred people. Young boys and girls asked me if I will take them. I said: Take anyone who is willing to go. When I returned to the base it was already dark. I said to Panikhin: We must go to the station in Gudogai and by morning get 300 railway cars. And Panikhin says if I know what am I doing because if we will not use the cars or if the people will not show up in the morning, then we would need to pay (a fine of) 20 rubles for each car, and it amounts to 6,000 rubles, it was a great sum. But I was sure that they will come. So, we came to Gudogai to the natsalnik (head of the station, nachalnik stantsii in Russian), and I tell him that 300 cars should be by the

⁸ Daūšyški, Davshiski, Daukshiski, Daukshyshki, Astraviecki/Astravetsky Raion, Belarus, 14.7 miles SSW of Astravets, 12.7 miles SSW of Gudogaj.

⁹ While Urke writes *Leningrad*, he had earlier [in this piece] identified the town to which the cattle were to be delivered as *Bryansk* and in his *Autobiography* also identified the town as *Bryansk*.

morning on the ramp. And he laughs and says that it cannot be done in such a short time. And I leave Panikhin in the room and I ask him [the *natsalnik*] to step outside and I put him in his pocket 500 rubles, and I tell him that it is an emergency and that he has the whole night to call to Molodechno and to other places and they should send the cars right away. And they sent 300 cars and three locomotives to pull the train with the cows. Panikhin did not sleep the whole night, and I could not sleep either.

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When it got to dawn, I see through the window that there goes a whole army with the packs, that were those who should go with the cows. And a rock has fallen from my heart. When it became completely light, we opened the gates of the cars and led the cows inside, except for those which could not walk. The road to Gudogai was 3 kilometers long. And I told Panikhin that he should go to the police, and they should organize the whole village to get horses and wagons and put the cows that cannot walk on the wagons and bring them to the station. And I went on my bicycle to Vorniany to the NKVD (*Naródnyy komissariát vnútrennikh del* - The Department of Inner Affairs or The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs; secret police) to get a passport for the people who will go with the cows. I come to the NKVD and they start to laugh at me, they have to check every person and find out who he is, and so forth. And I say to them that 300 cars loaded with cows are standing waiting for the passport, and the locomotives are ready to move, and they here tell me such stories. And I went to Podshershnik and told

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him that I have executed his order and cleared the base, not a single cow left. And now his job is to get the passport, and the train should get going. He became so spirited by what I did in just one and a half day, and he grabbed the telephone and he started to call to Minsk and to Moscow that they should issue the passport right away and that the train should go. And Podshershnik was so happy, and he says: *You know what, I knew that I can rely on you, you "sukin syn" (you son of a bitch). And now that you are going to fill the plan for the quarter, I am going to put a cross on your breast.* The NKVD brought the passport to Podshershnik, and he gave me the passport and said *Go*. And I came to Gudogai, it started to get dark. The locomotives were puffing, and the station head gave the command, and the train started to roll and to whistle. And then Panikhin, the director (of the base), run up to me, and hugged me and started kissing, and he cried: *You saved us, my wife and children!*

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I will never forget it.

That night I slept tight. But I could not imagine how can I fulfill the other part, that I have to buy in 15 days 400 cows, impossible. But I thought about the private landowners that had to pay much higher prices to fill taxes in meat. I got up in the morning on Sunday and went to the *shtetl* to a *dainer* (diner, inexpensive restaurant)¹⁰ for breakfast and then when I go back to the base I see in the window my friend, the head of internal revenue (office) Kulik. He saw me and knocked on the window, calling me to come inside. I came inside, and he says: *You know what, on a meeting of the raion party committee (raikom) I made a speech for you (supporting you), that they must bring you back to your position and that you will make an order, and bring back the good name of the Ostrovets raion that it used to have for filling provision plans that were*

¹⁰ Here Urke used the American word *diner* but was probably referring to a *shtolove*.

given to you. *But give me 100 rubles, I will send a girl, she will bring liquor from the shtolove* (canteen; cafeteria). I took out hundred rubles and the girl is out to get the liquor. And he says: *I will help you to fill the plan, do not worry.* The girl then brought the liquor and we sat to have

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a drink. And I say to him: *You say that you will help me—how exactly?* And he says that on Monday they are going to increase the taxes on the farmers (peasants) to be paid. And there will be so many cows driven to the market on Monday, because the farmers (peasants) have no other things to sell but cows and pigs, in order to get money to pay the taxes that we have imposed on them. They have to pay in 15 days, and who will not pay *vern forn tsu di vayse berelakh* (goes to the white [polar] bears).

When we were done with drinking I went to the base and I said to Panikhin that tomorrow morning he has to go to Molodechno to the bank, and to bring 100,000 rubles to Ostrovets. Because there was no bank there, one had to go to the bank in Molodechno to get money, as we need to pay in cash. He looks at me as if I am *meshuge*, so much money at once. I tell him: *You must come from Molodechno (with money) at 11am, and then I will tell you what I need to have this money for.*

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As he has a lot of trust in me, he did not ask me more. Very early in the morning he went to Molodechno, and he returned at eleven. They have brought so many cows to the market that it was impossible to go through there, and also on the streets. In the morning the sellers were insisting on high prices but I could not pay more than the government price. At 12, I started to buy and buy, and I have expended all the hundred thousand rubles. And then people started to give me the tax receipts that Kulik was taking instead of money. And by night we have driven from the market [to the base] an army of cows. And they started to call from the base to Minsk and to Moscow that Blakher in one day had filled a one third of the plan, for which the *tukhernikes* did not buy anything for two and a half months. I also had two markets, Tuesday in Michaleshik and on Thursday in Vornyany, and so I have filled the plan.¹¹ I cannot describe (what was next), the pope in

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Rome did not have such a name (high reputation) as I. I earned as much money as dirt, working day and night.

But ultimately my whole work ended in nothing. The Germans came, and the Russian money turned into nothing. Then the Germans brought from the front the exhausted horses, and they made an auction and were selling to farmers for the Russian money. And I had a line of *goim* (*goyim*, gentile peasants) and I was handing them out rubles to buy horses.

A couple have brought me food afterwards, when I was in ghetto, for the money which I gave to buy horses. But 90% have given me nothing. And so, my work and my riches ended in nothing.

U. Blakher

¹¹ Based on Urke's description, this event is believed to have taken place between Fri the 6th of Sep (when Urke was summoned to Vornyany by Podshersknik and Thursday the 12th of Sep 1940 (when Urke had procured the additional 400 head of cattle to complete the quarter's (Jul-Sep) order from the Soviet government.

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manila envelope to Dovid Katz with addresses, postmarked Southington, CT 26 Aug 1993.

(Page/Image 19 – reverse side of manila mailing envelope)

Dovid, if you like it, then it's all right [*olrayt*], and if not throw it in the garbage. They told me that you were in America and in New Haven.