

**THE WEDDING OF MINKA GRODZIENSKI AND AVREMELE FROM VORNYAN:
HOW THE BEST MAN COST THE GROOM MOST OF THE BRIDE'S DOWRY
(This manuscript is untitled)**

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This is a story about Nekhama Grodzienski, with her daughter Minka, who was in body and mind sick so that they had to bind her. She has rattled the whole *shtetl* so, that it used to stand under her window. *Zi vil seks, prost un poshet* (she wants sex, plain and simple) and they just had to take her to Vidzy to the doctors and in a little time she will get better and better until she became completely sound. And she was a girl 28 years old, and they started to look for a match for her. But no grooms were to be found for her, as they thought that the insanity might return back to her.

In Vornyan there was a guy who was a complete orphan, blind on one eye, who was hanging around with Efroyke Vaynshtein¹ on the basis that he was making seltzer and soda water and then carried his product around the *shtetlakh*, selling it. And the blind orphan used to travel with him carrying seltzer and soda water to the customers. And one day they started

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to talk in the *shtetl* that there is a guy who wants to marry Minka that was such an insane. And it was Avremele the Blind, an orphan from Vornian. He had nothing to lose. Minka had a house and a brother in America, who had agreed to send the dowry. And so, the match was made.

Also, Nekhama Grodzienski lived over the street from us, and of course we were invited to the engagement. The cantor took to writing the engagement contract. When it came to put down the amount for the dowry to be given to Avremele, mother Nekhama told the cantor to write down 700 dollars to the engagement contract. There was a *kluger yid* (literally, *clever Jew*), Bere der *Shmid* (the blacksmith) Papisky,² who was an uncle of Grodzienski's, a blacksmith on one leg. He says to the cantor: *Write down 500 dollars!* And Nekhama says: *Uncle, what are you talking about, what shall I do with the rest of the money?* And the cantor listened to Bere and he wrote down 500 dollars that the son [of Nekhama] had to send from America.

When there came the time, according to the engagement contract, for the wedding ceremony, and no money had come, Nekhama presumed that the groom would trust that the dowry money is going to come soon from her son in America. A week before the wedding Nekhama came to us

¹ Perhaps Afreyne Vayshteyn of Worniany, a brewer, b. 1911 to Grigori and/or Afroim Yoynshteyn of Worniany, both names found on two separate Russian-language lists of persecuted persons in the possession of Yad Vashem.

² Perhaps the father of the Itzek Potpiski, blacksmith, who was residing with his son in the Itzek Potpiski household at house no. 12 in 1939 according to the list of *Michaliszki Names* compiled by survivor Esther Katz Livingston.

and asked that we let the Minka's wedding to be done in our house.³ Our house was the most beautiful in *shtetl*, I have built it not long time ago.⁴

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Several months before that our rabbi Entin made a wedding for his daughter Zishe in our house with a young rabbi who had not yet have a position (place), and the rabbi's dowry was that with time he will hand him the Michaleshik's rabbi's position.⁵

All weddings in Michaleshik used to be held on Friday and lasted till late Sunday night. For the rabbi's daughter's wedding there came from the groom's side a lot of rabbis and other great scholars, very fine in-laws. And the wedding was outstanding. My mother has agreed that we let Minka's wedding to be made in our house, same as the rabbi's daughter wedding was, and also on Friday. And so Friday morning the groom came with his best man,⁶ Khone *der shuster* (cobbler),⁷ *yener mekhutn*⁸ (*that one kind of guy*). Other friends of Avremele of the same kind [as Khone] came from Vornian to the gathering of guests before the wedding ceremony. When the rabbi looked at the clock and said: *Nu, the time to go to the chuppah, it is getting late*. Khone the cobbler, who is the best man, pounded the table and said: *They will not go to chuppah until we see the dowry money that was agreed upon*. And the money had not yet come from America, from [Nakhama's] son. My mother had heard that the groom would not go to the *chuppah* without the dowry agreed upon, and that they would go back to Vornian without the wedding.

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She had seen with whom we have to deal here, with Khone the cobbler, *the parkh* (the rat or bastard),⁹ as people used to call him, and she was struck with fear as to the consequences that could come out of it. Minka could go back to the insanity condition. Such a thing that someone could walk away from a wedding because of the dowry was unheard of, but my mother thought that the people could do that. My mother called me aside and said: *We must handle them and we*

³ A record of the marriage exists in the Litvak Sig Lithuania Marriages Database: On 27 Aug 1937 at Mikaliskis, Avraham Saritski of Voryany, age 32 <1905>, son of Chanan & Freyda to Mina Grodzenski of Mikaliskis age 31 <1906>, daughter of Daniel & Nechama

[Record 6, Film link 2205057, Item 3, Image 660, Archive/Fond/Inventory LVIA/728/3/1552]

⁴ According to the story told by Urke Blocher to his children, in the December that he was 13 years of age (ca. 1923), he happened to have in his possession a large supply of a fermented foodstuff that Christians considered essential for their Christmas feast. It was a common fermented foodstuff generally prepared in individual households but, in this particular December, most of the ferments had gone bad (perhaps because of weather exigencies) so it was in great demand and Urke could command high prices for his supply. From his earnings, he built a house for his mother which became a tourist attraction – people traveling down Vilna Gas would point it out and marvel at how it had been built by a thirteen-year-old boy.

⁵ A record of the marriage exists in the LitvakSig Lithuania Marriages Database: On 22 Jan 1937 at Mikaliskes, Leysor Kaymovich, age 30 of Hrodna, son of Yakov Moshe and Ita to Zisa Entin, age 30, of Mikhaliskis, daughter of Tsvi and Feiga

[Record 1; Film Link 2205057, Item 3, Image 658, Archive/Fond/Inventory LVIA/728/3/1522]

⁶ Urke used the English words *best man* in Yiddish lettering.

⁷ Perhaps Khone Rashkovich of Vorniany identified in Litvak Sig records as a shoemaker and a witness to the 1938 marriage of Efraim Vaynshteyn to Ita Krivitski. Based on dates of birth given in the LitvakSig records, Khone was a contemporary of Avremele's deceased father.

⁸ Translator note: *yener mekhutn* is an ideomatic expression about a person who can cause problems, troubles, a troublemaker.

⁹ Translator note: *parkh* is a curse word like *rat* or *bastard*.

have to lend Nekhama the money. When Nekhama will get the money from her son in America, she will right away repay us. Nekhama was a very honest woman. Then we have communicated *hinter di kulisn* (behind the curtains) with Khone, who wanted to go together with the groom back to Vornyan, to Efroyke Vaynshteyn. Here he has a home, a house that they give away to him, and the money will come to him. Khone has agreed to negotiate with us, but the money he wants now, and without that it would not pass and he will go back with the groom immediately. So we have settled upon 200 dollars (1050 zlotys) which we handed to Khone, and so they went back to *chuppah* and so we have made a wedding of Minka with Avremele. Nekhama wrote to her son about what has happened, and that if it was not for us who knows how it all would come out. The son had immediately sent us 200 dollars and an emotional letter. He did not know

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how to thank us. He did not know me and my mother, but he knew my father when he was yet an unmarried young man, as they were neighbors before he went to America.

The match was successful, Minka had two children with Avremele, and Avremele was able to support the family. He used to travel to Vilne and bring merchandise from there for the Michaleshik's vendors. Minka did not go insane anymore. There was a similar case in Ostrovets, but after having a child the mother went back to insanity for good.

When I came to America, I met here Minka's brother, the one that sent me 200 dollars. He did not know how to thank me. He lived in New York, he was a plumber. One morning he went out to get a newspaper, and a negro¹⁰ run up to him and stabbed him to death. That told me my *landsman* Berke Klor.

Avremele and Minka with 2 children perished in Vilne at Ponar, with all other Jews from Michaleshik, Svir, Vornyan, Ostrovets, Bystritsa and others.

This is the story of Minka Grodzienski, who was insane, and Avremele from Vornyan.

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Esteemed friend Dovid, I have received the manuscript. I thank you very much; it arrived in order. My children want to have it as a memory, and so I have asked you to send it. And I want to stress once again, that I entrust all my writings to you. If they need improvement, you can do that, and what you don't like you can throw out. I don't want you to keep things you don't like.

I am not a writer. I just write to you about things that happened in Michaleshik. You are a professional writer and I ask you that you should not describe things that you do not like, mine or others' whomever it could be. While it can make all effect to get lost, do not describe fictitious and unsubstantiated stories, as it *ken iberfirn dem gantsn geshmak* (can spoil the whole taste), as people in Michalishek used to say, of the book. *Ployderayen* (chatter) is not for this book.

Your father, *z"l*¹¹ had instructed you to immortalize his beloved *shtetl* Michaleshik, and you do according to his desire as a devoted son, fulfilling his last wish. If you need to know anything, write to me and I will do my best to answer you. Have a happy *Pesakh* and write to me.

(Page 7—envelope addressed to Dovid Katz, postmarked 16 Mar 1994).

¹⁰ Urke used the word *neger*.

¹¹ *z"l* The abbreviation of *zikhroyne livrokhe* (*may his memory be a blessing*), used after referring to a deceased Jewish man.