

CORRESPONDENCE FROM URKE BLACHER TO DOVID KATZ

(This manuscript is untitled)

Written by Jórek Blocher

late Jun 1992

Translated by Vital Zajka

Annotated by Ruth C. Clarke

September 2024

[Image/Page 1]

Shalom, Dovid!

I have sent you several letters and have not heard anything from you for such a long time. You have agreed to send pictures that have been taken of Michalishek. I have never received them. I would like to ask you to send them, as I wish to see the bridge, whether it is the same bridge that I have built for the Soviets,¹ and the place where there was my house, and the cellar in the yard, to which the whole Michaleshik wanted to get in when the Germans were bombarding the airfield in Turlya.² Gershke,³ your cousin, had told me that you went for the *Pesakh* (Passover) in Swieciany⁴ with your mother. So, what did you do there? Did you retell the *Haggadah* (the text recited at Passover seder, telling the story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt) there? It is already 10 weeks after *Pesakh*, and I don't know where you are.

Berke told me that he had talked with your mother over the phone, and she had told him that you were in Michaleshik and at a *goye* (gentile woman) that has my photograph. It is Helena Ravidanovitch that stayed in our house as a maid for (Zubiskis?).⁵ I was on friendly terms with her parents, and they also wanted to help me get into hiding as they had a bunker in Kazionny forest⁶ that Motl Svirsky⁷

¹ See *My Work for the Stalin State After Liberation* believed to have been written by Jan 1992.

² Turle/Turler: Turly, 54°13'N, 26°27'E [54.79031N, 26.13787E], now Belarus, located about 1.86 miles S of Micháleshik, WNW of Markun. Described by Jórek Blocher in his *Tale of Two Weddings* among his *Yizkerbukh* essays as the manorial estate/home of *der porets* (local landlord/*gospodar*) Kotowicz,² where Fayve *der Muler* had, sometime in the late 19th century, built a mill, a brewery and a stable. Described by Esther Katz Livingston in her *Our Town – Michaliszki*, as a *Gut* (large farm) about 3 km. away from the *shtetl* behind the hill belonging to the Tuler family. During the first Soviet occupation (1939-41), it has been confiscated and turned into a flight school with an airfield next to it with more than twenty airplanes stationed there. During the 1941 German invasion, it was used briefly as a hospital.

³ Gershon Gubersky later Gershon Perecman, son of watchmaker Avram Gubersky, a second cousin of Dovid Katz' father Menke.

⁴ Svintzian; Svinianka; Svintsainka: Svencionys, 55°09'N. 26°10'E. now Lithuania, between the wars in Swencionys Powiat of Wilno Voivodeship, 18 miles NE of Pabrade, 23 miles NNW of Svir, 24 miles NNE of Kamelishki, 23 miles N of Micháleshik and 47 miles NE of Vilna.

⁵ Possibly the two brothers Chaim and Eltzik Zubisky, both rag peddlars, listed at house no. 93 in Esther Katz Livingston's *Michaliszki Names*, next to Esther Blacher at house no. 92. Also see Berl Klor's map entitled *Michaliszki, Poland to 1929*.

⁶ Perhaps (although considered unlikely) the forest near Kazanovshchina 54°58'N, 26°10'E (now Belarus) about 11 miles N of Micháleshik

⁷ Believed to be a son of Dovid Swirsky who was a cousin of Urke's mother Esther.

[Image/Page 2]

had made.⁸ He was staying there for some time with his family, and then he went to Kabylnik,⁹ and they all perished there.

I want to ask you to send me over *mayn togbukh* (diary). I guess you have had enough time to copy it, if you like it to be included into your project book. I also hope to hear from you, what you have accomplished in your hard mission that your late father has bequeathed to you to achieve.

Please give regards to your mother from me and my wife.

U. Blacher

[Image 3]

Envelope from Urke Blacher postmarked Southington, Connecticut Jun 1992

⁸ See pages 93 to 95 of the *aufklar* version of Urke's *togbukh* at USHMM in which Motl's name is given as Yosef and the name of the gentile with the bunker who offered to assist Urke get into hiding was Casimir Lavranovitch. Compiler note: The woman identified by Urke was clearly Helena Ravdanovitch (nee Lavranovitch) the daughter of Casimir Lavranovitch and it appears that her married name was Ravdanovitch.

In an e-mail dated 2 Jul 2024, Dovid Katz recalled two Ravdanowich households from his early (1990-1992) three visits to Micháleshik: A Mr. Ravdanovich who helped on the first visit who lived in a hut at the far end of *Sviranski di Khazershe* (other end of town); and an elderly Ms. Ravdonovich (thought possibly to have been the widow of the Julian Ravdanovich, the *soltys* of Micháleshik also mentioned in the *aufklar* version of Urke *togbukh* on pages 91-93). She resided in a wooden house on the site of Dovid's great grandfather's house and a video clip of his visit with her is included in Part II of his *A Guided Tour of Tour of Mikhaleshik*. taken during Katz' first visit to Micháleshik from about 12 Dec 1990 to 10 Jan 1991. In that video clip, she pointed out where houses of Jewish Micháleshikers had once stood and mentioned that she was one of eleven children and had worked as a maid before she was married. It seems probable that the Ms. Ravdanovitch shown in the video clip was Helena (Lavranovitch) Ravdanovitch.

⁹ Kalbynik (now Narach (known as Kobilnik/Kobylnik until 1964) 54°56'N, 26°41'E, in northwestern Belarus near Lake Narach formed in 1964 from a town earlier known both as Kobylnik and Narach, between the wars in the Postawy Powiat, Wilno Voivodeship, Poland, located 57 miles ENE of Vilna, 12.7 miles ENE of Svir, 22.4 miles ENE of Micháleshik, 45.5 miles E of Kamelishuk.

[Image 4]

CORRESPONDENCE FROM DOVID KATZ TO URKE BLACHER

(This manuscript is untitled)

Written by Hirsh Dovid Katz

15 Jul 1992

Translated by Vital Zajka

Annotated by Ruth C. Clarke

September 2024

Rowen, Gwynedd, Wales –

July 16, 1992

Dear and esteemed friend Urke Blacher,

Thousand apologies for prolonged silence. I remained in Swieciany till the nine weeks after *Pesach* and was extremely busy preparing to come back. Now I am working further on our *yizker-bukh* (memorial book). The address above is the best one till October.

About your great work:¹⁰ I understand that you give your permission to include the whole thing in the *yizker-bukh*, with your name, of course. If so, then certainly one copy should remain with me. Please be so good, clarify this matter, and I will follow your instructions.

About your autobiography:¹¹ If you agree, I would include it in full in our book. It is written exquisitely well, with understanding and with talent. And you deserve a great appreciation for it.

I am sending you here two photographs. One is from Helena Ravdanovich¹² with my friend and interpreter Ziske Shapiro. The second photo is of your house. As I understand, it was the house of Khaim der Shmid (the smith/blacksmith).¹³ Is this correct?

I have asked my secretary months ago to send to you the video on which there is the bridge with everything around.¹⁴ After receiving your last letter I made sure that she sends another copy, as you have apparently not received the first one.

In the time of my visit, I came to Michaleshik twenty times. We have found some 60 more gravestones. When I finish going through it and print the list, I will send it to you right away.

¹⁰ After interviewing Urke at his home in Southington, Connecticut on 22 Nov 1991, Dovid Katz took Urke's only copy of the *auf klar* version of his *togbukh* earlier donated to USHMM in 1988, promising to make a copy and return it to Urke.

¹¹ It is unclear that this is the 30-page document listed as Urke's *Autobiography* in Dovid Katz's online *Yizkor Book for Mikháleshik* (associated therein with a 10"x12" manila envelope postmarked Southington, CT 25 Mar 2002, over five years after Urke's death). It is possible that Dovid was referring to correspondence sent from Urke postmarked 16 Jan 12992 included in Katz's *Yizkor Book for Mikhaleshik* as "My Work for the Stalin's State After Liberation."

¹² See footnote concerning Helena Ravdanovich/Ravdanovitch in Urke's July 1992 letter to Dovid Katz.

¹³ This is not supported by Esther Katz Livingston's *Michaliszki Names* nor her English version of the Berl Klor map entitled *Michaliszki 1939*. In both, Khaim *der Shmid's* house is listed as no. 75 on the northerly side of Vilno Str. across the Kumser Str., while his shop is listed as 3-4 on the southerly side of Vilno Str. at the southwesterly corner of Kumser Str. along with the home of Khaim's son Zusl.

¹⁴ This is Part II of the video of Dovid Katz's first visit to Mikháleshik (about 12 Dec 1990 to 10 Jan 1991) linked to Katz's online *Yizkor Book for Mikháleshik*.

I hope that you have received my letter in April with the list of people from Michaleshik in Israel. If not, please let me know.

With warmest greetings to you and your wife, and to all Michalishker, I

Remain yours,