

**METHODS OF LIGHTING IN MICHALESHIK
and How I Occupied My Time While in Hiding**

(This manuscript is untitled)

Written by Jórek Blocher
28 Apr 1994

Translated by Vital Zajka
Annotated by Ruth C. Clarke
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Southington 28/IV 94

Esteemed friend Dovid,

I have received your letter, the one where you ask about with what they used to light the houses before the First World War. And [about the time] before the First World War I do not know.

In the villages they used to light with kindle. A kindle is made from the pine wood that should be without knots, very smooth, about 1.5 inches wide and about 3 feet long. Every year a tree grows a layer on its trunk, and so they split between the layers with a knife and make kindles. And then they use a stand of about 5 feet high, in which they stick the kindle. In Michaleshik the Jews and shtetl [other inhabitants?] have lightened the houses with kerosene lamps. They used to bless the candles on Friday evenings or on *yortsayts* (the anniversary of a loved one's death). The candles used to come from Vilne, in Michaleshik there were no candle-makers. To my memory there was no electricity in Michaleshik. At us and at the synagogue there were 2

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gas lamps that they used to light on holidays. And so, they used to light candles. The candles were the same as American candles. Svir had already electricity in the shtetl. We had a big lamp and we also used to light them on holidays. So, with kerosene lamps we did not have to deal with candles. And under Germans they used to light with turpentine from the *terpentin fabrik* (turpentine factory), that I think is still in operation now, as I've heard from Shapiro and Gulkovich from Vilne. Turpentine used to produce such smoke that the walls and the ceiling became covered with soot and the smell from the turpentine can be smelt in shtetl, and in the streets. As you have been in Michalishek several times and maybe the turpentine factory still works, so I mean you probably smelt the smell of turpentine. People used to say that it is a very healthy smell. *Di raykhere hoyzer* (the richer houses) had large kerosene lamps and poor had smaller kerosene lamps. So, each *Pesach* people

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had to clean houses (from soot). It was done by Khone Yankelevitch.

The 2 famous weddings I have already described to you. *Goyim* used to have a holiday that was called *Gramnitsy*,¹ they used to make candles from the beeswax, put inside a rope and it was

¹ Gramnitsy; Gromica: Celebrated in the Roman Catholic church on the second day of February, exactly forty days after Epiphany, Gromica is an early Christian feast day also known as Candlemas or Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ, Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Feast of the Holy Encounter, the day that Mary

their candle. They took it to the church and they lit them there and then prayed, and then the part which had not burnt they took back home and stuck them in the ceiling till the next year. Under Germans, when I lived at Dubrovsky's, I made soap which no one had in the ghetto. I saw how a woman from Svir that stayed in our house had cooked a little soap. For that you need fat, and what in English is called lye, and in Yiddish it is called *steyn* (stone), and it is cooked till the moment when you insert a stick and pull it out *un es memt fun em aroprinen* (it runs off it) then you need to cool it and it is enough cooking. Then pour it into

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flat vessels and wait till it cools, then cut it into square pieces and it is soap. We used to get for the soap more than I paid for the whole cow, and we made that much sausage from the meat. And we had bread that I have got working for the *goyim*, preparing the sheepskins to make fur coats. For each skin I got half-*pood* (8 kg) of grain. And so, we had a *pood*² of grain every week to brew liquor. Every day I used to take to my hiding place a half-liter of liquor and a jar of water, and I used to drink the liquor and eat the sausage, and then fall asleep. That's how it was. Nine months that I spent in hiding at Dubrovsky's and what the Podbrodzer Jews counted as a couple of years, I mean that I have described about the Dubrovsky's *hotel* that was a place of refuge for everyone who came to it, even though it was a ruin after the *porets* (landlord) of Podoltse³ had given to Dubrovsky the land where nothing could be grown, it was like a *midbar* (desert).

(and Joseph), according to Christian legend, presented the baby Jesus, the day of Jesus' first entry into the temple in Jerusalem, and the day of Mary's purification from childbirth. In Poland, which was first Christianized in 966 when Duke Mieszko I of the Piast dynasty was baptized and the Holy Roman Emperor recognized Poland, Candlemas is also known as the Feast of Mother of God of the Blessed Thunder Candle (*Matka Boska Gromniczna*), the Feast of the Holy Mother of Gromnice (thunder candles), and the Feast of the Divine Mother with Wolves, and the Christian tradition is intermingled with ancient Slavic mythology about a female deity, now personified as the Holy Mother, who protected people from thunder and wolves. On Gromica, a *gromica* (*grom* meaning *clap of thunder*) being a highly decorated thunder candle made of beeswax (bees being closely associated with the Virgin Mary) would be taken to the local church where it would be blessed by the priest, lit, and carefully (so as not to extinguish the flame) carried home to light the home fire, and then paraded through all of the buildings incensing them, with a drop of wax being left on the threshold of each building to protect its inhabitants. The *gromica* would then be put away and lit only during storms or other dangers. Sometimes, a *gromica* would be placed in the coffin of a deceased loved one to light the deceased's way into Heaven.

See: *Thunder Candle, Mother of God of the Blessed* at <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/t/thunder-candle-mother-of-god-of-the-blessed.phr> (2024); *Candlemas* at <https://timeanddate.com/holidays/common/candlemas> (2024); *Gromica: Polish Candlemas Day* at <https://meettheslavs.com/gromica> (2024); and Gawell, Donna, *Gromica: The Thunder Candle* at <https://donnagawell.com/europe/poland/gromica-the-thunder-candle/> (2024).

² A *pood* is a Russian measurement of weight equivalent to forty *funt* (Imperial Russian pound) or to 16.3807 kilograms or to 36.121 English pounds.

³ Podoltse, Padoł'tsy, Podol'tse, Podolce, Podol'tsy, 52°52'N, 26°06'E, 4.35 miles NW of Michaliszki, 3.1 miles SE of Hadzilun, 2 miles NE of Swiranki, near Plekhati, Muzhily, Buciumy, Popiskiu, Duda and Polyany. According to Jacek Szulski's *Sightseeing Routes* at <https://podbrodzie.info.pl/index.php?pid=2&sub=getTrasa&trasid=4> (2024), in the 19th century, the Podolce estate was owned by the Mikosz family who also owned the nearby Polany estate. From the beginning of the 20th century through 1939, the Polany estate belonged to the Breitkopf family. Its last owner, Wladyslaw Breitkopf had to leave when the Soviet army invaded Poland in September 1939. The Polany wooden manor house was destroyed during WWII, but a photo of the manor house from ca. 1930 exists in the Szzulski gallery. However, in *aufklar* version of Urke's *togbukh* at USHMM, Urke describes the land originally rented by Dubrovsky (and earlier by both his father and grandfather) as being at or called *Slanike* and named the *porets* as Krukowski.

Write to me about anything you want to know, I will answer right away.

U. Blacher

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Envelope addressed to Dovid Katz from Urke Blacher postmarked 30 April 1994 Southington, Connecticut

Note: The below-given sketches of the cross section of a tree trunk with the year rings, along which layers the kindle strips are taken; and a kindle holder were sketched by Urke Blacher in the left margin of page 1.

