

Letter from Fayvl Yavitsh Alvin (Philip Alvin) to Dovid Katz, 28 November 1991

Translated by Lena Watson from the original Yiddish text

November 28, 1991

My dear friend Hirshe-Dovid, son of Menke Katz,

Today is a great American holiday. It has a very hard-to-pronounce name, but I'll try – Thanksgiving. If my pronunciation isn't very accurate, I ask you as a friend to please forgive me. But because of this holiday, something happened that people with weak nerves wouldn't be able to get over, no more no less. A few weeks before this holiday, the Americans carried out a bloody pogrom, in which 28 million souls died across the whole of America... Some of them had their throats cut, and the rest had their heads chopped off, as with the guillotine in France. But don't be frightened: these were indeed two-legged creatures, but not humans – they were turkeys. In Mikháleshik, they would be called 'índikes' rather than 'turkeys.' This holiday requires everyone to eat nothing but roast turkey, so the Jews demanded that their turkeys have their throats cut instead of their heads chopped off and that this be done by a shochet so that the turkeys were kosher. Now that we're through with the holiday, let me get down to this letter.

I received your letter as well as all the other additional pieces. I'm very sorry you very annoyed by the fact that the address of the man in Texas had fallen out and you had to send a separate letter because of it. I thank you very much for your wishes and your sympathy with regards to my wife, but unfortunately it's not a passing illness.

I read in your letter that you were doing everything at the Mikháleshik cemetery, and I marvel at the patience and energy this job requires of you... And I think to myself: may God help you. You're truly worthy of having good health to carry out this mission by doing this hard work.

Some of the questions that you touch upon in your letter are very difficult for me to answer. As for pinpointing the dates and years after such a long time, it goes without saying that in the small shtetlach no Jewish person knew secular dates or secular years. It was enough for a Jew to know from his mother that he was born on the day of the third Hannukah candle, or on the

Second Passover Seder, and so on. True, there was one man in the shtetl that knew secular dates and years. It was Isroel Noakh. If I'm not mistaken, his family name was Yoel, and he used to write petitions if anyone had business with the government or had to appear in court.

You ask me whether I can give you at least some idea of where Yánkele's grave is located. This is why I've asked you several times why you haven't mentioned the *bes-médresh* all this time. It stood next to the great synagogue that burned down, or better put, across the road opposite the gate to the cemetery. Another indication: across the road from the rabbi's house. Another reason why it's difficult for me to know the location [of Yánkele's grave] is because as a kheyder boy, I wasn't allowed into the cemetery. Only Yánkele's family was allowed to attend his funeral, which was in the middle of the night, with police presence. What I do know is that for a whole year, his grave was marked with only a small board with his name and his father's name. Later, a headstone was permitted to be put up, but not a tall one, it was called half a headstone. The inscription on the headstone was roughly as follows – I enclose a separate note – I'm sure that in such a long time everything has changed. As for headstones, there should've been two headstones: my father's and my mother's, but they're not listed...

You also ask me whether I knew the crazy Motke Kive-Itsés. I wrote a whole story about him entitled 'Fires in the Shtetl.'

I wanted to complete the story and send it to you, but in the meantime, I received your letter with all the questions, and there's no doubt that the most difficult of them all is the question about the time. For me, this is the hardest question. Here's an example about myself. My parents told me that I'd been born on Purim, and this is what I believed to be true until the age of 21, when I was brought a conscription summons because I had been born in the shtetl of Mikháleshik on 18 April 1906, and it stuck with me.

You also ask me whether I know about Emma. One day, we'll talk about her, too. I started writing about the fires in Mikháleshik, but when I read in your letter how you applied yourself to the Mikháleshik cemetery, I stopped working on the story because I had found among the gravestones the name of Reb Mikhoel, and I think that it's the Reb Mikhoel that my grandfather had told me about when I was seven years old. This was when my grandfather studied the Gemara as a child with this Gemara melamed, Reb Mikhoel. This is the most interesting story of all, and the cemetery is mentioned a lot here. Well, you'll read it yourself. I think I'll finish it in a few weeks and I'll send it to you.

Now for the last question, which, unfortunately, I won't be able to get to the bottom of because you ask me to send the material to the Gershater person. The thing is that I have to go to the post office, and it's a matter of how much it's going to cost me. The post office is a long way away from me and I don't drive. I've never driven a car in my life, and I always have to look for someone to give me a lift. But most importantly, I can't leave my wife alone in the house, I've already paid a great price for it... And I think that Gershater will become my enemy because of my doing it. He'll want to be in contact with you personally, and not through a third party. Please forgive me for not being able to do this for you. Unfortunately, it's just not possible for me. I'd very much like you to meet Bernard, he'll tell you a great deal. I hope you'll reply to my letter.

With my best wishes to you to be healthy and strong and have the strength to do everything you want to do, and with great respect, Fayvl Alvin.

[Note on p. 2 of pdf]

The grave wasn't right by the fence, but about 20 yards further into the cemetery.

[Drawing] the gate

[underlined word] approximately

[Note on p. 3 of pdf]

I'm making it clearer:

'Here lies buried

Young man Yaakov son of Chaim and Basia

Murdered by young man

Yitskhok son of Tsvi Khonon'

[Inscription on the gravestone:] 'Here lies buried

Young man Yaakov son of Chaim and Basia'