

Letter from Fayvl Yavitsh Alvin (Philip Alvin) to Dovid Katz, 3 November 1991

Translated by Lena Watson from the original Yiddish text

November 3, 1991

Dear friend Hirshe-Dovid, son of Menke Katz,

I received your letter of 20 October 1991. As I sat down to write this reply, I got thinking whether I was actually worthy of writing a letter to such a highly esteemed professor of the University of Oxford, which is the most famous university in the whole world... But what would a simple Mikháleshik Jew say? Now that I've crawled in, I'll keep crawling...

My dear friend Hirshe-Dovid, you ask me many questions in your letter. Of course, it's impossible for me to answer many of them, and telling lies isn't my way. But '[a wise man] speaks of the first point first, and of the last point, last¹,' so I'll try to answer them, and let's go in order.

Question 1: This is not without certain difficulties, but if the Yizkor book gets to that point, my son has promised me that he'll be able to do it.

Question 2 is whether I can send you a map of the shtetl. You've got to be there to be able to draw a map, but the map you sent me isn't that bad at all. A few things are missing from it, for example, there were seven stores in the marketplace, as well as the fire station. Next to the seven stores, there was a well. And another thing, Vilna Street. Mentioned there is Perele Yavitch – she's my sister, and it was my parents' house. Then, it's Berl the Blacksmith's house, then, Hirshe Khayes Hopstein's, and next to it is the house of Leib Yehuda, the Gemara melamed. Between them was the house of the chimneysweep or stovemaker, his name was either Hirshl-Dovid or Yosl-Dovid. He was a soldier under Tsar Nicholas [I], [served] 25 years back in the days of the Cantonists. Among these three houses there was a well, the best well in the shtetl. Everyone used to come to it to draw water for tea. Your map doesn't show Leib Yehuda's house. After it came the house of Rokhl-Itl, a widow with five sons and two daughters, they were

¹ Pirkei Avot, 5:7

always called ‘the bunch of urchins.’ It was by this well on a small pile of snow and snowballs that Yankele’s murder took place.

Question 3: can I send my own biography? If I sat down now to write my autobiography, I’d have to write at least two volumes, but we’ll talk about it when we get a chance perhaps. Now I can’t talk about it, unfortunately. It’s somewhat complicated.

Question 4: Do I remember the main characters of this story and what did they look like? I’d have to be a plastic surgeon, as well as a psychologist and a painter, or a magician... I won’t lie: I was between 8 and 9 at the time. Now, I’ve been married to my wife since 1954 and I see her every day, yet if you asked me what color her eyes were, I’d swear to you I didn’t know... What I can tell you is that Yankele was of average height, with dark hair, well-built; he was neither fat nor lean. On the whole, a good-looking guy. He never dressed elegantly, and he wore boots with high bootlegs, I believe because of his knife.

Itsik was the opposite. He was half a head taller than Yankele, his hair brown-reddish, with a long thin face, well-built, and was always dressed elegantly. He used to wear very often high school uniform with silvery buttons. Both Yankele and Itsik were strong boys. When I think about how the murder happened, I’m inclined to conclude that it was more likely to have been an accident than a murder because when Yankele pulled out his knife and challenged Itsik, a fight broke out between Yankele and Itsik. In that fight, Yankele was killed, and Itsik disappeared. Reb Khayim the Blacksmith was of average height, lean, with a short beard more gray than black, a quiet, likeable person, and everyone loved him. He had no enemies in the shtetl. His wife was also a gentle and kind woman, and if I’m not mistaken, her name was Basia. She used to help the poor and give alms.

You ask me whether the Jews of the shtetl were in fact called as I told you, like Uri the Cobbler, or Hirshe Khayes. This is a tradition in all the shtetlach that every man has a nickname that the shtetl gives him. For example, Hirshe Khayes was called ‘Smekalke’ [Gumption], or Mendel the Halfmoon – why? Because he had a bold patch on his head in the shape of a crescent moon, poor soul. Or, for instance, Leibe the Tailor, Yankl the Carpenter, Alter the Gaiter Stitcher, Aber the Furrier, but not a furrier that sews furs and makes fur coats, but rather there were furriers in the shtetlach that made hats. In Mikháleshik, there was Abe-Yose the Furrier; Feiftsig the Painter, and so on.

You also ask whom the well belonged to, whether it was Abe Kaplanovich. This Abe was a fat man with a big belly. He had two sons: Yosl, a married man, and the other one, Ruven, a bachelor. This Abe was a fine man and householder of the shtetl, but the well didn't belong to him. No well had an owner. All the wells belonged to the shtetl, and the fire station controlled all the wells of the shtetl. The tragedy happened by the well that was between the houses of Hirshe Khayes and Leib Yehuda, by that one. It's on the 'Kumshe' on the right side of the street that goes to Vilna. Better put, two houses further down from my parents' house, which is marked on your map as 'Perele Yavich' – she's my sister.

The last question is what happened to Hirshe Khones' house and family. Immediately after the murder, Itsik disappeared, and the police protected the house of Hirshe Khones and his family because Khayim the Blacksmith's sons wanted to storm it and take revenge, but as if by some magic, everyone in the house was gone. For some time, the house stood empty, but years later some strangers took occupancy of the house. I don't know how it all came about.

I've written more or less everything I could think of. I want to thank you again for your appreciation of my work. Keep well and strong and may G-d help you.

Most respectfully, your friend Fayvl.