

Menke Katz's letter to Dovid Katz, 12 August 1986.

Translated by Lena Watson from the original Yiddish text.

Friday, 12 August 1986

[extra text in top left-hand corner] Will you have time and patience to read such a long letter? Especially in such a scrawl of a handwriting.

Hirshe-Dovid, Hirshe-Dovid,

Just spoken to you. I promised to tell you a bit more about the famous love murder of Mikháleshik.

First of all, as you know, I consider myself a native of Mikháleshik through and through, despite the fact that I was born in Svintsyán. Berke and Eltshik were born in Svir. Which is to say, we lived in Svintsyán for 13 years, and in Mikháleshik, for hundreds of years, no fewer than 600 years for sure.

After the Germans of First World War took Eltshik away in an unknown direction and we had no news from him for a long time, the beggar Chaim-Meir from Svir let us know that he had been passing through the little hamlet of Buvíts (not far from Mikháleshik) and found Eltshik all alone in a deserted barrack in a 'no-man's land,' starving, exhausted, with a pen or a pencil in his hand, writing something in a notebook to his girlfriend, Dveirke. Chaim-Meir of Svir told us he had shared some bread from his knapsack with him because he felt sorry for Eltshik, who looked ill, malnourished and sick with longing.

Eltshik had been left alone in the hamlet of Buvíts because the Germans were then fighting the Russians; both the Germans and the Russians fled, leaving Eltshik in Buvíts to die because they no longer needed him: he was ill. Why would they want to take a sick 17-year-old boy with them? So, they abandoned him in Buvíts.

After we heard the story from Chaim-Meir the Svir Beggar, who had been wandering from shtetl to shtetl begging all his life, my mother and I went to Buvíts to Eltshik. It was far, very far because we went on foot. The war was still raging on all the roads. My mother had taken

old wives' remedies, a little food – bread mixed with sawdust, and a few other things. The frost was severe. We stayed overnight in a village called Shimeníshik. Among all the non-Jews who lived there, there was a very old Jewish woman, and we slept in her house. She told us stories all night long and gave us something to eat and kvas to drink. She told us not to have any bad thoughts with regards to Eltshik. He was alive and well, she said. We believed her with great joy because we wanted to believe her.

At dawn, this ancient woman from Shimeníshik led us over the dangerously slippery ice out of the village, and we plodded on through woods and across fields, past trenches where German or Russian soldiers lay, but no one bothered us. German and Russian bullets whistled over our heads.

Finally, we reached Buvíts. Just like Mikháleshik, Buvíts was a small island surrounded by the River Viliya. People always had to cross by ferry, but the Germans built a bridge both in Mikháleshik and Buvíts. Many Jews worked on the bridge. They allowed my mother to cross the bridge, but not me, a little boy! However, the Jews reassured us, 'Don't worry, we'll get the boy across the bridge.' My mother, anguished, went off by herself, and a little later, a man smuggled me into Buvíts under his coat.

When I, a little boy, entered Buvíts, devoid of people, a terrifying silence, a fear reigned there. Suddenly, I heard a terrible wailing, which I recognised as my mother's. I followed it and found my mother standing over Eltshik's dead body.

Eltshik was buried in Mikháleshik. In one of my poems, I write that if I die in Jerusalem, I want a pouch of earth from Eltshik's grave be brought to me. In case there's no grave anymore because the Germans destroyed even his grave, I request a handful of earth from the Mikháleshik Jewish cemetery.

My mother moved back to Svintsyán, where Berke, Blumke and Yeiske were. I stayed in Mikháleshik for two years. My uncle Avremke trained me as a watchmaker. During those two years, I, a sensitive dreamy boy, soaked in the hundreds of years that our family had lived in Mikháleshik.

In Mikháleshik, I came down with a disease that was called 'Spanish flu,' an infectious disease that very few people survived. The symptoms were fever, fatigue, and sleepiness. I suspected already in the early hours of the morning that I had contracted it. I recited a lot of

psalms, followed by a lot of prayers in the hope it would help me, but of course it helped me like medical cups on a corpse.

No one from my family wanted to have me – not because they were bad people, but because of the risk to their lives – but the kind and wonderful Beilke said, ‘Menke will stay with us. If we have to die, we’ll all die.’ Beilke had two daughters, Blumke and Khayke. Khayke protested, saying that they could all die because of one boy, but the good Blumke said like Beilke, ‘Menke stays with us!’

I lay in bed and soon became lethargic. I saw unbelievable fantastical visions, which perhaps need a whole book written about them, but we’ll leave them out for now.

Well, now onto the famous love murder of Mikháleshik. Our uncle Chaim the Blacksmith and his sons wondered for a long time why Itshke, Khonke the Feldsher’s son, showed up every day to sharpen a big knife on the anvil, but it never occurred to anyone that he was plotting something bad. But one Friday, when we all went out for a walk after the kiddush as usual.

I and everyone around me heard a terrible scream. We all ran there. My cousin Yánkele (he was a son of my grandfather’s sister, i.e. my second cousin) had fallen down. Everyone hurried to raise him. We lifted him and carried him to the murderer’s father, Khonke the Feldsher, but he died on the spot (Khonke the Feldsher mostly used to treat people with leeches, medical cups and plants).

Why did Itshke kill Yánkele? Because they both loved my rebbe’s daughter (she wasn’t beautiful at all). I remember Yánkele always asking me whether I saw Itshke speak to my rebbe’s daughter in the kheyder (I don’t remember her name). They both loved her to death, but it looked as if she preferred Yánkele. This made Itshke furious, and he plotted to kill Yánkele.

Yánkele’s strong brothers and his whole family were so preoccupied with Yánkele’s death that they didn’t notice Itshke swim across the Viliya and disappear.

First, Yánkele’s brothers destroyed the house of Itshke’s family despite it being Friday night, Shabbos. Khonke, the father, who was completely innocent, had to flee from Mikháleshik, where also his family had lived for hundreds of years. For weeks following that, Yánkele’s brothers chased after the murderer, Itshke (many years previously, one of Itshke’s uncles had also murdered a love rival). Gentiles said he had passed himself off for a beggar, begging from door to door for bread and sleeping in stalls with the cattle, but in the end he went to America. It became known that he worked in a hospital somewhere in California. It was absolutely

impossible to find him. Many years later, it even became known that he had married a girl from Lithuania and had many children. I don't know what became of him.

In my previous letter, I wrote the names of my grandfather's ten children by his two wives, Blume and my aunt. Now, a few more names: Yánkele's mother, my grandfather's sister, was called Bashe; her husband was Chaim the Blacksmith. One of their daughters was a great beauty, her name was Braynke. One of her brothers was called Zuske. He lived in Passaic. After his father's death, Zuske lived in my father's house. He was a blacksmith in America, too, a man as strong as an ox. His wife never stopped telling how during World War II the Germans had taken her children away, and how she was allowed to see the children until they were gassed. She died in Passaic of a heart attack. Zuske's son was also a blacksmith in Passaic – my father's almost entire family lived in Passaic, so perhaps it's a good thing that in a hundred years' time we shall all 'live' together in Loday, not far from Passaic.

Well, enough for now, Hirshe-Dovid. Write a letter, give me a call. Stay well.

Menke