

The Shochet

A Memoir of Jewish Life in Ukraine and Crimea (Vol I)

By **Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn**;

Presented and Translated by **Michael Rotenfeld**

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SUMMARY

Set in Ukraine and Crimea, this unique autobiography offers a fascinating, detailed picture of life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tsarist Russia. Goldenshteyn (1848-1930), a traditional Jew who was orphaned as a young boy, is a master storyteller. Folksy, funny, streetwise, and self-confident, he is a keen observer of nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, both Jewish and non-Jewish. His accounts are vivid and readable, sometimes stunning in their intensity.

The memoir is brimming with information; his adventures shed light on communal life, persecution, family relationships, religious practices and beliefs, social classes, local politics, interactions between Jews and other religious communities (including Muslims, who formed the majority of Crimea's populace), epidemics, poverty, competition for resources, migration, war, modernity and secularization, holy men and charlatans, acts of kindness and acts of treachery. In chronicling his own life, Goldenshteyn inadvertently tells a bigger story—the story of how a small, oppressed people, among other minority groups, struggled for survival in the massive Russian Empire.

Until now, only a small circle of Yiddish-speaking scholars had access to this extremely significant primary source. This translation is a game-changer, making this treasure trove of information accessible to academics and ordinary readers alike. Informed by research in Ukrainian, Israeli, and American archives and personal interviews with the few surviving individuals who knew Goldenshteyn personally, *The Shochet* is a magnificent new contribution to Jewish and Eastern European history.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Michael Rotenfeld is a historical researcher who has long been fascinated by Jewish memory in its myriad forms, especially the genre of Jewish autobiography. He is the director of Touro University Library's *Project Zikaron*, a permanent collection of previously uncollated and undigitized historical material from Jewish communities across the world. He also coordinated the digitization of David Tidhar's nineteen-volume *Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel* (www.tidhar.tourolib.org), which has received over two million page views.

THE
SHOCHET

A Memoir of Jewish Life
in Ukraine and Crimea

Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn

Touro University Press Books

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THE SHOCHET

A Memoir of Jewish Life
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Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn

Volume One

Presented and Translated
by Michoel Rotenfeld

Preface by Israel Singer

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FIGURE 1. Pinkhes-Dov "Pinye-Ber" Goldenshteyn (1848-1930) in the early 1900s, when he first started to write his autobiography. At that time, his beard was still mostly red. He is wearing a *yarmilke* (skullcap worn by Jews) used by cantors, since he served as the *shoykhet* and cantor of Bakhchisaray. Taken in Feodosiya, Crimea, where his oldest two children resided at the time. Courtesy of Shifra Bernfeld.

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CHAPTER 14

My Unexpected Engagement, 1864–1865

That Yom Kippur, I spent all day in the *bes-medresh* in Tiraspol.¹ I stood there praying, sobbing, and asking God to take pity on me, for He is my father. I did not leave the *bes-medresh* for a moment the entire day, unlike the manner of some boys who would walk out of the *bes-medresh* during the Torah reading or during the breaks between prayers. I fasted, prayed, and studied the entire day. I studied the Mishnaic tractate of Yoma,² the rich pieces of poetic liturgy, and similar passages. At the close of Yom Kippur, after I had eaten a dry meager meal, I lay down to sleep because I was very tired from fasting and from exerting myself all day in prayer. As you can imagine, my pre-fast meal had also been quite meager. In short, I was so exhausted by the fast that I was satisfied with the meal that I ate and crawled onto the oven, my usual bed at Reb Olter's, and lay down to sleep. His wife and his aged mother were still sitting and chatting. I fell into such a deep hearty sleep that I did not begin to realize that I was being visited by distinguished guests. They were laughing at me for having gone to bed so early without being aware of the wonderful good fortune that awaited me. I was sleeping so soundly that when my sister Ite tried to wake me I did not hear her. It was not until they began poking me sharply that I realized something was going on and opened my eyes. I was about to turn over on my other side when I noticed my sister Ite and other people laughing, "Well, well. What a deep sleep!" said someone. "Apparently he's not aware of anything. He can't even imagine what's about to happen to him," said another.

I tore myself from sleep, particularly when my sister pestered me by saying, "Get up, sleepyhead. Aren't you ashamed? We're all waiting for you!"

1 October 10, 1864.

2 The Talmudic tractate Yoma discusses the laws of Yom Kippur.

“What is it,” I asked, “and who is the ‘all,’ and what are you waiting for? And who is waiting for me?”

“Get up quickly,” she repeated. “Get dressed and come down from the oven.”

I awoke and began to dress, though all of this seemed to be a dream, and I did not understand what was happening. Coming down from the oven, I saw Reb Shimen, Zolmen-Sukher-Kopls’s son-in-law, an upstanding, well-to-do young married man; our relative Shulem; and my sister Ite. Dressed up and with cheerful demeanors, they were all in Reb Olter’s home and were laughing at my sleepy appearance. My good friend, Reb Olter, and his wife were also dressed up. So I asked them, “Well, won’t you tell me already what’s the meaning of all this, your coming here and your cheerfulness?” They said, “Wash up, put on your clothes, and go with your sister to Reb Zolmen’s. From there you’ll go with Reb Zolmen to the rabbi’s because a large crowd is waiting for you there. We’ll now go directly to the rabbi’s to await your arrival. See that you don’t delay, because the night is running out.”

I went with my sister and Reb Shimen, Zolmen’s son-in-law, to Reb Zolmen’s, but still did not know why. I asked but was not told. “Why bother asking? When you get to the rabbi’s, you’ll know.” I arrived at Reb Zolmen’s and found his whole household there dressed-up and ready to go to the rabbi, Reb Shloyme. As soon as I came in, they all asked in unison, “Where did you find him?” And the group who escorted me related how they found me sleeping on the oven and how difficult it was to wake me. All laughed at the incident, but I still did not understand what was happening to me. Ite ordered me to put on the clothes that Reb Zolmen’s young son-in-law Shimen handed me: one of his silk *kapotes*, a nice beaver hat, a silk vest, and a good pair of attractive shoes. After I dressed, I caught wind of what was going on. My sister Ite shouted, “See what a handsome groom he makes.”³ With those words, I understood that a match was in the works. So I said, “Since you’re taking me to see a prospective match, you might at least tell me who she is.” They replied, “Would it be so terrible if you found out later? Go, go, there’s no problem. You can rely on us. We won’t mislead you.” “There’s no time to waste,” said Reb Zolmen, “we must go now.” “Yes,” said Shimen, looking at the clock, “it is already eleven. It took an hour for us to find him. Come on, then, come. It’s already late.”

We went off and everyone was whispering and speaking in low tones so that I could not hear. They avoided speaking to me, as though this had nothing to do with me. All this disturbed me, but there was nothing I could do. I could

3 In Yiddish, one becomes a groom upon becoming engaged.

not contradict Reb Zolmen and his wife or their son-in-law Reb Shimen. As for Ite, I was simply scared that she might strike me.

In short, I went with them until I entered the rabbi's house. At the rabbi's, I found a crowd of about sixty to seventy men, not including the women. All were already under the influence. When they saw me, a sudden shout went up, "He's here at last, the handsome groom. Look how he waited to be asked to come while such a large crowd, *kenehore*, was awaiting him." Some defended me while others blamed me, "Out of respect for the local rabbi, he shouldn't have delayed so long and waited for others to ask him to come." They grasped me and placed me next to the rabbi, Reb Shloy mele. I began to look over the crowd, which included the very finest young married men in town and all my relatives and familiar tenant innkeepers from Tashlik and Buter, including the familiar tenant innkeeper, Reb Itsye, and his wife, Dvoyre. Reb Itsye was seated next to me and the rabbi, and Reb Shulem Tashliker was seated next to Reb Itsye and the rabbi, meaning between them. I looked and saw that the cantor Kolmen-Volf was also here with his cantorial assistants. The crowd was well imbibed, and the table was laden with wine. I knew that after Yom Kippur people drank at the rabbi's, but I never expected that they were about to write an engagement contract with me.⁴

"Hand over ink and a pen," said the cantor. I wondered why he needed ink and a pen all of a sudden, but I soon knew all. Reb Shulem, who had been speaking the entire time with Reb Itsye, while his wife Dvoyre stood nearby, suddenly addressed me, "You know, Pinkhes-Dov, you're now becoming engaged, and we're about to write the engagement contract." "How's that possible?!" I said. "What does it mean that I'm becoming engaged?! How can you write an engagement contract when I don't have the slightest idea with whom? Who's my father-in-law?"⁵ Shulem said, "Yes, you're right about that. You need to know everything. So you should know that all of your friends are in agreement that you should become engaged to Reb Itsye's daughter. You know Reb Itsye and his wife well, and you know his daughter too. And if it's agreeable with all of us, it must be agreeable with you as well." The entire crowd became quiet and listened as Shulem spoke with me. Everyone gave their consent, and the rabbi also thought that it was a very good match. Everyone knew Reb Itsye to be an honest and virtuous Jew, particularly since he was ready to make the sacrifice to obtain a Torah scholar such as myself as a son-in-law, despite my poverty. Reb

4 After breaking the Yom Kippur fast, Jews customarily celebrate God's favorable judgment by drinking (*Kitsur Shulkhan Arukh* 133:29).

5 Until his actual marriage, the author refers to his prospective in-laws simply as his in-laws, as was customary in Yiddish.

Itsye simply wanted to make me happy, so he was willing to spend whatever was necessary to marry his daughter into a prestigious family and with a Torah scholar.⁶

They then began to list all the commitments undertaken by the father, namely a dowry of 300 rubles in cash, which was not to be given directly into my hands but to be deposited with a trustworthy person, and lifelong *kest*, which was possible because he did not have any other daughters, only a little boy. He must also clothe me from now on, especially for the wedding, with clothes for the Jewish holidays, for *Shobes*, and for weekday wear.⁷ Since I had nowhere to live, he would pay for my room and board until the wedding, which must be delayed for at least two years because his daughter was still too young, having just turned thirteen.⁸ And he undertook one more thing more important than all the other commitments: he must register me as his son. Since he was a former “Nikolayevian soldier,” this would be my best protection from falling into the clutches of the antisemitic Russian military.⁹ And the cantor was instructed to write all of this into the engagement contract.

I was torn and could not decide what to do. I never expected such a sudden development. All my relatives thought it was a fitting match, but what did they have to lose? This was such a sudden development for me. I pictured before me Reb Itsye’s coarse house, the silly village girl, the shameful nickname “Soldier,” which Reb Itsye was called, and many other issues. If I were to get up and leave, would they let me? Could I possibly contradict all the others, especially since they were all on my side and meant well for me. Shulem and the rabbi saw that I was very upset, so they persuaded me that this was truly a lucky break for me because who else would want to make a match with such a poor orphan who was not registered and therefore could not be allowed in one’s home even just

-
- 6 Itsye Herschkovits was a *kohen*, which means that he was a patrilineal descendant of the sons of the Biblical Aaron, brother of Moses, who served as priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. The author’s son Shloyme indicated this on a Page of Testimony on file at Yad Vashem, which he filled out on May 25, 1955 for his first cousin Itskhok (son of Mordkhe) Gerschkovits (1888–ca. 1941), who perished in the Holocaust. Though many simple pious Jews desire to have a Torah scholar as a son-in-law, it is specifically mentioned in the Talmud (Pesachim 49a) that a *kohen* should marry his daughter to a Torah scholar.
 - 7 A Jew should have separate clothing for the Jewish holidays, apart from one’s *Shabes* clothes (*Kitsur Shulkhan Arukh* 103:5).
 - 8 Hence, Freyde was born around September 1851. The author was just shy of his sixteenth birthday. Dubnow (1918, 2:40,112) notes that though legislation was passed in 1835 in Tsarist Russia forbidding Jewish males from marrying younger than eighteen and females younger than sixteen under the pain of imprisonment, it was easy to evade this prohibition due to “the defective registration of births and marriages then in vogue.”
 - 9 Being a former soldier, Reb Itsye’s sons were evidently exempt from military conscription.

to spend the night.¹⁰ The rabbi tried to convince me by telling me that Reb Itsye spent the Jewish holidays with him every year, that he already knew him for many years, and that he was truly a pious Jew who was meticulous in his observance of the Torah's commandments. The rabbi continued that Reb Itsye's having been a soldier made him even greater and more important.¹¹ And he had become even more honorable in the rabbi's eyes now that he was willing to give such a large dowry so as to obtain a Torah scholar for his daughter.

While the cantor kept on writing and the crowd kept on drinking, I kept thinking over what I should do. I finally decided to agree but dependent on the stipulation that Reb Itsye would register me as his son.¹² That commitment was more important to me than anything else, so everything was void if he would not do that. And that he should begin working on this right after signing the engagement contract. Everyone shouted, "Good! Good! The groom is right! That provision should be written in the most precise legal terms in the engagement contract stipulating that the registration must be completed within three months, without any excuses."¹³ In the end, the engagement contract was read, and I became, in a propitious hour, an unexpected fiancé.¹⁴

I did not see my fiancée then but she apparently wanted to see me, so she stood on the threshold of the door directly opposite me. When she stood up

10 Anyone harboring unregistered or unauthorized residents could be fined, and the authorities would monetarily reward informants who denounced such individuals (Matthews, 1993:7–8, Kofman, 1955:41–53). See ch. 13, p. 209, specifically footnote 27, regarding the author's fear of non-Jewish informants. Meir (2010:103–104) writes that the city of Kiev was unique in having nighttime roundups of Jews, but this because they lacked the requisite residency papers—not internal passports. Though the Jews had been forced out of Kiev in 1827, certain categories of Jews were allowed to live there beginning in 1855; many Jews would illegally lodge there on short business trips.

11 Since many such former soldiers were forcibly separated from many aspects of Torah observance for so many years, one who was very observant upon his return was to be particularly admired.

12 Reb Itsye's registering the author as his son would have provided the author with a second-level exemption from military service, which was for an only wage-earning son (though other sons were in the family) who assisted his father in supporting his family. (See the footnote regarding the three types of exemptions in chapter 24.)

13 Though translated as "in the most precise legal terms," the word used in the original is כפול (keyfln). This word literally means "doubling" and refers to the need for conditions to be repeated in a contract in both their negative and positive forms, that is, if this condition will be fulfilled, the agreement is valid, and if the condition is not fulfilled, the agreement is not valid. See *Shulkhan Arukh* (Even ha-Ezer 38).

14 Itsye's full name was Shulem-Itsye (ch. 11, p. 191). His surname was Hershkovits (Gershkovits in Russian), as related by the author's granddaughter, Aliza (Goldenshteyn) Bernfeld in 2001 and as noted in the entry for the author's son Raphael Goldenstein in *Who's Who in American Jewry*, 1926 (1927:207).

on her toes and raised her head to be able to see me over the heads of all the people, I saw her face and her blue eyes.¹⁵ I recognized her as the Freydele who had begged me to play with her and her little brother and had not wanted me to go away for *Shobes*.

The crowd grew very lively. Dvoyre did not spare the liquor. She knew what needed to be done. The engagement contract had cost her a lot of money, but who considers money when one has the opportunity to fall in with such a prestigious family. Normally, they would never even have met them, and now they were actually in-laws!¹⁶ She had satisfied the rabbi and the cantor with a fine tip. The crowd was satisfied, too. At dawn, everyone left satisfied, but not I.

Though the engagement contract had been written, I was not excited about anything. I had not contemplated becoming engaged that quickly. Had I known earlier what was in the works, I would have left Tiraspol earlier. But apparently Shulem had understood well how I thought; therefore, he had worked it out in strict secrecy, so that I would not know of anything until all was prepared. He had deliberately gathered such a large crowd so that I could not wiggle out of it.

When I was about to leave, my father-in-law handed me a twenty-five-ruble note so that I could leave some hard currency for my bride-to-be. My future mother-in-law led her to me by the hand, and I bade her goodnight and gave her the money. In my state of surprise and distress, I do not remember whether I put it into my fiancée's hand or in my mother-in-law's hand for her to give to her.

In short, I left and took off the borrowed clothes and put back on my own. I lay down to sleep, but now I could not fall asleep so easily. My head was spinning, thinking of everything that had happened to me. Finally, I fell asleep until the morning. Upon waking up, I began to dress, to wash up, and ran to *shul* for prayers. When I arrived at *shul*, they had already finished prayers. Everyone wished me *mazel tov* and said that the match was a lucky one for me. In short, now I was lucky and was to be envied.

My heart was not joyful. All of this seemed like a dream to me. I did not want to know about anything except the registration. Were I to be finally registered and have a document attesting to that, I would know that I was alive, and I would be able to think about a future for myself. As long as I lacked such a document, my life was no life and I enjoyed nothing.

15 Freyde's granddaughter Aliza Bernfeld of Petakh-Tikva recalled her father Shloyme saying that his mother Freyde had striking royal-blue eyes.

16 Under normal circumstances, a member of the relatively simple and rural Hershkovitshes would not have been considered a suitable match for a Goldenshteyn, a family more sophisticated and learned, including being related to the rabbi of Tiraspol, Reb Shloymele.

Actually, that very day, Shulem left for his home in the village of Tashlik and took his leave of me in a friendly manner, promising me that he would see to it that they registered me right away. My in-laws also bade me farewell, and I cautioned them that the most important thing for me was being registered, and that until they registered me, I did not know whether I was engaged. They explained to me that this could not be rushed, since it did not depend on them and would require much laborious efforts with the authorities. They would start to work on it right after all the holidays,¹⁷ and they hoped to God that by Pesach I would be registered as their son.¹⁸ I believed them and bade them farewell. They gave me a few rubles and started to ride off to their village. They added that during the intermediate days of *Sukes* one of them would return to the city to arrange room and board for me, but, in the meantime, I had those few rubles. And with that, they rode off to their village.

After their departure, I thought that I should not depend on their arranging room and board for me. I did not want them to squander money on me because, as things might turn out, they might not be able to register me. Since this was my main concern and I would break the engagement if this was not done, why should I let them squander money on me and then have complaints against me? So I decided to leave for Romanovke and stay there with my late brother's father-in-law, Reb Ersh, and with my sister Surele. I would stay a bit here and a bit there until I would receive word from my future father-in-law that he had registered me. I could then obtain an internal passport and become a free person, the equal of all, and be able to travel to some yeshiva to study for a while.¹⁹ And actually, the next morning, two days after Yom Kippur, I left Tiraspol for Romanovke.²⁰

First of all, I traveled to Bender, which was on the way, to see my sister Tsipe because she deserved a *mazel tov*, having given birth to a son on Yom Kippur. Upon arriving there, I found her recovering from the birth. I happened to arrive when the midwife was bathing the baby, so I tossed a silver coin into the bathtub. Tsipe was very pleased that her brother could provide “bath money” for the midwife—and a silver coin at that.²¹ The midwife, as well, certainly had

17 After *Sukes* and *Simchas Torah*.

18 Pesach was six months away. Though the engagement contract had specified three months, the author was evidently giving his first in a series of deadline extensions.

19 As mentioned in chapter 13, p. 211, footnote 37, one did not have the right to travel within Tsarist Russia without an internal passport. See also Avrutin (2010:91).

20 The author left Tiraspol on October 12, 1864.

21 Bath money is called *bodgelt* in the original and refers to the silver coins for the midwife thrown into the bathtub in which the child is bathed shortly after his birth. This passage is listed as one of the sources for this term in *Jewish Money* by Rivkind (1959:40–41).

not expected such great luck. “Oh,” she cried with joy, “the child will be lucky!” She apparently foresaw this in the coin . . . I told my sister about my *mazel tov*—my engagement and my future in-laws. She asked me about my bride-to-be, so I told her that I knew her from afar and that I actually did not want to know her any better until I received my internal passport and would be registered. When that happened, I would truly know that I was engaged and would then also give her more thought.

The birth of this baby boy was quite significant since Tsipe had prayed for children for years and had barely lived to see the birth of her little girl, Ester-Khaye, born three years earlier, whom we already know.²² And now God had provided her with a son, someone to say *Kaddish* for her. His birth was an answer to her tearful pleas before God by day and by night to grant her a son so that she could leave behind someone to say *Kaddish* for her in this world. Her great poverty mattered not to her, and she accepted it with love, as long as God would grant her a son to say *Kaddish* for her. And God heard her prayers and found her worthy of having a son whom she planned to name Duvid.

You can understand how joyful she was upon hearing that her brother had become engaged on the same evening as her son’s birth, creating a double *mazel tov*. I bade her farewell and kissed her goodbye. Though she asked me to stay until the *bris*, I could not do so because I was in a hurry to leave for Romanovke and did not want my future in-laws to run into me somewhere during the intermediate days of *Sukes*. She said, “Oy, how I would love to meet your bride-to-be, dear brother.” “You will meet her, God willing. When I come here for Pesach, I’ll drive with you to my future father-in-law’s, so you’ll meet them all, God willing. Be well! Be well! Until we meet again, beloved sister.” And with these words I left her home and headed for Romanovke.

It was about fifty *versts*, and perhaps more, to Romanovke, but what did that matter to me? The next morning, a day before the eve of *Sukes*, I arrived in Romanovke.²³ “A guest! A guest!” shouted everyone in Ershl’s house, and they all greeted me. Shoyl the *shoykhet*, Ershl’s son, asked me what was new with me since he had left me in Mayak with Reb Leyzer the *shoykhet* and felt sorry that I had left there. So I told him that it was precisely because Reb Leyzer had wanted me to marry his daughter that I left there, and that I was rescued from there only to fall into an even worse situation. I went on to tell him the entire story of my engagement. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It appears that you didn’t do badly. Your future father-in-law is apparently rich, and you could have been stuck with a

22 For details regarding the birth of Tsipe’s two children, see ch. 3, pp. 124–125.

23 October 13, 1864.

poor man as a father-in-law in Mayak. True, Reb Leyzer in Mayak has a more prestigious lineage, but that alone is not enough in life. You have it especially good since he's agreed to register you, which is more important than anything else. Be happy, Pinkhes-Ber, God is helping you and will help you. Don't worry. Stay with us over the winter. Study in the *bes-medresh*. I'll look after you and will study with you often and fellow Hasidim will also befriend you. You're a pious young man, and people like piety."

So I spent the entire winter at the home of our in-law Reb Ersh the *shoykhet*, until *Rosh-Khoydesh Nisan*.²⁴ My task was to study in the *bes-medresh* until eleven at night, wake up before dawn, and study until morning prayers. After prayers, I would go eat. When I would come to eat and did not find Reb Ersh at home, I would quietly seize a pen and pieces of parchment and practice writing on them the special Hebrew letters used in writing Torah scrolls and *mezuzahs*. Since Reb Ersh was also a scribe, these items were lying around. I wrote a small *Megilla*, and that is how I stealthily taught myself how to write these letters.²⁵ Once, Reb Ersh caught me writing, and I was afraid that I would be scolded. Instead, he was astonished at how well I had written and said, "When did you learn this?" When I confessed all my sins, he told me to show him all my work. When I showed him my little *Megilla*, he was even more astounded and said, "From now on, you don't have to be afraid of me. Actually, why don't I teach you myself. I'll give you *mezuzahs* to write, but first study the laws of writing *tefillin* and *mezuzahs*." I was delighted that I could finally earn the food he fed me, rather than eating the bread of charity, gratuitous bread. I learned the laws of Hebrew lettering used in Torah scrolls, *mezuzahs*, and so on.²⁶ Every afternoon, I would write one or two *mezuzahs* and was now honestly earning my food. On Fridays I would help him mark lines on the blank sheets of parchment of the Torah scroll that he was writing.²⁷ All in all, he received a lot of good help from me.

People in the *shteytl* thought that it was a pity that I had already become engaged, for there were many who would have been interested in having me as a son-in-law. Everyone inquired, "Is he already engaged?" I used to go to my sister Surele's every *Shobes*. As you already know, she was living with her in-laws, and her husband worked hard all week from morning to night trying to knock

24 March 28, 1865.

25 In his Hebrew ethical will from 1920, the author bequeathed this *Megilla* to his son Refuel. The current whereabouts of the *Megilla* are unknown. It is customary for those studying the art of writing Torah scrolls and *mezuzahs* to begin with the writing of a *Megilla*.

26 These laws can be found in Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried's *Keset ha-sofer* (1835) and other similar works.

27 The *Shulkhan Arukh* (*Yoreh Deah* 271:5) requires that the blank parchment used for Torah scrolls be marked with horizontal lines with an awl-like tool.

some sense into his students' wooden heads. They lived nicely and quietly, and Surele got along with everyone, and everyone loved her for her goodness and piety. All in all, it appeared that everything was going well for me, but what was going on with my registration? Do you know? I knew as much as you. I had already sent letters to my future in-laws, to my sister Ite, and did not receive an answer. Around Purim,²⁸ I received a letter from my future mother-in-law telling me that there was no news yet, meaning that there had been no response since they applied for my registration. I understood from the letter that this was a lie, so I decided to travel to Tiraspol to put an end to the match. But due to the cold weather, I had to wait until *Rosh-Khoydesh Nisan*.²⁹

When it grew warmer, I set out on foot for Tiraspol by way of Bender so that I could see my dear sister, Tsipe, and ask her advice. Upon reaching Bender, I went directly to the little house where my Tsipe lived and went right into the vestibule. I was about to open the front door of the house with the hope of seeing my sister and her child, puckering my lips to kiss my loved ones, when a woman stopped me and asked, "Who are you looking for?" I said, "What do you mean 'who am I looking for'? I'm looking for my sister Tsipe." She replied, "Who's Tsipe? What Tsipe? There's no Tsipe living here." I could not believe it, so I opened the door and saw that it was true—a strange woman was living there now. I stood there frozen. How could my sister have moved from there? Where had she gone? So I started to question her, "Perhaps you know the whereabouts of the former tenant?" She replied that she did not know who had lived there previously. When she moved in, she had found the place empty, and she has already been living there for two months. How could it be that my sister would move out of a dwelling in midwinter? What did that mean?

I ran off in shock to the owner of the house. I entered and asked if they knew where the previous tenant who had lived in the little house in their courtyard had moved. They said, "Why do you need her?" I said that she was my sister and that since her husband was a *melomed* he could not have left his *kheyder* in the middle of the winter term.³⁰ They did not know what to answer. At that, the landlord's daughter emerged. She had seen me on my visit to Tsipe when she was recovering from having given birth. She said, "Oy! Tsipe's brother, poor thing." Everyone motioned to her, and she retreated into the house. I then understood that something was amiss here. I began to plead with them to tell me the truth. They replied, "If you want to know where your sister is, go over

28 March 12, 1865.

29 March 28, 1865.

30 The winter term in a *kheyder* lasted from after *Sukes* in the fall until shortly before Pesach in the spring.

to Sluve, Nesonl the storekeeper's wife. She must know because they used to spend a good amount of time together." I immediately ran over to Sluve. As soon as Sluve saw me and heard that I was Tsipe's brother and was asking about her, she began to cry. And I too began to cry. "Tell me already, can it be that I don't have a sister anymore." "Yes," she said, "your sister has moved to her eternal resting place." Hearing those words, I fell to the ground and with the cry "My dear sister!" fell into a dead faint.

I do not know what happened to me then. I only know that when I came to and opened my eyes, I saw Nesonl the storekeeper standing near me, along with his wife Sluve and his children. They began to console me in the usual manner. I sat *shivah* for an hour and had a good cry.³¹ I mourned her entire life. I asked where were her little children, where was her husband, and when did she die. They told me briefly that she had died two months after her son's birth.³² The little girl had been taken in by someone locally by the name of Sender-Leytses,³³ and the little boy had been given to a wet nurse in Talmóz. The father himself, Reb Shloyme-Leyzer, had left right away to teach in order to make sure that he would not be asked to pay for the wet nurse. At that, they cursed him for being such an irresponsible father. I asked which wet nurse had the baby. They told me that my sister, Ite, had given him to a wet nurse in Tiraspol, "You'll learn everything from Ite." I wept profusely over the tragedy, particularly over the unfortunate children. From Sender-Leytses, I found out where Tsipe's oldest child Esther-Khayele was. Upon seeing her, I kissed and hugged her and grieved plenty. I thanked them for keeping her and left for Tiraspol.

In Tiraspol, I met with Ite, and then the real sobbing began. Ite told me all about Tsipe's illness, what Tsipe endured, and how she had tried to save herself by begging God to grant her the years to raise her little children. Tsipe's own death did not bother her as much as the fact that her little children would unfortunately remain alone and poor with an irresponsible father. That thought embittered her final moments even more than her own bitter life. Her life had been bitter, but her death was even more so.

Ite led me to a poor furrier's wife who was wet-nursing the baby Duvidl. The furrier's wife had her own child as well, and I found two babies in one

31 A Jew who hears of a close relative's death after thirty days only has to sit *shivah*, that is, in mourning, for one hour (*Kitsur Shulkhan Arukh* 206:2).

32 At the beginning of this chapter, on p. 223, the author writes that Tsipe's son, Duvid, was born on Yom Kippur (September 23, 1864). Hence, Tsipe died two months later, in November 1864. Being that she was twenty-four when her mother died in 1854 (ch. 1, p. 95, footnote 27), Tsipe was approximately thirty-four at the time of her own death.

33 Sender was either the husband, son, or close relative of a woman named Leytse, which is a nickname for Leye.

cradle. Both were lying there well soiled and in so many filthy rags that they could barely be seen. While looking at Duvidl, I said to Ite, "See how thin and bony he is." Ite said, "You should have seen what he looked like when I picked him up from the woman in Talmoz. He's now filled out somewhat. Right after our sister Tsipe's death, Shloyme-Leyzer found a wet nurse in the village of Talmoz for five rubles a month. When two months passed and he hadn't paid, she brought the baby back to Bender. Since the devoted father had gone into hiding, the wet nurse brought the baby to me. I traveled with the wet nurse back to Bender, found Shloyme-Leyzer, asked him for our sister's bedding, which he kept with our friend Sluve and I paid the wet nurse. I brought the baby here to Tiraspol and gave it to this poor but pious furrier's wife, where I can at least keep an eye on Duvidl. And now I don't know what's to be done. Shloyme-Leyzer doesn't want to have anything to do with his son, and I have to struggle to pay them. Do I have the means? But what should I do? Can I let the baby die, God forbid, now that this luckless soul is here in this world?"

My sister Ite told me all this while tears were streaming from her eyes. I said to her, "Don't cry. God will help. He's the father of orphans. Don't worry. The child will grow up. How that will happen is not up to us. Enough crying, my dear sister. Crying won't help at all." With these words we left the furrier's wife, and headed to Reb Zolmen-Kopls, where I spent *Shobes*.

On Sunday, I hired a coach at the marketplace and went to Tashlik to see my relative Shulem. He surely had to know the status of my prospective in-laws' struggles to have me registered. Since he got me engaged, let him get me unengaged if they would not register me. Sunday evening, I arrived in Tashlik exactly four days before Pesach.³⁴ I counted on spending Pesach with Shulem. When I arrived at Shulem's, I was welcomed as an honored guest. I could see that they were very glad to see me. His daughter and son-in-law had been married that winter, and Beyle, the young bride, hardly knew what to do for me. The young husband was also overjoyed that he would have a fellow city-dweller with whom to spend time, since he was a city dweller stuck in a village. In short, "Our relative Berele has arrived!" I pointed out to them that I should really be called Pinye-Ber rather than just Berl, and they promised to do so but soon forgot because they were used to calling me just Berele. Well, I forgave them for it.

The initial excitement passed. I was served food and we passed the time. I told them all that you know by now. They consoled me over my sister Tsipe's death and told me that they already knew about the tragedy. I asked if they heard anything about my prospective in-laws, and how things were going regarding

34 Pesach started the night of April 10, 1865.

my registration. They replied that they did not know and had heard nothing about it.

I hardly slept that night, and we sent a messenger the next morning to let them know that the groom-to-be was in Tashlik and wanted to meet his future father-in-law. In about an hour, my future mother-in-law Dvoyre arrived. She was overjoyed to see me and indicated that she was following up on the matter, but, she claimed, it was not yet finished. She would only know the outcome after Pesach. I made it clear to her that if she was fooling me, she was only fooling herself. I told her that as of now I believed her and would wait until after Pesach. She begged me to spend Pesach with her, but I did not want to. Nonetheless, she would not relinquish and proceeded to beg me and implore Shulem, Beyle, and her husband to pressure me to come until I finally had to promise her that I would come to her for Pesach. Shulem convinced me that my being right next to my future in-laws and not spending Pesach with them would be very embarrassing for them and others might deduce that I did not want the match. So I agreed that I would spend Pesach with them. She left Tashlik in great joy. In the late afternoon of the eve of Pesach, my father in-law's coach arrived and took me off to his home for *Yontef*. Twenty minutes later, I was at my father-in-law's home for it was only two *verts* away.

During the three days that I had spent at Shulem's, Beyle's husband and I passed the time amicably. He told me everything that was going on with him. I learned how little she tolerated him, poor fellow, and that this hurt him very much. I told him that she was a religious woman and that, therefore, with time she would probably reconsider and begin to appreciate him. I went on to say that she was still young, just a newlywed, and had not adjusted to him yet, while for his part he should bear the pain until they would have a child, when things would change. Beyle, being the same as ever, told me nothing, but her silence told me a great deal. And I understood from her sighing what was irking her: that such a simple girl as my bride-to-be, who was from common parents, could be so fortunate as to have such an accomplished fiancé—a learner and a singer, who was clever and had every desirable attribute. Her resentment was not out of jealousy, but it hurt her that she had committed such foolishness in rejecting me. Shulem also showed much regret over the foolishness that his fanaticism had caused in not taking me for his son-in-law. While sitting at the table, if the talk turned to Torah learning, I would always be proven right. For example, if I said that a certain topic or verse could be found in a particular source and they would argue and say it was in another source, it always turned out as I had said. So Shulem saw that my head was a lot better than his son-in-law's, though his son-in-law lived calmly while I was adrift and did not spend my nights where I

spent my days. But it was a lost cause, and so it had to be. It was truly “a misfortune that was not to be rectified.”³⁵

We will leave these side matters and return to my father-in-law and see how I was doing at his house. As soon as I arrived at the house, my father-in-law, Reb Itsye, welcomed me in a very friendly manner, as did his wife. I was taken into the house with love and friendship. The house was clean and attractively decorated in honor of *Yontef*. The table was covered with a tablecloth, and the samovar was already steaming. I was quickly given tea to drink along with a bite to eat. My father-in-law had no time to spare, like any head of a household before *Yontef*, and his wife certainly had little time, so they did not have the leisure to keep me company.³⁶ I was left in the house with their little son, Leyzerke, whom you met earlier; he was the one who had stared with his eyes wide open.³⁷ Now he was older, so his eyes were larger and he stared even better. He came in and greeted me. I struck up a conversation and asked if he was applying himself in his studies. He told me that he was learning to read Hebrew and studying the *khimesh*, which was fine for a ten-year-old boy.³⁸ I said to him, “I’d like to know where my bride-to-be is.” He replied that she was in the next room, at which point a pretty little girl, dressed up finely in a Jewish manner, entered the room.

I hardly recognized her since she had grown much taller over time and appeared far prettier. She entered silently and went over to a chest, took out an attractive *khalát* made from a simple material, and handed it to me,³⁹ “Here, *Mome* gave the material to the tailor to have this made for you, Berl.” I asked her, “How could your mother have known my measurements?” She had no idea how to answer this question and said only, “I don’t know,” and sat down near her little brother. It was not so long ago that she had danced around me and had called me to play with her, but now she was embarrassed to say a single word to me and sat far away. Nonetheless, when I finished drinking the glass of tea, she came over and poured me another glass. Meanwhile, I began to study from a small Jewish religious book that I had brought from Shulem’s. She said to me, “What are you reading in that little *sidur*?” (Among common folk, any Jewish

35 Ecclesiastes 1:15.

36 With all the many Jewish laws concerning major Jewish holidays, especially Pesach, the head of the household has many types of work that can only be done before the onset of the holiday at sunset. At the same time, the wife must prepare all the food needed for the meals that night, which in this case was the *Seder* meal.

37 For the author’s first mention of Leyzerke, see ch. 11, p. 192.

38 The author is probably being sarcastic since such studies are generally under par for a ten-year-old boy such as Leyzerke.

39 In Yiddish, a *khalat* is a Jewish man’s lightweight robe, often made of silk, worn by Hasidim as a housecoat, especially on *Shabes* and the Jewish holidays.

religious book is called a *sidur*.) “Drink your tea. It’s getting cold.” Her care for me had its effect since the tea had actually cooled off enough, and I finished the tea. She wanted to pour even more, but I did not let her. I thanked her and stood up to pray *Minkhe*.

After *Minkhe*, her mother came in to light the *Yontef* candles and her father returned to put on his *Yontef* clothes. Afterward we prayed *Marev*. After *Marev*, her father began to conduct the Pesach *Seder*. He donned a *kitl*, prepared the *Seder* plate, and sat down to read the Haggadah.⁴⁰ He read out loud from the Haggadah quite seriously. He counted the ten plagues so vigorously that by the time he reached their acronyms, “*Detsakh Adash Be’akhav*,” there was no more wine in his glass and they had to refill his glass.⁴¹ The *Seder* went very well and was in accordance with full Jewish tradition because he was a truly pious Jew, free of deception and guile. His wife, however, though a pious Jewish daughter and clever, was full of deceit and fraud, a babbler, and a swindler. She had a good heart, but tricking others was second nature to her. That is why I considered him to be a pure soul, and her to be a shrewd woman.

During the first days of Pesach, I had enough time to consider my in-laws in order to know with whom I would be dealing in my future life. I discovered that my fiancée had good Jewish character traits but had little upbringing. No one had taught her, and she had no one from whom to learn. It was not her fault. Her father was an honest Jew, pure and straight; whatever he said was sacred. Her mother was the opposite: whatever she said could not be believed. Her pure father informed me that all his wife had done about my registration was to inquire about what needed to be done, but that, in truth, she had not begun to do anything at all. This caused me to become very upset. I asked her the reason why nothing had been done, but she replied with false excuses. I understood that the fact that she was a swindler led her to believe that others certainly were too. So she had done nothing about this matter because she thought that if I were to become free by obtaining an internal passport, I would be off and would not return. So she wanted to delay my registration until the wedding. I gave her

40 The Haggadah is the text that sets forth the order of the Pesach *Seder*. Reading the *Haggadah* at the *Seder* table is a fulfillment of the commandment (Exodus 13:8) for each Jew to “tell your son” of the Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt.

41 It is customary to dip one’s finger in the cup of wine and tap the wine on the finger into a bowl (or pour out a little wine from the cup into a bowl) for each of the ten plagues, as mentioned in the Haggadah. Afterward, in the Haggadah, the initial letters of the Hebrew names of the ten plagues are divided into three acronyms, for which one also dips (or pours) for each acronym.

until *Shvues*.⁴² If I did not have my internal passport by *Shvues*, I would no longer be engaged . . .

On the first of the intermediate days of Pesach, I left them and went to Tashlik.⁴³ From there I left for Tiraspol. When I arrived in Tiraspol, I suddenly saw my mother-in-law Dvoyre there. Now, what was she doing there? She said that she wanted to really pursue the matter seriously; my words had finally moved her. She found a fixer and settled on a fee of 150 rubles. He promised her that all would be completed by *Shvues*. She explained to me that her husband was a good-for-nothing and that she had to take care of everything herself. That was why things had been delayed until now. “Now that I see that you are determined that it be finished quickly, I must pay a higher price so that it will be as you wish. Come with me to Bender. I have sisters there. You can eat at my sister Rukhl-Leye’s, and you can study in the *bes-medresh* there.” She gave the fixer, a Jew, twenty-five rubles for expenses and we left for Bender. I studied there in the *bes-medresh* and had my meals at her sister Rukhl-Leye’s. Her husband was called Velvl Bidnezhid.⁴⁴ Their house was common but pious. He dealt in grain. They had three boys: Berl, Itsl, and Khayem.⁴⁵ Berl was to have become engaged to my fiancée, Freydele, but she chose me, a stranger named Ber, over her relative of the same name. “But that doesn’t bother me,” Rukhl-Leye said, “let the family grow larger.”

Two weeks before *Shvues*, I traveled to Tiraspol and sought out that Jewish fixer to determine what was happening. He told me that he was waiting for my mother-in-law because she needed to give him money, but she was not even showing her face. I hired a coach for the round trip and went with that fixer to Perkon. I came to my father-in-law’s so early that my bride-to-be was still asleep. His wife was astonished: why had I come suddenly with the fixer? So I told her why we had come, and she gave him another twenty-five rubles. We then drove back to Tiraspol.

Two weeks passed and the fixer was not to be found and the papers had certainly not been obtained; as it states, “We heard nothing and no one was

42 May 30, 1865.

43 April 13, 1865.

44 The words *bidne zhid*, originally from Russian, mean “miserable Jew.” In chapter 14, p. 240, Velvl’s wife is referred to as “Rukhl-Leye ‘*Bidne Zhid*,” where (unlike here) the two words are within quotation marks, which evidently indicates that it was a nickname and not a surname. In fact, the surname Bidnezhid cannot be found in Alexander Beider’s *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire* (2008) or in any of the large databases of Jewish vital and census-like records from Eastern Europe. See ch. 18, p. 309, footnote 39, regarding another odd nickname, “Velvl the Nun’s.”

45 Khayem is referred to as Arn-Khayem in chapter 24.