

AMOL IN RASSEIN  
(*Once Upon a Time in Rassein*)

MEMOIR  
OF  
A LITHUANIAN JEWISH BOYHOOD

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The Author (center) surveying Rassein Street scene

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## FOREWORD

Once I happened to be walking down a long curving corridor. For no reason, it occurred to me to stop and look back. I could see for some distance in clear light, but then the corridor began to dim, and finally it faded into complete darkness. The farthest reaches lay beyond my sight. I often wonder if our memory does not function in the same way. We peer into our past until we reach a point where the light of recollection vanishes, and we are no longer certain whether what we remember is actual experience or imagined experience based on something repeated over and over again in our presence.

Marie Waife-Goldberg, My Father, Sholom Aleichem, p.15.

“Tell me more about your escape from Tcheikeshik... and the time the Germans bombed Rassein... and about the night you spent at a farm without letting your parents know...”

When my children were young, and it was my turn to tell them a bedtime story, I would often put aside the prowess of the "Little Engine That Could" and tell them some of my adventures in Rassein, the Lithuanian town where I was born and spent the first 15 years of my life. The idea of someday writing a memoir of that vanished period was probably born at the bedside of one of the children. But it was the urging of my grown children in recent years that persuaded me to undertake the pleasant task of engaging my memory for fun, as a small legacy, a tribute to my parents, brothers and sisters and as a memorial to members of my family, Jews and non-Jews, and countless other people who died at the hands of the Nazis in Lithuania and elsewhere.

In this Memoir of my boyhood I have faithfully recorded events in which I participated or observed, as well as impressions which have left a strong imprint on my memory. Parts of the narrative which deal with matters obviously not known to me at the time, such as the history of Lithuania and Rassein, our family's antecedents and the course of World War I outside the narrow scope of my birthplace, are based on published accounts (listed in an appendix) consulted in the process of writing this account, and on conversations with my sister Frances and my brothers Reuben and Martin, to whom I acknowledge my deep gratitude for their encouragement and assistance. They are, however, in no way responsible for any errors of fact or omissions in this chronicle. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of certain details of a social or political nature, but thought it best to record my recollection of them in the context of my growing up in Rassein. Another way of saying it is that this is not an historical or sociological monograph, but rather a fragment of an autobiography.

Several aspects of the narrative seem to stand out as I look back on that distant period of my life. As a child and boy I was very much a part of my family and people, but partly as a result of my parents' near total involvement in making a living and because of the long German occupation (1915 - 1918), it was possible for me to grow up with a minimum of familial and social restraints with regard to religious convictions and observances, making friends with children outside our "class", and sexual exploration. The German occupation in particular was decisive in exposing me to much that was novel and dramatic in what might otherwise have been the rather uneventful life of a boy in an East European *shtetl*. But even without the tumultuous events of the War, life in Rassein for me and other young people was only a prelude to emigration - to America in the first instance, but also to South Africa and to some extent to Palestine. Much as the East European *shtetl* has been romanticized in such productions as

"Fiddler on the Roof" and novels, it was essentially a way station on the road to other worlds - "die golden medine" (America), Zionism, or revolutionary involvement. My 15 years in Rassein have, I believe, left a strong and lasting imprint on my life and undoubtedly influenced my choice of career, a lifelong interest in working with people and for social change in the interest of a more humane society.

March 21, 1976

## 1. Rassein: An Ancient Lithuanian Shtetl

Although I was aware of the existence of other towns in Lithuania besides my own, had visited two of them briefly, and had heard of such large cities as Kovno, Vilno, Warsaw and the giants of the New World - New York, Baltimore, Worcester - Rassein was the center of my world during the first 15 years of my life. In imagination I traced its history not to Lithuania's past and present, or to the Czarist realm, but to the Bible and to the chief historical events which affected the wanderings of the Jews since the destruction of the Temple and the eventual dispersion of the Jewish nation. If I had any curiosity about Lithuania's and our town's history as I was growing up, it was swept away by the tumultuous events brought about by World War I and the German occupation. It was only toward the end of the War, when I witnessed the birth of the Republic of Lithuania, that I became interested in the country's past and most of what I record here I learned long after I left Rassein.

Bordering on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia form the group of Baltic States, each with a history marked by invasion, union, absorption, and independence with relation to Sweden, Poland, Germany, Czarist Russia and more recently the Soviet Union. Speaking a Baltic language belonging to the Indo-European family, and predominantly Roman Catholic, Lithuanians appear in historic records since the 2nd Century A.D. During its earliest history as a nation, Lithuania was hard pressed by the Livonian and Teutonic Knights, and to protect itself the ancient realm joined with Estonia and Latvia to form a strong, unified state in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. At one time the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became one of the largest states of medieval Europe. In 1569 Lithuania sought protection against the Russians, merging with Poland in an uneasy union, and for several hundred years the two peoples were closely identified. As a result of the partitions of Poland before and during the Napoleonic wars, Lithuania was annexed by Russia and became a part of the Czarist empire until the end of World War I. Following the defeat of Germany, which had occupied the country for most of the War, Lithuania became an independent republic in November 1918, and in spite of almost continuous conflict with Poland, and to some extent Germany and the U.S.S.R., managed to remain independent until 1940. As a result of the Soviet-Nazi Pact the U.S.S.R. occupied Lithuania and after elections (the legitimacy of which has been strongly disputed) Lithuania became a constituent republic of the U.S.S.R. During the Second World War Germany occupied Lithuania, and following the defeat of Hitler the country once more reverted to its former status as the Lithuanian S.S.R. The incorporation of the country as a constituent republic of the U.S.S.R. has never been recognized by the United States and the republic maintains a consulate in Washington to this day.

Occupying an area of approximately 25,174 square miles, with a population somewhat under 3,000,000, Lithuania was until 1940 largely agricultural, with dairy farming and stock raising prominent in its economy. Since the end of World War II it is reported that there has been considerable industrial development. The ancient city of Vilna is once more the country's capital, with Kaunas and Memel (Lithuanian Kłapeida) the other major centers of population.

Rassein (Lithuanian name Raseinai) is one of the oldest Lithuanian towns, with a recorded history going back to the 13th century. Located in the western part of the country, the town served as the seat of the regional court and the meeting place for the area's nobility until Lithuania's last partition in 1795. Early in its history the Dominicans and Carmelites built notable churches and monasteries in the town. The Dominican Baroque church and monastery, built in the middle of the 17th century, are being preserved to this day as architectural monuments. The town's total population (of whom a large proportion were Jews) numbered 8,516 in 1857, but

declined in subsequent years, numbering somewhat over 5,000 after World War I. From its beginning Rassein was an important agricultural trade center and during the period of Lithuanian independence (1918-1940) served as the county seat.

Jews first appeared in Lithuania in 1321, as the center of Jewish existence in the Diaspora shifted, first from their ancient centers in the Near East and North Africa to western Europe, and later to Central Europe - particularly Germany, Bohemia, Hungary and Austria - and finally to Eastern Europe - Poland, the Baltic provinces, Russia and the Balkans. Known as *Ashkenazim* (*Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew name for Germany), and speaking Yiddish, based on the German of the Middle Ages, the Jews moving into Eastern Europe were in flight from Western Europe, and particularly Germany, during the periods of religious and political tensions symbolized by the Crusades. Conditions for their settlement in the East seemed to be particularly favorable in Lithuania where Jews were granted "charters of privilege" as early as 1388, whereby they were able to live as "freemen" with rights differing only slightly from those enjoyed by the gentry. The Jewish population grew to 3000,000 by 1897, and constituted about 10 percent of the population. For several centuries before Lithuania achieved its independence the Jewish community, although small in number in comparison with Polish and Russian Jewry, it made notable contributions to the cultural and religious life of its people. Lithuania had a number of distinguished *yeshivot* (rabbinical colleges or seminaries), learned rabbis and was a center of *Haskalah* (enlightenment-- a movement promoting the secularization of Jewish life). Vilna (or Vilnius), the country's ancient capital, was referred to as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania". Lithuania was one of the few East European lands in which *Hassidism* (the folk religious movement opposed to the rabbinical emphasis on formal learning) never took hold. It is interesting that one of the meanings applied to *Litvak*, the appellation for a Lithuanian Jew, is that of a learned but skeptical person. Other nuances of the name are less complimentary, such as a shrewd, clever fellow and sharp trader.

Jewish life under the young republic developed rapidly as a result of the favorable political and legal conditions prevailing in the country. Nevertheless, the Jewish population declined as a result of emigration and numbered only about 175,000 at the outbreak of World War II. The Soviet occupation of Lithuania on the eve of World War II and the subsequent invasion of the country by the Nazi armies had a disastrous effect on the Lithuanian Jewish Community. A small number of Jews left the country in the wake of the Russian retreat in 1941, and when the Germans occupied Lithuania they massacred the remaining Jews. In 1970 the Jewish population of the Lithuanian S.S.R. was reported to be 23,600 or less than one percent of the total population of 3,128,200.

We do not know when Jews first settled in Rassein, but as one of Lithuania's oldest and best known towns, we may presume that Jews appeared there early in its history. It is noteworthy that the authoritative Jewish Encyclopedia (New York and London, 1912) has an article on Rassein, one of the few Lithuanian Jewish communities described. As early as 1775 the town had a rabbi prominent enough to be mentioned in this important work. Referring to it as a "district city in the government of Kovno, Russia", the Encyclopedia tells us that Rassein "had a prosperous Jewish community in the first half of the nineteenth century, and was a center of *Haskalah*, or progressive ideas, when Abraham Mapu lived there (1837-44)". Mapu (1805-67) wrote the first original Hebrew novel, Ahavat Zion (Love of Zion). The Encyclopedia goes on to say that "most of the men who were animated by progressive ideas left Rossien for more promising fields of activity in larger cities, and a fire which almost totally destroyed the city in 1865, and the hard times which followed the brief period of revival in the first part of the reign of Alexander II, contributed to the city's decline. In 1866 Rossien possessed 10,579 inhabitants of whom 8,290 were Jews... By 1897 the entire population had dwindled to 7,455, mostly Jews. The

chief articles of commerce are wood and grain for export..." By 1923 the town's population numbered 5,270, of whom about 4,000 were Jews. The dwindling Jewish community suffered the fate of most Jews in Lithuania when the Nazis overran the country during 1941. The few Jews who survived the holocaust have left a grim account of the systematic rounding up and extermination of the Jewish population by the Germans, aided by the native fascists.

The historical events regarding Rassein and Lithuania sketched here were entirely unknown to me when I was growing up. Before 1914 my interest in history was limited to the absorbing panorama of the Bible, and during the German occupation there was enough living history to excite any young person. Had my curiosity about Rassein been aroused, I would have been especially eager to talk with a remarkable self-taught genealogist, Reb Moshe Markovitz, a cobbler by trade, who with the help of his sons compiled a well known book, Shem Hagdolim (Names of the Great Ones), detailing the histories of Jewish families in Lithuania, and especially Rassein. I visited his shop many times and at the request of my brother Mendel he prepared a brief genealogical account of our family, which is summarized later in this memoir.

Recent sociological and historical writing dealing with the vanished world of the historic Jewish communities of Eastern Europe has popularized the term *shtetl* (literally, small town or little city). It was the *shtetl* which was the "stronghold" and carrier of the East European Jewish culture. As the well-researched study, Life is With People, puts it:

"Whether among Poles or Russians, Lithuanians or Hungarians, the Jews retained their ways and their language responding to the environment, assimilating much of it, integrating it into their way of life, yet keeping the core of their own tradition intact. They spoke Yiddish, wrote and read Hebrew, bargained in broken Polish and Ukrainian. In large cities, as time went on, more and more of them rebelled against the sole authority of the Torah. The *shtetl*, also touched by waves from without, felt the impact less violently and resisted more sturdily. Only the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century with the final destruction of six million lives, put an end to its role as the current home of the tradition."

The ebullient Leo Rosten, in his The Joys of Yiddish, puts it this way:

The Jews of the *shtetl* were poor folk, fundamentalist in faith, earthy, superstitious, stubbornly resisting secularism or change. They wrote in Hebrew or Yiddish, shunning foreign tongues among themselves. They were dairymen, draymen, cobblers, tailors, butchers, fishmongers, shopkeepers, peddlers. They considered their exile temporary and dreamed of the Messianic miracle that would any day return them, and their brethern around the world, to the shining glory of a restored Israel in the Holy Land.

Rassein as I knew it was certainly a *shtetl*, but perhaps because of some characteristics peculiar to it, or as a result of the prolonged German occupation, it was strongly influenced by secular factors composed of Russian culture, revolutionary echoes, Zionist aspirations and German influences. Although predominantly Jewish in character, Rassein had some of the features of a Russian provincial town as portrayed in, say, Chekov's plays. Just as my life in Rassein has heightened my appreciation of the tales of Sholom Aleichem, modern Hebrew poetry, the German romantic poets, especially Heinrich Heine, so it has given me added insight into the atmosphere of such plays as "The Cherry Orchard" and "The Three Sisters". However I regard my native town, it has had a profound influence on many aspects of my life in ways that may not be fully known to me consciously.

## 2. Family Origins

In writing this Memoir it seemed appropriate to say something about our family's genealogy, but as I thought about it I realized that I knew almost nothing about our family's origins and that the term genealogy was most inappropriate to describe the little I did know. As a child I did not have any curiosity about my parent's family history, never heard my mother or father mention their parents, who died when I was very young, and I did not seek information from other sources. Except for the modest celebration of Bar Mitzvah, no notice was taken of anyone's birthday and the ages of my brothers and sisters were known to me only in an approximate way. When I came to America and filed for naturalization papers I inquired about my date of birth, which my mother said occurred in the "third week of Sh'vot" (the Hebrew month equivalent to January). I translated this to mean January 24, 1905 and let it go at that.

There exists a traditional family "genealogy", prepared for my brother Mendel (Martin) in 1918 by Reb Moshe Markovitz, a Rassein shoemaker who spent a life time collecting information on rabbis, scholars, and prominent Jewish families and published the results of his vast research in several volumes. There is probably no way of verifying the account of this remarkable Chronicler who traced the history of our family on my father's side to medieval Hungary and one "Reb Schneur, who was minister of finance of Hungaria and was killed for the sanctification of the holy name". The descendants of Reb Schneur then changed their name to Zaks (an acronym for "the holy offspring of Schneur"). The family is next traced to Lithuania and it is possible that the name Volpe (our family name) was derived from the name of a town in Poland on the Lithuanian border. My mother's family is traced to the German city of Altona and several Lithuanian centers. Reb Moshe Markovitz counts among our ancestors rabbis, scholars, prominent community leaders and Shokhtim (ritual slaughterers).

Although lacking interest in our family's history, I did have a strong sense of family identity. This was based on our family's standing in the community, as evidenced by the location of our pew on the eastern wall of the synagogue, my father's reputation as a Talmudic and Hebrew scholar, his knowledge of several languages, travels in Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Germany, the size and prominent location of our store. Our well built house stood out on our street and contained such amenities as a piano, record player and a small library. My sense of belonging to a well established family was further enhanced by our friendship with the prominent families of the community and the selection of our home by one of the German commanders as his headquarters during the early stage of the German occupation in 1915. When Rassein was a part of the Czarist empire I was probably too young to have any sense of affiliation or loyalty to Russia. During the German occupation I was strongly drawn to German culture and was so impressed by the military prowess of the Germans that the possibility of becoming in some way a citizen of the German domain seemed very real. These sentiments, as I shall describe later, vanished as the Germans seemed to be on the point of military collapse and I became enthusiastic about the emergence of Lithuania as an independent republic. Later, when the prospect of emigration to America presented itself, I began to think of myself as a future American. Throughout this period my strongest affiliation was with the Jewish people, nation, or folk, not so much as I knew it then, but as represented in the Bible which I regarded less as a religious work and more as an historical narrative. Whether living in Czarist Russia, occupied Lithuania, the republic of Lithuania or looking toward emigration to America, it was natural for me as a young person to align myself with the Zionist movement, which held out the hope of a return of the people of the Bible to the Holy Land.

To return to my family's origins. What I have learned has come to me from my living sister and brothers, who certainly know more than I do, but whose knowledge is nevertheless incomplete. My mother Peshe (Pauline) was born in 1867 in Rassein, the daughter of Mendel (der Shokhet) Ziff, married for the third time to Chalayah, not a native of Rassein, who also bore him two sons, Azriel and Berl. Berl emigrated to America at the beginning of the 20th century and made his home in Worcester, Mass. Azriel left Rassein shortly after we emigrated to America and came to live in Worcester with his family. Three of my mother's stepbrothers also immigrated to America. Two of them, Abbe and Scheul, made their home in Worcester, and the other, Louis, lived in a number of cities, eventually becoming professor of mathematics at the University of Louisville and completely estranged from his family. The estrangement, it has been said, was the result of the family's disapproval of his love for a seamstress, the daughter of a shoemaker. My mother died on April 18, 1948.

My father Avrohom (Abraham) was born in 1868 in Ragole, Lithuania, the son of Velvel and Reizel Volpe. He had two brothers, Chaskel and Zalmen Hendel, who emigrated to Cleveland and Baltimore respectively. My father's father, Velvel, too had immigrated to Baltimore, worked as a peddler for a short time and then returned to Lithuania. It is said that when he was peddling his customers had difficulty pronouncing his name and he was advised to change Volpe to Wolfe. My father had three sisters, Miriam, Sore Golde and Fraddel, all of whom immigrated to America. My father died in September 1919.

My parents had eight children. Joseph, the oldest, was born in 1891 and died on September 23, 1918 while serving in the armed forces of the United States. Reuben, born on October 5, 1893, lives in Baltimore. Feigel (Frances) was born on January 20, 1897 and lives in Worcester. Freida, born in September 1899, died in 1941 in Palestine. Mendel (Martin) was born on December 15, 1902 and lives in Asbury Park, N.J. Velvel (William) was born on May 7, 1909 and died in New York on May 21, 1951. Another sister, Yentele, died in infancy. Joseph immigrated to America in 1907, Reuben in 1912, while I and my sisters Frieda and Frances and brothers Martin and William (Bill) immigrated to America with our mother in October 1920.

### 3. Early Memories of Home and Family

My earliest memory, perhaps dating to the time when I was a toddler, is of sitting on the floor of our large kitchen near one of the wood ovens similar to a Dutch oven, watching a woman helper leave the room and wondering whether she would return. I spent a good deal of time in the kitchen when very young, enjoying the warmth and activity all around us, and occasionally tasting, if not eating, charcoal. When I was able to climb, the elevated area behind the cooking and baking stove was a favorite spot to hide or look for something to play with. Except for late afternoon, and Saturdays and holidays, when my mother was home, I was cared for by servants and helpers who occasionally took me to their own homes. I remember the strong smell pervading the servants' small apartments, probably resulting from the cooking of food, especially the forbidden pork, and my fright when the man of the household became violent in argument during a family quarrel. When my mother came home from working in our store she took me in her arms and listened sympathetically to my queries and complaints. I have the impression that my father was absent from the home a great deal of the time either on business or in the synagogue engaged in study. His departure on journeys and returns from them were always important events in the home accompanied by a little ceremony when he would sit down briefly then rise and leave. Occasionally he would give each child a coin as a going away present. On returning he would generally bring small presents from his travels. My early childhood years were probably quite uneventful and ended abruptly when my mother brought me to the *cheder* for the start of my varied education.

The house where I spent most of my years in Rassein was located on "Beheimes Gass" (Cattle Street), so named perhaps because it led to the main pasture for the cows owned by residents, including ours. It was a one story frame structure with a large attic and small pantry-like basement. For a family the size of ours the house was rather small, consisting of a dining room, large kitchen, living room and two bedrooms, one of which was occupied by my parents. Attached to the rear of the house was a small shed where we kept our cow, and hay and some implements. We had a tiny back yard which was generally muddy from the cow's tramping in coming and going. There was a great deal to interest me in the homes, stores and workshops in our immediate neighborhood and beyond. The bakery next door was always a lively place to visit, even though their specialty was bread. A few doors away there was a small sawmill where I watched the shaping of planks and played in the sawdust. Opposite the mill there was a substantial tailoring establishment where, I learned when I was older, some of the town's socialists or "Bundists" were employed. I was frequently sent to purchase small food items in the combination grocery store, saloon and inn a short distance from our home. This was an especially busy center on market days when the peasants used the inn as one of their headquarters. When I was old enough to read Dostoyefsky's "Crime and Punishment" I placed the famous saloon scene in this neighborhood inn.

There was little differentiation between the town's residential and business sections, although some streets had more shops than homes. Our store, more like a small department store than a general store, was located on the principal business street in a two story brick building made prominent by the fact that the officers' Club (or Klub as we called it) was housed on the second floor of this building. Whenever I could get away from school I was drawn to our shop where there was always something exciting going on - crates to be unpacked, merchandise to be stored, window displays to be arranged. On busy shopping days, especially during the German occupation, I was often asked or volunteered to help in selling and running errands. The weeks

preceding Christmas and New Year were especially fascinating when our store featured a dazzling assortment of Christmas tree ornaments in a variety of shapes and colors.

Familiar as the town had become to me I never tired of exploring its streets, alleys, shops, synagogues, churches, schools, workshops, mills, saloons, inns and roads leading to the country. The contrast between the liveliness of the street life and the confinement of school was very striking and there was always a strong urge to escape from the school room. The choice of places to visit ranged from shops selling hardware, notions, bolts of cloth, groceries, candy, bicycles, to the many workshops making shoes, clothing, furniture, and the homes of relatives and friends in and out of the town. Although I did not consciously think in terms of class differentiations it was obvious to me that our family belonged to the upper stratum of Jewish society, as judged by our economic status, the high reputation of my father as a scholar and businessman, the location of our pew on the eastern wall in the synagogue, the size of our house and its amenities - a piano, record player, books, two samovars, good china and silver - and the fact that we had a live-in maid and part time helpers. I do not recall choosing my friends from the better educated families, but my sister Frances tells me that there was a "pronounced caste system" and that the more affluent families regarded "the workingman, tailor and shoemaker" as coming "from a different world" whose children were to be avoided as friends or even walking companions.

When I was growing up I was closer to my mother and sisters than to my father and older brother Mendel, who, although only a few years older than I, regarded me as much younger and took little interest in me. I had no special responsibility for my younger brother Velvke, but had the feeling that I was to look after him whenever there was a family outing or whenever we were thrown together. My sister Frieda was especially solicitous of me and would sometimes invite me to accompany her on excursions with her girl friends. She taught me simple card games, how to play a game similar to tiddly-winks in which small knuckle bones were used as disks, and how to make toy furniture using the glossy brown seeds of the horse chestnut tree and matches. With both parents engaged in the store, I was allowed a good deal of independence but welcomed my mother's interest in my welfare when I was young. She had little time for the children but came home as often as she could to take care of us when we were very young. My sister reports that my mother "never found time to take a vacation", by joining families who spent short periods in a neighboring village which stood in the middle of a forest of pine trees. One of our neighbors who was accustomed to take vacations once asked my mother why she never went anywhere. My mother replied that she couldn't leave her husband, children, home and store. The neighbor said, "So what if you die?" To which my mother responded, "Then I won't be able to come back."

My father always appeared as a distant, though not unkind figure to me. He was generally reserved in his relationships with the younger children, but he could be quite playful when in a relaxed mood. One of his favorite practical jokes was to invert an empty egg shell in an egg cup and hand it to me, saying, "Here, Meyke, have another egg." I usually humored him and cracked the egg with a spoon to discover that it was empty. He would laugh, only to repeat the trick a few days later or suggest that I do this to someone else. He liked to joke with people and tease them. My father subscribed to a Warsaw newspaper which he lent to neighbors and friends. I remember one time when one of our neighbors brought the newspaper back to my father who asked him whether he had left some news for him. He swore that he had left the paper intact.

I did not really get to know my father until his illness when I was twelve and I more or less took it upon myself to minister to him in many ways - removing and cleaning his bed pan, bringing him clean bandages, helping him dress and trim his beard, bringing him newspapers and books and staying in his tiny bedroom when he was very ill. From overhearing conversations between my sisters, especially after his return from Berlin where he was taken by my sister

Frieda with the permission of the German occupation authorities, I knew that he was probably fatally ill. I thought quite consciously how his death would affect our family and saw myself as playing an important role, possibly because of what I had done to help my father during his long illness. When my father died there was a great deal of crying among members of our family and I desperately wanted to cry too but couldn't. I tried to wet my eyes with spit but still couldn't bring forth tears. This made me very sad and I wondered why I did not react the way others, and especially my mother and sisters did. Perhaps I was too absorbed in thinking of my new responsibilities toward our home, business, and my mother to show emotion openly.

My father's death and funeral was a notable event in the town. His body was carried in a coffin from our home, which was completely surrounded by townspeople, to the synagogue where it was placed on a platform in the courtyard. Most of the people who had come to our home followed the casket and were joined by others who filled the road leading to the synagogue. There was a constant hubbub, but all fell silent as my uncle Azriel Ziff rose to deliver the *hesped* (funeral eulogy). He had been with my mother almost constantly and as he scanned the assembled mourners a light snow began to fall. I remember only the opening words of his discourse which were, "A bombe iz gefallen," (a bomb has fallen), an obvious allusion to the wartime atmosphere. From the synagogue the procession proceeded on foot to the Jewish cemetery some distance from the town. I walked with our family and had the consciousness of becoming a *yossef* (orphan), endowed with a special grace according to Jewish tradition. Some of my friends joined the mourners and, so I thought, already regarded me with special concern. (I am reminded of one of Sholem Aleichem's stories, "I'm lucky - I'm an orphan," about a boy who became a "privileged character" when he was left an orphan). The straggling column moved in silence, except for the mournful but lively cries of alms collectors who shook their cans with a jingle and the cry: *Tzdokoh tazil memoves!* (charity saves from death). When we finally reached the cemetery, well known to me from previous visits, I hung back somewhat knowing that there would be a great deal of wailing at the graveside, eventually reaching the scene as it came to an end. We returned home in what seemed like an exhausted state, to settle in for the traditional *Shivah*, the seven day period of solemn mourning. No food was prepared by us during this time, relatives and friends supplying all of our needs. The atmosphere in the home was somber the first few days, with each visitor starting up a fresh wave of reminiscence and weeping. As the days passed, however, a lighter mood became evident and by the fourth or fifth day I observed my sisters not only smiling, but occasionally laughing and conversing quite normally. This puzzled me at first, but I came to understand the contrast between the period of deep mourning and outward show of grief and its resolution toward the end of the mourning period.

I am sure that I experienced the usual childhood illnesses, but I have no recollection of having been really ill during my life in Rassein. The ill of the town were treated by three physicians, I believe, one of whom was Jewish. During his long illness, my father was treated by a tall, very impressive gentile physician who seemed to be very solicitous of my father and cared for him with kindness. Once when I complained of a severe stomach upset, brought on no doubt by the eating of green apples, my mother took me to Dr. Mankovsky, the Jewish physician, who told my mother that I was quite well. I continued to complain and someone offered the explanation that "worms had gotten into me from eating so many unripe apples." I did suffer from innumerable tooth aches and frequently walked about with a huge bandage to cover a swollen face caused by an abscessed tooth. Our woman dentist was an imposing figure and invariably treated an abscess by killing the nerve.

#### 4. My Education in School and Out

My formal education began at age three or four when my mother, without much previous notice, led me to the traditional *cheder* and presented me to the head teacher, a white bearded old man who also served as the *shames* or sexton of our synagogue, Chaye adorn (the Life of Man) located a short distance from the *cheder*. Since my older brother Mendel attended the same *cheder*, and I passed the house of the sexton, which also accommodated the school, every Sabbath, holiday, and some weekdays on the way to the synagogue, I already had some familiarity with the practice of regular school attendance by boys. My entrance into the noisy, somewhat chaotic atmosphere of the *cheder* holding my mother's hand made me realize that a drastic change was about to take place in my life. The melamed (teacher) welcomed me and to allay my fears, my mother dropped a coin on the table and gave me a sour ball and then left me seated next to the teacher at the head table.

The single school room was occupied by 30 or 40 boys, aged 4 to 8, mostly seated around three or four oblong wooden tables reciting, reading aloud, babbling, shouting. The school day began at about eight and lasted until five or six with two breaks for dinner at about 12 and supper late in the afternoon. When weather permitted the entire student body rushed outdoors at a signal from the head teacher or his helper to play in the small fenced yard adjoining the school. The outdoor play was active, sometimes rough and involved no equipment except an occasional rubber ball, the forbidden sling shot and perhaps a home-made whistle. The ten minute walk home for dinner and supper was a welcome change from the many hours of sitting and "learning" the Torah (the Pentateuch) slowly and painfully by rote. There was always the temptation to linger on the way back from home but the return to school in darkness during the fall and winter months was scary trudging through unlighted streets, frequently in deep snow or mud, and sometimes beset by dogs, drunken citizens and an occasional wandering man or woman obviously mentally ill. I was supplied with a candle burning lantern and sought companions for safety, but mostly walked by myself.

The rote method, practiced by small groups of pupils with occasional instruction from the teacher, was apparently effective enough to teach me to read the Torah with some fluency by the time I was six or seven. This was probably the chief accomplishment of the first three years of schooling in the *cheder*.

There was some informal practice in writing the Hebrew alphabet and an occasional exercise in writing short sentences from Genesis. Mainly I remember the endless recitations of biblical phrases, sentences and paragraphs, many in some way related to synagogue readings and prayers and all of which merged easily with the school exercises.

I attended *cheder* six days a week, except for holidays. The only vacation from school was enjoyed during the half day attendance during the eight days of *Chanukah*. It was almost impossible to play hooky since one's absence from *cheder* was observed by family and townspeople who were prepared to report the fact to my parents or the teacher. Discipline in *cheder* was maintained more or less by shouted commands, the active involvement of the teacher and his aide who did not hesitate to use some form of corporal punishment. I was not spared the customary treatment, but was nevertheless aware that I had a privileged position because of my family's standing in the community and synagogue and the presentation of a loaf of sugar to the teacher a day or two before Passover. This perhaps protected me from being harshly disciplined for the infraction of some unwritten rule, fighting or staying in the yard longer than permitted.

Advancement in the *cheder* was marked by being moved from one table to another in relation to its distance from the teacher and the increasing emphasis on reading more difficult

sections of the Torah, and later some portions of the Talmud. Since attendance was on a year-round basis, there actually seemed to be no beginning or end of the school year, at least as far as I was concerned. There were no examinations as such and it was assumed that each pupil would progress at his own pace. From time to time the teacher came to our home for dinner on some Sabbath, at the end of which he was expected to "test" me in the presence of my father. I generally dreaded these public examinations and never knew at the end of them whether I made the grade.

The *cheder* and more advanced Hebrew schools in the town were privately operated and did not seem to be under the supervision of the Jewish community authorities. The Russian town administration did not supervise the Jewish education of the children, but more or less required boys and girls to attend the *Yevreiskaya Uchilische* (Jewish School) several mornings a week beginning at age eight. Those who qualified were later admitted to the two gymnasias for boys and girls. The Jewish School was municipally operated and located on the second floor of a prominent brick building in the center of town. I attended this school from 1912 to 1914 and studied Russian, arithmetic and geography. The atmosphere of the school was quite different from the primitive *cheder*. There were two large classrooms with individual school desks for perhaps 150 students. We were supplied several text books and asked to bring notebooks and pencils and erasers. There were several teachers (non-Jewish) who presided from large desks backed by black boards which were used extensively in the teaching process. There were class recitations, individual and occasionally class examinations. There were maps and photographs of the Czar and Czarina on the schoolroom walls. From time to time the classes were led in singing Russian popular and folk songs. In contrast to the drabness and chaos of the *cheder* the Jewish School seemed to me exciting and opened educational opportunities previously unknown to me. I was especially proud of being able to go to the tiny stationary store smelling of books, paper, pencils and glue, to purchase the tools for my new schooling. Mathematics was a completely new subject and the singing was always fun, especially since the woman teacher, who knew our family through our store, decided that I had a good voice and once asked me to sing solo before the entire class.

The highlight of my two years in the Jewish School came on May 1, when the annual school picnic was held. Preparations for this event were made weeks in advance, although the only requirement was that we bring a packed lunch, a new experience for most children. The day before the picnic I walked to the pasture where our red and white cow was kept and accompanied her home to make sure that she would produce enough milk for the family and, most important, for my picnic lunch. Pupils assembled in the large school yard, where we played during recess, early in the morning and lined up for the two kilometer walk to Lilac Woods, an informal park which was a great favorite with young people, and the site of the picnic. The walk with the entire school body was thrilling in itself, although I had walked to the area with friends many times before. When assembled under a large tree in the woods, we were instructed about the activities of the day - walking in groups, singing, dancing games and, of course, eating lunch. Above all, the picnic put me in closer touch with girls than was possible in the classroom, during the round dancing and games. The day passed rapidly and ended in a straggling march home.

Returning to the *cheder* in the afternoon was always a disappointing experience, for I would have been happy to study in the Jewish School all day, every day. But I knew that my "studies" at the *cheder* would soon be over and that I would be transferred to a more advanced Hebrew school, whose teacher, a younger man living not far from our home, conducted his "modern" school in the living room of his home. He had the reputation of being something of a *nar* (fool) who was unable to maintain discipline, but had a great interest in Hebrew as a spoken language and lent his books to pupils who were interested in reading modern Hebrew. Except for

attendance at the Jewish School several mornings a week, the hours at the "modern" school were the same as at the *cheder*. The atmosphere was less oppressive, most of the time the pupils seemed to be in control, Bible and Talmud study was more advanced (I was especially interested in the sections of the Talmud dealing with law, ethics and family relationships) and, above all, the teacher interested me in the study of Hebrew as a modern language. In studying the Talmud I made an effort to observe how well the legal and ethical precepts were actually practiced in my home and community. One Talmudic section, dealing with the employment of workmen, their compensation and promptness in paying for their services, impressed me especially since so many of the townspeople were poor and depended for their livelihood on day labor. Knowing very little about the status of the Jewish community in relation to the larger world, I regarded the Talmud and Bible not so much as works of history or philosophical discourses, but as guides to everyday living.

Thanks to the teacher of the new school, I was exposed for the first time to "literature". Until I was 10 or 11 the Bible was the only book I read extensively. I regarded the Bible not as a religious work, but as a kind of anthology of historical narratives, short stories, poems, proclamations of a nationalist character, laws and biographical information about fascinating men and women. Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Esau, Joseph, Pharoh, David, Saul, Solomon, Deborah and the many other Biblical figures were very real people to me, whose adventures, relationships and ultimate fate interested me intensely. The story of Jacob, Isaac and Esau ("The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hand is the hand of Esau"), Joseph at the court of Pharoh ("There came a time when a Pharoh did not know Joseph"), David fleeing from the wrath of Saul (David takes refuge in the tent of the chieftain and pretends to be mentally ill, but the chieftain is not impressed since he has a mentally ill daughter and tries to discourage David from staying by telling him that he already has enough *meshugoim*), Saul caught in a tree branch in his hasty flight, Deborah and her defiant Song of Deborah, the story of Samson and Delilah, David and the Philistines - these constituted my reading and stimulated my imagination. The teacher dramatized our Bible reading and began to interest us in Zionism, Palestine and Hebrew as a living language. Every Friday afternoon he offered us a choice of several Hebrew short stories to read at home and I eagerly accepted them. The stories, dealing mostly with some historical incident in the Diaspora seemed to be a continuation of the Bible. Two stories in particular impressed me very much. One dealt with the adventures of several Jewish boys who had been kidnapped by gypsies with whom they lived for a number of years but eventually escaped, and another told of the *chapers* (catchers) who shanghaied Jewish young men for military service when the community was obliged by the Czar's authorities to deliver the proper quota of men for service in the army. When I had shown sufficient proficiency in reading Hebrew, the teacher gave me the prize of his small library, Robinson Crusoe, which I read in one day and later borrowed again.

Attendance at the new Hebrew school was interrupted for a short time following the German occupation. When I resumed my education attendance became sporadic due to the exigencies of the war and occupation, a prevalent restlessness, the relaxation of discipline both at home and school, the many distractions offered by the military (such as movies several times a week, parades, outings) and the requirement that I assist in our store on busy days. I "graduated" from the school when I was fourteen, but pursued my education with private tutors in Hebrew, Russian and what might be called "science". Some of my tutors were paid for their services and some volunteered to help me together with several of my friends.

Attendance at the Russian Jewish School ended abruptly when the fighting neared Rassein in 1915, and ended with the German occupation. Far from arousing anxiety, the war, rumors of battles only a few miles from the town and the possibility of invasion, excited my

interest in the startling events, as if Rassein had suddenly become a part of a world I knew nothing about. There was a rumor that one of the women teachers was of German extraction but she continued to teach. Then one morning, when the Russian military and some town officials had left with the imminent approach of the German forces, the assembled pupils were told to go home. There was no explanation, but it was obvious to us, filled with rumors and the evidence of the flight of officialdom and an air attack on two successive days, what was up. We lingered in the class rooms for a while and someone was bold enough to throw a spitball at the portraits of the Czar and Czarina and pull them down from the wall.

For several weeks or months after the German occupation, there was no schooling of any kind. The entire population was observing with awe and admiration the methodical manner in which the German troops left behind by the combat units installed themselves in private homes, the few public buildings and tents. With so much time on our hands, the erstwhile students roamed the town and its environs, fraternized with the troops, extracted candy from the ample commissaries, learned German words and phrases, followed the motorized vehicles wherever they went, and came home only at meal times, which were irregular anyhow. I did help in our store, since the Germans soon patronized all of the shops and I enjoyed my contacts with them. The spree which young people indulged in as a result of the occupation soon came to an end with the reopening of the Jewish School under German auspices with most of the old teachers in charge. German now replaced Russian as the language of instruction, portraits of the Kaiser and Austrian Emperor soon appeared on the walls, we were taught the German national anthem and some folk songs and introduced to German history. The revamped school continued to function until the end of the War and was later incorporated in the school system gradually established by the Lithuanian authorities when Lithuania became a republic. The teacher who was supposedly of German origin became the principal or assistant principal. I remember visiting her cottage on the outskirts of town with some other members of our class and being impressed by the beautiful flower garden of pansies, nasturtium and lilac bushes - the only flowering plants known to me by name, besides a number of flowering weeds such as dandelion and cornflower. My recollection of the three years spent in the German school is rather meager, perhaps because life under the occupation was so much more exciting and varied. I did learn to read and speak German quite fluently and was introduced to German literature, geography and history.

While attending the German school, I continued my studies at the advanced Hebrew school and had occasional private lessons in Russian, and now and then "dabbled" in science with the help of several young men. Scientific terms in German, Russian and yiddish had a special fascination for me and I enjoyed repeating words like *atmosphere*, *probleme*, *natoor*, *physiologie*, *natooralnie*, *astronomie*, *ekonomie*, *agronomie*, *politik*, *socialismus*, etc. even though I did not always know their meaning. The "study" of weather conditions was a special favorite and I was deeply impressed when my young "teacher" informed that one could predict weather by the wind drift, and then illustrated by wetting his forefinger and raising it high over his head to announce that the "wind is blowing from Kamchatka", which meant, he told me, that there would be a cold spell. He illustrated the principle of water evaporation by boiling down a small pot of water and then pointing to a sediment of salt at the bottom of the pan. I read a biography of Thomas Edison in serial form on the reverse of our daily calendar pages, and admired the Germans for introducing electricity in the town. I eagerly thumbed our illustrated Russian dictionary which had many sketches of machinery, mechanical inventions and famous scientists. Insofar as I had any education in the year or two prior to our departure for America in September 1920, it consisted of these informal lessons in German, Hebrew, and Russian and "science", reading the few books available, stamp collecting which led to a study of geography, studying text books in mathematics, listening to the discussions of the Bible and Talmud by the

synagogue study groups, conversations with German soldiers about life in Germany and, most of all, observation of the multi-faceted life developing as a result of the occupation.

Bar Mitzvah, the religious ceremony by which a Jewish boy becomes a formal member of the community when he reaches age 13, was, in contrast to contemporary practice, a simple and muted affair, at least in war-time Rassein. My preparation for the synagogue ceremony required little time and effort since I knew Hebrew and had witnessed the traditional rite many times in the synagogue. Perhaps another reason for the lack of special attention to the experience was my father's grave illness and the fact that our family synagogue was being repaired at the time. My father was too ill to attend the celebration, my uncle Azriel Ziff, taking his place, and the affair took place in a private home which served as a temporary synagogue. I was ill at ease during the ceremony and few people present paid much attention to it. There were no presents, but my brothers and my father wrote messages of greeting in a small album. I did not feel any different after the Bar Mitzvah and continued my formal and informal education in the community as before.

In retrospect it would seem that the educational system for Jews in Rassein, and probably in most of the small towns or *shtetlach* of Eastern Europe, was not directed at any kind of vocation or profession (with the exception of the rabbinate), but to the acquisition of knowledge, language arts, traditions, ethical precepts related to Judaism and to the Jewish past. Education in general subjects - Russian, mathematics, geography - was provided in the state administered Jewish schools. Those who qualified were admitted to the *gymnasium*, one for boys and one for girls, with little or no hope of going on to the University in one of the larger cities of Russia. Had the war not occurred I would probably have attended the *gymnasium* and then emigrated to America, or possibly Palestine. As it was, the War and German occupation both interrupted and enriched my education by exposing me to German and German literature and Kultur and to the many other by products - social, cultural, sexual - of the German presence for more than three years.

By the time our family embarked for America, my educational baggage consisted of a speaking, reading and writing knowledge of Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian and German and some acquaintance with Lithuanian and Polish. I had a fairly thorough understanding of the Old Testament, mainly as a work of history and ethics, some familiarity with the Talmud and a few creations, mostly poetry, of modern Hebrew literature. Although I was able to read Russian and German quite well, I had read few books in these languages, perhaps because they were not easily available except to my sisters and older brother. I had a serious interest in the study of geography, mathematics, "science" and history, but my specific knowledge in these fields was limited. As a result of my stamp collecting hobby and correspondence with other stamp collectors in the Baltic states, I became thoroughly familiar with the new map of the world following the World War. I became somewhat familiar with the ideologies and programs of political parties, operating mainly in the organized Jewish community formed after the establishment of the Lithuanian Republic, such as General Zionists, Poalei Zion (left Zionists) and the Bund, radical and generally anti-Zionist. Echoes of the Russian Revolution reached Rassein through various channels but had no special significance for me since I was primarily interested in Palestine and in America, which seemed to be our destination following the death of my father. News from America came in letters from relatives and an occasional visitor at the conclusion of the War. Although I still attended synagogue from time to time following my father's death, I had no deep religious interests and perhaps considered myself, as did most of my friends vaguely, as non-believers, questioning the story of Genesis and observing Jewish holidays in a somewhat perfunctory manner. My interests in Jewish life were secular and nationalist, as was true of most young people in Rassein.

When I left for America I assumed that I would continue my education without having any clear idea of its direction. As it happened, my educational career almost came to an end the first day I was enrolled in the Ward Street School in Worcester, Massachusetts. Not having had any experience with immigrants for several years as a result of the War, the school authorities were hardly prepared for the trickle of immigrant children arriving in Worcester. It was therefore decided that since I did not know a word of English, it would be best to place me in the first grade! I was outraged and returned home to tell my brother Reuben that I would not return to school and would rather go to work. The next day I was assigned to the seventh grade, the highest in this school, and I thus resumed my interrupted education.

No aspect of my formal and informal education was more varied than the languages spoken and read in Rassein. Yiddish was of course my *mame-loshen* (mother's language), so called perhaps to distinguish it from *loshen-ha-kodesh* (the sacred language- Hebrew) which few women could read, having been taught to read Yiddish, which in turn enabled them to recite some of the Hebrew prayers, since both languages use Hebrew letters. I spoke Yiddish at home, in school, in the community and with my friends, and read such Yiddish newspapers and literature as came my way. I knew nothing of the nearly 1,000 year history of Yiddish, and although appreciating its rich folk vocabulary, often heard my native tongue referred to as *zhargon* (jargon, a term used by detractors of the language who preferred to speak Hebrew, Russian German or even Polish). It was several years, after I emigrated to America, before I learned of the existence of a multi-faceted literature in Yiddish by such outstanding writers as Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Asch, and the "proletarian" authors in America who wrote about the travails of the newcomers in what they ironically referred to as *die goldene medina* (the golden land). Hebrew, the language of the Bible and prayers, had far more status in my eyes as one of the world's oldest languages and at the same time, one of the "newest" in its form as a modern language closely related to the birth of the Zionist movement. With Biblical Hebrew as a firm base, I learned to speak and read modern Hebrew and frequently conversed in Hebrew with my friends. Russian was spoken by every member of our family except Velvel (William) who was too young to pick it up, but probably knew German to some extent. My brothers and sisters knew the language well and read Russian literature, both fiction and poetry, which was especially popular, as a matter of course even during the German occupation. I knew Russian quite well and used a Russian encyclopedic dictionary to practice learning the vocabulary. I was very fond of the Russian poems and songs which my sisters and brother Mendel recited and sang with their friends. I can still remember one very sad song about a poor peasant boy, which began with the couplet: Vetcher byll, sverkali zviozdzie/ Na dvore morazh treshchal (In the evening the stars sparkled/In the yard the frost was crunchy). German, already familiar as a language with some Rassein residents even before the occupation, became very popular during the German presence as a matter of necessity and to some extent choice. Since German is the dominant element in Yiddish, it was relatively easy for many adults and children to learn to speak and read it. I quickly learned the German national anthem and the marching and folk songs popular with the military. Occasionally I was able to "borrow" German paperbacks from soldiers and read Heine for the first time with much excitement, since he was both a good poet and a Jew. My parents knew Polish, spoken by some of our store customers, and I picked up a smattering of Polish phrases. "Lithuanian, the ancient language of the native Lithuanian population, was spoken principally by the peasants and some of the workers living on the outskirts of the town. Lithuanian, too, was known to my parents, chiefly for business reasons. Our two Lithuanian house helpers, mother and daughter, spoke the language, and if I remember correctly the daughter knew Yiddish quite well. I had a limited Lithuanian vocabulary, but in a pinch could

carry on a simple conversation in the relatively unfamiliar language, which was frowned upon by the Russian authorities and ignored by the Germans.

In addition to the several forms of "formal" education, self-education and help from tutors, the environment of my home, the community and the turbulent times shaped my development and attitudes toward the larger world. I listened intently to the conversation of adults at home and in the synagogue and was attracted by anecdotes, recollections and bits of humor. Unlike the rich Jewish humor familiar to me at a later age, the humor of Rassein was rather bland. The story was told of a man who traveled from his town of Kovno to the smaller city of Ponivez and fooled everyone there by telling them that he came from the capitol city of Vilno. A man was walking one day and bumped into a brick building. "What uncouth people they are, to place such an unwieldy building in my way." Although they were not known to me then as "proverbs", the speech of some adults in Rassein frequently contained these short, pithy sayings in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish and German. My mother was especially fond of quoting proverbs in her infrequent conversations with the children. One of her favorite sayings was the Polish, "What is cheaply bought is dear." Others, in Yiddish, were, "Two cadavers a-dancing go," (referring to two ineffectual persons); "Spirited, healthy and crazy," (a comment on the contradictory behavior of young people); "One dies, is buried and it is unfashionable to revive the dead," (a realistic acceptance of the finality of death); "What the sober one retains in his lungs, the drunkard shows in his tongue;" "When one sleeps with dogs, one awakens with fleas;" "Purim is not a holiday and a cold is not a disease;" "One wants to live, but they won't let you," (I always wondered who the "they" were, and finally concluded that it referred to anyone and to no one in particular); "What a pity, the bride is too pretty;" "One cannot dance at two weddings at the same time."

I was also impressed by the prevalent beliefs regarding ghosts, apparitions and what might be called folk lore on every conceivable subject. The barking of a dog at night indicated the approaching death of someone, especially a child. The Angel of Death could be diverted from entering the home of a sick person by changing the name of the person marked for death. Entering the home of a sick relative, I often noticed small posters containing special prayers for the recovery of the ill person. It was dangerous to visit or even approach the Jewish cemetery at night, and it was unthinkable to disturb graves and headstones. We had a very anthropomorphic idea of God, who appeared to us children as a very old and kindly man whom you could address directly in prayer, supplication or when in distress. There was little talk of *Gehinom* (hell) but some speculation about *Ganeydon* (paradise), which I visualized as something like an apple orchard. Various forms of gestures were used to express anger or disapproval, the most popular (and annoying) being the gesture and expression, "A fig under a roof."

There was, of course, no such thing as "sex education", but I absorbed attitudes and observed the lively interest in sex, especially during the war years, of myself and my friends. Although my friends and I did not have a word for "sex", we were quite aware of the relations between men and women at various levels. The physical and spatial arrangements of bedrooms in our home stimulated my curiosity about women at an early age. Our Jewish maid Alte, shared a bedroom with my brother Mendel and myself; my bed being directly opposite hers. I frequently lay awake watching Alte retire, leave her bed during the night and dress in the morning. She paid no attention to me or my brother in her going to and leaving her bed, and perhaps assumed that she could not be observed in the dark. I was ignorant of the menstruation phenomenon, but could see red blotches in my sister's beds and assumed that this had something to do with being a woman. Occasionally my sisters invited me to join them on a swimming expedition, and although they asked me to swim a short distance from them and their friends, I eagerly looked in their direction as they swam naked, much to their amusement. The women's bathing area was

close to the main swimming hole used by men and boys, and at times a group of us boys approached the relatively small number of women bathing to have a "good look"

Masturbation was freely discussed by boys, and although it was considered "sinful" and deleterious to health, it was very commonly practiced by me and my friends. Sometimes we sought the advice of older friends, who assured us that masturbation was normal for boys, and we felt good about defying the traditional view of it. To show our "modern" attitude, we used the most grown up Yiddish slang expressions for the male and female sexual organs. On excursions to the country, when we could be alone in the woods, we occasionally practiced a kind of communal masturbation exercise, which encouraged the timid boys to participate freely. On the way to one of these country excursions there was a peasant woman in the wagon with us who offered to show us "hers" for a small coin. When we shyly refused, she proceeded to lift up her skirt anyhow as she laughed at us "city boys".

There was constant talk during the occupation of romances, flirtations, liaisons between German military and Jewish girls. For the first time I heard that there were prostitutes in town patronized by the army men. One of these prostitutes, a young peasant woman, did housework for my best friends' mother. She lived in a hut on the grounds of the inn and saloon not far from our home and I often observed her entering her home in the company of a soldier. My friend Joseph had apparently approached her about going to bed with him and invited me to join him. I agreed reluctantly and waited with my friend for the arrival of the young woman when Joseph's mother was at work. She silently followed my friend to his bedroom, leaving me in the living room as a lookout. He emerged a short time later and asked me to go into his bedroom, but I was frightened and refused. This bold episode was preceded by several other encounters with young girls. The father of one of my friends had a small lumber mill, which employed a number of peasant families who lived near the mill. My friend and I arranged to meet the daughter of one of the mill workers in one of the sheds after school, but without having any idea as to what might happen there. When we arrived she was not there, and when I came home my family knew all about the aborted assignation, having been told by the girl's mother, and I was severely reprimanded for my involvement in the incident. We seemed to consider peasant girls fair game, but had quite a different attitude toward the Jewish girls whom we knew. We did not dare to approach them for anything that might be considered forbidden, but tried in every way to have a "romance", exchange poems, letters, go for walks in the country and to be invited to their parties.

Interest in the Holy Land, Palestine and Zionism was a prevalent feature of my boyhood years. In studying the Bible and portions of the Talmud, Zion-Judea-Jerusalem were always in my consciousness more as symbols of a glorious past inhabited by warriors, adventurers, thundering prophets, heroes and cowards, than as hallmarks of a religion. At the Passover *seder* and on other occasions I heard the wistful hope or wish expressed: *L'shono haboh b'yerusholaim!* (next year in Jerusalem) and saw myself wandering through the streets of the ancient capital as described in fragments of the Bible. As I began to read the Prophets, Zion and its ways of greatness, sin and corruption became even more real to me. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither!" "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered thee, O Zion." Later, when I studied modern Hebrew and read some of the classical poets – Jehudah Halevi, Chaim Nachmen Bialik - I had a strong longing for Zion-Jerusalem and memorized the famous poem by Jehudah Halevi, "Longing for Zion."

Zion, will you not ask after your imprisoned ones,  
The remnant of your flocks, who seek your peace?

I took it for granted that there was a "Promise" or "Hope" of a "Return to Zion", but until I learned of the existence of the Zionist movement and saw a photograph of Theodore Herzl, I did not know how this was to be brought about. To be sure, I did hear from earliest childhood of

a mysterious figure, a "Meshiach" (Messiah) who would someday, perhaps any day it was said around the "study" tables in the synagogue, appear from nowhere and "liberate" the Jews and achieve their return to Zion of old. I imagined the Messiah coming to Rassein on the main thoroughfare, "Vilner Gass", and wondered whether I would recognize his presence. My friends and I speculated about this but the adults were not inclined to help us in our search for more precise information about the coming of the Messiah. The idea of a Messiah receded in my mind as I learned of the existence of "colonies" in Eretz Isroel, as Palestine was sometimes referred to, growing oranges, heard of the founding of a new city with the magic name Tel Aviv (Spring Hill) and saw stamp-like adhesives which were sold by the Jewish National Fund to raise money for the purchase of land in the Land of Israel. As the German occupation waned and the promise contained in the Balfour Declaration was publicized, Zionist activity became a reality in Rassein. My "modern" Hebrew teacher organized his pupils and others into a club which he named "Pirchei Tzion", (Flowers of Zion) which eventually became a sort of scouting group which went on hikes, carried a white and blue Zionist flag, sang the stirring and sad hymn "Hatikvah" (The Hope) and read Hebrew pamphlets. I was of course entirely unaware of the politics of Zionism and imagined Palestine as a deserted and barren land which was being revived by the labor of pioneers who had to be armed to ward off the periodic attacks of hostile "bedouins" or nomads. I had heard of the organization of a group known as the "Hashomrim" (Guards or Defenders), and saw myself as a member of this brave force defending the new colonies. Had I remained in Rassein following the war, I most likely would have joined one of the Zionist youth groups and possibly emigrated to Palestine as a "*Halutz*" (pioneer). The call to come to America diverted my attention from the Zionist movement.

## 5. Household Chores and Pleasures

Aside from offering, or being asked, to help out in our store on busy days (unpacking wooden crates of merchandise, running errands, selling) little was expected of me by way of help in our home. Actually I had little time to spare for anything but school, except during the early days of the German occupation and at the end of the War, when the school schedule was upset. Since my mother worked full time in the store, we had a live in maid and the help of several women, a mother and daughter I believe, who did some of the heavy work, especially before the Sabbath and holidays. Our maid, Alte, was Jewish and came from a nearby village and ran our household with an iron hand. She served meals to the children grudgingly and never failed to remind us how many dishes she would have to wash after we were fed. A request for a snack between meals was usually turned down with the complaint that this would only make for more dishes to wash. It would have been unthinkable for her to ask me for help, on the theory that children were only in the way. My sisters were called upon to participate in house cleaning before major holidays, and they too saw to it that we were not underfoot. Nevertheless, I had a strong urge to observe every household activity and to participate in some way whenever possible, frequently with the support of my mother, to whom I appealed when I was excluded by Alte or my sisters. Sabbath and holiday meals were leisurely and meticulously prepared, with the entire family and guests present. At other times our meals were informal with only some members of the family participating. The atmosphere was generally rushed and unrelaxed. My sister Frieda, who seemed to have the job of clearing the table at the end of dinner or supper, had the habit of snatching our dishes before we were finished eating, and to this day we refer to anyone's effort to speed up meal time as "pulling a Frieda".

Each aspect of everything that had to do with food interested me from an early age. With the exception of short periods during the occupation, there was never any food shortage in our home. The quality of bread deteriorated at times, there was a shortage of dairy products and meat, but we never experienced hunger. There was just the same a preoccupation with food of which children were very much aware. My bedroom, which I shared with our maid and my older brother, adjoined our large kitchen and since there was always some activity going on there early in the morning, particularly on Fridays and before holidays, I was usually awakened by the hubbub and culinary odors. I would dress and approach the kitchen cautiously to test the climate of tolerance. At first I was content to be a silent observer of the kitchen activity, which included stoking the stove for cooking and bread baking, food chopping, grinding, mixing, egg beating, butter making, the use of mortar and pestle and much more. Gradually I was allowed to participate in some small way, such as butter churning, grinding or bringing in wood for the stove. I enjoyed these tasks and took advantage of my new status as a helper to become familiar with the two large locked commodes which were kept in an elongated pantry, which also served as a corridor leading to the dining room and kitchen doors. The commodes contained a variety of cooking ingredients and I soon learned to pry the locks open with a knife and help myself to nuts, bits of cake and candy. By helping in the kitchen, I learned a number of skills by the time I was ten and I was very proud of my ability to break an egg rapidly, beat the white of egg, clean a milk bottle using egg shell, churn butter, make cheese, crumb a table using the side of one hand and the palm of another, fry eggs and bake. In spite of my skills and apparent helpfulness, I was never allowed the freedom of our kitchen to cook or bake anything for myself.

Having established my credentials as a kitchen helper, I was allowed to participate in the annual *matzoh* baking event. Several weeks before Passover the town's bakeries were ritually cleansed of all of their usual products and prepared for the task of baking *matzohs* for the Jewish

residents. People living alone, and those who could not afford to have *matzohs* baked for them to order, met their needs by buying their *matzohs* in the bakery. Our family ordered flour from the mill or baker and contracted with a bakery for the baking of our *matzohs*. The bakery, owned by a man and his daughter, was located next door to our home and usually set aside the early morning hours for our order. Actually, there was very little for anyone of us to do while the baking was in progress, but my mother or Alte was usually present and I saw to it that I was included. Rising at four or five A.M., we would enter the bakery to find the bakery crew, employed especially for this purpose, working around several rectangular tables in the living room of the home bakery.

As the unleavened dough was mixed in the bakery proper it was brought in vats to the tables where the workers prepared the round *matzohs* for the oven which was probably operated on a 24 hour basis. Everyone worked very rapidly and soon the finished *matzohs* emerged from the oven and were taken to our home in batches, where they were stacked in large hamper kept in the roomy attic. Although it was considered improper to eat *matzohs* before the start of the holiday, I managed to "taste" the freshly baked products and was especially fond of the egg *matzohs*, which were baked when the regular order was finished. Since the *matzohs* were normally consumed during the eight day holiday period, I used to hide a few in a torn section of the wallpaper over my bed, but this was soon discovered and I was reprimanded for my transgression. It was almost impossible to "hide" anything in the house or get away with any "secrets". Everyone was alert to what the children were up to and smoked out anything that seemed to be amiss. During one of my days in the store I took a deck of cards without permission, knowing full well that I would not be allowed to have playing cards. I put the cards in a locked locker box which I kept under my bed, only to have my father, when he was ill and at home, discover my secret and chide me for my act.

For several years during my boyhood we had kept a cow in a shed adjoining our house. The red and white cow supplied us with most of our milk needs. I remember someone in the family saying that our doctor prescribed "warm milk from the cow" for my mother and she did drink milk as soon as it was brought in by our gentile helper. I assumed a good deal of responsibility for the cow, probably without being asked to do so. I was simply sorry for the way the cow was kept cooped up in the shed, which was seldom cleaned. I took it upon myself to clean the shed, provide fresh hay for the cow to lie on, scraped the dung off the cow, and occasionally accompanied her to pasture. The street we lived on, called Cattle Street, led to the town pasture and whenever I could I saw to it that our cow left the shed on time to join the herd on the way to pasture. During the summer I would sometimes start out to the pasture, perhaps a mile from town, late in the afternoon to see our cow safely home. The shed also accommodated a number of chickens which we kept and their care became my responsibility too, to some extent, especially when they wandered off and had to be sought for and brought back. I came to know the personalities of the chickens and was squeamish about seeing them killed and dressed for table. To overcome this feeling, I would pay special attention to the chicks and watch them grow.

There were a number of household activities of which I had little knowledge, primarily because they were carried out during the day when I was at school. However, when I was ill and stayed home I could observe some of these operations. Water was delivered to us by a woman carrying two wooden pails attached to a pole across her shoulders. Butter, milk and other dairy products were stored in a kind of cellar or dugout outside the kitchen in the vestibule which ran the length of the house. There was much baking of cakes, cookies and choleh before the Sabbath and more especially before holidays. Small batches of laundry were washed periodically, but the bulk of our laundry was taken twice a year, in the spring and fall, by several laundresses accompanied by our maid to a stream on the outskirts of town where it was washed, dried and

folded. I was either asked to help in this major operation, or volunteered my services. Other families did their washing the same day Oat the same time, and my friends and I made a picnic out of the event. The small procession would leave our home early in the morning on a clear, sunny day and proceed on foot to the stream. There the laundry was washed, then pounded on flat stones, turned to rinse and finally set out to dry on makeshift dryers or on the grass. There was a basket of food for all and plenty of time for me to explore the area. At the end of the day the clean, fresh laundry was brought home and stored in cabinets and straw bins. I had a special interest in clean laundry, since I was very sensitive to dirt, strong odors and the pervasive smell of urine outdoors. When I was home during the day I became aware of the beggars who came to our house for a handout and occasionally were given a meal. They were served on dishes retained for their use only, and I took careful note of that and made sure that the dishes were not used for my meals by mistake, since I noticed that some of the mendicants were obviously ill. My mother was very solicitous about the welfare of the very poor and neglected and did what she could to feed them, even though she had very little time even for the children.

## 6. Relatives, Neighbors and Friends

We had a number of relatives in the town, but few of them seemed very close to our family, perhaps because there was little time for socializing. More importantly, I had the impression that each family was deeply involved in making a living, taking care of their children's needs and meeting unexpected crises caused by officialdom and the occupation authorities. On holidays, particularly Passover, the families exchanged visits which all the children were expected to join. There was first the ceremonial setting out of refreshments, which we looked forward to even though they were no different from what we had at home. Once the serving of refreshments was over, I would join the children of my own age in exploring their attic in search of such items as buttons for our collections, the garden whenever it contained berry bushes, the barn in search of bird nests. One of my favorite places was a large barn in which one of our relatives stored ice in layers of hay, which he sold in the community. One of our relatives, Zemach Volpe, the only other family bearing that name, had a farm quite close to the swimming hole a few kilometers from town, and when I knew that one of my cousins was at the farm I would stop by on the way home for buttermilk and black bread. As I made my rounds in the town during off hours, especially during the occupation, I would stop at the homes of relatives where some bread, cake or candy was always at hand. As I was walking through the town square market, one of our relatives spotted me and invited me in. She insisted on my sampling a concoction which I took to be some variety meat, new to me, and when I hesitated she insisted, much to my annoyance. In the future I would avoid their home.

Our closest relative was the family of my mother's brother Azriel Ziff, the town's respected *schochet* (ritual slaughterer). Their home was situated on an unpaved street midway between the butcher shops and the ritual slaughter house. I spent many hours there since one of my cousins, Meishke, older than I but very friendly, was extremely gifted mechanically and taught me carpentry. From time to time he helped me construct a wagon, wooden skates and what I prized more than any of my meager possessions, a lock box where I kept my button collection, stamp album, cards, photographs and occasional contraband foodstuffs such as matzohs kept after Passover. They had three sons and one daughter at home and two sons in America, one of whom, Joseph, later married my sister Feigel (Frances). The oldest son, Ephraim or Ephie, was one of the town's young intellectuals, which meant that he had a good education and no occupation whatsoever. The Ziff family had a very small notions store not far from our shop, but only my aunt Feige Hene and cousin Rivke worked in it. Ephie befriended me and occasionally would talk Hebrew with me, discuss Zionism, the war, family matters and even sex. I was much closer to him than to my older brother Mendel (Martin) who usually disdained associating with me, much less taking me into his confidence on affairs of the intelligentsia. Our neighbors were valued by me for quite different reasons, but in the case of two the presence of girls in the families was the chief attraction. Our neighbor across the street was the owner or manager of forest property, and frequently invited me and his two daughters to accompany him on his visits in the country where he had business. While he was occupied with his assistants, the girls and I would be left in one of the peasant homes where we were treated to fresh buttermilk, black bread and fruit. I became very friendly with the younger daughter, approximately my own age, and used every opportunity to visit their home where I was welcomed by the girl's mother, who was quite genteel in contrast to her husband, who was more of a countryman. They kept their own horses and had two barns, where I often played with the younger girl by literally rolling in the hay. When I was in my early teens I was intensely interested in being with and talking with girls and running errands for them. Another neighbor living in a rather large house

in an alley to the right of our house also had two daughters. I believe the family were either newcomers to the town or refugees from one of the Lithuanian border towns evacuated by the Russians. I frequently passed their house on my way to visit a tannery, and when I spotted one of the girls, invited her to join me on my walk. She would ask her mother's permission and shyly follow me, only to turn back when the strong odor emanating from the tannery reached our nostrils. I tried to entice her on other walks, but she did not seem to be interested in my company.

The neighbor living to the left of us, as I have already related, was a baker whose bakery adjoined his home. The bakery specialized in black and rye bread and did not interest me very much except in the weeks prior to Passover, when it was converted for the baking of *matzohs*, when I used to spend a good deal of time there, especially when our *matzohs* were baked to order. The baker had a large vegetable garden to the rear of his house which we passed on the way to the common outhouse. I picked cucumbers, carrots, radishes and peas regularly and discreetly and got caught only occasionally. The baker, a surly man with an unmarried older daughter, punished me by barely tolerating me at his weekly "kino". In spite of this humiliation, I tried to be on good terms with the baker and his daughter, who were related to a Jewish landowner whose farm I would occasionally visit. (It was rumored that the baker's daughter had an affair with the landowner and had a child by him. We used to watch her walking to the outhouse and observed the course of her pregnancy).

Other neighbors were a distant relative who invited us once a year for delicious refreshments and who had tea with my father almost daily. There was a combination general store, inn and saloon, used by peasants coming to market, a short distance from our house where several of the town's prostitutes were pointed out to me. I considered all of the households, businesses and workshops as our neighbors since I was known to most of them and felt free to visit them on my walks through the town on one pretext or another.

I have no recollection of having had friends until I began to attend *cheder* at the age of three or four. Until then I was tied very closely to home and immediate neighborhood and probably played with children my own age and still out of school. Upon entering school I was plunged into a noisy, restless and mischievous group of perhaps 30 to 40 boys ranging in age from four to eight, most of whom I had never seen before. Although accompanied by my mother and shown special consideration by the teacher, I remained watchful and fearful during my first days in school. Slowly and hesitantly I began to make friends among the less aggressive boys, most of whom it turned out later came from families with backgrounds similar to mine. The friends I made in *cheder* remained my companions as we moved to the "modern" school when I was eight, to the Jewish School maintained by the Russian authorities and later to the German School. This intimate group of friends consisted of perhaps five or six boys, whose friendship called for sharing of small belongings, gifts, "secrets", gossip, news heard and overheard, sex lore, rudimentary social and political ideas and plans for the future, such as they were. Our parents were all merchants in one way or another and we probably had a sense of "class" which separated us from the very poor, who generally did not attend school at all.

My closest friend was Joseph Marcus (the only one whose name I still remember), a neighbor, an only child living with his mother and existing on remittances from his father in South Africa. We were the same age but he always seemed bolder than I was in approaching girls, making plans for excursions and extracting money from his mother. He was not a good student, read little, had no special interest in Zionism, but I was attracted to him because of his "worldliness". (It is interesting that when he moved to Memel Germany right after the war, he wrote to me in German rather than Hebrew or Yiddish). We were constant companions and whenever I was wanted at home someone came looking for me at the Marcus residence.

Another good friend was intellectually inclined, as I was, and our relationship was practically limited to long discussions about school, the war, refined girls, and the few books that we read. One of my friends was an expert card player, very knowledgeable about the world of adults, ways to obtain change from German soldiers by doing small favors for them and locating stamp collections in homes where young men had been drafted. I was sometimes repelled by his crude way of talking, lack of interest in attending school, but he was a good companion on excursions and taught me how to roast heads of wheat and where to find the best horse chestnuts for toy furniture making. My friends and I generally stayed together for such activities as skating, swimming, visiting orchards on Saturdays, looking for girls on the weekly walks along Apothecary Street, going on school picnics, being truant from synagogue services whenever possible, playing cards and of course street and yard games whenever we could.

While some neighbors were friendly in my casual contacts with them, others could be quite cross and even abusive. One man who was on my list for collection on behalf of charity favored by my Hebrew teacher, would invariably ask me if I had change for a 10 ruble note, which of course I did not, since collections were made up of groschen.

## 7. Some People of the Shtetl

Telling and listening to stories, anecdotes, gossip and news about people was a favorite interest of old and young in our town. Children participated in this perennial activity more as eavesdroppers and bystanders than as conduits, but our eagerness to pick up any tidbits floating through overheard conversations was just as great. Those talked about usually knew that they were the subjects of town talk, and I had the impression that they were frequently the authors of tales about themselves. There was the son-in-law of my first Hebrew teacher or *melamed* who ran an afternoon and evening school for older children and some adults in secular subjects in his own living room. I was not one of these students, but frequently visited his home and observed students sitting around large tables reading, studying and reciting. He was a jolly man and occasionally displeased his venerable father-in-law by his levity, if not agnosticism. It was told that when he attended his father-in-law's Passover *seder* he was impatient about the long preliminaries to the serving of food, and quietly urged a little speed. One Passover evening when the soup was finally served up, this man's young son turned to him and pointed to what he thought was a crumb of bread in the broth, which, if true, would have made the soup unfit for service at a Passover meal. The teacher quickly grasped the meaning of this threat, grabbed his son's arm and said under his breath, "Fresh, ver dervorgen!" (Eat up, even if you choke on it). The story must have originated with the iconoclastic teacher and told to his friends for their amusement.

This same "modern" teacher had an assistant who was drafted into the Czar's armies at the beginning of the War and returned more dead than alive late one night after the German collapse, either from a prisoner of war camp or the interior of revolutionary Russia. He is reported to have made his way to the home of his old employer late one night and after being admitted was at first barely recognized by the teacher, who embraced him and announced, "Haint vell ich dir derzeilen die maishe mit Tuziken." (Now I will tell you the story - or fate - of Tuzik). It seems that the assistant had a dog named Tuzik whom he left with his employer when he went forth to the War, and who was killed in the intervening period. The town knew all about Tuzik (few Jews had dogs) and marveled at the head teacher's eagerness to tell his assistant about Tuzik's fate even before he inquired about the man's health, well being, let alone his experiences in the War for four or five years. The greeting has remained in our family and is used to/refer to a highly inappropriate greeting during a reunion of people who had not seen each other for a long time.

People were frequently referred to by their given names, to which a surname representing their occupation or some characteristic was often added. A man named Nissen was called Nissen der Zeiger (Nissen the Watch) because he was in the habit of showing off his watch and gold chain sent to him by a son in America. He was seen around town displaying his watch and I would often approach him and ask for the time of day. After a while he became impatient and would give out the time of day only to adults who, he was sure, would not make fun of him. The same Nissen approached a cousin of mine after the War broke out and inquired anxiously where the Germans were in their campaign. My cousin replied unhesitatingly, "Nisson, they have already taken George Borman," (the name of a well known candy). Nisson looked at his watch and remarked, "Is that so?" "There's just no stopping those Germans."

Zelek der Unterschames (Zelek the assistant sexton) of our synagogue Chayeh Odom (The Life of Man) was a jolly red headed man, always on the go performing various chores, generally barefoot, always at the beck and call of his superior and the occupants of the Eastern Wall. He had no station of his own for prayer and either stood in the rear of the synagogue or in

one of the aisles during services. He was in the habit of reciting the memorized prayers (he was probably illiterate and perhaps retarded) in a loud voice, and when he happened to be in the front of the synagogue close to the Eastern Wall he was admonished by one of the elders not to shout so loud. His response invariably was, "Az ich ken nit hecher!" (I can't shout any louder)

A non-Jewish customer of ours whom my mother apparently knew well and whom she referred to as Yashinshke der Speier (Yashinske the spitter), a nickname bestowed upon me when I was observed spitting unduly. Other sobriquets by which I was known were Meierke, Meike and perhaps others, such as "Meier der sprintzer," because of my skip like walking habit.

The story was told of the two close women friends who visited each other's home almost daily and if the visit lasted into the evening the hostess would accompany her friend home, and when they reached their destination the woman would offer to see her friend home, and so it went on until they separated and each went her own way.

A distant relative of our family, Ailyeh Berman, a bachelor, an amateur actor, story teller, book collector and *luft mentsch* (a man of no particular occupation) was the subject of stories about his nonchalant attitude toward the affairs of the world. It was said of Ailyeh that when a fire broke out in the town hospital, which was fought throughout the night by a human chain passing buckets of water to the firemen, he did not participate and when the fire was nearly under control the gentleman deigned to open the window of his apartment to inquire if it was all over.

There was always an unusual bustle in the town a short time before sundown on Fridays, as people prepared to "receive the Sabbath". Chores were completed or set aside, stores were closed, children gotten off the streets and stray animals sought out. My uncle Azriel told of meeting a neighbor, as he walked to the synagogue, who was evidently looking frantically for a lost chicken and as she saw him and realized that the Sabbath was upon her, said to him, "Have you seen, Good Sabbath, a chicken without a tail?" He looked at her sternly and she ceased her pursuit.

My aunt Feige Henne was a very frugal housekeeper and when we visited were usually served what we considered small portions of refreshments, except on the day prior to Passover, when all non-Passover food had to be consumed or otherwise disposed of. If we happened to visit during that time, Auntie would not only serve up larger portions of cake or bread, but urge us to help ourselves to more.

An elderly man considered something of a "philozof" was remembered because of his oft repeated remark, "What is life" Why should we want to live longer than our allotted years? It only means that we would be having 'noch a kugel, noch a kugel,' (pudding of noodles or potatoes).

It was quite common to identify people by some outstanding characteristic of their personality, whether positive or negative. There was the "shayner yeed", the Jew who, though he may have been old, infirm and burdened by unattractive physical disabilities, was nevertheless described as a "beautiful" person. Although rare, at least in Rassein, there was also "der shtiler gevir", the man of wealth who kept quiet about his, good fortune. There was also the "der eideler mench", the refined or genteel person. There were a good many appellations of a negative character, a phenomenon made familiar in Yiddish literature, especially in the stories of Sholom Aleichem. We all knew the type identified as "der beizer yeed", the angry Jew, who probably as a result of poverty, misfortune or bad luck, was perennially angry at the world. My mother frequently referred to some busy body, usually a woman, as "a kochelefel", a mixing spoon. She characterized a whining and complaining person as "a klogmutter", a professional mourner. A woman who gossiped incessantly, was unable to keep a secret and was generally unattractive as a person was dubbed "a yente". A man who boasted about his prowess with little to show for it was referred to as "a gantzer knacker", one who goes about cracking or snapping without too much effect. Interestingly enough, I do not recall that most common figure of the *shtetl*, "der

schnorer", the begger with lots of *chutzpeh*, or nerve. There was, however, no dearth of the type known as "a shleemazel", "a luft mench" or "schlemiel", products of the *shtetl* characterized in some way by hard luck, getting by on air or nothing in particular, and being consistently unlucky.

The eccentricities of people I encountered in the synagogue, on the street and sometimes in our home made a strong impression on me and I was delighted to find that the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem described many of our town "characters" in his stories. In addition to the eccentrics there were a number of people in the town who were obviously mentally ill, although they were never referred to as "meshugoin" (crazy people). They were considered "odd" or disturbed, circulated through the town freely and were sometimes accompanied by a relative or member of the family. The father of one of my friends who worked sporadically as a watchmaker walked the streets murmuring to himself endlessly and was always accompanied by his young son. When I attended *cheder* a woman visited the school often and berated the pupils for what she considered lapses from religious observances. She had a special interest in nail cuttings and warned the children that if they didn't dispose of their nail cuttings in the proper way, they would be "doomed". She was able to frighten us by her intense manner and loud speech, although we would sometimes make fun of her and ask her to leave. At times I was frightened by the vituperative talk of disturbed people and when walking to school at night I would try to avoid passing the homes where I knew them to be living.

## 8. The Sabbath, Holidays and Holy Days

The weekly observance of Shabbes (Sabbath), not so much as a religious ritual, but as a refreshing change in every aspect of daily living, was a welcome event for me. I interpreted the Biblical injunction, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy: six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God," to mean that, being free of school and following the required attendance in the synagogue, I could join my friends in enjoyable rambles in the orchards and fields adjoining the town, play games in daylight, slide over ice fields in the winter and pick vegetables surreptitiously in the summer. The Sabbath transformed the busy life of Rassein, and although I sometimes resented the unnatural calm of the day, I sensed that the Jewish inhabitants of all classes were changed in dress, speech, movement and manner of greeting. From what I could see and hear, preparations for the Sabbath began in the middle of the week in the talk of expected guests, plans for new dishes and some special synagogue observance. Active preparations started early Friday morning when I was awakened by the activity in the kitchen adjoining my bed. In anticipation of the coming Sabbath and early dismissal from school, there was more restlessness and turmoil than usual in the crowded schoolroom. During the brief summer season my friends and I made a dash for the swimming hole and returned just in time to dress and join the male members of my family in the walk to the synagogue for the Sabbath eve service. When outdoor bathing was not possible, I would go from school to a kind of Turkish bath (also, I believe, the site of the town's *Mikva* or ritual bath) for the only complete washing of the week. When I was home ill on a Friday I observed how thoroughly the house was cleaned by our regular and special maids assisted by my sisters. All activity stopped by the time my mother ushered in the Sabbath (referred to as "the Queen of the week" and "the Bride") by blessing the candles set out in the dining room at sunset. Without knowing very much about the considerable body of tradition and legend regarding the lighting of the candles on the eve of Sabbath, I was always glad to see my mother standing quietly at the end of the dining room table looking more relaxed than she did at any time during her busy workweek.

The walk to the synagogue Friday evening looked very much like a procession, with families dressed in their Sabbath clothes headed for the different synagogues. Arriving at our synagogue my friends and I would loiter outdoors as long as we could and then hurry inside when the service was about to begin to take our places at our family pews. The synagogue seemed to be especially well lighted and there was the usual hub-bub produced by the congregation praying in unison and the discordant voices of adults disciplining children who were not heard in prayer or attempted to leave the synagogue briefly. I joined in the praying and reading aloud from the prayer book spasmodically and was grateful that the Sabbath eve service was comparatively short. While the well to do members of the synagogue had assigned pews or spaces, the poorer congregants sat in the back on long benches and on Friday evenings they were joined by occasional travelers who were not the guests of specific families. On the way out of the synagogue my father frequently invited one of the strangers to share the evening meal with us. Soon the family gathered around the dining room table, set for the evening meal with the traditional *challah* covered with a white napkin in front of my father and brightly lit by a large spirit lamp (later replaced with a bare bulb when the Germans introduced electricity) fringed by glass beads suspended from the globe. There were always special dishes, with generous portions for all, and in contrast to meals during the week the pace was leisurely and family members were expected to remain at the table instead of disappearing one by one.

The Sabbath morning service lasted the entire forenoon and prompted children to absent themselves for short periods on one excuse or another. It was risky to play just outside the synagogue since one could be observed, but the area leading to the outhouse was relatively safe, if malodorous. The outhouse itself was heavily used and avoided by me as much as possible, especially after it was reported that an old man had fallen into one and had to be rescued. Whatever the excuse for absenting oneself from the service for brief periods, it was always expected that we would return for the conclusion of the morning service, which seemed to take place in a festive mood in anticipation of the main Sabbath meal and a measure of freedom in the afternoon. I usually preceded my parents home and took my place at the dining room table. Except for some periods during the occupation, the meals were always varied and tasty and I usually knew what was to be served from observing the planning and preparation of dishes early Friday mornings.

Guests were often present at the noon meal and it was customary to invite relatives and friends for tea and cake during the afternoon of the Sabbath. Strangers invited to the Friday evening meal usually returned the next day, too. Occasionally one of my teachers was invited to dinner for the main purpose, it seemed to me, of testing my knowledge of the Bible. The informal test took place at the end of the meal, when my mother and sisters had left the table, and was always dreaded by me. I sensed that my father had high expectations of my scholastic achievement and the teacher generally asked difficult questions to impress my father. The atmosphere seemed unusually oppressive and I was relieved when the quizzing ended.

Following the meal my parents retired for their siesta. I was free to join my friends on excursions, walks on Apothecary or Senator sky Street where all of the photographic shops were located, or to engage in outdoor games. I was expected to return in the early afternoon to accompany my parents on visits to relatives or on walks to the outskirts of the town. When guests came to our house I would frequently accompany a Christian boy to fetch hot water at a central dispensary for tea. The Sabbath ended at sundown with an informal home religious service. I always experienced a sense of sadness at twilight as the atmosphere began to change from peace to busy preparations for the week ahead. I did not look forward to school and I also felt that my parents' usual anxieties about the store, family and the future made themselves evident as the Sabbath ended.

By the time I was six or seven, I was fully aware of the cycle of year-round religious observances evidenced by the weekly Sabbath, the succession of holidays and occasional special events associated with Zionism. I cannot say that I was deeply conscious of the religious significance of the observances practiced in connection with these events. Their meaning for me was more related to the passing of the seasons, the opportunity to be away from school, the availability of special food and treats, the exchange of presents, the refurbishing of our home, playing traditional games and being outfitted with new clothes. Although I recognized the solemnity which accompanied such holy days as Rosh Hashonoh (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) which followed it, I favored the more secular and nationalist holidays like Purim and Chanukah which had a gayety the others of course lacked.

An observance which I resented was Tisho B'Ov (the ninth day of the Hebrew month Ab, commemorating both the first and second destruction of the Temple), which occurred sometime in August.

Because of its' theme and the fact that the days were becoming shorter and autumn was more or less in the air, the melancholy remembrance seemed to mark the end of the short summer. When I became interested in Zionism this commemorative event assumed a new significance for me and I would attend synagogue and dream of the eventual return to Zion. About this time preparations began for Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur which coincided with

the end of summer, the coming of autumn and a full school schedule, the end of playing outdoors, the coming of muddy streets and long hours in the synagogue. The Jewish New Year had no special significance for me, perhaps because of a poorly developed time sense. When I was nine or ten I was able to witness the observance of the Christian New Year in the Klub and was much impressed by the colorful pageantry, dress and sense of celebration. Yom Kippur was notable because of the required fasting and the daylong attendance in the synagogue. I enjoyed the experience of fasting, which made me feel older than my years and I waited impatiently for the modest feast at the end of the holy day to break the fast. The day had a rhythm of its own, characterized by the ups and downs of the adults' energy as they passed the entire day in the synagogue standing or sitting, occasionally using smelling salts, and for the most part engaging in active prayer. When not too strictly observed, I would leave our pew or location in the synagogue as frequently as I could manage and play outdoors discreetly. Occasionally I would visit my mother in the "weibershe shul", the balcony reserved for women worshippers, to use her smelling salts even though I did not really feel faint. The day seemed endless and I waited for the conclusion of the service at sunset when the spirits of the worshippers seemed to revive and friends greeted each other with a sense of relief. As soon as the service was concluded, my friends and I rushed to one of the fancy bakeries which opened its doors to sell the delicious pastries baked before the holy day and then came home for the after fast spread. There was a family exchange on the experience of fasting, but once out of the synagogue there was no discussion of the significance of Yom Kippur and its emphasis on spiritual stock taking.

The holidays which followed Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur were lighter in mood and always had some element of fun, and besides required less sustained attendance in the synagogue. On the fifth day after Yom Kippur we began to celebrate Succos (the Festival of Tabernacles), which was in marked contrast to the two holy days. The purpose, much less the history, of holidays and festivals were not explained to me, but I probably learned of their significance in school and from hearsay at home and in the community. Succos was a form of thanksgiving for the bounty of the land, which I took to be ancient Israel, when Jews farmed the soil as described in the Bible. An additional purpose of the festival was to remind us of the time the ancient Hebrews, fleeing in the wilderness, lived in temporary shelters. Some families in Rassein erected a small *succoh* (booth or pergola) adjoining their homes for the celebration. Our *succoh* was built into our house and was formed by raising the roof of the entrance hall. I helped my father raise the roof and decorate the beams with tree branches and fruit available at the time. We had our main meal in the *succoh* which had the aspect of camping out. I felt sad when the time came for dismantling the *succoh* and I took it upon myself to watch the contraption through the year for leaks or breaks.

Simchas Torah (the day of rejoicing in the law) was a festival observed on the ninth and final day of Succos. During this holiday the synagogue became a very lively place as the holy scrolls (Torah) were removed from the sacred Ark and carried by male members around the *Bema* (pulpit). I was always pleased to see the congregation in a relatively festive mood. Chanukah, which came in December and commemorated the rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabaeus, was eagerly anticipated by me, not only because of the intrinsic meaning of the festival and its associated ceremonials and practices, but also because it came at a time when winter was now well established and could be enjoyed outdoors. School attendance was relaxed during the eight day duration of Chanukah, which was perhaps the greatest attraction of the celebration for me. I was, of course, thoroughly familiar with the Book of Maccabees which told of the Jewish revolt against the heathen under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus and the rededication of the Temple by burning a cruse of oil which lasted eight days. The ceremony of lighting the Chanukah candles each night was a joyous occasion and prepared the ground for

soliciting small gifts of coin from parents and older siblings. Change was badly needed to play the then to me fascinating gambling game using a *dreidel*, a kind of top with four sides marked with Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimel*, *hay*, and *shin*, the initial letters of the Hebrew words - "a great miracle took place there." These letters also referred to the Yiddish words *nem* (take), *gib* (give), *halb* (half), and *shtell* (put). I learned to fashion my own *dreidel* by making a frame consisting of four pieces of wood somewhat hollowed out, in each of which the appropriate letter was carved in the proper order. The parts of the frame were then tied together firmly and molten lead cast in an opening at the top. Going back to school full time after the eight day spree was a great let down.

The Yiddish proverb has it that "a catarrh is not a disease and Purim is not a holiday." That is not the way I regarded this much anticipated event, which combined the unusual spectacle of gaiety and even abandon in the often gloomy premises of the synagogue, the exchange of gifts and, besides, heralded in many little ways the bare beginning of spring. The story of Purim (the Feast of Lots) was known to me from an early age through a reading of that unusual Biblical chapter, The Book of Esther, which was read with much emphasis in the synagogue. The romantic story of the mighty Ahasueros, King of Persia, who chose the beautiful unknown Jewish girl, Esther, as his Queen in place of the stubborn Vashti, the dastardly plot against her people by the wicked Haman, the intervention of our heroine and the end of the villain on the gallows and the deliverance of the Jews was not only told in the Megillah (Book of Esther) but presented dramatically by a group of itinerant players who moved from yard to yard where I followed them. After the reading of the Megillah, and even during it, whenever Haman's name was mentioned, we trotted out various types of noisemakers (groggers or whirling rattles), which we used with abandon, often much to the annoyance of the elders. On this occasion I had complete freedom to use my home made cap pistol, which became even more popular during the German occupation. A good deal of the glorious day was spent in sending and receiving gifts through young emissaries who carried the offerings on plates covered with a white napkin and ran from home to home. I collected gifts for my friends weeks before Purim (small pocket knives, button collections, stamps, candy) and stood on our small porch sending off my presents and awaiting gifts in return. It was not unusual for me to return a present which did not suit me and to suggest to the messenger what I really wanted. There was always much excitement when some member of the family received an orange, a rare fruit available in the town for a short period each year. The special treat at meal and snack time were the *homen tachen* baked with sweetened poppy seeds, which I helped prepare by pounding them in a large wooden mortar and pestle. I always managed to stash a few *homen tachen* for future use, since they were made only for *Purim*. When the day was sunny, it was especially delicious as an augur of the beginning of the end of the long winter.

Keen disappointment at the swift passing of this memorable festival was tempered by my knowledge that Passover (Pesach) would soon be underway, further signaling the approach of spring. No other holiday seemed to require such extensive advance arrangements as Pesach, which generally occurs in April. Religious precept and tradition commanded that the entire dwelling be cleaned, refurbished and renewed for the coming eight day celebration of the ancient Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Every female member of our family, including our live-in maid and occasional helpers, was mobilized in performing some rejuvenating task weeks before the first Seder. They made life hard for us younger children, who were always in the way. My younger brother Velvke and I were told by our sisters and helpers that our presence in the house was most unwelcome, as they swept, washed, moved furniture around and hung freshly laundered curtains. When I complained once to a visitor about being yelled at for no apparent reason and chased from the house, he turned to me and pronounced judiciously, "After all, it is

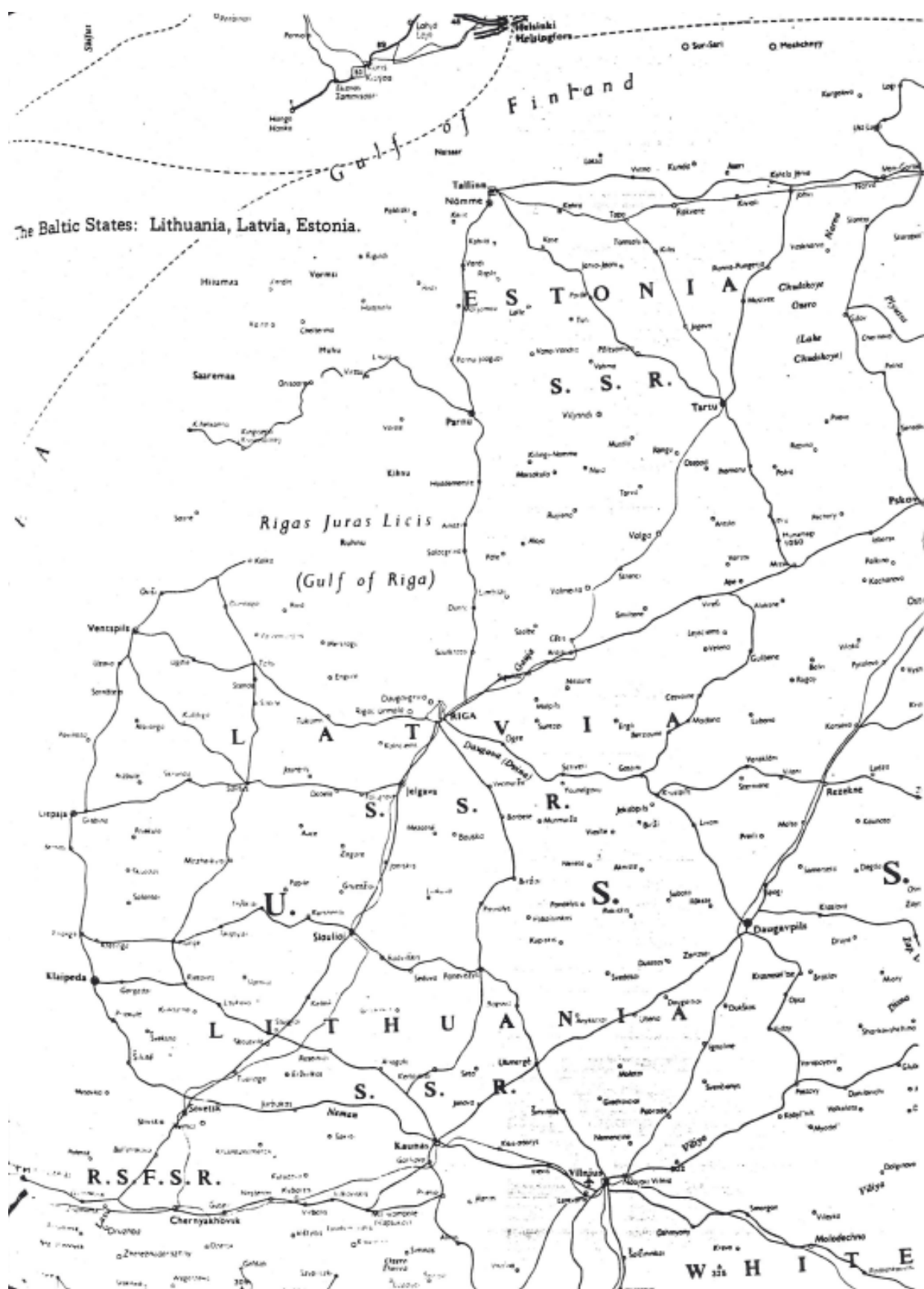
*erev Pesach*" (the eve of Passover), as if to say that this justified stern measures. The younger children, always in search of snacks during these hectic days, were kept under special surveillance during the days immediately preceding the first Seder, since it was imperative to remove all leaven (*chometz*) from every nook and cranny of the house, and it was feared that we would mess things up somehow. I was allowed to participate in only two phases of the long cycle of preparations - taking all of our cooking utensils to a tin smith for relining to make them "Kosher l'Pesach" and being permitted to rise at dawn to observe the baking of the *matzohs* in the bakery next door to us.

In addition to the house cleaning and general air of renewal, there was great activity in the kitchen where special Passover dishes were being prepared, honey cakes and almond cookies baked in large quantities, *teiglach* (honey confection) prepared and placed in special containers and the brewing of mead.

At times it seemed there was no end to the arrangements and that we would somehow be found wanting when the time for the first, and most important, *Seder* (main Passover dinner) approached. I learned to stay clear of the adults and my sisters as tempers flared on the eve of the great holiday and was amazed to find everything in order as we prepared to dress for synagogue services, moving cautiously and respectfully through our familiar rooms in their festive look. Voices were lowered, there were whispered conversations between my mother and sisters presumably about last minute details concerning the table setting, so different from all other occasions with its special plates loaded with the traditional bitter herbs, lamb's shankbone, the beloved *matzohs* which I helped see through the baking marathon, the silver engraved wine cups, nuts, honey and more. Finally, the time came for the slow walk to the synagogue in the company of my father and brothers. On this occasion the service seemed even longer than usual, since I was eager to return home and the bitter-sweet ceremonial of the *Seder*. By the time the family sat down at table with my father perched on his "throne", I was quite hungry having had the last non-Passover meal early in the day. The preliminaries and the reading of the *Haggadah* (the narrative account of Passover) seemed to take endless time and when the time came for me to ask the *fier kashes* (four questions) - Why do we eat unleavened bread? Why do we use bitter herbs? Why do we dip the herbs in salt water? Why do we recline at the table? - I was quite anxious facing my father, family members and occasional guests. I never thought that I did well in carrying out my part and did not enjoy the search for the *afikomen* (a piece of *matzoh* hidden by the father) and the singing of the traditional songs as much as I had expected to. The evening was long and what with the obligatory drinking of sweet Concord grape wine during the meal, I frequently fell asleep toward the end and mercifully was not disturbed by my parents and siblings.

I was glad that the first *Seder* was over and looked forward to the days ahead when I visited all of our relatives in succession with my family, played with my friends outdoors, especially enjoying a game not unlike bocce using a small steel ball and walnuts as targets, took long walks in the country where the snow was beginning to melt in earnest, consumed as many *matzohs* as I could come by, especially the scarce egg *matzohs* and *teiglach*, nuts and the even rarer grapes and oranges. When the festival came to an end I did not experience the letdown I had felt on other occasions, principally perhaps because spring was in the air. By the time the last of the major holidays, *Shavuot* (the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost), came around in June, snow and ice were completely gone, it was possible to walk in meadows surrounding the town and wear light clothing. I am sure that I had some knowledge of the national and religious significance of this holiday, which originally marked the end of the Palestinian grain harvest and later commemorated the revelation of the Law on Mount Sinai, but its chief meaning for me was

as a harbinger of summer which would bring greater freedom from school and a life outdoors, at least some of the time.



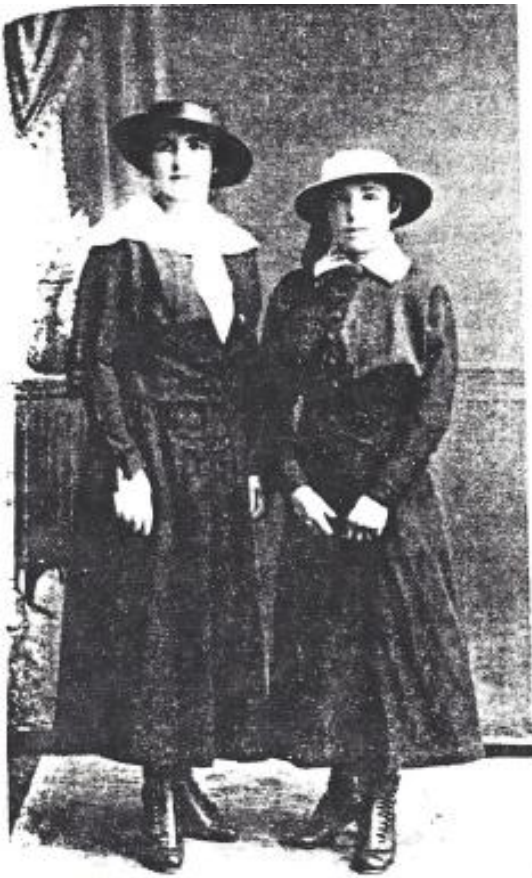
My parents, Avrohom and Peshe Volpe.





Top Left: Frieda, Feige, Reuben, Mendel, Meier David.  
 Top Right: Mendel, Velvel, Meier David.  
 Bottom Right: Joseph.



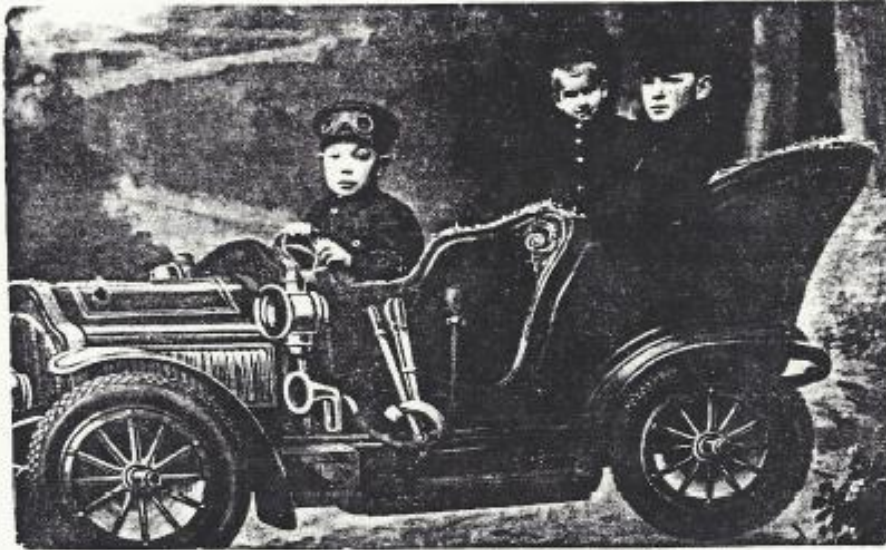


Sisters, Feige and Frieda; brothers Reuben and Mendel, and Cousin



Photo Mania. No. 1



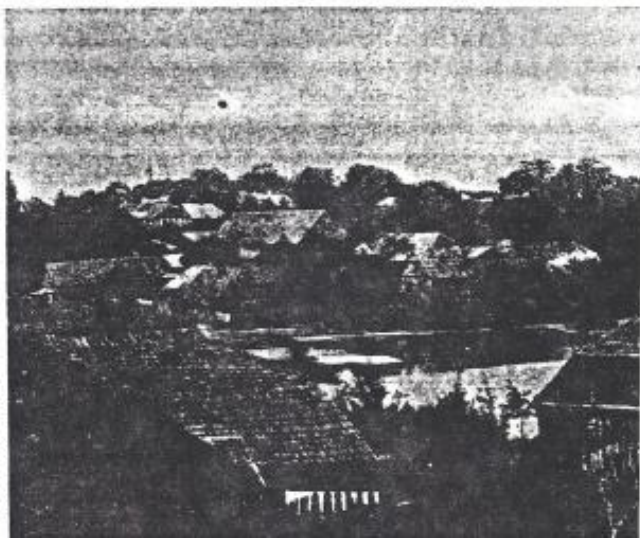


The SHTETL No. 1





The SHTETL  
No. 2



German Occupation No. 1  
Commanding Officer stationed in our house and Russian Prisoners



*Russische Typen 7*





Östliches Kriegsbild

Abtransport getragener Russen



Östliches Kriegsbild  
Kavallerie-Abteilung



Dortige Russen erfrischen sich während des Abtransportes



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## 9. Amusements, Diversions and Some Exotics

The after school activities of children in Rassein were largely determined by the cycle of seasons, which of course also deeply affected the economic life of the entire community.

As a child, I had a strong awareness of seasonal changes regarding them primarily in relation to my ability to be outdoors, in itself a source of recreation. Geographers have compared the climate of Lithuania to that of Wisconsin and from personal experience I would liken it too, to the climate of New England, say Massachusetts. Winter came early and settled in roughly from October to April with snow and ice on the ground most of that time. Attending school from morning until evening there was little time and opportunity to enjoy sledding, skating, snow ball fights, building snow men (and during the occupation, snow forts) and sliding on the frozen open fields. I looked forward to the few hours on the Sabbath when it was possible to enjoy winter sports. Our house was heated by the large kitchen oven and by several Dutch type ovens, which provided warm walls in the bedrooms and living room. I had fairly warm clothing and boots, but preferred to dress lightly and shivered in the morning before the ovens were stoked and especially when I had to make my way to the outhouse located several hundred yards from the house and reached by a muddy, snow covered path which was not free of human and animal excrement. School was held regardless of weather conditions and when there was a heavy snowfall I dreaded the trip home in the dark for supper and the return to school with the help of a dimly lit lantern. By the time winter had lasted four months or so, I eagerly looked for the first signs of spring and usually that was evident in the appearance of slivers of black earth on the edge of buildings. There was a limited supply of fresh vegetables and fruit during the winter months kept in straw filled bins where they frequently froze just the same. Frozen apples and pears were considered delicacies when not crushed by extreme cold.

Spring emerged by very slow stages and produced muddy streets and alleys, making outdoor play impossible. The frozen, icy streets melted gradually, the open fields became watery sheets, the peasants began the slow task of ploughing and finally there were green swaths of grass, and then an outburst of dandelions which I greeted joyously as the best sign of the coming of spring and then summer. The most spectacular sign of spring was the flowering of many lilac bushes in a park like section of the town where our annual Russian school picnics were held. Most of the town's young people made a pilgrimage to the lilac covered area on the Sabbath and singing could be heard from various groups. In late spring we enjoyed picking currants, gooseberries and cherries in the gardens of friends, but this had to be done somewhat stealthily for one was never sure of the attitude of adults to the pleasures of children.

Summer was a favorite season, even though there was no interruption in the school schedule, but there were compensations in daily swimming, picnicking, occasional hikes, visits to farms, band concerts in the *Sod* (town garden or orchard), freedom from heavy clothing, romancing, fresh vegetables and fruit, and a late bed time. But the summer season seemed to be very short. Sometime in the middle of August there was a change in the weather, the days were shorter and imperceptibly preparations began for the High Holidays, which for me were always a signal of summer's end, mourning for the Temple, cloudy and rainy days and an end to the relative gaiety of the warm days just ending. Fall was also a comparatively short period and enjoyed mainly because there was an abundance of fruit in the orchards and there was much excitement in the country as the peasants harvested their fields and rushed their grain to storage bins before the arrival of winter, which was never late in coming.

Lacking rail service, telephones, a newspaper, good roads, Rassein was relatively isolated from other towns and cities of Lithuania, let alone other sections of Czarist Russia and the world

beyond. There were commercial contacts with such cities as Warsaw, where my father traveled from time to time on buying trips for our store and as the Germans felt more and more secure in their occupation they permitted travel to Koenigsberg and even Berlin to a few seeking medical help, such as my father. There was regular correspondence with America, except during the war years, where so many of Rassein's young men had settled, chiefly to avoid the dreaded draft into the armies of the Czar.

Perhaps as a result of this isolation the Rassein Jewish community developed a very lively cultural life in which young men and women, in their late 'teens and twenties took a leading part. Out of school and only marginally involved in their families' businesses these semi-educated but well-read sons and daughters of the thin layer of middle class "cultured" families obviously had talent and a great deal of time on their hands. Musicals at which gifted performers such as Grisha Mankovsky, the town's outstanding violinist, participated were frequently held in private homes. A number of young men, including my brother Mendel, organized a balalaika orchestra. There were outings in the summer in the country and to the nearby river Dubissa, where the Russian army made a vain attempt to halt the German advance. These were organized excursions with hampers of food, games and group singing. There was no public library but one of our relatives, the somewhat eccentric Ailyeh Berman, organized a small lending library in his apartment. During most of the year the *Sod* which was probably privately owned, was the center of many public activities. Prior to the German occupation the band attached to the Russian army detachment stationed near the town performed regularly. From time to time a group of traveling circus performers, specializing as I recall it, in stunt bicycle riding, entertained visitors to the *Sod*. Whenever there was a performance in the Orchard there was a small general admission charge, but there were many ways of crashing the gate which I and my friends resorted to by climbing the fence which surrounded the area. Several times a year the *Sod* was the scene of a well organized fair for the benefit of the many charitable and political organizations in the town. Apart from enjoying whatever performances there might be, it was fun to stroll through the many alleys and paths in the *Sod* in search of friends and girls who were engaged in the same pursuit. Another almost daily pleasure was to stop at a shop which produced soda water and order a glass or soda with some exotic syrup.

Most of these activities and events excluded children, or at best tolerated them, but determined youngsters were able to gain admission. Since my two sisters and older brother were active participants in some of the programs, I was able to attend most of them. This was particularly true of the performances put on by the amateur theatrical group, "The Rassein Lovers of Dramatic Art". Plays were performed several times a year and were anticipated by me as I heard my older sister Feigel, who played in most of them, discuss them at home. I cannot recall the themes or content of these plays, but they seemed to deal with family problems. In one of them there was much merriment when one of the characters, an habitual pill taker, kept asking, "Where are my *pillulen*?" On at least one occasion I acted in a one act play with a children's cast. After many rehearsals the play was scheduled to be performed in the Klub as part of a cultural evening. I became ill a few days before the opening, but insisted on going on and persuaded my parents to let me go, on condition that I be allowed to powder my face heavily so as to disguise my reddened face as a result of my illness.

Following the German occupation most of the town's recreational and cultural activities came to a halt, but that was only temporary. The Germans, once firmly in control, did not interfere with the normal life of the Jewish community. As far as I and my friends were concerned the greatest contribution by the Germans to the recreational resources of the town was the introduction of Movies! I presume that at first this was inaugurated for the benefit of the military, but as the number of occupying troops dwindled, movie showings were opened to the

general public for a small fee. For me the motion picture was as novel as it was exciting. So far as I can recall none of the silent motion pictures shown dealt in any way with the war or occupation. They seemed to deal with bizarre themes and some of them were not unlike "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," or so it seemed to me. Being introduced for the first time to kino-moving pictures, I was enchanted by this marvel and was told by a German soldier that a toy moving picture projector and film was available in German toy shops. When my sister Frieda returned from Germany where she accompanied my father for medical treatment, she brought me this toy and an impressive stamp album. These were probably the first and only toys I ever received as presents.

Film showings were scheduled for late afternoon and evening and I tried to see all of the programs, which were changed weekly or more often. I did not have a regular allowance, but was given small change for helping in the store and occasionally won small amounts in card games, but young people were constantly short of funds. To save on the price of admission to the Kino, my friends and I developed a simple device which called for the purchase of tickets by two of us who then collected stubs from patrons already admitted which we took out to our waiting confederates on the pretense of going to the outhouse. The film programs continued as long as the occupation lasted. On evacuating the town the Germans took all of their equipment, depriving us of one of their most popular contributions to the recreational life of Rassein.

There were other diversions, both before and during the occupation. The traditional Purim play, which I later learned has been performed in East European Jewish communities since the 18th century, was performed in Yiddish during the Purim holiday by visiting players in fenced court yards all over the town. The price of admission was only a few groschen and I managed to see several performances. The actors, all male, were dressed in outlandish costumes and acted their parts with great spirit. From time to time and without any prior announcement groups of jugglers put on their short acts and when news of this reached me through friends at school, I raced to the most likely places to watch them. At the end of each performance a collection was taken up which usually netted only a few coins. (After the outbreak of the War it was rumored in the town that the jugglers were really German spies in disguise) .

The town was visited regularly by groups of gypsies whose colorful costumes, pot and pan laden wagons, noisy children and gesticulating men and women attracted much attention. I was warned by my parents not to get too close to their wagons since there was a tradition that the gypsies were capable of kidnapping Jewish children. The gypsies, it was reported, made camp outside town and came to the market to sell their copper wares. These were well, if crudely, made, and we had a large collection of their pots, pans and kettles in our kitchen. (When we came to America we brought a good many of these utensils with us. They were used first in Worcester and later in two locations in Brooklyn, but when my mother moved back to Worcester they were left behind in the basement of our Brooklyn apartment. They were ignored by us until one rainy Sunday, when my brother Bill (Velvel) and I recalled the fate of these gypsy products and rushed to Brooklyn only to find that most of the pots and pans had disappeared. We recovered what was left and I still have a few of these mementos of Rassein).

Apart from the introduction of motion pictures, occasional vaudeville type acts for the entertainment of the military, concerts and musicales, and virtuoso performances by individual soldiers, there was constant movement throughout the occupation period. Marching and singing soldiers were everywhere in evidence. The Kaiser's and Austrian Emperor's birthdays were observed ceremoniously. As the occupation wore on, the Christian community resumed the practice of holding religious processions. Market days were held once more and since attendance in school was becoming lax, I was able to visit the market frequently and to observe whatever else was going on in the town on those days.

There were no organized sports and meager play equipment, but this did not preclude a very active outdoor play life throughout the year. Games and play activities which I enjoyed most were desultory forms of ball playing using small rubber balls, hide and go seek, hoop rolling, a form of bocci employing a small metal ball to knock out walnuts placed in a long row some Distance from the players (this was a gambling game for small change common during the Passover period when walnuts seemed to be available), tree climbing, boating, card playing, wooden sword and gun play during the occupation, using a slingshot, various forms of leap frogging, jousting piggy back fashion, balancing long poles on one's finger and nose, swinging in the parks, foot races, a form of tiddly winks using small animal bones for equipment, and a good many games improvised on the spur of the moment, some of them suggested by the more or less organized games of the Germans. The short spring and summer seasons were used for hikes to nearby farms owned by Jews, some of them relatives of friends, where we were sometimes grudgingly offered butter milk and black bread, fresh fruit and vegetables and pony rides. Swimming was the most popular activity in the summer. Groups of children would race from school to the nearby stream like river, which provided good swimming on one side of a bridge and a waterfall on the other side where the water came down in a crude spillway. I learned to swim when quite young, but did not venture in deep water since I did not become an expert swimmer and drowning were not uncommon. We remained along the river until it was nearly dark and often had to hurry home in semi-darkness. I was very sad when the swimming season ended abruptly after or just before the high holidays.

The long winter season, from the beginning of October to the end of April, made possible a number of winter sports and diversions - sledding, snow ball throwing, snow man and snow house building, occasional rides in horse drawn sleighs, sliding along sheets of thin but smooth ice sheets in the open country, and above all skating, which was eagerly taken up by children from a very early age. My first skates were homemade and consisted of a crudely carved wooden shoe base with heavy wire runners. Once the snow settled in for the winter, the streets of the town were covered with sheets of ice and provided excellent skating surfaces for the beginner near one's home. I learned to skate using one skate at a time and once I gained confidence in the use of skates, whatever their design, I practically lived on them when outdoors - on the way to school, returning home from school and in darkness after school. When I was older I even dared to skate before sunset on Saturday afternoons when I could evade the eyes of my parents or other adults. My ambition to acquire a pair of regular skates, which fastened onto shoes with a key, was finally realized when my older brother outgrew his pair and it was handed on to me. (This is the way I fell heir to much of my clothing, but my shoes were generally made to order). From street skating I advanced to skating with older children and adults on the two lakes which were suitable for winter sports but not for swimming. The lakes were always crowded and I met all of my friends there at one time or another. Since we did all of our skating after school we helped to keep bonfires going to provide light for the unlighted lake areas. The lakes in winter were our rendezvous for meeting girls who customarily expected boys to fasten their skates. Our reward was being allowed to skate with them arm in arm. I tried to avoid meeting my sisters and brother at the lakes for fear of being teased about my attentions to girls.

Familiar as I was with every street, alley, shop window, house, synagogue, church, cemetery and country road, I kept returning to favorite spots which held special interest for me. On the way to visit my cousins, whose father, my mother's brother was the town's *shochet*, I invariably stopped to observe the noisy activity which centered on the two rows of butcher shops which formed the entrance to the street where my uncle lived and where the ritual slaughter house was located. The butchers and their assistants had the reputation of being rough and tough, as was evident from the way they treated customers. The arguments which reverberated

throughout the shops had to do less with price bargaining as with cut, quality, and shortages. I was impressed by the brusqueness and loud voices of the butchers and the strenuousness of their work from sun up to sun down, six days a week. I also made it a point to hang around the two or three stations in town where the draymen took on freight and passengers. Like the butchers these *baale golim* were hard working men, vituperative and strong physically.

The town shops, all I believe owned by Jews, were located along the main streets and probably numbered several hundred. I had my special favorites among them for Shopping, browsing (which was discouraged) and window gazing. The half dozen bakeries were at the top of the list. These were especially well stocked during the occupation and featured a large variety of cakes, pastries, cookies. Although our home had a good supply of baked goods, it was normally doled out to children only at meal time. Looking into one of these bakeries I made up my mind to buy a whole cake for myself and surreptitiously took several marks from our store till when I was helping out as a salesman. It was a daring act and was soon discovered when the baker's assistant reported the purchase to my family who drew the admission from me that I had taken the money from the store. (Although I never stole money again, that incident was recalled to me every time there was a shortage). The bakeries were especially popular at the end of Yom Kippur, when my friends and I rushed to them at the end of the fast to buy a napoleon or some other French type pastry, on credit I presume, since we did not carry money on Yom Kippur. Although we baked bread at home, I was sometimes sent to buy bakery bread and managed to include some delicacy in the order. Except for the early war years, when there was both a shortage and serious deterioration in the quality of bread, the town's bakeries produced exceptionally good bread in variety.

Aptheiker Gass (Apothecary Street) as I knew it, was the principal avenue for the more or less ritual *spatzier* on Saturday afternoons and some evenings. This was one of the few tree lined streets, mostly horse chestnuts, and contained the homes of the more prominent Christians. There were a number of attractions which drew me to Aptheiker Gass. The town's two or three photographers had their studios there and displayed their work in imposing bay windows. Being photographed, by professionals or amateurs, was a passion with most people in Rassein who could afford it. My adolescent friends and I were constantly exchanging photographs which were kept in albums. One of my best friends was the son of a professional photographer and with our encouragement he freely "borrowed" his father's cameras to photograph his friends and eventually he began to buy and sell cameras and got into some difficulty with his father and the German authorities. Having one's picture taken became especially popular at the end of the war when families were eager to send their photos to relatives in America. There was always a small crowd in front of the photographers' studios looking at the latest photographs displayed in the windows.

One of our two apothecaries was located in a park like setting on the street. To me the apothecary, with its large clean windows, tree lined entrance, beautiful cabinets and counters, delicate scales, professional looking pharmacists and imposing apothecary jars in several colors, was always a place of mystery and I never failed to stop to look into the shop. The town's only fire station, consisting of several horse drawn water sprinklers, was also located on this street and was included in my frequent tours of the area to look at the equipment and especially at the brass helmets of the firemen. Our walks on Aptheiker Gass usually ended at the church marking the start of open country. The street was short and it was sometimes necessary to walk up and down a number of times to meet friends and, above all, to run into girls who usually walked in small groups and engaged us in provocative talk and flirtatious comments.

The town's grocery shops were favorite places for a brief stop to look, smell and when change was available, to buy such delicacies as *halvah*, ginger, or *boksher* (St. John's bread or

carob pod). Except for certain products, such as tea, most groceries were sold from open bins, barrels and other containers. I frequently prevailed upon my mother to let me accompany her to our grocery so as to be able to spend more time on the premises. Ordinarily merchants did not welcome the visits of children and hustled them out as soon as they made their modest purchase. Occasionally when I was sent to buy something for home, I hastened to announce my mission for fear of being ejected. In contrast to most shops, I was always welcome in the ice cream-candy parlor opposite our store, where I had the reputation of cleaning my ice cream plate so well as not to require washing. Oranges, individually wrapped in soft paper, appeared as if from nowhere once a year and grapes, packed in a kind of heavy sawdust, occasionally came on the market in small quantities. Fresh fruit (apples, pears, plums, cherries, gooseberries, currants) were readily available in several orchards where we went every Saturday afternoon during the summer and fall to buy on credit since no money was exchanged on the Sabbath. Fruit off the tree or bush could also be had at the homes of friends. One of our relatives was the owner of a flour mill on the edge of town adjoining a small orchard. The miller was very friendly with my father, who used to compete in feats of strength with the mill workers, but had little patience with children. However, his grandson and I were good friends and I visited the orchard often to pick cherries, currants and gooseberries. The mill's granaries were also favorite stopping places for games and vain attempts to catch birds which made their home there. In our frenzy to catch birds, we would sometimes flush the birds' nesting inside the barns and then quickly close shut the doors, hoping to catch some in the process. Unfortunately we killed more birds than we caught in this manner.

The most colorful area in town was the large market place, centrally located and bounded on one side by the central synagogue, an imposing building which the Germans commandeered for a time and used as a stockade, and on the other sides by two story buildings with the shops on the ground floor and apartments on the upper floor. On non-market days the market place had something of the character of a "plaza" for strollers and was a favorite playground for children when they could get away from school. Following the occupation the Germans used the market as a staging area displaying to us the great variety of their military vehicles, both motorized and horse drawn. Peasants brought their farm products to market on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I believe, and occupied every inch of the area. They were joined by some of the town's merchants, who had regular stalls for their wares on market days. Some of the farmers and fish peddlers came directly to the market place and set up their displays early in the morning, while others - perhaps those who could afford it - left their products at the market and brought their horses to the local inns, owned by Jews, where they would return at the end of the market day for vodka and refreshments. The German occupation interrupted the regular market schedule, but it was eventually resumed on a small scale since the occupiers requisitioned most of the peasants' products. Much as I wanted to spend a great deal of time wandering through the market place, it was difficult to get away from school for any length of time. But I was there often enough to be fascinated by the array of peasant carts, neighing horses, farmers shouting their wares and bargaining with customers, both Jews and non-Jews, wandering beggars, drunks, blind musicians generally accompanied by a child or two, amused groups of German soldiers and the watchful eyes of officials who were there to keep order and to stop fights which sometimes broke out at the end of the day. One of the inns, or *pivnes*, was located a short distance from my home and passing it on the way back from school; I could hear singing and accordion playing in the inn's saloon. (Later, when I read Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment I transposed Raskolnikov's meetings with Sonya to this saloon). The peasants not only sold, but also bought supplies in the local stores and I would frequently be asked to help out on market days. My father was on very good terms with some of the farmers, most of whom spoke Lithuanian, who seemed to trust him.

At the end of the market days, I could hear my parents discuss the events of the day and plan for the next market day.

I came to know a number of the town's artisans and visited their workshops as often as I could either for fittings or to play with their children. On the way to our store I invariably stopped to look in the window of a nearby watchmaker who sat in his tiny shop stooped over a watch with his eye piece surrounded by many clocks on the walls. The centerpiece of his window display was a porcelain clock with a pendulum in the shape of a young girl on a swing. The watchmaker must have wound the display clock regularly for the smiling girl never stopped swinging. I had a special affection for this shop for another reason. When the long Lithuanian winter began to abate in April, there was always a tiny patch of black soil in front of the store which was usually in full sunlight. I hardly ever spoke to the watchmaker since I had no business with him, but he must have observed my movements sufficiently to tell my mother that she should not let me run around the town without a warm overcoat. My mother took this implied criticism very seriously and begged me to wear my winter coat which I considered burdensome since I walked skipingly and enjoyed being dressed lightly. Another watchmaker I came to know well was the father of one of my good friends who did not attend school and whom I met at play near his home. I learned from other members of my family, but not from the boy, that his father was mentally ill and worked only spasmodically at his trade. The young boy cared for him at home and invariably accompanied his father, who liked to walk rapidly through the town. I visited their home often to help the boy build entire armies of cardboard soldiers which he cut out and colored very skillfully: We would play for hours while the father worked in his home shop when he could.

My clothing was generally handed down to me from my older brother, but on some pre-holiday occasions my mother would arrange for a seamstress to produce a shirt and pants for me from new cloth or from some used garment. This involved fittings which I resisted since the seamstress seemed to make too much fuss over me. Moreover I was not too keen on wearing new clothing, since I had to walk the length of the synagogue to reach our family pew and was eyed by other children who were either envious of my good fortune or were simply bent on making fun of anything new or novel. Out of curiosity I often visited the men's tailoring shop where the owner and several assistants worked sitting on tables or at sewing machines. The workers in this shop were "proletarians", friends of our Jewish maid Alte and members or followers of the radical Jewish working class party The Bund. They hardly acknowledged my presence in the shop, but allowed me to watch operations. I would meet them frequently in one of the public gardens where they once invited me to sit in a gondola like swing which they swung to a great height. With the exception of summer sandals, my shoes and boots were made to order and I spent a great deal of time at the two or three shoemakers whose customers we were. One of the shoemakers was the father of one of the two salesladies working in our store and I therefore enjoyed a special entree to his homeshop. The process of making a shoe or boot fascinated me and I was determined to watch every step in the operation. Fittings were held often and there were always repairs to be made since I did a great deal of walking and wore shoes out quite rapidly. In general my friends and I came from middle class families who paid a great deal of attention to shoes, polishing and greasing them often, especially in winter, and throughout the occupation period when we played at soldiering and considered our shining boots as part of our uniform.

Since the son of the town's principal photographer was my friend, I was able to visit his studio often, especially when he was out of the house. My friend explained the operation of the different types of box cameras, the dark room and showed me the many props which were used for background in picture taking. There was a tannery a short distance from our house where

some kind of work seemed to go on at all times of the day and night. When passing it we were attracted by the acrid smell, steaming vats and the shouts of workmen, a scene very much like the dyeing operation in the early part of the film, The Youth of Maxim Gorky. The father of another of my friends was the owner of a small saw mill and I was allowed to watch the mill in operation. Other workshops which I came to know through repeated visits were a flour mill, a forge, carpenter's shop, blacksmith's shop and a wagon repair shop and book bindery.

## 10. Excursions and Escapades

Until the outbreak of World War I, I was hardly aware of past and future or the world beyond the boundaries of Rassein and its immediate environs. My knowledge of the past was limited to the historical narratives, as I regarded them, in the Torah and some other books of the Old Testament. Insofar as I thought of the future it seemed to be related to Rassein, except that America and possibly South Africa, where the father of my best friend Joseph was living, appeared somewhere on the horizon as possible destinations in the far future. This frame of reference was changed drastically by the War, and more especially by the German occupation, the progress of the War, the Balfour Declaration with regard to Palestine, the entry of the United States in the War, the rumored shift in the fortunes of War, the Russian Revolution, the defeat of Germany, the establishment of the Lithuanian Republic and finally the call for our family to settle in America following the death of my father and that of my oldest brother, Joseph, in America.

Until August 1914 my life was rooted almost totally in Rassein - home, school, synagogue, relatives, friends, play, the Sabbath and holidays, the seasons, household chores, our store, and the town's streets, alleys and hideaways. These elements, with family at its center, gave me a sense of order and continuity and a strong awareness of the present. I probably had some knowledge of the persecution of Jews in other parts of the Czarist empire, of pogroms, the Dreyfus case, the Beiliss case involving a charge of ritual murder, but these conditions and events had little meaning for me. Life seemed secure and peaceful, at least as long as one did not venture outside the town's boundaries where there were many clogs, few Jews and peasants forever watchful of their farms and especially the vegetable gardens which tempted visitors from town. The peasants and other gentiles who either lived in town or came into it on market days, appeared to be getting along well with the town's Jewish merchants, although relations were sometimes strained at the end of a market day when the farmers had had too much to drink and disputed some transaction or bill. The town's officials, who were probably Russians or Poles, were not much in evidence as far as I was concerned and were on friendly terms with my father. The good relations with officialdom, plus a rumored payment of graft, stood my father in good stead when he was unjustly accused of storing gun powder in our small warehouse on the grounds of the Klub. As I heard the story in whispered conversations, a hardware merchant asked my father's permission to store some merchandise in our warehouse where I spent a good deal of time helping to unpack crates of our wares. Apparently the merchant traded in contraband gun powder, some of which he stored on our premises. When the police discovered the gunpowder, my father was, of course, accused of the act. I don't know whether he was actually tried for this most serious offense (gunpowder would be useful to revolutionaries even in distant Lithuania) but our family went through a very anxious period until the case was somehow resolved. Whenever I passed the hardware store thereafter, I would look angrily at the owner who apparently refused to take responsibility for the store's contraband.

Familiar as the town had become for me, there were still some areas that I had not fully explored. Except for one dramatic occasion, I had never ventured into the interior of the town's three churches. Without ever knowing whether the extensive grounds of the churches were off limits to us, my friends and I occasionally walked cautiously through the park like church setting, observing priests and nuns in their traditional Babits walking or working. I was aware of the injunction not to look directly at Christian shrines, monuments and crucifixes, but there were so many of these on the grounds that it became impossible to avert my eyes consistently. I may have taken a cue with regard to this from my father who did not avert his gaze when passing

roadside shrines on our infrequent walks outside the town on Saturday afternoons. In addition to being places of mystery, the church yards supplied me with ample stores of horse chestnuts which my sister Frieda and I used to make toy furniture with matchsticks. The priests did not seem to object to collecting of chestnuts from the ground, but frowned at our picking them off the trees. Of course, I knew nothing about Christianity or Christ but recall a doggerel in which Christ was referred to as "yoshke pandre", presumably not a complimentary designation.

Lacking local maps and having limited information about the immediate surroundings of Rassein, I had a strong desire to venture out of the town in all directions. Opportunities for exploring the countryside were few and fraught with some danger. It was best to go with friends because of the presence of dogs and the potentially hostile attitude of the peasants when we crossed their fields or helped ourselves to vegetables or fruit on their property. Actually I was never attacked by peasants directly, but was chased by dogs on a number of occasions. The most travelled road out of town was the dirt road leading to the river where we swam during the brief summer season. This was generally very safe whether one walked in a group or singly. Once when I was kept late in school on a Friday afternoon, I ran to the river alone. Finding it deserted I returned in the twilight in constant fear of being ambushed by the peasants' children playing in the fields. When we walked in groups we were bold enough to pick ripe wheat stalks (which we toasted by holding a match under them) and bunches of corn flowers. When I came to the river early enough, usually on Fridays, I would sometimes visit the farm of one of our relatives (a Volpe) a short distance from the main swimming area where I was received rather coldly by the busy family getting ready to return to town for the Sabbath. I suspect that I visited the farm less to see my relatives than to pass the swimming area reserved for women, which was near the farm.

I was very friendly with our neighbors across the street who either owned a forest area or operated a logging business. On several occasions I accompanied the forester on his trips by horse and wagon to his forest properties. He was a taciturn man who, I suspected, abused his fun loving, easy going wife and I felt that he only tolerated my presence on these trips. He would leave me at one of the forest stations and go off to attend to business. This gave me an opportunity to walk cautiously through the forest - a new experience which I enjoyed very much. When he returned to the station we would sometimes stop at a farm house and drink buttermilk and sample freshly baked black bread. The forester's wife would greet me cordially on our return and inquire about the trip. Her favorite expression was, "Mut verloren, alles verloren," (courage lost, all lost).

Once I accompanied a party of mostly older boys, including my brother Mendel, on an excursion to the Dubissa, a river five or six miles from the town where the Russian forces were reported to have made an attempt to halt the advancing Germans. Unlike the nearby river which had some depth, the Dubissa was shallow, very clear and had a pebbly bottom. We waded in the river, had a picnic lunch, explored the river banks and made walking sticks out of saplings. At one point I wandered off to look around the vicinity of the picnic area and saw a peasant girl watching me shyly. As I continued to walk in her direction she ran and I followed, seemingly in pursuit, but was halted by the appearance of several young men. I turned and ran back to my party as fast as I could, realizing that I had probably exposed myself to retaliation for my rash act. I told no one about the incident and was relieved when we started home late in the afternoon. I was, however, determined to return to the river and persuaded my sisters to let me accompany them and some of their friends on one of their periodic trips to the area for a picnic, flirting and singing. I was the only very young person in the group and largely ignored, but I enjoyed the solo and group singing of romantic Russian songs.

During my 15 years in Rassein I visited only three other towns and even this was rather exceptional. Most of my friends never had this opportunity and did not spend a single night away

from home. Our relative Eilyeh Berman, who had some kind of shadowy business, invited me to join him on a trip to a neighboring town and I readily accepted. The distance from Rassein must have been only five or six miles, since we left late in the morning and returned the same day. Coming from Rassein, which was a substantial town, I was struck by the smallness of the village we visited. It consisted of one long street with the shops clustered in the center and dirt roads running off in all directions. There were few people on the streets, and surprisingly, no German soldiers. When Eilyeh did his business I walked the length of the main street several times, looked into the small synagogue and observed the meager displays in the shop windows. I returned to Rassein feeling rather superior, but wanting to visit more towns.

Shortly before the War my family planned a visit with my father's sister in the town of Ragole. I had of course heard of my relatives and was curious about the town where my father was born and often mentioned by my parents. It was closer to the German border and was included in the Czarist edict ordering the evacuation of the Jewish inhabitants as the Germans advanced eastward. As usual, the children were not told anything about the projected visit, but it was not difficult to know what was going on by listening to the conversations of parents, servants and older siblings. We left early one Friday morning and traveled perhaps four or five hours. My aunt, her husband and their five or six children overwhelmed us with their greetings, questions, directions and offers of help. I was eager to see the town and asked one of my cousins nearest my age to show me around. We walked through the empty market place, which compared favorably with the one in Rassein, passed two churches, looked into the synagogue and were summoned to return and prepare for the Sabbath, the evening service and Sabbath eve meal. Since the house of our relatives was rather small, I don't know how all of us were accommodated but it was not unusual for two or three people to sleep in one bed or on the floor. Our visit to the synagogue seemed to arouse a great deal of attention since our uncle was a respected citizen and had his pew on the eastern wall. I listened and observed more than I prayed and was glad when the service was over. The evening meal was festive, noisy and ample. After the Sabbath morning service and noon day meal I asked my cousin to walk through the outskirts of the town with me. I was struck by the contrast in housing accommodations in town and outside of it, which was inhabited mainly by non-Jews who lived in shacks adjoining small garden plots. As we neared the town on our return I saw a legless man for the first time in my life. He was propped up in a kind of high chair and was covered almost completely by flies. There were a number of people nearby standing in the doorway of their shanty, but no one paid any attention to the crippled man. I stopped briefly to look at the scene and then hurried past for fear of offending, but the sight made a deep impression on me and saddened me because of the man's helplessness and neglect. We returned home the following day and I came back with a renewed appreciation of the big town of Rassein.

Although I had visited several farms briefly, I remained curious about life on a farm, and at about age seven found an opportunity to spend a night on a real farm. One of my school mates in *cheder* lived with his family on a nearby farm "commuting" to town where his father owned a produce store. My friend would tell me about the trip to and from school by horse and wagon, the fun of horseback riding, picking as much fruit off trees as he wanted, swimming in a pond, sleeping in a barn and rising before dawn. I asked him to take me along some evening and he readily agreed provided I gave him several sweet buns of which he was very fond. I had no money to buy these but knew that I could get them on "credit" from a bakery near our shop where mother would sometimes direct me to get a few rolls when I helped her with errands. After school, while it was still light, I ran to the bakery, obtained the buns and gave them to my friend who was waiting outside. As I passed our store I decided not to tell my parents of my plan, being quite sure that they would have refused to give me permission to go, but quietly

accompanied my friend to his family store. We waited outside for quite a while and occasionally helped some member of the family bring in boxes of vegetables into the store. Finally everyone returning to the farm climbed into the wagon and, without telling his father that I was to accompany them, my friend told me to get in the back where we would be partly obscured by straw. We traveled the short distance to the farm in twilight and as we left the town behind us I began to have qualms about my secret venture and wished I were back home for the evening meal. It was dark when we reached the farm and as soon as we alighted my friend directed me to a barn where a number of farm hands were having their supper. I waited as my friend left to get food for us and I realized that this was the first time that I had been away from home overnight and that I would probably be punished for going off without permission. We had a supper of bread and farmer's cheese and then retired for the night in a hay loft while the peasants slept below.

The reward for my rash act came early in the morning when my friend led me to an open field where I rode a horse bareback, probably for the first time in my life. I was scared but hung on and somehow learned to control the horse. We had no breakfast but had our fill of cherries, climbing a huge tree to pick them, currants and gooseberries. There was a good deal of activity as the family prepared to return to town with bushels of vegetables and berries and I was completely ignored by the adults. On the return trip I was practically hidden by the produce going to market. When we reached town I reluctantly walked to *cheder*, knowing that I would be punished for my unauthorized absence. The teacher immediately informed me that my parents had been looking for me and that I deserved to be dealt with sternly. Soon my mother appeared, but instead of punishing me she talked quietly about my absence and how worried everyone had been and made me promise never to do that again. I was ashamed and anxious since I still had to face my father, brothers and sisters. There were more remonstrances and warnings about the consequences of a repetition but no physical punishment. When the dust settled on the incident I learned that my parents found out fairly quickly where I had gone. There were no secrets in Rassein and this episode was no exception. The baker reported my purchase, neighbors had observed me waiting outside the produce store, and I apparently had been seen in the wagon on the way to the farm.

Sometime during the German occupation (1915-18) I accompanied my father on a business trip to a market place in an adjacent town. By cutting off the sources of supply for most manufactured goods, the occupation caused various shortages and stimulated speculation. My impression was that my father was not vitally interested in our business, possibly because of his "scholarly" pursuits and the beginning of his illness. Nevertheless, he probably felt compelled to take advantage of the opportunities offered by town markets which featured agricultural products as well as manufactured goods and scarce necessities, such as sugar. I don't know how I was able to persuade my father to allow me to join him on one of these market trips, but he may have needed a helper and my eagerness appealed to him. We left with our merchandise late in the afternoon and arrived in an inn adjoining the market late at night. I was very tired and sleepy but could not resist the opportunity to observe market life even at that late hour. The market place was completely filled with wagons, horses, adults, children, dogs, most of whom were still awake, eating, talking, setting up display booths by the light of lanterns. Many years later when I saw the Russian film "The Youth of Maxim Gorki" I recognized a good representation of that scene in the marketplace sequence. I felt sorry for my father and the trouble he had taken to come here where he seemed entirely out of place. I returned to the inn and found a corner of the main room to sleep in. My father woke me before dawn and I followed him to the market which was already busy. He talked to several people and apparently was able to transact his business in

a short time. We left later in the morning, arriving home in the evening. As usual my father said little when I was with him, but seemed very thoughtful, tired and sad.

My most daring escapade, which later came to be known in our family as “The Escape from Cheikeshik”, occurred toward the end of my life in Rassein. Although neither my younger brother Velvke (Bill) nor I joined in the continuing mourning of our father's death (perhaps in some ways we enjoyed the status of being orphans) our family decided that we needed a change. What is more likely is that they wanted us out of the way. There was evident concern about our future in Rassein, the status of the business and the possibility of having to emigrate to America. Whatever the reason for the suggestion that we leave home for a few days, it was welcome news to both of us. It was most unusual for the older members of the family to pay any attention to us apart from the provision of schooling, clothing, shelter and food. This lack of concern for us as children, apart from necessities, was accepted as normal, especially since most children in the community did not fare as well as we did. Partly as a result of this lack of concern, and partly too because of the unsettled conditions resulting from the War and occupation, we enjoyed a good deal of independence and freedom outside the home, synagogue and school. So far as I can recall, the type known to us today through literature and life as “the Jewish mother” is more an American-made stereotype than a representation of the *shtetl* mother, who was too busy to pay much attention to her children.

We were excited by the prospect of a trip, anywhere, even before we were informed of our destination and arrangements. From bits of conversation overheard and occasional hints from our older siblings we gathered that a visit with an old family friend was being arranged through correspondence, but we did not learn of the actual plan until a day before our departure. A good friend of my mother had recently married a widower, a rabbi with two daughters, in the town of Cheikeshik. I had known this woman well and had often accompanied my mother when she visited her in her shop adjoining her apartment not far from our store. They would sometimes take long walks and I would trail a few steps behind overhearing what I took to be confidences about each other. Because of the unsettled conditions, no one from our family had yet visited my mother's friend in her new home and we were given to understand that we would be welcome guests. I barely had time to tell my friends of my coming adventure, packed a few belongings in a small box, instructed my brother about his role as junior partner and walked to the market place to board the wagon which was especially engaged for our trip. On the way to Cheikeshik we passed through a number of villages where our coachman sometimes stopped to rest the horse or to chat with people whom he evidently knew. He did not speak with us at all and we were too absorbed in observing the varied countryside to ask any questions. Before leaving home we had been given buttered bread which we ate shortly after our departure and were rather hungry but did not dare ask the coachman for any food. He was a well built, brusque man, like most of the town's *balegolim*. The trip seemed to be very long and we began to have doubts about the prospects of our visit, perhaps because we had never been in the home of a rabbi and were afraid that our movements might be restricted.

We arrived late in the afternoon and were met by our family friend and her stepdaughters, about 10 and 12. The rabbi's wife inquired about each member of the family, expressed the traditional sentiment about us as orphans and asked us to follow her to her home. The girls regarded us very curiously but did not say a word. As we walked toward the rabbi's house we examined our new surroundings and compared them unfavorably with Rassein. The house was situated on a rise at the end of a street and must have been rather small since we were told that we would be sleeping on a couch in the rude porch in front of the house. The rabbi greeted us politely and reminded us to prepare for the Friday evening synagogue service. We followed him to the synagogue soon after our arrival and did not have any time for food, although we were

both very hungry. During the service we joined a number of other mourners in reciting Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. We had our first real meal of the day after the service and once we answered the inquiries about our family there was nothing more to say. We slept rather fitfully on the porch, attended service in the morning and afternoon on the Sabbath, sat quietly at table and then found that there was nothing to do in the unusual silence of a Sabbath day in a rabbi's house. Sometime during that long afternoon we began to talk in whispers about going home, without knowing how, by what means, and without any money except for a few coins given us before leaving home. We retired early and decided to make our getaway early in the morning before anyone was likely to be up. We had heard of a boat which took passengers on a nearby river to a town some distance from Rassein where we thought we could get some kind of transportation home. Whatever the means of reaching home, we were determined to leave and, gathering up our meager belongings, opened the door of the porch gently and walked quietly into town at dawn when few people were up. We followed a road out of town which we guessed would lead to the river and after walking a short distance away from the town met a peasant traveling in a one horse cart. We walked alongside for a short distance and then inquired whether he would take us to the boat stop on the river. He was non-committal but finally agreed when we gave him all the change we had, a small sum. We climbed into the straw filled vehicle with alacrity and although hungry and a bit chilled, enjoyed our adventure. Being totally absorbed in our immediate situation, we gave only passing thought to our hosts.

When we reached the river bank after a ride of perhaps half an hour we were surprised to find a number of townspeople gathered at a small structure, which we learned later was the pier, presumably waiting for the arrival of the boat. We were unknown to all of the waiting people, except one, a former resident of Rassein who knew of our visit to the rabbi's family. We told her sheepishly of our homesickness and our failure to tell our hosts of our abrupt departure for fear of being stopped. When she learned that we did not have any money for ship's fare, she offered to pay for our tickets since she knew our family and we were "orphans". We readily accepted her offer and were instructed to disembark at a certain town where we would get transportation to Rassein. The small boat, beautiful to our eyes, soon came into view, discharged a few passengers and some freight and took on half a dozen travelers, including us. The boat, we learned later, was either left by the departing Germans or bought from them by the Lithuanian authorities. There was an upper deck, which we immediately surveyed from one end to the other, and a lower deck with a small bar. We were impressed by the brass handles and railings, the shiny wooden panels, the ship's lights and the uniforms of the sailors. As we stood watching the single smokestack we heard a piercing blast, the ship's departing whistle, and fell to the floor, much to the amusement of the adult passengers. We got up shyly and holding on to the deck railing watched the banks of the river as the steamer glided past villages and fields. We had not had anything to eat and went to the lower deck where one of the passengers, perhaps sensing our plight, bought us rolls and a bottle of soda. Somewhat refreshed we explored the upper and lower decks from one end to the other and being the only children on board we were regarded with some curiosity.

We were out only a few hours when the boat slowed perceptibly, followed by a hubub, a slight listing of the small vessel and passengers leaning over the low railings. Soon the boat came to a halt - it had run aground on a sand bar, visible from starboard. This was apparently not an uncommon occurrence as was evident from the caustic comments of some of the passengers who blamed the inexperienced Lithuanian crew, as they characterized them. The few crew members talked among themselves and then ordered all passengers to disembark on the sand pit to allow them to right the boat and to prepare to refloat it with the change in tide. We readily complied with the order and walked barefoot from one sandbar to another toward the river's shore. Some passengers disrobed and tried to swim in the shallow river pools. We wondered whether the boat

would be refloated and for the first time since our escape at dawn began to talk about our family and our Cheikeshik hosts and what might befall us in the next day or two. Some of the men passengers remained behind to help the crew and after considerable shoving and pushing the boat seemed to be righted. Soon we were ordered to board the boat and resumed the trip, this time staying in the middle of the river.

Late in the evening we docked near a town which we knew to be fairly close to Rassein. It appeared that we were the only passengers headed for Rassein and were met at the dock by two draymen, whom we knew only by sight, who had evidently come to pick up some goods for our town. As soon as they learned of our presence on the boat they began to argue between themselves as to whether they should take us home since they had no authorization from our family to do so. Finally one of the men, who apparently had known my father and probably did some work for us, reluctantly agreed to take us since we were "orphans" and couldn't be left alone on the dock at night. We clambered on board and soon fell asleep amidst the burlap bags and straw baskets. We were awakened by the gruff drayman, who admonished us about our adventure and reminded us to tell our mother how good he was to us. It must have been nearly midnight when we approached our house, which was totally dark. We walked through the corridor to the kitchen door, knocked gently and called out, but there was no response. We tried again without result and then one or both of us began to cry when my mother came to the door and greeted us in astonishment with a stream of questions and comments about our journey, the Cheikeshik friends, our health and the lateness of the hour. We were barely able to tell our story but were greatly relieved that we were not chided. Soon other members of the family appeared and asked more questions, but my mother warded them off after she learned that we had practically nothing to eat all day. We had bread and milk and were soon in bed.

The "affaire Cheikeshik" reverberated for several weeks, if not months, with recriminations from our brother and sisters, but not my mother, and open admiration from our friends who begged us to tell our story in great detail. My mother, of course, wrote immediately to her friend and soon received a letter expressing regret at our unscheduled departure. I was urged to write her, but I really did not know how to explain our rash act even though I understood the impulse to flee very well at the time it occurred.

## 11. World War I Comes to Rassein

In 1914, at age nine, my knowledge of history past and present was very meager and limited in the main to Biblical events. In the four or five years since, I began to attend the six day a week, eight to six, Hebrew school or *cheder*, I had read or rather studied large portions of the Old Testament, chiefly by rote, over and over again and was quite familiar with the accounts of battles, kingdoms, personalities, heroes, villains, miraculous doings, divine interventions and the wonderful stories of daily life in the distant past, which to my primitive time sense meant both past and present. So real was Bible history to me that I imagined many of the events to have occurred in and around Rassein. The world outside the immediate present and the Biblical epochs existed only as peripheral, vague realities. Although I had by 1914, attended the Russian Jewish School several afternoons a week, on a kind of released time basis, I learned only some arithmetic, Russian, perhaps a few geographical facts, but no history. Czarist Russia was represented in the school by the presence of Russian teachers and portraits of the Czar and Czarina in the two school classrooms. The adults in my family and in the community, and especially my father, must have known a good deal about the Russian empire, rivalries with the Austro-Hungarians and Germans, but adults were not in the habit of communicating anything but orders, complaints and occasional moral precepts to children of my age and older. What we learned of local, national and international affairs came to us through hearsay and the highly developed sense of overhearing adult conversations. This was fairly easy to do since living quarters were crowded and adults generally had the strange notion that children did not understand matters of interest to adults only. We were all ears all of the time and occasionally picked up bits of information about the Russo-Japanese war, the Russian Revolution of 1905, the workings of the draft, the prevalence of the system of gratuities to local and district officials, the nascent Zionist movement, the famous cases of Dreyfuss and Mendel Beiliss.

The Czarist policy of suppressing the dissemination of information about Lithuania's notable past as an independent and powerful kingdom effectively prevented us from learning anything about Lithuania's past, let alone the secret aspirations for national independence undoubtedly entertained by some of the Lithuanians in Rassein. Lithuanian as a language was spoken by some of the uneducated townspeople and the peasants. I do not recall ever seeing a book in Lithuanian. America, known also admiringly as the "Goldene Medine" - the golden land - was known to me through knowledge of the emigration of young Jewish men, including my brothers Joseph and Reuben, to escape the harsh draft into the armies of the Czar, family correspondence with the emigrants which were frequently read aloud, occasional gifts received by parents (Nissen der Zeiger), an occasional visitor from America, bits of information I picked up from a Russian encyclopedic dictionary which had a prominent place in our small family library, and a long account of Thomas Edison's career which I read serial fashion on the back of the calendar in Yiddish with a page for every day of the year.

News of the impending war came to me in our dining room where my father and two of his friends sat one late afternoon in the summer of 1914 to drink tea-and hear my father read the Warsaw Yiddish paper which he received by mail from time to time. I had watched this group many times before, but on this occasion I felt that something extraordinary had occurred. There was evident concern on my father's face as he read of an assassination of someone somewhere, all I could understand of the reading, as one of his guests declared in what seemed to me a very grave tone, "There will be war soon." I did not know what "war" meant and could only think of the wars described in the Bible so vividly. My father's guests left in silence, but their concern was evident to me. I thought about the vague news of impending war which seemed to be in the

air and perhaps welcomed it as possibly bringing me some relief from the endless regimen of school attendance.

In the weeks that preceded the actual outbreak of war there was little observable evidence of the world shaking events to come. The Russian army garrison stationed near the town was no more in evidence than before. I could hear my father engage some of the town officials with whom he was friendly in earnest conversation when they visited our store, and sensed an air of crisis. The first hard evidence of what I later understood to be a form of mobilization was the drafting of a number of young men, some of whom I knew well, and their hasty departure from the town. (My friends and I who were stamp collectors kept track of the draftees and as soon as they left we decided to visit their families and offered to buy or trade their sons' stamp collections). The actual outbreak of World War I in July 1914 probably became known in Rassein, at least to children, several days later and so far as I can remember did not affect our daily existence. But in a few months we could see groups of soldiers passing through the town, evidently on the way to the front which was never very far from Rassein. An event more startling than the movement of troops was the sudden arrival of a number of Jewish families from several towns close to the German border, such as Yurburg, who were either ordered to leave by the Russian authorities or left on their own. There was also a rumor that the Russians did not trust the loyalty of the Jewish population and ordered its evacuation to other parts of Lithuania and in some instances to the interior of the Czarist empire. The refugees were welcomed by the Jews of Rassein, who shared their homes with them, and aided them economically. One effect of the war on young people was that attendance at school became less regular and we had an opportunity to observe most of the war related developments in the town.

I am writing these recollections some sixty years after the events described took place. In October 1922, two years after I arrived in America, I wrote an account of my impressions of the coming of World War I to Rassein, which was published in the November 1922 issue of The Argus, the magazine published by the Worcester, Massachusetts Classical High School, to which I had just transferred from night high school. I reprint it here for what it is worth, even though it contains at least one piece of "literary license" - the introduction of a railroad station in Rassein which, alas, had no train service and no station.

## THE FIRST DAYS OF FEAR IN RUSSIA

By Myer Wolfe

There was terror in the air  
And the Heavens spoke of dread  
There were voices everywhere  
Weighing on the heart like lead

- S. W. Wallach

Already in the beginning of the year 1914 war rumors went from mouth to mouth. Men with keen perceptions predicted the outburst of a war between Russia and Germany. Others were more pessimistic and declared with a certain certainty that a worldwide nation quarrel was at hand. Those predictions warned and frightened indirectly. Every day life gradually became vague and threatening. People read, heard and discussed only the possible war. An invisible fear encompassed the days and weeks, and dread pressed and pressed the hearts.

All those reports were light breezes that usually precede a terrific storm; and in July 1914 the tempest raged. The city papers printed the full text of the war declaration between Russia and Germany. As one looked upon the paper, the big printed words appeared as envoys from a different world, a dreaded world.

War! The cry spread all over with the speed of lightning. Men received the news calmly, only faces covered themselves with darkness and souls predicted despair and destruction.

Mobilization began. The City Hall was crowded with men and women eager to learn of their sons' and brothers' fates.

A week after the enlistment the young men were to leave the city for the camp. A crowd of about five thousand assembled, at the railroad station, to bid the recruits farewell. Even nature seemed to share the general pain, for a monotonous rain poured down and cast a drowsiness upon everybody.

The leave taking began. Each person clung to his kinsman and many a tear was shed. A sacred feeling reigned at the depot where human hearts challenged the dark future. The loud railroad signal awoke the crowd. Once more kisses and fond embraces were exchanged as the train was about to leave. Faint cries were uttered, and the train disappeared in the clouds of smoke. For some time the crowd stood and watched the dissolving vapor, and hearts were so full, too full.

One morning there was an order for all men, young and old, to assemble in the center of town for assignment to trench digging several miles from Rassein. I watched my father and brother Mendel join the ragged line of townspeople, some with shovels and lunch bags, who soon departed for their task, returning at the end of the day in what I took to be a deplorable condition since most of the men were not accustomed to heavy, physical labor. The military and public officials seemed confused by the suddenness of the war's approach to the town and occasionally gave contradictory orders about the trench digging which lasted only a few days. It was evident that events were moving very fast. A few months after the trench digging order, what we took to be a German aeroplane made a low pass over our town and dropped a single bomb, as a warning it was said, which landed in a meadow a mile or so from town. I was outside our home when the plane, the first I had ever seen, was sighted and followed its course for a short while and then joined a group of young people who raced to the meadow where the bomb was said to have landed. We found a small crater and picked up fragments of the bomb. There was no panic since we knew little or nothing of aerial warfare, bombs and the damage they could cause. One of our neighbors who watched the aeroplane in the sky remarked to no one in particular, "Just think of it - a meat cleaver in the sky." There was feverish speculation about the next aerial attack, German military strategy, the incompetence of the Russians, the possible effects of what people assumed to be the coming German invasion, the possibility of reprisals by the fleeing Russian authorities, the mood of the native Lithuanian population, the shortage of some food items, the effect of it all on business and, above all, the potential end of all schooling. A second aeroplane appeared the next day, apparently on an observation mission, without dropping any bomb. It was clear from what I saw and overheard that the Germans were within striking distance and could be expected any day. The sudden departure of the remaining uniformed officials and military was the strongest evidence that the town was about to fall to the advancing enemy. So far as I can remember I did not hear any conversations among my parents or other adults about the probable behavior of the invading Germans, possibly because their progress was very rapid and there was absolutely no information on how other towns and

especially their Jewish population, fared under the Germans. I sensed however, that the Germans were considered "civilized" and perhaps even friendly to Jews.

A few days after the plane overflight it was rumored that the invaders were on the outskirts of the town and that the advance units could be seen a few miles distant school attendance had been irregular during this period and now ceased altogether. One morning I joined some of our neighbors, who climbed to the roof top of a nearby barn with a clear view of open country in an effort to spot the Germans. They were clearly visible – men vehicles and horses milling about a field near a flour mill where my father and I went often on Saturdays. For days there had been talk of the coming invasion, which was expected to be peaceful since there were no Russian soldiers in sight and no resistance was to be offered by the civilian population. The word got around quickly that in anticipation of the occupation it would be best for the population to become completely invisible. It was said that the Germans followed a precise plan for occupying a town, which was to marshal the principal force on the outskirts and to test the possibility of resistance by sending a small group of "Uhlaner" (mounted lancers) racing through the main streets. The "Uhlaner" were described as fierce warriors wearing plumed helmets who did not brook being observed while they were on a mission. If their progress was undisturbed the main force was said to follow.

In preparation for the dread event my family had arranged to take shelter in the basement of the "Klub", adjoining our store, where we assembled with several dozen other inhabitants to await the occupation - or battle if one should develop. We met few people on the way to the "Klub" and it was evident that the population was following the instruction (which probably no one gave) to clear the streets. We brought some food to the shelter and speculated on the coming events with considerable anxiety. After staying quietly in the basement for several hours, I left stealthily and walked to the entrance of the "Klub" compound to observe the familiar scene, normally so crowded with people and now completely deserted. I had planned to return after peeking to satisfy my curiosity, but I had barely had time to look in all directions when I heard the clatter of hoofs to my left in the direction of the street leading from the field where I had seen the troops massed. Several plumed "Uhlaner" came galloping up the street, their long lances pointed forward, without meeting any opposition. I ran back to tell my family of what I had seen and was scolded for leaving the shelter. It appeared to be safe to emerge from the basement and gradually the streets were filled with people standing silently on the wooden sidewalks awaiting the Germans. Within a very short while we saw the forward units made up of cavalry, followed by infantry and all kinds of vehicles and ammunition carriers. The civilians and weary military looked silently and curiously at each other and I had the feeling that the adults were glad that the ordeal of waiting and speculating was over for the present. The main body of the invading army was observed to march away from the town, but substantial units were obviously left behind.

I watched the marching soldiers with growing excitement and changed my observation post frequently to see as much as possible. I sensed that a new life was beginning for me and my family, without having any clear idea of what might be in store for us except that no school or a different type of schooling was probably to be expected. I seemed to take an immediate liking to the Germans and savored the smell of leather saddles, belts and dispatch cases and found the gasoline fumes coming from the few staff cars a delightful aroma.

The line of men, horses and vehicles continued until darkness and some said that additional troops passed through the town during the night. I returned home late in the evening to find that our home had been commandeered as one of the headquarters for an officer. He took over one of our bedrooms while his orderlies made themselves comfortable in a tent which they pitched in our yard. They set up an outdoor military kitchen and began to prepare the evening meal using their own food, which to my delight included thick bars of chocolate. The soldiers

made little effort to communicate with members of our family but when they addressed us we could understand some of the German. (Later we learned that some of the military spoke what some of the town's "linguistic experts" called Platt-deutsch, a vernacular dialect of North Germany). That night we slept in odd corners of the house, which was more or less taken over by the officer and his men.

I was up early the next day and eager to see what was happening in the center of town, which was roughly the location of our store. Shops were open, people moved about freely and only small numbers of the military were to be seen. Opposite our store there were two parked open touring cars painted light tan, chauffeurs in place, apparently awaiting the arrival of officers who had taken over the "Klub" overnight and stabled their horses in the yard. As I walked through the familiar streets I found that a number of public buildings, including the largest synagogue overlooking the market place, had been occupied by the soldiers and used for different purposes. The synagogue was turned into an armory which later also housed military prisoners. Soldiers were in all the stores, especially bakeries, and paid for what they bought. The officer stationed in our home told my father that the Germans had strict orders to pay for what they bought and to treat the civilians in a disciplined way. This was pretty much the case throughout the occupation although there were a number of altercations between civilians and the soldiers. It was evident as I walked through the town that the military were quite experienced in the rapid occupation of towns which, at least in Lithuania, gave them little trouble. The new order in Rassein seemed to be installed in less than 24 hours with civilians getting their instructions from the military either in proclamations posted on buildings or by word of mouth. I returned to our house to find the orderlies cooking, washing clothing, polishing boots, occasionally breaking out in song and chattering, still ignoring us for the most part. I found the activities of the soldiers fascinating and tried to make friends with them. They left provisions unattended and we soon helped ourselves to chocolate bars which were dark and delicious. Since we had a cow they asked for some milk and later all owners of cows and goats and chickens were required to deliver milk and eggs to the authorities for their use and, it was said, shipment to Germany. The officer and his entourage stayed in our home only a short time, much to my regret, and either moved on or found quarters elsewhere.

## 12. The German Occupation, 1915-18

The occupation transformed the life of Rassein in a very short time and seemingly brought many benefits to the population, especially the townspeople. From what the soldiers told us the peasants did not apparently fare so well, perhaps because they could not communicate with the occupiers and possibly did not deliver their quota of produce willingly. It was rumored that to set an example, several peasants had been hanged, but this was hard to verify. The soldiers did tell laughingly of walking off with poultry and animals after a visit to a farm and telling the uncomprehending peasants, "Ich hab dem schwein, and du hast dem schein." (I have the pig and you have the chit). The Germans supposedly expected to pay the farmers later, but this we understood never happened. Since most of the Jews were in some kind of business they prospered during the occupation and there was a developing trade between the occupied country and Germany. Train service was either resumed or newly established with Germany and some travel was allowed. When my father was stricken with cancer the authorities arranged for him, accompanied by my sister Frieda, to visit a specialist in Germany. The Germans encouraged trade fairs, to one of which my father and I traveled on one occasion. There was considerable fraternizing between the occupation forces and the town's young women who were frequently seen together on walks in the country and at social gatherings. One of our salespersons had to stop working and was reported to be mentally disturbed supposedly because of a love affair with a young soldier and an unwanted pregnancy. As the occupation took on an air of normalcy officers and soldiers were invited to our home on special occasions. The commanding officer, a Jew it was said but no one was certain, was invited to our Passover *seder*. He arrived late in his dress uniform and took his place at the table. There was very little conversation during the festive ceremony and meal and it took all of our forbearance not to laugh when the dignified officer made a faux pas. In the course of the *seder* the door is opened and a goblet of wine set out for the coming of the Prophet Elijah. The German observed my father's movements and as he came back to the table turned to him and said, "Bald kommt der malchemoes," (Soon the Angel of Death will appear). The Prophet Elijah is, of course, the exact opposite of the Angel of Death, but the officer, while proving to us once and for all that he was Jewish, was a bit mixed up about the proper identification of the august and unseen Passover guest. No one said a word, but in the manner of Rassein the incident was commented on for weeks and was of course made known to everyone who would listen.

The first days of the occupation were full of explorations and discoveries. The stable of the "Klub" was a favorite place to visit and watch the orderlies brush the horses, clean the saddles and polish the stirrups as they talked and joked among themselves. I was eager to run errands for them and was sometimes rewarded with a chocolate bar. There were field kitchens at several points in the town and I soon learned when meals were being prepared and watched the process of opening food cans of all kinds. Within a matter of days the Germans set up a collection station for the delivery of food, mostly milk and eggs, by the population. The station was located in the flour mill owned by the grandfather of a friend of mine and I volunteered to deliver our quota of milk so as to be able to play with my friend in the barns and orchard adjoining the mill. The small local hospital soon became a military hospital staffed by army physicians and sisters in beautiful white and blue uniforms. The large synagogue which was used as a barrack was of course off limits, but I could observe the activity in and near it by placing myself in front of it at the edge of the public market. One morning I saw a young blond soldier, unarmed, standing in the doorway and guarded by several armed soldiers. The story soon got around that he was a suspected spy, having been found wandering in the woods with a story of

having lost his way. He disappeared from sight several days later and reportedly was shot. True or not we were becoming accustomed to stories of reprisals, spies, peasant resistance, soldiers disciplined for disorderly conduct and laxness.

The holiday from all schooling did not last very long. The second Hebrew school which I had been attending reopened but discipline, never very strict, became fairly relaxed since the pull of the streets was very strong. The former Russian school for Jewish children also reopened with some of the former teachers, who were said to be of German origin, in charge. Except for the substitution of German for Russian, and the singing of German patriotic songs, the curriculum remained pretty much the same. Since there was never any sense of "loyalty" to the sort of grapevine which some Germans may have fed. However, perhaps more important than news of battles and further conquests were the sensational events of 1917 - the Russian Revolution, America's entry in the War and the Balfour Declaration – which probably shook the faith of the population in the durability of the occupation. These historic turning points became widely known to adults and children in spite of the lack of news sources, reliable or otherwise.

Prior to the War my family, along with our relatives and neighbors, seemingly accepted their status as subjects of the Czar with resignation. So far as I know, Lithuania did not experience any pogroms or other violent acts of oppression against the Jews. As a child I was not aware of any antisemitism although I sensed that officials had to be bribed on occasion and that the police were feared. I had heard of the 1905 Russian Revolution chiefly as a result of the popularity in Rassein of several Russian songs which had been in vogue in the Russo-Japanese War and the Revolution which followed it. Our Jewish maid Alte, although non-political, was friendly with a group of Jewish "proletarians" who belonged to the Jewish socialist grouping "Der Bund" which was part of the Russian revolutionary movement. The news that a new and more successful Russian revolution had taken place and was bound to change the course of the War was discussed at home and in the synagogue but details were scarce.

America's entry in the War on the side of the Allies had a direct impact on our family and town. Although almost everyone in Rassein had some relative in America (my brothers Joseph and Reuben had been living there for a number of years) all contact with the United States had ceased during the war years. There was no doubt speculation about the possible involvement of America in the spreading war but in its' isolation the town could only spin theories. However, the entry of the United States on the side of the Allies in April 1917 soon became known to all and was probably responsible for a basic shift in the attitude of the Jewish population toward the Germans and the war. It is not likely that the draft of my two brothers into the armed forces of the United States became known to my family, but I heard talk of this possibility. News of the war's progress was then sought eagerly but pretty much in vain. It is possible though that Woodrow Wilson's call for national self-determination became known since I often heard Wilson's name mentioned along with that of Herzl. Though the Jewish population, impressed by the surprisingly smooth occupation and the peaceful, if not prosperous course of the German presence, was inclined at first to adopt a pro-German attitude, this was changed overnight by America's involvement in the War. At the end of the year, news of the Balfour Declaration issued by the British Government and containing the ringing words that "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a National Jewish Home for the Jewish People," reached Rassein and stirred interest in Zionism as well as support for the British and their allies in the War.

By the spring of 1918 the number of occupation soldiers seemed to dwindle still more and there were rumors of a German collapse, food shortages and intensified collections and requisitions of dairy products and grain for shipment to Germany. Throughout the occupation there was never, I believe, any actual shortage of basic food requirements for the civilian

population, but the quality of such essentials as bread deteriorated substantially and milk products were always in short supply. There seemed to be a growing resentment of the Germans and their demands for food. At the same time the Jewish population was apprehensive about the possible departure of the occupation forces and its effect upon security since the Russians were not expected to return and there was as yet no visible evidence of the establishment of a Lithuanian authority. The brutal murder of a Jewish man and his wife about this time emphasized the gravity of a possible breakdown of authority as a result of the unsettled situation in the town. The facts of this sensational and unprecedented case became known to me in bits and pieces by overhearing conversations at home and in the community and to some extent from personal observation of its aftermath. The brother of a friend of mine (who was a member of the small group of intellectuals and students of Russian, German, Hebrew and Zionism, and an intimate of my cousin Ephie in whose company I used to see him), apparently had a love affair with a young gentile woman who worked in his parent's shop facing one of the town's principal churches, somewhat on the outskirts of Rassein. The young man walked with a limp and used a cane and was known as a witty and brilliant student. One morning his parents were found murdered in their beds and his younger brother wounded. It was said that the young man and his girl friend had disappeared and that they had arranged the murder which was carried out by a gang of ruffians whom they hired with a promise of payment. It was further rumored that the young man planned to convert to Catholicism and return to marry the girl in the church across from his home. Conversion from Judaism was unheard of and in this case was especially abhorrent in view of the grim circumstances. Some people said that the murderers were known but that there was no authority to investigate the murder and bring the guilty to justice. There was some concern that once the Germans departed the non-Jewish population would show active resentment to Jews because of their more or less favored position under the occupation.

The young man's former Hebrew teacher, presently mine, decided to lead a group of citizens to the village where the fugitives were known to be staying in an effort to dissuade him from converting to Catholicism. I was rather surprised by the action of the teacher who had always seemed to me to be so ineffectual, and a few days after the departure of the mission I saw them returning without the young man, as their vehicle crossed the bridge over the river where I happened to be swimming. It soon became known that the church was preparing to arrange for the public conversion of the young man and his marriage to the girl. This took place in the church opposite the man's home and although there was intense concern and anxiety about the event, many, including myself, came to the church yard where I had often gone to collect horse chestnuts in the fall in an effort to get a glimpse of the proceedings. It was difficult to see what was going on and returning home my friends and I went to visit the young man's brother who had been badly hurt and was staying in a small clinic maintained by the Jewish community. The married couple moved into the young man's home and were later seen together in the town. (When Lithuania was proclaimed an independent republic, a magistrate and supporting officials were sent to Rassein to investigate the double murder and a hearing and perhaps trial was held in the hall which the Germans used as a motion picture theatre.)

Historically the birth of the Republic of Lithuania as an aftermath of World War I came about after considerable political maneuvering and some hard fighting involving Germany, revolutionary Russia, the Allied Powers and renascent Poland, but little of this was known in Rassein, at least to children. It was not until November 1919 that the Germans left all of Lithuania for good and the Republic was established. Local government under the leadership of both Jews and non-Jews, with Jews being granted religious and cultural autonomy, finally came to Rassein and was celebrated by a parade in which I marched carrying, I believe, the banner of free Lithuania as well as the emblem of my scouting group which had now become a part of the

Zionist movement. So far as I knew there were no recriminations as a result of the occupation experience and relations between Jews and non-Jews remained friendly. Compared to the glitter of the German military forces, especially in the early period of the invasion, the new Lithuanian soldiers appeared to us but as crude play characters, since some trained using wooden rifles and wore wooden shoes, or "klumpes". In the manner of Rassein we called the new recruits "klumpes" and made no effort to play army or war games. The war was over for good and life "in Rassein relapsed into its' old tempo - but not quite.

### 13. To America!

Although I knew that my two oldest brothers were living in America, and that many other families had sons there, it did not enter my mind during the occupation that I, myself, might someday immigrate to the United States. Had the great War not intervened, I most likely would have joined my brothers, if for no other reason than to avoid the harsh Russian draft. During the German occupation life was too exciting and the promise of continuing to live under enlightened German rule real enough to put America out of my consciousness. When the occupation was coming to its disillusioning end I learned of the colonies being started in Palestine and I saw myself briefly as a future pioneer. My father's death, the end of the war and the resumption of communication with America made it almost inevitable that we would emigrate as soon as it was possible to do so. In addition to my brothers, we had a number of relatives living in New York, Baltimore, Cleveland and Worcester, Massachusetts. Several of my mother's and father's brothers and sisters had settled in the United States as early as the 80's and 90's and it was my father's father and brother Zalmen Mendel who changed their name from Volpe to Wolfe when they emigrated to Baltimore and Cleveland and found that their customers on their peddler's route could not pronounce the family name.

Judging from the family's letters to our brothers in America which have survived (and characteristically undated for the most part), there was a lively correspondence between Rassein and far away America. The letters which I have seen were usually in the form of round robins in which I sometimes participated. At first my contributions were brief and limited to sending "regards" and assurances of my "well being, blessed be the Name". When I was eight or nine I began to write proper letters, responding in part to inquiries from the "Arnerikaner". Brother Joseph wanted to know whether I remembered him and I assured him that, "I often look at the photograph in which you hold me by the hand and looking at the picture I know that you are my oldest brother Joseph." I informed brother Reuben that, "I remember him very well and will never forget you until we see each other once more." I reported that I was becoming a big "boy" (using the English word), studied with "Avrohom Eliyohu Passel" and that my subjects were Talmud, the Pentateuch, the Prophets, ending the letter by sending greetings to "the whole family, especially my cousin, Ziff. "In another letter I responded to Reuben's query as to whether "I still played with buttons" and told him that this "was no longer done" and that I was now playing with drumsticks, cut outs of horses and hopscotch, and "besides there is very little time to play since one has to study and I am now studying Russian in order to enter class (presumably the Russian School) this summer." I apologized for the brevity of my letter since, "I now have to do my lessons."

My brothers Joseph and Reuben were drafted into the armed forces of the United States but only Reuben went overseas and saw action. Joseph was drafted later and died of the flu while in training toward the close of the war in September 1918. News of his death did not become known to us until my father died a year later, although my uncle Azriel Ziff, my mother's brother, must have learned of it earlier. On the day of my father's funeral, as we were getting ready to accompany the coffin on foot to the cemetery I heard my uncle say, as if to no one in particular, "I suppose we ought to tell her now (my mother) that she had also lost a son." I knew at once that he must be referring to Joseph and his message immediately reached my mother and other family members since there was a new crescendo of crying. During the traditional period of mourning (shivah) we talked freely about Joseph although we lacked details about his death. It seemed to me noble to die for America, for by this time I had heard of Wilson and his idealistic program for the small nations, which had, including Lithuania, gained their freedom as a result of the War. I

saw the creation of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine as another historic result of the war, but for the moment I did not think of going there as a pioneer. My father's death, the sacrifice made for America by my oldest brother whom I had never known, the desire aroused in me by the occupation to see the world beyond Rassein and the obviously limited opportunities for further and "real" education, all made emigration to the United States practically inevitable. One day a former Rassein resident arrived from America to visit his family and was constantly followed around town by curious people, old and young, inquiring about "Columbus' land" and admiring his spiffy clothing and polished pointed shoes. My friends and I talked about the future and almost everyone had some plans about emigration, particularly to America and South Africa. My best friend Joseph was the first to leave with his mother for South Africa where his father had been a resident for a number of years. I had a feeling of great expectations about travel, seeing big cities and trading stamps wherever I went, while at the same time I was sad about the prospect of leaving Rassein and my friends. My younger brother Velvke asked me many questions about America and I did my best to inform him of the little I knew.

Soon after the end of the war we began to receive letters from my brother Reuben who had returned from service and was living in Worcester, Massachusetts, inviting us to join him in America as soon as he could make arrangements for our transportation. The reply to his first letter was in the form of a round robin and when I was invited to participate I declined saying that "I did not have my thoughts." This amused my family very much and as no foible or faux pas was ever passed over in silence I was teased about my remark for months. The news that we were planning to emigrate became widely known since we were among the first, if not the first, families to do so and we were given messages for relatives. I took very little part in the travel preparations, spending most of my time with friends and visiting favorite sites, particularly fruit orchards. We began to sell our furniture and the store stock and brought down a number of large wicker baskets from our ample attic for packing. We had little information about the selection of household objects to take with us, but I remember that we packed our two samovars, silver cutlery, copper pots and pans, clothing, ceremonial cups and goblets, photographs and personal items, some books of my father's. I had few belongings to take besides some clothing and my stamp collection and a few memorabilia of the occupation - German coins, photographs of Rassein and numerous snapshots given me by friends. The actual move took place in September 1920 after a hectic period of packing, saying goodbye to relatives, friends and neighbors. I believe that every member of the family except my sister Feigel (Frances) was enthusiastic about going to America. Feigel was more or less "engaged" to marry a young man who was at that time in revolutionary Russia and was, she tells me, reluctant to leave.

My mother, brothers and sisters and our belongings were loaded into a plain straw bottomed wagon as our neighbors gathered to watch the scene. Many of my friends came to bid me farewell and some of them followed the wagon for quite a distance. I was excited and sad and felt sorry for those who were being left behind in what I now saw as a village compared to New York and Worcester. My mother cried, no doubt thinking of my father's and brother's death, and her fifty or so years of residence in the town as a girl, wife and mother. Soon we were outside the town and on our way to America. We spent the first night in Yurburg, the town from which a number of refugees had settled in Rassein at the beginning of the war. The next day we crossed the German border and stopped briefly in a small town which gave us our first view of Germany - neat white washed cottages, attractive stores, fenced gardens and a railroad station! I looked for the post office but there wasn't enough time and I was keenly disappointed since I had German marks and wanted to buy some of the post-war stamps. We boarded an impressive train car, the first I had ever seen, and headed for Tilsit, a city I learned later made famous by the meeting there of Napoleon and Emperor Alexander I during the Napoleonic Wars. We all took

our seats and I was disappointed that there was no window seat for me. When I threatened to leave the train unless a seat with a good view was given me, my sister Frieda reluctantly vacated her window seat. The ride to Tilsit lasted only a few hours and we arrived there early in the evening, staying in a small hotel which faced the main street. No sooner had we settled in our room than I persuaded my brother Velvel to accompany me on a tour of the town. As we emerged from the hotel we were struck by the well lighted street and the rush of people. As we looked about us we saw that a streetcar had just stopped a short distance from the hotel and we immediately boarded it, paying the fare with the German coins we brought from Rassein. We had no idea where the street car might be going, but as it turned out it merely went the length of the street which was evidently the main shopping area with stores open in the evening. We must have spent an hour riding up and down until we realized that we hadn't told anyone where we had gone off and so returned to the hotel for a late supper. The next morning I rose early and walked the length of the same street, which was deserted. As I explored some of the side streets I was surprised to find that some of them led almost directly to country which was not too different from the outskirts of Rassein except that everything seemed cleaner and more orderly.

From Tilsit we headed by train for Berlin and ultimately Antwerp, where we were to board a Red Star Liner for America. The train stopped briefly in Koenigsberg at night and I had just enough time to see the interior of the imposing railroad station where I bought a roll at one of the kiosks. We arrived in Berlin on the eve of Yom Kippur and put up at a pension which seemed to serve immigrants from the East and offered kosher meals. Although this was my first visit to a big city and I was at first confused by the masses of people in the streets at any time of the day and night, I felt very much at home in Berlin, possibly because of the occupation experience and my knowledge of German. The next day I passed up an opportunity to attend one of the synagogues and instead walked the streets for many hours. I was impressed by the fact that the principal department stores were closed on account of the Jewish holiday. I took with me some of my Lithuanian stamps, the first issues of the new republic, hoping to swap or sell them. As I looked in the window of a large stamp store a woman evidently recognized me as a foreigner and asked whether I had stamps to sell. I showed her my Lithuanian collection and she bought some. I then went to a post office to buy current German stamps and discovered that I could get them from a stamp machine which intrigued me very much. As I deposited the necessary coins and obtained the stamps a postal official or policeman approached me and accused me of using foreign coins or perhaps slugs. I assured him in German that I had not and he proceeded to open the machine to determine whether there were any non-German coins. Fortunately there weren't any and he let me leave without further complaint, but I was rather shocked by his officious action.

I enjoyed our stay in Berlin, and used every opportunity to walk the streets, visit shops, philatelic stores - the first I had ever seen - the famous Tiergarten, restaurants and ride the streetcars. One afternoon I discovered a movie house near our pension and invited my mother to see the picture show with me. She was amused by my initiative and went to the theatre with me. There was a short wait for the film to start, during which a young woman walked through the aisle offering candy in a plaintive voice, "Schokolade gefällig, schokolade gefällig." I bought a bar and shared it with my mother. As it happened I had already seen the picture in Rassein, but nevertheless enjoyed seeing it again and explaining some obscure parts of a complicated plot I to my mother. We walked home in darkness and my mother was pleased that I knew the way back so well.

While in Berlin we were visited by several former German soldiers or perhaps civilians whom my sisters had met during the war. One of the young men who was a friend of my sister Frieda, handed her a gift which she took to be a box of candy. Frieda turned to my mother and

said, "Oh, mama, my friend brought me a box of candy." The young man turned to her and said quietly but audibly, "zvei," (two). We all laughed when he left and the phrase stayed in our family for a number of years. Apparently we arranged to have our baggage shipped by a different boat and a young man named Walter helped us in making the necessary arrangements. When we arrived in Worcester it took several months for our baggage to be delivered. One of our uncles who was concerned about the delay questioned us closely about this mysterious Walter and kept repeating, "Who is this Walter"? "Tell me again how Walter made the arrangements in Berlin." "Wer iz der Walter," was a phrase we used anytime something was missing or late in arrival. Berlin at that time, the fall of 1920, was already in the grip of inflation because we were able to obtain large sums of the new money for the old German currency which we brought with us and possibly for some Russian gold coins we still had from pre-war days. Everything was very expensive and there were" obviously some scarcities.

I left Berlin with regret and made a resolution to return there someday. I especially liked the wide streets, tall buildings, parks and streetcars. Our final destination was Antwerp, where we stayed a short time. I remember the huge square in the middle of the city and not far from the wharves. I left our hotel early in the morning and walked all around the square which was ringed by bars and cafes, already open and serving men in sailors' uniforms. At last we were ready to head for the wharves and the waiting steamship bound for New York. Until we arrived at the embarkation area we had encountered only a few emigrants in Berlin and Antwerp hotels. At the dock we were overwhelmed by the sight of hundreds of people in various national costumes milling about and speaking a number of different languages. Papers were being checked, parents kept an eye on their children, small pieces of baggage were guarded and the excitement mounted as passengers began to board the boat. Other than the small boat which my brother Velvel and I boarded after our flight from Chaikeshik, I had of course never seen a large vessel, let alone an ocean going steamer. I had little time to observe the exterior of the boat with its imposing smoke stacks and soon found myself in one of the lower decks with my brothers. My mother and sisters were assigned to a different part of the deck and we met only at meal time. We probably had enough money to travel second class, but space was scarce during the beginning of the post-war emigration to the United States. The accommodations could be characterized as steerage rather than third class. Almost the entire space on our deck was taken up by double decker metal bunks arranged in close tiers. Compared to the hotel rooms which we had en route, the shipboard lodgings were cramped and smelled of oil. There was no room other than the narrow bunk beds and assorted bulkheads for use during the day. Meals were served in a large hall with settings for different groups during most of the day and evening. The sleeping space was in partial darkness day and night and getting to the single large bathroom became something of a problem.

We were out to sea only a day or two when most of the passengers became sea sick and turned the sleeping and sitting area into messy ill smelling quarters. Meals were taken only intermittently and not at all as the days dragged on. My enthusiasm for going to America vanished. I looked back longingly to my life in Rassein, to my friends whom I pictured as strolling through the town's orchards now full of ripe apples, pears, plums and nuts. On the fifth or sixth day I began to feel better, ate moderately and saw more of my mother and sister. There was very little interaction among the passengers, partly because of their wretched physical state and perhaps because each family was absorbed in thinking of its own future in the new land. There were of course, no news bulletins or announcements to passengers, but it became generally known that we were approaching New York. We began to see passing boats and the number increased as we neared our destination. The actual arrival seemed to happen rather suddenly and soon we passed the Statue of Liberty, of which I had read in the one volume Russian encyclopedia in Rassein. We knew that before entering New York we would have to spend some

time on Ellis Island, a group of buildings in the harbor of New York which resembled a large prison or institution. We disembarked on Ellis Island on a Friday, I believe, because there were some officials of a Jewish immigration society, probably the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, who offered Jewish immigrants a Sabbath meal in a section of the common dining room. Here, too, there were separate dormitory quarters for men and women.

The following day all arriving passengers lined up for a cursory physical examination and interview with an immigration official. Unexpectedly, the physical examination disclosed a scalp infection (very common in Rassein) on my brother Velvel, which presumably would have to heal before we would be allowed to enter New York. My brother Reuben and several cousins learned of our detention and made an effort to visit us, which was not allowed. They did manage to send us a package of biscuits and candy and on one occasion came by the Island in a rented tug boat which managed to come close enough to the wire enclosed recreation area, where we spent most of our time during the day, to see and greet us for the first time since our arrival. My brother Reuben called out our names one by one and we made some response. My brother Velvel ran the length of the fence and followed the course of the tug boat as it headed back to New York. Reuben called out (in Yiddish), "How are you?" And Velvel yelled back, "Well, thank God!" Every day we inquired about the date for our "release" and were given some vague assurances that it would come soon. We could see the New York skyline from the fenced outdoor area and felt like prisoners. There was a rumor that some desperate detainee had broken out and attempted to swim to New York. Our release came on the sixth or seventh day of our detention, and the trip to New York harbor by ferry was almost an anticlimax. We were met by Reuben and my cousins at the headquarters of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society on Lafayette Street and immediately taken by tube to Jersey City to spend the night with a cousin. Our reunion with Reuben was tearful, with my mother mourning the death of my father and brother Joseph.

I had been away from Rassein less than three weeks, but felt that I had left it a long time ago. New York was too overwhelming and made me feel very small and insignificant. I was in America and had the impression that I had been swept into it rather as a grain of sand might be swept by a strong wind.

#### 14. America Rejected and Re-entered

The excitement of leaving Rassein for America and the experiences of the adventurous journey through Germany and Belgium were dampened considerably by the crowding and malodorous atmosphere of the antiquated Red Star ship steerage accommodations. The prison-like conditions of our unexpectedly prolonged stay on Ellis Island further diminished my expectations of glamorous America. It was a great relief finally to be released from the forbidding gateway to New York and to be ferried across to the foot of Manhattan. I had an overwhelming impression of the piers and warehouses lining our entry into New York. The city with its giant skyscrapers and shattering noise passed quickly before me as we made our way to the murky smelling tubes which took us to Jersey City where we were housed by relatives. Jersey City with its miles of shabby looking row houses in no way fitted my image of America. I compared the city unfavorably with the German and Belgian cities we passed through. The train which took us to Worcester did not enhance my initial impression of the "goldene medine" of my imagination.

The identity, as we would now call it, which I had acquired in the small world of Rassein suffered further erosion as we settled into our flat at 57 Arlington Street (or Strasse as we called it at first). My brother Reuben had furnished our new home, the ground floor of a typical three-story Worcester dwelling, with modern plumbing, a coal burning stove range, steam heat, electricity and other amenities. I soon met most of our "American" relatives but with the exception of several young people, especially Eishke Ziff, who seemed to take an interest in me, I had little in common with them and was rather put off by what I considered their limited range of interests, materialism, lack of interest in literature and their hum drum lives. The language barrier was, of course, a considerable handicap, even though some of our relatives spoke Yiddish, but not Hebrew. The humiliating experience of being placed in the first grade of the Ward Street School further deflated my sense of self – a linguist, student of the Bible, young Zionist, avid stamp collector, an observer of a phase of the Great War, and sexually aware young man. Returning to Rassein was of course out of the question, but I dreamt of becoming a *halutz* (pioneer) in Palestine, preferably riding a motor cycle through the Judean hills as a protector of the new colonies from the native bedouins or Arabs. I continued to study Hebrew, taking lessons in advanced grammar from a gentle scholar who had to make his living selling piece goods in the Jewish mercantile section of Worcester.

After moving in quick succession from grade one to seven-A to eight-B in less than eight months when the principal of the Providence Street School decided to give me a diploma, I quit schooling to go to work as a shipping clerk in a wholesale dry goods store with the thought of saving enough money to emigrate to Palestine. I was given encouragement in this plan by my sister Frieda who, herself, left for Palestine several years later to become a *halutzah* (pioneer). I enjoyed working and gave \$10 of my \$12 weekly earnings to my mother for "board and room". I worked through the summer of 1921 and learned much on the job. As the only employee I was soon given a variety of responsibilities, including selling and going into the community on collections. This brought me into contact with a variety of small merchants and peddlers, mostly of Syrian and Italian origin. My English improved rapidly, and during the slack periods I had ample time to read in English, Yiddish, Hebrew and German. I also discovered the public library and spent many a Saturday afternoon in the open stacks and reference room. One day I discovered the catalogue of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and read about the courses in agriculture offered there. I began to think of preparing myself to enroll as a special student, learn scientific farming and emigrate to Palestine. Still, I resisted the idea of returning to

school - a necessary step for enrolling in a college course. But as the summer waned and the school season was about to begin, my reluctance to become a student again was broken down. It came about this way.

On the morning after Labor Day I opened the store where I worked, swept the premises and then stood in the doorway watching the square at the foot of Providence Street, the main artery of the Jewish neighborhood (later given a small niche in literature by S. N. Behrman's memoir, "The Worcester Story"). Suddenly the square filled with a small army of young people, some of whom I recognized from my brief grammar school days, who emerged from Providence Street. I concluded that they were all on the way to high school. The brief scene that confronted me that morning acted as a powerful stimulus to make me overcome my strong reluctance to continue my formal schooling. That day I learned about the existence of night high school, since I knew that I had to continue to work to support myself and to "save" for my eventual emigration. I registered at once and had three classes from six to nine, five nights a week. In night school I came into contact with very earnest students, mostly of working class origin, and dedicated teachers, referred to by my relatives as "real Yankees". The English teacher, Miss Dodge, after learning of my background, took a special interest in me, invited me to her home for tea and persuaded me to prepare myself for entrance in the small but prestigious Classical High School. On her recommendation one of the day high school English teachers, a Mr. Post, agreed to tutor me in English literature. He was obviously very fond of poetry because our Saturday afternoon lessons consisted entirely of readings in the New England poets. I was enchanted by such lines as "What is so rare as a day in June?", Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and the homey poems of James Whitcomb Riley. As a result of my contacts with the night school teachers and Mr. Post I began to realize that there was an America outside the restricted "ghetto" of Worcester Jewry and my family constellation.

The prospect of becoming a full time day student turned my thoughts away from emigration, especially after I learned about the existence of Clark University in the city. I eagerly looked forward to attending Classical High School in the fall of 1922, when I was assured by my understanding employer that I could have the same job from one to six and all day Sunday. Sometime in the spring of 1922, Mr. Post arranged for me to see Mr. Porter, the principal of Classical High, who reviewed my academic record. I was overjoyed to learn from him a few weeks later that I would be admitted as a junior. About this time I became interested in the socialist wing of the Zionist movement and after hearing Eugene Debs at a rally in City Hall Park in Worcester, got hold of some socialist literature which made a deep impression on me. I also read a number of pamphlets on "free thought" and agnosticism, some of the essays of Elbert Hubbard, a biography of Tom Paine and a life of Heinrich Heine. I also began to learn something about American history and started to build my own library by visiting the amply stocked used book department of the Salvation Army store. Much as I was occupied in reading widely and in learning about various movements, my chief interest continued to be in obtaining a good education - high school and then college - which I hoped would not only lead to a career, but to a knowledge of America, its past, present and future and my possible place in it. I decided to apply for American citizenship and after much agonized deliberation asked the Clerk of the Court to list me in the naturalization papers as George Meir David Wolfe. The name sounded more "American" and also promised to make me feel less of a "greenhorn". The day came when I informed my sister Frieda, who still hoped that I would join her as a pioneer in Palestine, that I was determined to continue my education and would probably remain in America. She was keenly disappointed but wished me well. My mind about becoming an "American" was finally made up when I read the catalogue of Clark University from cover to cover and was dazzled by the range of courses offered, the high requirements for admission, the academic standing of the

faculty and the accounts of student groups and activities. From that time on Rassein began to recede into the background as the venerable buildings of Classical High and Clark University invited me to re-enter America.

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