

*Shalom*  
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*My Dear Children*



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**Feiga Mirel Shamis**

Originally written circa 1939-1941  
Translated and printed in Johannesburg in 1998 by  
Nora Favish

Published with permission of Feiga Shamis's descendants

Vienna, VA  
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## ***Preface***

### **LeeAnn Dance**

My journey with Feiga Shamis began in 2011 when her great-grandson, Steve Nathan, brought me an original copy of *Shalom, Shalom My Dear Children*. It is a letter – a long one – written by Feiga to the two children – Mannie and Rose – she relinquished for adoption in 1921. Rose would become Steve’s grandmother.

Steve is originally from South Africa, a world-renowned pulmonologist, and director of the Lung Transplant Program at Fairfax Hospital in Northern Virginia. He has also been a dear friend for more than 17 years, and our teenage sons have grown up together. He was curious whether I thought Feiga’s letter might be the basis for a future documentary. I was excited to read the little book, but when I did, I was perplexed. Feiga wrote about incident upon incident of anti-Jewish violence between the years 1917-1921 in what is today Ukraine. Anti-Jewish violence in the aftermath of WWI? Why had I never heard of this? So I put the little book aside, waiting for that elusive free time to launch my research.

A year later, my husband Glenn was diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer, amyloidosis. The day before he was to start chemo, he suffered a life-threatening stroke. Luckily, Glenn ended up at the hospital where Steve works. Over the next week in the intensive care unit, Steve would drop in, go over Glenn’s chart, coordinate his care, and keep me informed. He was my lifeline.

Glenn was in the hospital for a month. His recovery was long and slow, but he has been in remission for four years now and is happily back at work.

A year after Glenn’s stroke, Steve told me his cousin Judy Favish was heading to Ukraine to trace Feiga’s story and asked if I wanted to go along. I didn’t hesitate to say yes. As I re-read *Shalom, Shalom* in preparation for the trip, I was

struck by the fact that Steve is alive today because Feiga chose to send Rose and Mannie to South Africa. It is clear in reading *Shalom, Shalom*, that Feiga herself was torn by her decision. At the time she wrote the letter, she had no idea that her decision would protect Rose and Mannie from the Holocaust. The Shamis children who remained in Eastern Europe after WWI all later perished during WWII. While Rose and Mannie may have been hurt and confused by Feiga's decision, it undoubtedly saved their lives. Today, Rose and Mannie's descendants number nearly 50.

And here I am, a non-Jew in Northern Virginia, touched by events in Eastern Europe nearly 100 years ago. I have been the beneficiary of Feiga's pain. And so, I'm truly honored to have co-created *My Dear Children*, the documentary film based on this little book. I am even further honored that the Shamis descendants have allowed me to re-print *Shalom, Shalom*.

Feiga painstakingly handwrote the 174-page letter in Yiddish in a composition notebook, and she did it three times. Rose and Mannie each had a notebook, and we discovered a third with the descendants of Feiga's oldest daughter Tillie, who immigrated to the U.S. sometime between 1913 and 1917. Mannie's copy of the letter was lost after his wife Nora had it translated following Mannie's death in 1994. Rose's copy survives and is held by one of her daughters. Scholars who have examined that copy say Feiga's handwriting is poor and difficult to decipher. We have not been able to compare the two remaining originals, though there are some variations between the two translations. Feiga includes details in Tillie's copy that are not in the other two. And there are word variations, which may be due to the difficulty in deciphering Feiga's handwriting. Otherwise, the two translations are remarkably similar. The letter is printed here as it was originally in 1998. I have made no attempt to correct grammar or punctuation.

I also include here the original preface by Nora Favish, Mannie's wife. I have added footnotes based on our

discoveries and research during the course of making *My Dear Children*.

The introduction that follows is new, written by Natan Meir, Lorry I. Lokey Chair in Judaic Studies at Portland State University. At the risk of overusing the word “honor,” I have to say I truly *am* honored to have Meir’s contribution. We relied heavily on his expertise in developing *My Dear Children*, and he has been a steadfast supporter of our efforts to see this film become a reality.

Creating *My Dear Children* has been a labor of love. We couldn’t have done it without the help of many. But more importantly, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. We stand on the shoulders of Feiga.



*Feiga Shamis*

## *Original Preface*

**Nora Favish**

**1998**

Mannie Favish, my late husband, was born in Verba (which was formerly in Poland<sup>1</sup> and is now in the Ukraine) in 1912. Details of his early childhood are contained in this book. In 1920<sup>2</sup>, when he was eight years old, he and his sister Rose, who was ten, were brought to South Africa by the philanthropist Isaac Ochberg, who rescued two hundred orphans<sup>3</sup> from the Ukraine.

The orphans had been living in extreme poverty, many were sick and starving. He brought them to South Africa and this transfer of orphans was referred to as the Ukrainian Adventure. Some were taken to the Cape Town Orphanage and the rest went to Arcadia Orphanage in Johannesburg. There Rose refused adoption. She received her education in Johannesburg, worked there, and married Lulu Miller on 10 December 1931. They had a very happy marriage.

Mannie was adopted by Israel and Shaina Favish of Benoni, where he received his schooling and studied law through the University of South Africa. He qualified with a BA LLB and practiced as an attorney in Benoni until his death in 1994. In 1946 he married me, Nora Austoker, and we had 48 wonderful years together. It has ever been my regret that I did not meet his adoptive parents, especially his mother who gave him so much love.

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<sup>1</sup> Verba was in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until 1772 when the territory was divided between Habsburg Austria, Prussia, and the Russian Empire. After the division, Verba was in the Russian Empire.

<sup>2</sup> The actual departure date was September 1921.

<sup>3</sup> The actual number was closer to 172. More than two-dozen children ran away when rumors of wild animals roaming the streets of South Africa began circulating amongst the children. We believe Rose and Mannie were chosen to make up for the runaways. Their names do not appear in the group passport photos.



*Mannie and Nora on their wedding day*

This book, in its original form, was written by Rose and Mannie's biological mother, Feiga Mirel Shamis, in Palestine. She had gone there from the Ukraine to live with her daughter Tzilla on a *kibbutz* called Givat Chaim, between Tel Aviv and Haifa. Two copies of the book were written in longhand, in Yiddish, and sent to South Africa,<sup>4</sup> one each for Rose and Mannie.

Mannie had his copy of the book translated into English in 1991 by a Mrs. Luba Cesman of Johannesburg. The translated copy was kept in his safe, and I believe it was too painful for him to deal with it. In 1998, four years after Mannie's death, I decided to tackle the task of having the book

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<sup>4</sup> We believe Feiga gave Mannie the two notebooks when he visited Feiga in 1941, as Rose's family reports that Mannie gave her a copy upon his return.

edited and published as a legacy for Rose and Mannie's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



*Feiga Shamis and Mannie Favish, Givat Chaim, Palestine, 1941*

In 1941, when Mannie was serving with the South African Forces in Egypt during the Second World War, he took leave and visited his biological mother on the *kibbutz*. He spent a day and a night with her - mother and son had not seen each other for twenty years. One can only imagine the emotions they each experienced during this touching meeting. When he awoke from his sleep on the *kibbutz* he found his mother sitting in a chair and looking at him. She had apparently spent the night in that chair - probably remembering the tragic separation from her two young children twenty years before.<sup>5</sup>

In June 1998, approximately fifty years after the book was originally written,<sup>6</sup> I was assisted in its completion by editors Mike and Jo Sandroock and by Geoff Sifrin, Mrs. Luba Cesman, our daughters Janet and Judy and my niece Margot

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<sup>5</sup> The visit was to have lasted a week, but Mannie left after just one day.

<sup>6</sup> We believe Feiga wrote the letter sometime between 1939 and 1941 due to her references to Hitler.



Miller. I offer them my grateful thanks. My thanks also go to the Arcadia Orphanage, Johannesburg, for the record of the children's admission, and to the Reference Library in Johannesburg for important maps.

The task was done with much love, in memory of my beloved husband Mannie.



*Mannie Favish circa 1963*



## Introduction

Who was Feiga Mirel Shamis? The little book before us, *Shalom, Shalom My Dear Children*, presents us with an enigma of a person, a woman who suffered unimaginable horrors, many *tsores*, as she described them, yet still managed to describe the world around her as beautiful and good. At times despairing, even suicidal, she nonetheless lived into her seventies. Less a conventional memoir than a stream of consciousness – indeed, the work was written as a personal, even confidential letter to which we are privy thanks to her children and grandchildren – *Shalom, Shalom* follows Feiga from her unhappy childhood through her marriage to Kalman Shamis and then to the period that takes up the bulk of the work: the Great War and the bloody chaos of the post-years, which resulted in her separation from the two children to whom this letter is written, Rose and Mannie (Manes). Fatalistic (“bad luck follows me wherever I go”) yet incredibly resourceful, full of regret yet resigned to her fate, Feiga cuts a striking and somewhat inscrutable figure. Let us try to understand her better by parsing the words of her letter and placing it in its proper historical context.

Feiga’s experience is representative of the lives of many Russian Jews in the eventful last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. In her youth she was pulled between two worlds. Having visited her prosperous aunt and uncle in the big city of Kishinev, then the capital of the Russian province of Bessarabia (now Moldova), she no longer wished to return to the backwater of Verba, her hometown in the province of Volhynia, though she was eventually compelled to do so. In Kishinev, she met a young man whom she apparently wanted to marry, but her mother would not allow it, and she eventually married the man whom her family set up for her in a traditional match. Nor would her mother permit her to continue with her studies, which she very much wanted to do. Feiga’s circumstances

were far from unique; it is not too much of an exaggeration to state that, at the turn of the century, an entire generation of young Russian and Polish Jews who had been raised in shtetls like Verba were eager to escape the stifling, provincial life there for the opportunities of Kishinev, Warsaw, Lemberg (L'viv), and Kiev. This was especially true for working-class Jewish families like Feiga's, but as we know, Feiga's mother was unwilling to let her go. For one, she and Feiga's sister – both of them traditionally pious, if not Orthodox in the modern sense of the word – seemed eager for her to marry a man from a religious family like Kalman's; but more importantly, the family could not afford for an older child like Feiga to strike out on her own in a far-away city. Feiga's mother needed her nearby in order to help support her and her siblings.

But Feiga's bitterness toward her mother was more than the classic intergenerational strife. "I could do nothing with my mother and I felt that she had robbed me of my life" – these words, so full of rancor and hostility, clearly point to a major trauma that never healed. Was that trauma subsequently reflected in Feiga's relationship with her own children? Perhaps, despite her many declarations, no doubt sincere, that her children were her only wealth, we can find a hint of that trauma when, towards the end of the letter, she confesses, "I had lost my whole world because of my children, I had lost my youth, but I was prepared to do anything for them." In Feiga's eyes, it was not only her mother who had robbed her of that which was most precious to her; her children had, too.

The events between her marriage in 1894 and the outbreak of war in 1914 Feiga passes over in a few paragraphs. All we know is that she and Kalman, who held some sort of important position in Verba (though he could not, as she claims, have been mayor, for the Russian civil service was closed to Jews), lived a comfortable life and that she was "very happy." She was to rely on that sense of importance – symbolized most vividly by the portrait of the tsar that hung in Kalman's office – many times during the war years.

With the coming of war, Feiga writes, "we were caught in the middle" – precisely the position of most Russian and

Polish Jews during the First World War, since the region of densest Jewish settlement in the world happened to overlap with the Eastern Front. As was the case with so many Jewish families, the Shamises fled their home in order to escape the threat of violence; later, after returning to Verba, they were forced to leave again, this time expelled by Russian troops, as were tens of thousands of Jews, suspected of colluding with the enemy. Here we begin to see Feiga as we have not seen her before: forthright, daring, even heroic. She stands up to the landlord who wants to evict her family from their shelter in Kremenets; she pushes her way in to meet with the prosecutor in Dubno and thus saves 10 Jewish men from possible execution; she insists that her husband's body be removed from the Kiev hospital in a timely fashion. The episode with the prosecutor seems to hold particular significance for Feiga: she writes that the meeting was "such an experience that I cannot, dear children, describe it well enough." The achievement even has a kind of religious meaning for her: "it is *Simchat Torah* [the festival of the Rejoicing with the Torah]!" she cries to the families of the rescued men.

"One has to know how to speak to important people," Feiga tells us. And clearly she did. But in between, she curses the day she was born, loses the will to live, considers jumping into the Dnepr River, and thinks of taking poison. Life was bitter indeed – but she had to continue for the sake of her children.

And that, seemingly, is the crux of the letter. Feiga writes,

I wanted to take poison but when I looked at my orphans my heart broke. Where will eight children be without a mother? I did my children no harm, I fed them and I brought them up well but they had no luck. Let them all be well. I asked God for the strength to carry on because I hope to see them all again during my lifetime.

Note the slippage between past and present in this passage – Feiga writes that she asked God for the strength to carry on because *she hopes to see them all again*. Somehow, Feiga of the present, living in British Palestine, is still stuck in wartime Russia. Her struggle for her children continues; she has never abandoned them. And that is the message that she wishes Rose and Mannie, the children who were sent away from her, to understand and internalize – what happened to them was not her fault. She did them “no harm”; indeed, she brought them up well, and it was bad luck that separated them from her. But was it?

After Kalman’s death in 1918, Feiga and her children entered the period of the Russian Civil War, which played out with particular chaos and brutality in the Ukrainian lands as multiple armed factions – Bolsheviks, Whites, Ukrainians, Poles – fought for dominance over regions, cities, and towns. The absence of consistent government authority created an anarchic vacuum into which sprang various Ukrainian peasant militias, many of them vehemently anti-Semitic; these are Feiga’s “terrible bandits who robbed and killed.” The fact that Feiga does not identify this period by any particular historical marker is not surprising, since many ordinary people, Jew and Christian alike, probably did not notice much difference between the upheaval caused by World War I and the bloody chaos of the civil war period that followed on its heels. There was an important distinction, however, that we sense in the motivation that Feiga imputes to these new villains: unlike the wartime expulsions and pogroms, the massacres of the 1918-1921 period were often genocidal in their intent. “We overheard them saying that they should kill all the Jewish children so that the Jews would die out”; and later, from the mouth of a soldier whom Feiga assumes is a Bolshevik: “I will kill all the Jews in the shtetl.” Indeed, Feiga must now protect her children not only by feeding and sheltering them but also by literally wrestling with bandits who intend to kill them. In another case, she must stand by helpless as a bandit searches the house for her son (who dies the following day). “Can you imagine, dear children, what I went through? I had no way to

protect my child....” As with the earlier passage in which she pleads for strength to carry on, she has a very particular motive in writing these words to Mannie and Rose. They could just as easily be applied to her separation from them.

Of the period of the massacres, which the historical record shows were full of inhuman and indescribably brutal violence, Feiga writes, “In order to tell you everything that happened at that time I would have to write for a year.” When she writes, “the bandits tortured me,” she leaves it to Rose and Mannie (and, by extension, to us) to imagine what torments she suffered. Sexual violence was an all-too-frequent aspect of the civil war-era massacres. “I suffered much more than I have written about,” she acknowledges later.

Rose and Mannie, we imagine, would have read through the entire letter in anticipation of the passage that would explain to them how their mother could have allowed them to be sent away as orphans to South Africa when she was still very much alive.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the preceding pages tell only of how she struggled and suffered to protect them and remain with them and their siblings. But the three paragraphs that describe how they became two of “Ochberg’s orphans” (after Isaac Ochberg, the South African philanthropist who spearheaded the project to bring two hundred Jewish orphans from eastern Europe to Cape Town and Johannesburg in 1921) are strangely opaque on how the separation occurred; according to Feiga, it was all a terrible mistake, a misunderstanding on her part that parents would be allowed to accompany the children. Did Ochberg truly refuse Feiga’s request to return Mannie and Rose to her? It seems unimaginable, especially since there must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of eligible children from whom he could have chosen substitutes, many of whom had no close relatives

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<sup>7</sup> When Rose and Mannie received the letter, neither could read Yiddish any longer. Rose had the letter verbally translated by her Rabbi. Her daughter Sheila says Rose cried for days afterwards but wouldn’t share any details. Mannie had the letter translated years after receiving it, but his wife Nora believed he never read it.

left among the living. And since Feiga's narrative makes clear that she left no stone unturned when it came to protecting her children – even confronting would-be attackers face to face – why did her famous pluck fail her here?

What did happen, then? A clue appears several lines later. When Feiga received photographs of Mannie and Rose, she cried and “regretted having sent them away.” Could she really have sent them away, knowing that she was unlikely ever to see them again? In the society in which Feiga lived, it was not unknown – even somewhat common – for parents, especially single parents, experiencing extreme hardship to deposit their children in orphanages temporarily; sometimes a period envisioned as being only a few months might turn into years. Similarly, it is not inconceivable that Feiga thought that Rose and Mannie might have a better life in South Africa than they would in Poland; perhaps she even imagined that she could follow them a bit later and be reunited with them. In fact, the next sentence reads, “It’s a shame when a mother exchanges her children for paper and I never received any ‘paper’ anyway.” Is that “paper” the steamship ticket that Feiga remembers being promised? Or perhaps a visa? It’s impossible to know... and yet, one wonders. One wonders, too, why Feiga never expresses sorrow on behalf of Rose and Mannie, or imagines the trauma they must have experienced at being separated from their mother. The story, it seems, revolves only around her.

As Feiga moves towards the conclusion of that story, she returns to despair, and confesses to Rose and Mannie that she considered suicide. And then: a bombshell. “I decided to write to you about my life because I want you to know how I suffered.” Not “I wanted you to know how much I love you” or “I wanted you to know the lengths I went to to protect you.” No: her motivation, at least as it’s expressed here, is that her children learn about her suffering. Thus, the letter is not an apology or even an explanation but a defense and a vindication: no matter how much you suffered as orphans, I suffered more, because I gave up my life for you.

Feiga Shamis was not a simple person; nor, one imagines, was she an easy person. Thwarted from her dreams as a young woman, she resigned herself to the good that life would bring, and took consolation in the fact that, no matter how terrible things got, “there are good people in the world.” As was true for so many Eastern European Jews during the period that she describes, her life was shaped by tragedy, both the heartbreak brought about by a domineering mother indifferent to her dreams and the multiple catastrophes caused by the tumultuous historical events she had the bad luck to live through. Only those who walked in her shoes can truly know what she experienced, or understand the decisions she made.

Natan M. Meir  
Lorry I. Lokey Chair in Judaic Studies  
Portland State University







Map created by Martin Walz ©2018



*Rose Shamis, date unknown*



*Mannie Favish, date unknown*





Kalman and Feiga Shamis, date unknown

**פראנץ-בוינען פאר גאנצע יתומים** (אן פאסוק און מימער)

Shamis, Reibel, Margot

אין 897

- 1) דער נאמען \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) דער פאמיליע-נאמען \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) דעם פאטער'ס נאמען \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) די מוטער'ס נאמען און אורז פאמיליע-נאמען \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) נעשליכעס \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) עלטער \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) בענוד-זושאנא אריבער קראנקייטען, אריין-סלער'ן, לינגען קראנקייטען, קאס און היט - קראנקייטען און א.ו.וו.
- 8) נעבור-ס-אָרט; טונקע, קרייז, טעגערע \_\_\_\_\_
- 9) דער אָרט, צו וועלכען דאָס קינד איז געגעשריבען \_\_\_\_\_
- 10) וואוינ-גאָרט בױ דעם פאטער, ווען דאָס קינד איז געקומען קיין \_\_\_\_\_
- 11) מיט וועם האָבען זיך די עלטערן געשעסטיגט \_\_\_\_\_
- 12) זענען זיי געווען אָרעם, רייך, בעמיטלע (אין וויילע האָט מען געשאַצט זײער שטימען) \_\_\_\_\_
- 13) האָבען די עלטערן געוואָסן און וואו אומבועזעליכעס פערמיגען (ווי, שטייבלעך, באָרעך, סוף, ערד וכדומה) און אַרײַן און וועמענען רשות געפֿינט זיך דאָס אַיטש \_\_\_\_\_
- 14) וועלכע קרובים (ברודער, שוועסטער, פאטער, מוטער און ווייטער קרובים) האָט דאָס קינד, די נענדיג אָרעמען פון אַיטש'ען פון זי \_\_\_\_\_
- 15) ווען האָט אָפּ אַן אָבערן קינד יודיש אָדער פּאָליש \_\_\_\_\_
- 16) צו אַזוי די דאָזיגע פּערזאָן סטאָט, אָן דאָס קינד אָדער אַרבעט, געוועהרע ווערען און אָנגעבן קלאָר, דאָס דאָס פּאַרענטערס ווערען אָדער דערצוגעבן ווערען און אַ ווייטער געוועהרעט, אונטערזייערע \_\_\_\_\_
- 17) צו אַזוי דאָס קינד אַליין געלייגט צו פּערזאָנען זיין אַיטשען וואוּן-אָרט און פּאַרען און אַ ווייטע מדינה \_\_\_\_\_
- 18) צו קען דאָס קינד לייגען יודיש, לשון קודש, אַנדערע שפּראַכען \_\_\_\_\_
- 19) צו קען דאָס קינד שרייבען יודיש, לשון קודש, אַנדערע שפּראַכען \_\_\_\_\_
- 20) צו קען דאָס קינד דאַרען \_\_\_\_\_
- 21) צו האָט עס בעזוכט און זיי פּאַנג און אַלגעמינע פּאַליק-שול, אַ ווייטע שול, חדר, חלמוד-תורה א.ד.ג. \_\_\_\_\_
- 22) צו האָט דאָס קינד זיך טוין געלערענט אַ געוויסע מלאכה, ביי וועמען, וואו און זיי לאָנג \_\_\_\_\_
- 23) וועלכע דאָקטעמענטן האָט דאָס קינד (מטריקע, היילאָגע צייגלעך און א.ו.וו.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 24) ביי וועמען זענען געלייבט געוואָרען די אַרבעטגעבאַרע יודישע וועגען קינד \_\_\_\_\_
- 25) אַלגעמינע באַפֿענדיגונגען פון דעם פּאַרענטערס צושטאנד פון קינד: קעמפער, טוישע, שוואַנד, כּלפּ, פּענעקייטען, אַלגעמינע גוטע, בערן-גיסות און א.ו.וו. (די דאָזיגע רופֿיק וו אַרין רופֿיק 7 דאָרף צוגעגעבען ווערען פון פּאַר-לייט) \_\_\_\_\_
- 26) אַנדערע יודישע און געמיינעליכע \_\_\_\_\_

אונטערזייעט פון רעגיסטראַטאָר: \_\_\_\_\_

אונטערזייעט פון קאָמיטע-מיטגליד: \_\_\_\_\_

בינעלייגט אַ פּאַרענטערס פון קינד, \_\_\_\_\_

Admission form for Rose & Mannie to join Ochberg Orphan group



*Isaac Ochberg*



*A group of the orphans outside the Warsaw orphanage.*



*Ochberg Orphan group arrives in London from Warsaw. Ochberg is at the top of the ramp. August 1921*





*Ochberg surrounded by a group of the children in South Africa.*



*Feiga and her youngest child Yente in a photo she sent to Rose and Mannie in South Africa sometime after 1921. Yente remained in Warsaw with Feiga.*

Handwritten text in Yiddish, likely a letter, written on aged paper. The text is arranged in approximately 15 horizontal lines, written from right to left. The handwriting is cursive and somewhat dense. The paper shows signs of age, including yellowing and some wear at the edges. The text appears to be a personal communication, possibly a letter from Feiga to Rose and Mannie as mentioned in the caption.

First page of the original letter Feiga wrote to Rose & Mannie.



Now dear children, I your mother will describe what I have done in this beautiful good world, with lots of *tsores*,<sup>8</sup> ever since I was young. I was born Feiga Mirel Misler in a small *shtetl* called Verba in 1878 and my father died when he was still very young. We were five children when he died and my mother was pregnant. We all worked and helped, and the elder sister was engaged but my father had not been able to take her to the *chupa*. He had organized a religious husband with *peyot*<sup>9</sup> for my other sister.

I missed my father who had gone on business to Dubno where he took ill. We were called out on a Sunday when he died and the funeral was held there on the Monday. When we returned my mother was a widow with orphans.

Imagine our troubles when we lost the head of the home. What did we have left? We looked like wandering sheep, and they say a widow is very bitter even if she has a golden roof. But we knew that we could do nothing. It was God's will.

After my father's death I wanted to go to Rovno to study in high school but my mother prevented me from going.

'There is no father so there is no high school,' she said. 'We have to look after the shop.'

'You have other children,' I told her, 'let them be in the shop.' But I was very capable and could look after the business better than the others, so she would not let me go. I wanted to study nursing and become a sister to help the doctors, but she would not let me. I promised to return the money that she would have to spend but it was 'no,' and one has to listen to a mother sometimes.

As time passed she forced me to go into our business and she made a businesswoman out of me. I was able to go out

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<sup>8</sup> troubles

<sup>9</sup> side locks

and buy goods without getting lost, but thank God I had completed the Russian primary school early.

The *tsores* was growing like weeds. God dishes out the good and the bad and one has to accept it. My mother married off Rosa and she then had two more children, giving me another brother and sister.<sup>10</sup>

My brother, who produced vodka at his home, did not live long. Peasants who wanted vodka came into his home and tied up his wife and children. A woman who heard their screams arrived and the peasants ran away but my brother died soon after that. His wife and children later went on to live in Palestine.

My mother had an aunt in Kishinev who sent a cable to say that she was marrying off an orphan, as she herself was childless, and she invited my mother to come. Mother said she would not go and leave her children behind, and so I asked her to send me.

‘The train will take you somewhere else,’ she replied, ‘and I will have to go and look for you.’

‘I have a mouth,’ I said, ‘I can enquire at every station.’

‘Do you have any money?’

‘I’ll find the money,’ I told her, and I sent a cable to the aunt in Kishinev who sent me 50 roubles. So I told my dear mother that I had received the money and would go soon. Then I took leave of my sister in Vishneviets, a very nice and *frum*<sup>11</sup> woman. After four days with her I went back to my mother’s house for *Shabat* and left for Kishinev on the Sunday.

I planned not to return from Kishinev. I wanted to leave behind all the *tsores*. It was not bad in my mother’s home, we had a nice house but I knew that I would have to study for something and I have been sorry until today that I did not study further.

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<sup>10</sup> According to the third copy of the letter, Feiga’s mother gave birth three months after Feiga’s father died.

<sup>11</sup> devout

I went from Verba to Dubno and from there to Zhdolbunof and Radziel from where I sent a telegram to my mother and another to my aunt and uncle asking them to meet me at the station. A porter took me to the carriage and said I would reach Kishinev in the morning. When I arrived there I saw a man and woman looking into the carriages and realized that they were my Aunt Zlata and Uncle Shlomo.

When they came nearer I said, 'Are you my aunt and uncle?'

The uncle replied, 'Are you the Polish girl?'

'Yes, I am,' I said. 'You guessed right, this is I.'

So we were all very happy and went to their home.

They lived like very rich people. Their hobby was to marry off poor girls. They took me on a tour of the city and they took me to the theatre and the cinema and they bought me a present. My aunt took me shopping for clothes and you can imagine how I felt when she said: 'You are ours, I will leave everything to you in my will.'

After the grand wedding of the orphan they were marrying off, my uncle engaged me as a cashier. My aunt said I should learn to speak Ukrainian so that I could converse with the customers and a young woman came to teach me and I progressed very well. I would not go anywhere without my aunt and I did whatever they told me. I was very happy and they were happy with me.

My teacher used to come in the daytime to give me lessons so I was surprised when she arrived one evening. She told me in confidence that the Cossacks (or Russian peasants) were going to organize a *pogrom* and she advised me to go home. I told my aunt to go to her sister in Balta until the trouble was over but she wanted to be clever.

'I have worked hard for my possessions,' she said, 'and I don't want to give them to the Cossacks.'

'Let's call your neighbour,' I pleaded, 'and ask his advice because many Jews have already left for Balta.'

So the neighbour, who was also a very rich person, said: 'Your aunt does not want to go and we should not force

her. Come with us, and we'll go even further than Balta. I already have two children, let me think I have three.'

I thanked him very much and replied: 'I'll go home to my mother because I'm afraid that she will be worried.'

My aunt said that she would not let me go, so I said: 'Dear aunt, come to us in Verba for four weeks. See how many people are leaving. But if you do not want to go, I must go.'

I decided to go home and the neighbours went to Balta for four weeks. If I had been clever I would have followed the neighbours and would have gone to high school with their son and then married their son and my life would have been wonderful. I would never have gone back to that forsaken place, Verba.

When the time came for the *pogrom* they strangled my uncle and stole everything. My aunt remained with her troubles and I suppose it is all from God.

Later I received letters from my friend's father in Kishinev and also from his son. They wanted to send me money so that I could go there but my mother would not allow it. I had come home and she was very pleased with me.

'I told you not to go,' she said, 'and one should listen to a mother.'

'I will listen to you the second time,' I replied.

'My child, you have become so clever suddenly.'

'Mother, when was I a fool? I was always clever and in a big city one becomes clever because one mixes with clever people.'

I did not even want to see the village of Verba, but one cannot take only the good things. It comes from God.

Time passed and my friend from Kishinev came to visit us. He was very educated and he wanted to take me to the big city with him. I was hoping to go there because I very much wanted to study nursing. But my mother would not allow it and after two weeks my friend went home. I could do nothing with my mother and I felt that she had robbed me of my life. Nowadays one does not consult a mother, a mother is

not such an important person anymore. Children do what they want to.

Time passed and then my mother said she had written to my sister in Vishneviets asking her to find a good looking, educated man as a match for me.

‘If that’s what you want I’ll go back to Kishinev to my friend,’ I said, ‘and they are very rich people.’

My mother said, ‘NO.’

Then my sister came on a visit and I told her what had happened.

‘Why do you have to go to Kishinev?’ she asked. ‘There is a very nice young man in Vishneviets. He is educated and he is decent. If you want him he can come to you.’

‘No, not to me,’ I said. ‘I will accompany you when you return home and you can invite him to visit you. Then, if I do not like him, nobody will know.’ I said this because I agreed with Hershele Ostropoler who believed that if one has an opportunity one should use it, and also because my mother liked to marry her daughters off when they were still very young. So I went to my sister and she invited the young man who greeted me very warmly. Then he went away and I went home. He asked my sister if I could write and, if so, if I would write to him, and I said, ‘not so soon,’ because I did not want to get too fond of him. I still preferred the one from Kishinev.

However he came to visit us. He was from a very rich family and he brought his uncle with him because he was afraid he would be cheated without his uncle. He was very attractive and well educated and he became attached to me like glue, but my heart did not permit me to love him.

My mother kept on asking me: ‘Do you like him?’

‘I prefer the one from Kishinev,’ I said. ‘He is from a big city and this one is from a *shtetl*.’

I forgot about him and worked very hard for the business, and went to collect money in the village, nothing was too much for me. Then I received a letter from my sister saying that the young man wanted to visit us again, this time accompanied by my sister as well as his uncle. But the *Mazel*

was far from me. This is something one cannot take for oneself, one has to ask God for it, only He has the key for the *Mazel*.

My sister was now also very keen on the match. They were nice, religious people, the young man was very well educated and we understood each other. There was a match.

My dear children, I was not yet seventeen and your father was twenty years old, and he died at 42. When we became engaged I had a pain in my heart. He spent two weeks with us and all the people envied me because he was a very nice lad. He bought me a gold chain and he admired me but I felt nothing. I knew that everything had gone and I did not want to speak to my mother.

My mother gave him a thousand roubles as a dowry, and a gold watch and the wedding was arranged for the Saturday after *Shavout*<sup>12</sup>, after the winter. I wrote to him sometimes in Yiddish and sometimes in Russian and he liked my letters. When the time came, he came to us and we had the *chupa*. Like me he had no father, only two sisters and a mother, and my mother organized a very good wedding, even though there was no father.

We were not short of troubles but when there are troubles one gets used to them. I was lucky that your father was a knowledgeable man, dear children, and after the wedding he did not want me to struggle in a shop. He wanted to be a businessman and I agreed on condition that he would earn well because a man must provide for his wife, and I helped him.

As happens with the Jews we had children quickly. After a few years my father's sister died and their house was transferred to my name because they loved me very much and they had no children. So we had a home of our own, and your father treated me very well. When we sat down to meals the atmosphere was wonderful and I was very happy. The main

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<sup>12</sup> major Jewish festival 50 days after the second day of Passover

thing was that he was educated, and I never needed money, except after *Havdala*.<sup>13</sup>

He became a civic leader in the little town and we had a nice office in my home with a picture of the Tsar hanging there. He used to issue travel documents and things like that and once a year people used to come from the ministry to check the books and see if everything was correct. If they were satisfied he was given a train ticket and a holiday, wherever he wanted to go to.

Some years passed and a few more children came. People have smaller families these days but your mother had 12 children. Your father sent two of them to America before he died and left me with children who are now spread all over this world.

Then war broke out. They were training soldiers in the forest near our *shtetl*. There were many soldiers and officers and much shooting. It was very unpleasant because the soldiers would loot. They wanted money and food and, if we did not have any, they took our cows and the harvest from the fields. Later we organized food in our kitchen and soldiers who passed through stopped to eat at our place.

They wanted to enlist your father and he said to me: 'Who knows if I will survive, I can't go.' So he advised the soldiers to go on to Dubno and return later and they took this advice because he had an office with a picture of the Tsar on the wall and they held him in high esteem. They left, and your father remained.

Later the fighting grew worse. They started shooting from both sides of the *shtetl*, Germans on the one side and Russians on the other, and we were caught in the middle. Most of the Jews fled but we could not leave because the Cossacks wanted our horses and they worried us until we felt like the wicked in the next world.

A Jewish soldier said to us: 'Run away, they will burn you.'

'Where to?' we asked.

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<sup>13</sup> ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath or a Jewish holiday

‘Anywhere, wherever you can go.’

So we kissed the *Mezuza* and left. We went from one shtetl to another, with each child carrying a bundle and walking all the way because there were no horses. We could not go by train in the war, and they had burned down the station. It was dark and I was pregnant and I felt terrible and, dear children, it started raining. We reached Dubno where we rested for a few days and then went on, with the police behind us.

Life was very bitter. We reached Ostro where your father took ill. Fortunately a Jewish blacksmith approached us and took us into his home and we stayed there for four weeks. They were very good people. Then God helped us, we heard that the Germans were retreating, and we decided to go back to our home because I was in the ninth month.

Our new friends in Ostro did not want me to go. They said I should give birth to my baby in their home. They offered me a special room and said they would provide a midwife and give me everything of the best. But I thought we might be able to get back to our own home, so I risked my life and we started off.

On the way we met a soldier with a wagon, so I gave him three roubles and he took us to Varkovitz. In this town a woman gave us a room that had not been swept in at least ten years, but I told your father that I would clean it up. Luckily we were there for only four days. Soldiers told us to leave and go to Aziran because there would soon be shooting and, as we left, the shooting started. The children were crying, and I cried with them.

A wagon came by and the owner was a Jew. I begged him to take us to Dubno, which he did, and I thanked him but he would not take any money. We were not short of troubles but I felt better when I saw Dubno where we stayed for two days before going on to Verba. A Gentile took us part of the way but your father took ill again and we carried on like real Gypsies. Everyone suffered. It was war.

We reached Verba, home at last. We spent that night with another family because we were afraid to go to our own



home. When we went there the next day we found a hole dug in the middle of the room, and nothing else. The home was cleaned out like before *Pesach*. The Germans had looted everything and sent it away to their families in Germany.

I felt bad and I was due any day. There was no midwife in the *shtetl* so your father, dear children, went to the village and brought back a Gentile woman who had worked for me years before and had taken my children for walks in the forest. When she arrived I gave birth to a daughter,<sup>14</sup> a war baby. My new daughter was called after my mother's mother but we could not name her in the *Shul*. You can imagine, my children, how bad it was, with not a drop of milk. But the old woman, Ditoska, had brought a loaf of bread and some potatoes and we boiled water for tea.

We stayed at home for a while but then soldiers and officers arrived and things were bad again. We were chased out of our *shtetl* to the village of Nosivits, four versts (about 4 km) away, with such a tiny baby.<sup>15</sup> You can imagine how bitter I was. We did not even see Gentiles on the way and the soldiers told us to carry on to Stopets where we stayed with Gentiles for six days. Then they left and we went to the village of Komerivke with the police on our trail again.<sup>16</sup> We walked all the way and it was raining, it was a terrible ordeal.

The children were wet right through and my heart broke for them, and of course we had the baby with us. Not even many Gentiles were there any more but we did come across some old peasants in the village and we started meeting soldiers again. It was bitter. The children wanted to eat but we could not stop because the soldiers wouldn't allow it and we couldn't find a wagon, so we carried on. You can imagine the wonderful 'tour' we had.

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<sup>14</sup> Yente; also known as Yentele

<sup>15</sup> Verba lay on the Eastern Front during WWI. The Russian Army evicted Jews from the frontlines in the belief Jews would act as spies for the Germans given the similarity between Yiddish and German.

<sup>16</sup> possibly Cossacks hired by the Russian army

We passed through Danishkevits where we stayed in the home of a wonderful peasant family. We rested a bit there and they roasted potatoes for us and gave us tea in the morning before we carried on to Teruea. From there it was very far to Terye and a soldier took us on his wagon. We spent *Shabat* at the home of a peasant in Terye and on Sunday, although we barely had the strength to live, we went on like Gypsies through the village of Sapiniets and reached the city of Kremenets. We had passed through about twenty villages and had suffered a lot with the children. It is difficult to describe.

Conditions in Kremenets were good so we stopped in the centre of the city where a butcher approached us and I told him our troubles. He kindly directed us to his house and we went there. The children were tired and wet so we dried them and fed them and put them to bed. Then I cried and cried.

I cursed the day I was born, and from travelling like that your father had taken ill from sorrow. We spent a long time at the butcher's home, they were very nice, religious Jews.

One morning, while we were having breakfast, we heard shooting and the windows were broken. Kremenets is a city of hills and they fired over the hills, as if I hadn't had enough, and a shell landed in the garden. It destroyed the whole garden and left a deep hole. The house was full of old people and if the shell had gone any further they would have been killed. Thank God everyone was still alive. This was 'real life' and we went back into the house in case it happened again. After all, it was a war.

I discovered that there was a Jewish militia in Kremenets and I went to them and told them all that had happened to us. I asked them if they could find a room for us because your father was ailing and could not manage to do anything. That was my life. Later that day they said they had found a place with two rooms and a kitchen for 16 roubles a month. So I went and paid the 16 roubles for the month and we moved into our new abode. Your father's health failed

again and I was very distressed at seeing him lying there so ill in that lovely little room.

When the month was up the landlord arrived on a Friday and I thought he had come to collect the 16 roubles for the next month.

But he said: 'I can get 30 roubles. You must move on Sunday.'

He was holding a stone in his hand and he shouted: 'If you don't move out I'll hit your husband with this stone.'

I stood there and thought the man was mad. What kind of person speaks like that?

But he repeated the threat: 'On Sunday you must not be here.'

'Maybe you will not live until Sunday, Mr. Spiegel.' I replied, 'I am not afraid of you and your stone and you will come to remember me. My husband is afraid, not me. I will take the stone to the police and go to see the President of the city and ask whether you are allowed to evict people in this manner during the war.'

Next morning your father felt better and went to the synagogue.

I said to him: 'What would we have done if that man had killed you with the stone? I will not keep quiet about it.'

The landlord and landlady went into hiding but their two daughters remained at the house. I went off to see the President. It was a long way but I was determined and I arrived at his castle where there was a guard standing outside.

'You are not allowed in here,' he said.

'Last night someone was going to kill my husband,' I told him, 'if you won't let me in I will go home and telephone the President direct.'

'Wait here,' said the guard, 'I will ask him. Maybe he will come out.'

After five minutes the President came out in his shirtsleeves and told the guard to let me in. I told him in Russian what happened and he said: 'All right, all right, I will come with you now.'

We took his carriage and we went right through town where all the Jews stood and looked at how the President was travelling with a Jewish woman. He was not a very good man, but he was good to me. One has to know how to speak to important people.

I had told him that my husband was a leader, that he had been a Mayor<sup>17</sup> for eight years under Tsar Nicolas and that a picture of the Tsar had been on the wall in our office. I also told him that our landlady locked all the doors and refused to let my children use the toilet.

‘We will teach them a lesson,’ he said.

He came with me right up to the entrance to the yard, then he whistled and police arrived. All the people who lived on that street came to see what was happening. The landlords were not liked and the people were happy that I had been brave enough to report them.

The President said to the daughter; ‘Where are your mother and father?’

Then I said: ‘Mr. President, they are hiding from you.’

He ordered the police to break down the doors that were locked and I invited him to look at my room which the daughter had told him was dirty. The room was clean and the President told the daughter that he could see from my appearance that my room would be clean.

‘Your father will have to pay a large fine,’ he told her, ‘and when you have to run from Kremenets will you please take your house with you on your shoulders. Your father wanted to kill a civil servant who has worked for the Tsar for eight years. He will sit in jail for this.’

The President was there for an hour. He wrote down everything I told him and sent a letter to the government in Warsaw. He instructed the police to guard us at night and said that the two rooms and the furniture remained with us. I thanked him very much and I thanked the police and gave them some vodka.

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<sup>17</sup> As a Jew, Kalman could not have been mayor of Verba. He was a civil servant.

Mr. Spiegel sat in jail for three months. He should have been there much longer but he managed to buy himself out for a lot of money.

We stayed for a few months, then many soldiers and officers arrived and they liked our rooms so they said we should leave and go to Shomsk. So we travelled like Gypsies again from *shtetl* to *shtetl*, from village to village, from town to town and we travelled after dark because it was wartime.

We arrived at Shomsk late at night, there was mud and rain and the children were crying and I cried with them. I cursed the years I still had to live, I could not stand it and I did not want to live anymore. We stood in the middle of the *shtetl* in flooded streets, wondering what to do when a man presented himself as Itche Meier. I asked him to take pity on the children who had suffered so much and he said he could give us a room. We stayed at his house for two weeks and our families came to like each other very much.

We then found a suite of two rooms and a kitchen, with a separate entrance, in a Polish woman's house. We moved in with nothing, no beds, no table, nothing, and we slept on the floor. Still, it was wartime and the children were safe and your father was feeling better and I was grateful for those things. But I just couldn't stop crying.

Your father met the rich man of the *shtetl* and told him that I wouldn't stop crying and the man, his name was Mr. Kofke, said that he and his wife would visit us. They came in the evening and I said to them: 'Dear visitors, I would ask you to sit but I have no benches.' Then I started crying.

'If you promise not to cry I will send you all the furniture you need tomorrow,' said Mr. Kofke, 'but you must not cry.'

They spent about an hour with us and, the next day, the furniture arrived. There was a table with stools, two beds, a sideboard, crockery and everything one needs, all on condition that I did not cry. I thanked them very much and our families began to visit each other and your father did business with them.

We lived like all the Shomsk Jews and I was happy. A year passed and then your father took ill again. He lay ill for some months and you can imagine how I felt. Doctors saw him often and God helped him and he recovered. I thought all was well, but then my dear child, I received a letter from my mother to say that your father must come to Verba immediately, it was a matter of life and death.

Some Jews from Verba had bought two wagonloads of sugar from an officer and had taken them to Shomsk at night. A soldier had seen them, and he had been given a bag of sugar to keep him quiet, but he still reported them and then Jews were arrested. I knew from your father's books that people could be shot for doing that in wartime. You can imagine the *tsores*, with your father lying ill and me not knowing what to do.

'I will go to Verba and see what is happening there,' I said to your father, 'and if it is very bad I will send a telegram for you to come.' Then I sent a telegram to your father's mother, for her to come immediately so that your father would not be left alone with the children. It was bad to leave him and I left with bitterness in my heart, but I had to go.

In Verba it was terrible. My mother was crying because both her brothers had been arrested and the women were saying that it was a big sacrifice for the Jews to have their men in jail, and there would be an outcry in the heavens. What can one do, dear children.

'I will do better for you than my husband could have done,' I told them. 'Give me a thousand roubles and I will go and see the Prosecutor in Dubno, and God will have to help me.' So I took the money and we left for Dubno at five on the following morning.

It was very difficult to reach the Prosecutor who had the right to shoot me. I could speak Russian very well and went into the first office where they stopped me. I was not afraid of them and gave the person at each desk five roubles so that I could go further, and God helped me. I came to the door where there was a waiter and he would not let me pass. But I had to have my way and I gave him a gold ten-rouble piece.

‘If I write a letter to the Prosecutor will you knock on the door and give it to him?’ I asked. ‘I will write it immediately and pour my heart out to him.’ The waiter said he would, so I gave him the letter and he took it in to the Prosecutor. I was then asked to come into the office where I felt faint and the Prosecutor’s secretary gave me some water to drink.

‘Why are you so frightened?’ asked the Prosecutor.

‘Mr. Prosecutor, you will shoot me.’

‘After such a letter how can I shoot you? Your letter is very dear to me.’

I thanked him and began to feel more confident. Then I greeted him officially by handing him the money. He went into another room, obviously to count it, and came back looking sad. I got the shivers.

‘Why are you so sad, Mr. Prosecutor?’ I asked him. ‘I can tell you a nice story from a novel I have just read.’ So we sat down and I told him the contents of the novel. He seemed happier, and did not return the money to me.

Then I asked him: ‘Perhaps you would like a letter from Peter Swetnikoff ? He is a very rich man who used to buy from my mother’s business. When I was a young girl he would come and tease me by taking off his monocle and putting it over my eye. He managed to get my brothers out of the army.’

‘I know him well,’ said the Prosecutor, ‘and now please tell me, what is your request?’

We went into another room and I told him the horrible story about the ten Jews who had bought the two wagonloads of sugar from the officer and had been arrested.

‘Please Mr. Prosecutor, save their lives.’

‘All right, all right,’ he said, ‘I can see that you are a good person. I never knew until now that a Jewish woman could write such a wonderful letter in Russian. How did you know I was a good man?’

‘Because you allowed me to speak to you.’

Then he picked up a book and read, and laughed out loud. It is the money laughing, I thought. He had kept me a

long time and I was worried about the women of the arrested men who were out in the street waiting for a verdict. What could I do when I was in his hands? Still, one has to know how to speak to such a personality.

‘Mr. Prosecutor, is there anything else you want to tell me?’

‘No.’

I wondered whether to ask him again, bearing in mind, my dear children, that he had the right to shoot me.

Then he said: ‘Your writing and your speaking will do you good. I will come to your house tomorrow morning. Put a bag of sugar in your house where I can see it. I will then ask you what you are doing with that sugar and you will answer that it was left there by soldiers who were passing through and said they would collect it on their return.’

I thanked him and asked him to give me a letter in the meantime which would allow the arrested men to be released. I was afraid they might be sent to Rovno that same night and be executed immediately. In wartime they do that. So he gave me a letter which released the men from prison.

Then I said: ‘Mr. Prosecutor, I have another request.’ Nothing is enough for us Jews.

‘If it is possible I will do it for you, write to me about it.’

I did, I wrote to him about a terrible officer who treated Jews very badly and the man was later transferred to Rovno.

Then he said; ‘I do not normally travel in wartime but to you I will travel.’ I thought, this is God’s wonder.

‘Are you still afraid that I will shoot you?’

‘I have to try for our Jewish nation,’ I replied very diplomatically.

I took my leave of him and he kissed my hand.

‘I am coming to see you tomorrow, Madam,’ he said.

I asked him if his secretary could give me some more water to drink. I did this so that I could thank her, and I also gave her five roubles.



The meeting with him was such an experience that I cannot, dear children, describe it well enough. You can imagine what your mother went through while completing her mission during wartime when we were all in danger of being shot.

I came out of the building to find the wives of the condemned men crying and waiting anxiously for news. I forgot that I had left your ill father and the children on their own. All I could think about was the ten families I had saved.

‘It is *Simchat Torah*,’ I shouted. ‘Dance all the way home, you will have your husbands.’ I gave them the formal letter from the Prosecutor.

‘Deliver it quickly,’ I said, ‘and your husbands will be released. They will be free.’

On the way home I bought a bottle of wine and some other delicacies and the next day I stood at the window waiting for my visitor to arrive. When I saw him I opened the door quickly and he came in carrying a big cross and a book. He kissed my hand again.

‘Madam Shamis, I keep my promises. I said I would come and I did.’

I thanked him, knowing that he did not travel anywhere in wartime. He looked around.

‘What is that bag of sugar doing there?’ he asked, pointing.

‘Mr. Prosecutor, some soldiers who were passing through put it there and said they would come and take it away when they return. I have not seen them since.’

‘Good, good,’ he said and wrote something down in his notebook. He had two hours to spare before his train left for Dubno so I invited him to sit down and have something to eat. My two brothers and my brother-in-law were present and my sister-in-law arrived with a roast chicken and a bottle of Vishniak.<sup>18</sup>

The Prosecutor asked me to come and visit him.

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<sup>18</sup> homemade sour cherry brandy

‘Mr. Prosecutor I have a sick husband at home. When he is well again we will certainly come and visit you,’ I said.

Then he told my sister-in-law about the letter I had written him and how he would not even have let me into his office had it not been for that letter.

Turning to me, he asked yet again: ‘Are you not still afraid that I will shoot you?’

‘When I travelled to see you I was very nervous,’ I said, ‘but not anymore.’

I have managed to do such a *Mitzva* through him, I thought, that I am not afraid of him now. Let him be afraid of me. He asked me to accompany him to the station and on the way I told him that my husband had been in charge of passports for eight years, in the service of Tsar Nicolas, and that a picture of the Tsar had been on the wall in our office. He was very impressed.

‘I recognized right away that you were a very important woman,’ he said.

I thanked him and we chatted and we became good friends. Then I pointed out to him that there was a railway truck full of sugar standing at the station.

‘Go and buy it,’ he said. ‘Nothing will happen to you. Your wonderful letter will not allow anybody to do you harm. I will keep your letter all my life, and I will show it to my friend Mr. Swetnikoff who used to do business at your mother’s shop.’ He bade me farewell and kissed my hand as his train left.

I went and bought the truckload of sugar and sent it to your father in Shomsk. Some Jews complained about this and the police went to see the Rabbi. But I gave each policeman a bag of sugar.

I wish I had a truckload of sugar now, dear children. I would then have the opportunity to visit you and come back to Israel. In our *shtetl* they wanted to give me 500 roubles but I would not accept it. I did not want to sell the *Mitzva*. I said goodbye to the people and went home to your father and my children, thank God for that. I told your father about

everything that had happened to me since I left home. He was very impressed.

The following day I went to Vishneviets and sold the sugar to a winery at a profit but it gave me no pleasure because your father was lying ill again and I could think of nothing else. He remained ill in bed for another four months. There were trains going to Kiev with soldiers and I decided to take your father to hospital there. It was a very difficult journey.

We arrived at Kiev at 3 o'clock on a Monday and at 10 o'clock on the Thursday night your father died.<sup>19</sup> I was at his bedside. He held my hand and talked to me, and until the last moment of his life he was concerned about how I would manage on my own with the children.

He said: 'My advice to you, dear Mama, is that you should not die.'

I cried.

'They are calling me and I must go,' he continued, 'and you know that. Firstly you must teach the children. They must be educated so that they will always be able to make a living. And they must not trouble you.'

'Dear Kalman,' I said, 'after you die I will look after the children and I will not attend celebrations and I will not get married again because you have treated me very well. For ten years I will honour your wishes, dear Kalman.'

I continued to talk to him but he could not answer me. He took my hand and kissed me softly so that the children and I would stay well. Then he fell asleep. So died a Russian civil servant and my pain was very deep. The war had done this to him. Ever since the Cossacks had first driven us from our home I knew he would not survive the war. And so it turned out to be.

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<sup>19</sup> The admission form shown on page 12 indicates that Kalman died of typhus. A typhus epidemic swept from Serbia through Russia and surrounding countries from 1918-1922 resulting in as many as 3,000,000 deaths.

Imagine, dear children, the sun had risen by the time I left the hospital but I could not see anything in front of me. All I could see was your father as I left him.

In Kiev they do not remove a body from the hospital without a death certificate. I went to the *Gabbe*,<sup>20</sup> Mr. Maisel, and I went to many places before I found the department that issues death certificates. And when I took the certificate to the hospital they sent me back to get another certificate and your father's passport. I walked ten blocks and my feet were very painful. When they gave me the two certificates I put them in my pocket and forgot they were there.

It was already late on Friday and the hearse had not yet arrived, so I went out into the street and started to scream and cry. A Jew who was passing by asked me what the matter was.

'My husband died at ten o'clock last night and the hearse has not yet come,' I stammered.

'If we phone them they will come quickly,' he said.

We went into a shop and he phoned them and five minutes later the hearse arrived. I asked him to come with me into the hospital until the body had been taken away. But they would not release the body without the certificates and I had forgotten where I put them. Fortunately the Jew was there. He signed an undertaking to produce the certificates on the Sunday and they allowed the body to be taken away in the hearse.

On Sunday I found the certificates in my pocket. The Jew arrived and together we went to the cemetery to present the certificates. We could not find your father's body there. Then they told us they had organized a funeral on the Saturday night. Can you imagine what I felt, dear children?

'How could you organize the funeral of my husband without me?' I screamed at them. I did not mince my words and I wanted to tear up the burial place. But nothing could be done, it was too late.

The Jew took me back to the hospital where he asked the nurses to give me food and look after me. He even said

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<sup>20</sup> Rabbi's assistant

that if I wanted to rest for a few weeks I could stay at his house and he gave me his address.

I thanked him. There are good people in the world. If it had not been for him they may have cremated your father after he died, or kept his bones for study and research. In Kiev there were many friends from our *shtetl* who had moved there before the war. I told them that I wanted to jump into the river. How could I go back to my eight children<sup>21</sup> without their father? And such a father, I did not want to live without him. My friends would not let me travel and they looked after me for eight days. I began to realize that it would be bad enough for my children to be fatherless and it would only make things worse for them to be without a mother as well. So I did not throw myself into the river.

Now, dear children, I had to go home from Kiev by train. When I got on to the train some soldiers said Jews were not allowed and wanted to chase me out of the carriage. I would have been squashed between two trains.

A Russian soldier said to me, 'Mama, I have not eaten for two days. Give me 50 kopeks and I will look after you. If the soldiers push you out you may be killed.' I gave him a whole rouble. He helped me off the train and took me to another one with instructions on where to change trains for Kremenets. From there I went by wagon to my home and my children at Shomsk. I had bought the *Mitzva* from the Russian soldier for a rouble, and he had saved my life.

When I returned, my children, you both had measles and scarlet fever and then you both caught colds and you got bronchitis. Can you imagine that, after all the 'real life' I had been having. I cursed the minute I was born. I cried with blood, not tears. I wanted to take poison but when I looked at my orphans my heart broke. Where will eight children be without a mother? I did my children no harm, I fed them and I brought them up well but they had no luck. Let them all be

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<sup>21</sup> Two children had been sent to the U.S. by this point, and in the third copy of the letter, she writes that two children died in Verba, but she does not say when or under what circumstances.

well. I asked God for the strength to carry on because I hope to see them all again during my lifetime.

I needed a doctor for my children. I was completely confused and did not know what to do. For four weeks I stayed in my room and cried. My mother-in-law was staying with me and some very nice people, refugees from Radzivil and their wives, came to visit. One of them suggested that we should be partners and open a business. I went out and bought eight pieces of linen and two hundred pairs of old trousers. We were to share the profits but it turned out that he gained the profits and I risked my life.

I went a few times and bought goods, dressed like a peasant because they did not search peasants. But carrying the goods gave me palpitations and I felt it was harmful to my health.

One day he said to me: 'When are you going again?'

'You go this time,' I replied. 'Do you think you have found a fool to work for you?'

That business ended then, but one cannot be idle and live on capital. I decided to make vodka and went looking for someone to make the sales. The children had recovered, thank God, but I still had to pay rent. I went to the *Schochet*<sup>22</sup> of the *shtetl* and told him: 'Avraham, I am going to produce vodka, and I am looking for a salesman.' He gave his approval so I started and I risked my life again. But to do nothing is worse.

I made vodka until two weeks before Passover and then I couldn't carry on any more. It is hard to make a living and I got palpitations from the vodka. I used to work right through the winter nights making it and pouring it into bottles and then I would have to wash all the barrels and put them outside. Every minute I thought someone was coming. I felt worse than the wicked in the next world and finally my conscience would not let me make it any more.

I bought two kilograms of *matzos* for the children for *Pesach*, and a lot of potatoes, but there was no wood for a fire

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<sup>22</sup> The person officially licensed by rabbinic law to slaughter animals and poultry for food in accordance with Jewish laws.

so I went with another woman to the forest to find some and we carried it a long way on our backs. Eight days before *Pesach*<sup>23</sup> some Jews came to my home and said:

'Mrs. Shamis, we hear you are making vodka, so you must give us twenty roubles per month.'

'If you find one drop of vodka in my place you can have a hundred roubles a month,' I said.

They searched and found nothing.

'You've missed the boat,' I told them, 'you should have come six months ago.'

One of the children took ill again and we needed things so I went to the *Schochet* again.

'Avraham, I want to buy empty bags and exchange them for salt or matches or sugar or whatever I can get. Will you look for buyers?'

'I am fearful about this,' he said.

'Put your fear to one side,' I told him, 'I have to go on with this.'

I went to see the biggest thief in the village, a peasant who knew how these things were done. I dressed in his wife's clothes and became a peasant again. That way it would be more difficult for people to recognize me as a Jewess and, as I have said before, peasants were not searched very often.

God helped me and I managed to buy salt and matches and sugar with the empty bags. Sometimes my goods were confiscated but I did not lose heart. I struggled like the wicked in the next world but I managed to earn what we needed and, thank God, the children were well. My troubles grew like weeds but, I thought, a bitter leaf from God is better than a sweet one from a person, and I knew that God would help me again.

On the eve of Passover we saw people wearing red hats in the streets. They were bandits, so I took all our possessions from our room and hid them, leaving the room like *Tisha B'av*<sup>24</sup> when one mourns the fall of the temple. They

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<sup>23</sup> Passover

<sup>24</sup> annual fast day

were terrible bandits who robbed and killed. We heard shots and screams. One couldn't go out into the streets, one was even afraid to go to the window. They were in the *shtetl* until after *Pesach*. We hid for the full eight days of Passover. You can imagine, dear children, the *Yomtov*<sup>25</sup> we had.

The bandits left after killing some Jews and then new bandits arrived, at the same time as Poles who were looking for Communists to kill, and we were in the middle. We overheard them saying that they should kill all the Jewish children so that the Jews would die out. Every so often a new group would arrive and they robbed and killed. They attacked the Rabbi and hurt him so badly that he died four weeks later. We were hungry because we could not go out to get food but fortunately our rooms were in the house of a Polish woman who was sometimes able to go out and bring us potatoes.

When the police arrived it was just as bad because they were completely wild. They broke the doors and shattered the windows and killed anyone they suspected of being a Communist. When I said I wanted to complain to an officer they threatened to kill me. They shot and wounded a Communist who managed to stagger to my door and ask for water. I gave him some but he died. Then the Polish bandits wanted to cut up his body right near my door.

'Can't you do that somewhere else?' I begged them. 'I am frightened and my children are frightened.'

They moved off saying, 'The dogs should eat this Communist's body.'

After this group left things became quieter and we could go out and buy food. But there was starvation in the area, there was no bread and people were frightened of each other. Then there was shooting in the forest again and many peasants came into our *shtetl* from the village. The peasants said they would not allow the Poles to come in.

Two peasants came to the house and asked if they could sleep there. They looked like decent lads from a nice home so I gave them the children's room. I told them how I

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<sup>25</sup> happy holiday



had suffered since my husband died and they said they had never harmed any Jews. Then my landlady arrived and said there were two bandits staying at her house who had that very day killed four Jews in our *shtetl*. You can imagine how I felt. When I told the peasant lads about it one of them said that I should leave the lamp in our room burning through the night and he would stay awake. If I needed help I should call him.

I hid the children under a large round table and covered them with a sheet. I did not sleep. I guarded the children as they lay there like chicks. At about 2 o'clock there was a knock on the outside door. First I went to see if the lad was awake, and he was. So, without being nervous, I opened the door. My heart nearly stopped as a bandit burst into the room and went straight for the children.

I grabbed him by his throat and shouted at him: 'How can you come here at night to kill my children?'

Then the lad came into the room and slapped the bandit so hard that he nearly lost his face.

'You are going to kill people at night, are you?' the lad screamed at him. Then he threw the bandit out through the door like a dog. If it had not been for the lad we would have been slaughtered. God had looked after us.

One day there were some shots in the forest and some bandits arrived with an officer who boasted that on the previous day they had killed forty Jews. But we have a good God. Members of the militia followed the officer and a companion to see where they went and what they were doing. They stopped near a Jew so the militia surrounded them. They tried to run away but they were caught. The officer refused to answer questions but his companion said they went around looting and had killed many Jews. The officer was shot dead on the spot and his companion took the militia to where they had hidden the silver and money they had looted. Everything was recovered.

Thank God the Jews in the *shtetl* stayed alive. But they had a bad time. The Bolsheviks came and there was shooting again. One of them came into the house and said; 'You will see how I shoot and kill Jews.' I thought, if he is going to kill

me what should I do? I took one of my children in my arms and sat near the window. He fired a shot through the window to frighten me and the panes were shattered and I fainted from fright and fell over still holding the child. Fortunately my landlady heard the shot and brought the doctor immediately. I think the child and I would have fallen asleep for good if he had not come.

One Sunday a Bolshevik came to the house dressed as an officer. He looked a bad man and I thought I recognized him as the same person who had frightened me by shooting through the window.

'I will bring you a gift that will keep you awake all night,' he said.

'No,' I cried, 'I have young children.'

'And I will kill all the Jews in the *shtetl*,' he added.

It was terrible to hear such words from a bandit. I was speechless and I could not move, then I got the shivers.

He left and towards evening he returned with his 'gift,' a soldier who had been wounded in the head and had gone mad. He put the madman in my bed. Every now and then, right through the night, the man would wake up and shout: 'Where is my money, where is my horse?' Then he would fall asleep again. I stayed up the whole night trying to console the children who were beside themselves.

In the morning I went to the authorities and asked them to take the man away. I said the children were very nervous and our lives were in danger. They said they would take him away on the following day and again that night I did not sleep. But God helped me, they did come and they took him away. He was a Jew from Odessa and they sent him back there, as a gift to his mother.

There had been shooting for ten days and much of the *shtetl* had been destroyed. Most of the people who survived were ill. It was terrible. We sighed with relief when that group left. Then, on a Sunday, new people arrived wearing long grey coats with red stripes and white hats with red bands. One of them approached one of your brothers who was 16 years old.

'Go and tell your Polish landlord I want to speak to him,' he commanded your brother.

When the landlord arrived the man said: 'I want a horse.'

'He does not have a horse,' said your brother.

'If you open your mouth again I'll shoot you,' said the man.

The landlord pleaded with him not to touch your brother who then ran upstairs and hid under the roof. The man followed him and searched for him but could not find him. Can you imagine, dear children, what I went through? I had no way to protect my child because I had to hide in the wardrobe.

Towards evening I went upstairs and found him. He was ill with shock. We called the doctor but he died the following day, a Saturday, at 11 o'clock. He was a lovely lad.<sup>26</sup> The funeral took place on Monday night at 10 o'clock. You can imagine, dear children, how sad it was when such a wonderful person was taken from my family. I had lost two men, my husband and my son. What could I do?

In order to tell you everything that happened at that time I would have to write for a year. There were many murders and people were being assaulted. We were afraid even to go to the window. The bandits tortured me and there was nowhere to run. Then the bandits were shot at by the Bolsheviks and finally the Red Army came. They handed out leaflets saying they would not harm anybody and they gave the Jews food and cigarettes. They also looted but they did not hurt anybody.

One of the officers came to my house and asked me if he could have a room for two weeks. I could see he was decent, and I didn't want to be evicted, so I gave him the children's room. He returned late that night and I made him tea.

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<sup>26</sup> In the third copy of the letter, Feiga identifies the boy as Hichel. She describes him as "handsome as gold," and while she is vague here about what happened to him, in the third copy of the letter, she writes, "Hichel was killed by the bandits in Shomsk."

'I am sorry, dear sir, that I have no sugar,' I said.

'I know many people and I will bring you sugar,' he offered.

I thanked him and added respectfully, 'I can live without sugar.'

'I will also install lights in your home for you,' he said.

I felt shivers. One must beware of people like this. He told me he was a senior officer and that he came from a very rich family in Moscow. There were two children, he and a sister, and his family owned forests and four houses.

'We have plenty of money but everything is very expensive,' he said.

'If there is plenty of money nothing is expensive,' I suggested.

'Where are you from?' he asked.

'I come from a small *shtetl* called Verba near Dubno.'

He went on asking questions.

'When you know everything you will grow old very soon,' I said. I doubted whether he was telling the truth. People like this are a long way from home and sometimes their minds wander.

'If your father is so wealthy, with only two children and so many houses,' I asked him, 'why are you in this place following the bandits?'

'For talking like that I can shoot you.'

I was not afraid of him, one must be strong and not give in.

'When you are at home do you also threaten to shoot people,' I said, 'or do you go to church with your father?'

'I could shoot you, and your children, but I won't because I like you.'

My neighbour had come in with his two daughters and we talked, sometimes seriously and sometimes laughingly, until three in the morning.

'Give me your money,' I said, 'and I will show you that I can lead the army better than you.'

'I see you are very clever,' he answered, 'For that I will take you and your children to Moscow where you can stay with us and have plenty of money.'

'I don't want to go to Moscow, I don't want money, my children are my wealth.'

'But as a mother on her own with children you struggle. I can see your life is hard. I am begging you to come to Moscow with me, Mrs. Shamis.'

'First you want to shoot me, then you want me to come with you. When I leave this place it will not be with you. The God who has helped me until now will help us further.'

'Where is your God, in heaven?' he asked. 'I have no God and I am rich on earth.'

'I have children so I am richer than you. You run around from place to place and you have nothing. God will improve my lot, not you.'

'Then I have no choice but to shoot you.' He drew an empty gun and made as if to shoot at the door.

'You are being unkind,' he continued, 'when I first saw you I noticed that you are a very pretty woman with a good figure and lovely dark eyes.' He went on telling me about my virtues and added that he had never done any harm to Jews.

'Thank you for that,' I said, 'but I have suffered very much and have had to hide my children from the bandits.'

'You need not suffer any more. Now you can have it very good, if you come with me.'

'If you arrive home with me and my children your father will chase us away. Go home to your big city where you can find a nice girl. I am old and I have many children.'

'You are younger than me,' he said.

'No, you are an important man and you have a rich father, you can easily find a beautiful girl in Moscow. You can help me and my family if you want to but you must get married to someone in Moscow. You can invite us to the wedding.'

'You make trouble for me,' he said, 'I lie awake at night thinking about your lovely dark eyes, and I become delirious and I clamp my teeth.'

My neighbour interrupted: 'Why do you pester Mrs. Shamis like this?'

'Because I am as lonely as a dog. If she will come with me I will do whatever she asks, throw away all my possessions if she wants me to. I will listen to her.'

'If you listen to me,' I said, 'you will look at my neighbour's two lovely daughters and ask one of them to come with you.'

He laughed, 'I only want you.'

'My husband was a Commissar under Tsar Nicholas for eight years,' I said, 'and we had a picture of the Tsar on the wall. I have no need to become a Russian *grande dame*, but I will come with the children to visit you in Moscow.' Then we all went to bed.

Early next morning he wanted tea, and he said: 'Mrs. Shamis I had a dream last night. In that dream I gave you a big box of money and you came with me to Moscow.'

'No I didn't. And I don't want your money. I have said before that my children are my riches.'

When he left our home he gave me his address and asked me to write to him. 'If you don't write' he said, 'I will not come and shoot you - I will shoot myself.'

It was a stick from God that such a man had stayed with us. But we Jews hope that the stick will break one day and flow with the stream to the sea, and there will be the best Jewish life. If I had lost my pride, or my sense of humour, he would definitely have shot me. One day soon after he had left, Gentiles wearing masks arrived and robbed every home and broke the locks on the shops and threw goods into the street. They demanded money, got drunk, smashed the telephones and murdered and assaulted people. We could do nothing because there were no police. It was real anarchy and the children and I spent the whole day hiding in the cellar of our Polish landlady's house. They departed towards evening and shot at doors and windows as they left. They simply took our souls from us.

The *Pintele Yid*<sup>27</sup> is not good. One gets used to such things, one learns to live with the *tsores*.

A Chinese<sup>28</sup> group then arrived. Nobody knew where they came from. The first thing they did was to take away the wood I used for making fires in the stove and then they took my table and benches outside and chopped them up for firewood. They said if I locked the door they would smash the windows and one of them said: 'You have so many children. We will take two of them when we leave and cook them when we have nothing to eat.'

I got a terrible fright and asked my neighbour to take the children and hide them. For several days I did not know where they were. My *Mazel*<sup>29</sup> was under a black cloud, I had to be a mother and a father to my children. I did not sleep at home while the Chinese were there and before they left one of them held a knife to my throat and said, 'I will slaughter you.' Thank God I survived them.

The next people to arrive were French, about two hundred including soldiers, officers and members of a military band. They seemed very nice people and they appeared to be rich. A colonel spoke to me in English but I did not understand English so I took him to an interpreter and learned that the officers wanted my room. When I complained that the children would have nowhere to go it was agreed that they would come only for meals, four times a day. They brought many good things with them, I boiled eggs for them and baked bread for them and they liked it very much. Yente was a beautiful child and was taken by them to eat at the table.

The Colonel asked me through the interpreter who I was and where I came from. I told the interpreter to tell him

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<sup>27</sup> Jewish spark

<sup>28</sup> Feiga may be referring to Kazakh or Central Asian troops, but there were also Chinese soldiers serving in the Red Army as part of various Soviet International Regiments. Chinese soldiers were part of the Fourth Soviet International Regiment, which served in the Uman region in the summer of 1919.

<sup>29</sup> soul

my story and about the various groups of bandits, and how I had suffered with my children.

The Colonel was astounded. He said he would give me a letter of introduction to a rich Jew in France who would allow us to stay with him and would see to it that the children were educated. Then, when he returned to France himself, he would set us up in a home and I would be rich and things would be all right.

I thanked him and said I had previously received a similar offer from a Commissar in the Red Army who had also threatened to shoot me. I told him that I wanted to take my children to Warsaw and educate them there. He and the French soldiers then went to another village but they came back twice to visit and brought me flour so that I could bake for them and brought me a bag of potatoes. Then they said farewell and went back to France.

Thank God it was quiet for some time, but one must carry on. I had lost my whole world because of my children, I had lost my youth, but I was prepared to do anything for them, even break iron if I had to. So when I heard about a peasant who had secondhand soldiers' clothes I went to find him even though he lived quite far away. On the way I met two strange soldiers.

'Where are you going?' they asked.

'I'm not sure myself.'

'Are you interested in buying old clothes or new clothes?'

'I will buy anything you bring me,' I said.

I did not continue on my journey to find the peasant and took one soldier back to my house to show him where they should bring goods at night. At about 2 o'clock that night they returned with two bags of clothes. I washed all night to get the dye stamps off the clothes and in the morning went around the houses to sell them. Thank God I made a good profit.

One night they brought me a white saddle and I was really afraid. I cut it up and sold the pieces of leather to the shoemakers. I kept on buying from them and risked my life in



doing so. Before they left our *shtetl* for the last time they gave me a coat as a gift for the children. Then I went to a village far away where I found old hats and arranged with a peasant to come every two days, late at night, and bring me whatever he had. I sold them to the tradesmen who made hats and that is how I earned money.

The time came when I wanted to educate the children so we left Shomsk for Kremenets with the intention of going from there to Warsaw. In Kremenets I hired a room for two months because we were not sure when we would leave the place. We struggled there, sometimes I earned money and sometimes not, and there were always new bandits.

I had suffered enough from them in Shomsk, I had lost your father, dear children, and your brother. I kept on having palpitations and I suffered from headaches. Sometimes I felt that I couldn't take it any more. My dear child I suffered much more than I have written about, even friends did not give us a good deal. One night I slept in a little kitchen which was so cold that my headscarf froze. But I made sure my children were well, and thank God I overcame the problems.

I married off your sister Leika in Kremenets. Her husband was a clever man who came from a good family and they had a very nice house. But who knows what is happening now with that 'wicked man'?<sup>30</sup>

I had thought that I would get rid of the bandits in Kremenets but still they worried us and threw stones through the windows. They were terrible people and I was afraid that I would lose all the money I still had. So I went ahead with the plan to go to Warsaw and sent one of the children ahead to start studying.<sup>31</sup> Four of the children I would leave in Kremenets with some money and I had a letter of introduction

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<sup>30</sup> Reference to Hitler

<sup>31</sup> In the third copy of the letter, Feiga makes no mention of sending a child ahead, only that four remained in Kremenets while she went on to Warsaw to look for a job and a place to live. At this point she had only four children with her.

to an editor in Warsaw called Polotski, a Jewish Commissar who was a very rich man with a sister in Kremenets.

In the meantime shooting from the mountains around Kremenets had started again. I saw some of the bandits involved, they had long hair and big eyes and rode on small horses. They had long, warm coats and carried shotguns on their shoulders and other guns and knives at their sides. They murdered people and blood was flowing. It was terrible, I could not allow the children to go out. Then police arrived and arrested the bandits and confiscated their arms.

When things had quietened down a little I went to the station to take the train to Warsaw. They did not want to sell me a ticket so I asked to speak to the man in charge. I told him that I had to go to Warsaw to find a home for my children and that I had left four children behind in Kremenets, and my tears flowed. He took pity on me and took me to the train himself. I never paid.

When I reached Warsaw I asked a Jew to direct me to the editor's office.

'If you give me 50 zlotys I will tell you where to go,' he said.

'No,' I said. 'Rather you give me 50 zlotys and I'll take you right through Warsaw.' I managed to find the office on my own.

I was shown in to Mr. Polotski and gave him the letter of introduction. And I told him about the lot of the Jews in the area I came from. He told me that I should have gone to the police. Then I asked where the office was for refugees who want to emigrate to America. He gave me a letter and sent a man with me to the Centre for Refugees where it was agreed that I would work as a matron. I remained there and was able to send money to the children for *Pesach*.

I worked hard to make the thirty families at the Centre feel that it was really *Pesach* and a Mr. Peroaz and his wife, who were very rich people and had donated money for the purpose, came to see if everything was being done properly. They were very satisfied and invited me to their home for *Pesach* but I declined because my children were not there.

After *Pesach* they sent for me and said that refugees would soon be sent to Mexico. So I borrowed 300 zlotys from them and went to Kremenets to fetch the children. When I arrived the children cried with joy and so did I, and I felt so guilty about having left them that I couldn't sleep that night. The children had grown and I thanked God that they were well.

I went back to Warsaw with the children and we stayed at the Centre. When Mrs. Peoaz went on leave for four weeks I ran the Centre better than she had. I wrote down who arrived and who left and doctors came every day and I kept everything clean and they liked my daughter Yente very much because she is such a pretty child. However, I thought it would be better for the children to be in the orphanage, so I took them there.

There were 60 Jewish children at the orphanage which was very clean and well run by a Professor and Mrs. Engel. Two of the girls were married off there.<sup>32</sup> A Professor Shor performed the ceremonies (*Chupa* and *Kidushin*<sup>33</sup>) and bought clothes and spent 20 dollars of his own money on each bride. I always knew your sister Vanka<sup>34</sup> would marry a doctor, and so she did. There were many doctors present, a band was playing and it was a very nice wedding.

I was asked to remain working at the Centre until all the refugees had left but my first concern was to provide for my children. What would people say, I thought, if I leave my own children and go on camps with other children? My children would be lost without their mother. I protected them

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<sup>32</sup> Feiga is not referring to her own daughters.

<sup>33</sup> Kidusshin is the first of two stages of a Jewish wedding ceremony. Commonly translated as "betrothal," the ceremony actually renders the bride and groom full-fledged man and wife. The second stage is nisu'in.

<sup>34</sup> There is some mixing of time periods and name confusion here, which may be due to Feiga's poor handwriting and the name similarities between her older daughter Yankel, also referred to as Yanka, and the youngest Yente. According to the third copy of the letter, Yankel married a doctor around 1915 shortly after the family was evicted from their home in Verba.

from the bandits and I won't desert them now. I knew that God would not forsake me because I am a widow.

My daughter Tzilla who is now at Givat Chaim in Israel worked at the children's hospital in Warsaw and in the evenings she went to meetings of the *Chalutzim* (pioneers) to be trained like *Hachshara*.<sup>35</sup> She wanted to get a certificate to go on *Aliyah*<sup>36</sup> to Palestine. It was not easy but I managed to earn some money and eventually she received the certificate and left for Palestine. Vanka<sup>37</sup> went to work at the hospital as a sister but who knows how she is getting on with that 'wicked man.'

I remained with two children, you, dear Rose, and you, dear Manes.<sup>38</sup> I worked at a Jewish Centre for the Jewish congregation and during the holidays I went on children's camps. I was recommended by Professor Shor and took you, Rose, and Reysele<sup>39</sup> and Manes with me on the summer camp when I worked as a matron and they were very satisfied with me. We spent two months in Zakopany and when we returned there was a letter from Tzilla saying she was very happy in Givat Chaim. She said she would arrange for me to go to Palestine.

Then came a man from South Africa, a Mr. Isaac Ochberg. He wanted to take about two hundred children who had been orphaned by the First World War to South Africa where they could be looked after and begin a new life. He also wanted us to go and I was convinced that I would accompany

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<sup>35</sup> Zionist youth movement

<sup>36</sup> immigration

<sup>37</sup> Again, possible confusion in the translation. The third copy of the letter makes it clear that it was the youngest, Yente, who became a nurse.

<sup>38</sup> Feiga does not mention that Yente also remained in Warsaw, though we know this because Feiga says so in the third copy of the letter and because she later sent Rose and Mannie pictures of herself and Yente.

<sup>39</sup> Reysele is the name by which Rose is identified on the Arcadia Orphanage admission form, so it is unclear why Feiga seems to refer to three children here.

the children. However, Mrs. Engel then told me that children only, and no parents, would be going to South Africa.

I approached Mr. Ochberg and asked him to return my two children. I told him I would look after them and educate them even if I had to carry stones in order to do it. But he said he had already obtained visas for them and refused. I was deeply distressed.

You can imagine, dear children, how Mrs. Engel broke my heart when she said I could not go. You can imagine what a mother feels when she has to part with small children. You, dear Manes, were only eight years old and you, dear Rose, were ten. I read in the newspapers that there was no food for them on the train taking them to the boat on which they would go to London. We heard there had been a storm in which the boat nearly sank. The children were already dressed in lifebelts but God helped them and the boat was saved. They stayed in London for a while and then left, again by boat, for South Africa.

After six months I received a letter from Mr. Ochberg saying that my two children were missing. I was so upset that I cried right through the nights. I sent Mr. Ochberg an airmail letter in which I told him to return my children or arrange for me to come to South Africa and find them myself. After a while he sent me another letter saying that the children were no longer missing. I sent a second airmail letter and this time he replied saying the children were well and had settled down. I did not believe him, but what could I do? If the sea had not separated us I would have gone to join them.

I had written ten letters to the children before I received one from them. They said I should not cry and sent photographs. You can imagine how I felt when I saw those pictures of my children. I looked at those photos at night and cried. Such little children who need their mother, I regretted having sent them away. It's a shame when a mother exchanges her children for paper and I never received any 'paper' anyway. When I asked them in Warsaw whether I could go on a boat to South Africa they said: 'We are taking men only, no women.'

I was rewarded twenty years later when Manes came to see me. He told me he was coming from South Africa on a visit, he did not tell me that he was in the South African Army and had been sent to Egypt, from where he came to visit me in Palestine. He did not want me to know he was a soldier because he thought I would worry. But I had the feeling all along that he was in the army, his mother is not a fool. I took consolation from the fact that he was only one of many soldiers, it was the Second World War.

One thing that worried me when the children were still young in South Africa was that they sent me money. Where did they get the money from? I wrote a letter to the teachers at their orphanage and asked them where the children had managed to get money. They wrote to tell me that the children had come first in their classes at school and had been given prize money which they sent on to me.

Then I read in the newspaper that there had been a terrible earthquake in Africa. I fainted and was unconscious for an hour before the doctor revived me. I sent a letter to the orphanage and the children replied saying that the earthquake had been in another part of Africa, far away from them. I thanked God for that.

Sometimes I did not have the will to live. I thought of suicide but, fortunately, people looked after me. And I decided to write to you about my life because I want you to know how I suffered. I hoped, dear children, that you would all be happy and that one day I would see you again.

Tzilla wrote from Givat Chaim saying that she wanted me to come to Palestine. She had been there for three years and had finally managed to obtain a certificate for me to enter the country. I had no husband to support me so I needed money to support myself, and I also needed money for travelling. I worked at a school camp where I looked after 300 children and then at another camp in Zakopany where I had an unpleasant experience.

A doctor arrived there and said he had heard that the place was dirty. I took him round and showed him all the floors and he saw that everything was clean. I suspected that

he was trying to frighten me and that he wanted a bribe. I did not give him one but I gave him a good lunch with plenty of wine and sent him on his way. When I left there I had enough money for the tickets to Palestine and I was proud that I had earned it through my own labour.<sup>40</sup>

I went to Lvov, took out a passport and paid for it. On a Tuesday I took the train which connected with the boat which left on Wednesday. We all wanted to reach the destination as soon as possible. Many people were sick on the boat but I felt well. I met a young woman from Lvov who was going to visit her parents and had a child of four with her. She befriended me and invited me to share her cabin. Her name was Esther Steinberg and her husband worked in Haifa. She invited me to visit them in Haifa and one day I will do that. Every minute of the time I thought about the fact that I was going to be with my daughter in Palestine. I was very happy.

At 3 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon we disembarked at Haifa and stood in a long queue to be inoculated against smallpox. It grew late and Esther Steinberg invited me to sleep at her house but I declined because I had arranged to stay with my sister-in-law who has three children and lives in Meshek Yagur. I travelled there that night and on the following day your sister Tzilla came and took me to her home in Givat Chaim.

They had a meeting at Givat Chaim and a Mr. Zimerman and a Mrs. Sima Liberman told me that I could not be accepted there. I was stunned, and your sister Tzilla wanted to commit suicide.

'Bad luck follows me wherever I go,' I told her. 'I have suffered so much in Europe, finally I manage to get to Palestine, I stand here with no money left and no home, and I get this kind of welcome.'

I thought they wouldn't send me back to Poland because I no longer had a home there. But they found a middle way. 'You can stay,' Mr. Zimerman said, 'but only for four months, as a visitor.'

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<sup>40</sup> Feiga left for Palestine in 1937.

'Then give me the money to go to America where I have a daughter,' I said, 'or send me to South Africa where I have a son and a daughter.'

What would happen after four months? I did not know, I was very unsettled. I started working, mending and altering linen from six in the morning until four in the afternoon. There was no room for me where Tzilla stayed and I would have had no place to sleep if a member of the community called Sarah had not given me shelter for four months. I am still grateful to her.

Then a case arose where they had to go and look for a member's mother in Russia. So all the members in this community where decisions are taken collectively said: 'But this mother (meaning me) is already here, why can't she stay?' That is how I managed to remain there. I want to thank all the boys and girls who voted for me and wish them success in whatever they do.

The Redemption should come soon. We should be redeemed from the hand of the 'Wicked Man.' He is the only stick and the stick will be broken. Let him drown in the sea and the Jews will swim to Redemption. We Jews should be proud and not lose hope, everything will be all right and it is not long to wait.

Now, my dear children, you deserve to hear about the good years I had. Your mother was 17 when she married your father who was 20 and they lived together for twenty-two years. I had twelve children and your father sent two of them to America. When he died at 42 your father left me with eight children.<sup>41</sup> Two of them died at home and I married off Leika and Vanka. I remained with four, Yente, Tzilla, Rose and Manes. They all swam over the sea to different lands. Yente was left in the hands of a 'wicked man,' God knows if she is

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<sup>41</sup> In Tillie's copy of the letter, Feiga names the eight surviving children minus Tillie and the oldest boy Harry, who were both sent to the U.S. They are Yankel, Hichel, Moishe, Laikin, Tzulla (Tzilla), Yanke (Yente), Rose, and Manisin (Mannie).



still alive, Rose and Manes went to South Africa and I am here in Israel with Tzilla.

I ask God to allow me to see my children again while I am still alive. I would like to be with you, even four weeks would be enough to chat with you. I finish my writing, dear children, with a big SHALOM.

Thus writes the mother of Rose Miller and Manfred Favish.