

To

Rachael and Amos
Tillie and Aditieh

*Though for no other cause, yet for this,
that posterity may know we have not loosely
through silence permitted things to pass away
as in a dream.*

—Richard Hooker,
Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity

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FOREWORD

I do not know this woman. . . .
I do not know her and yet I know her.
She was . . . not a person but a whole kind of person,
the ones who crossed the ocean,
who brought with us to America
the villages of Russia and Lithuania

Descendants of this immigrant woman,
you do not grow up in America,
you and your children and their children
with the *goyische* names,
you do not live in America, no such place exists.
Your clay is the clay of Litvak shtetl,
your air the air of the steppes.

Because she carried the old world
on her back across the ocean, in a boat,
and put down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush,
and she worked that earth into your bones,
and you pass it to your children, this ancient,
ancient culture and home. . . .

You can never make that crossing that she made,
for such Great Voyages in this world do not any more exist.
But every day of your lives the miles that voyage
between that place and this one you cross.
Every day. You understand me?
In you that journey is.

—Tony Kushner,
selections from *Angels in America*

1. A CACHE OF LETTERS

By the rules of the retirement center in Bloomfield, Connecticut where my father had lived, the family was allotted five working days after his death to clear out the belongings from his cottage. My brother and I had agreed: we wouldn't save any furniture, just the china, the stemware, the samovar, and the contents of his study. It all was to go into a storage unit near his home in Wallingford, CT. Together, later, we three siblings would sort through it all. Each of us would take what we wanted and we'd toss the rest. We doubted there would be any scraps between us; we three are much too different. Exactly a year after our father's death, I traveled from Seattle, my sister came from Charlotte, to stay with my brother and his wife.

I knew the contents of many of those boxes marked "Books—from study." During my visits to my father I had often looked at his books, on occasion he would gift me one or two. It was torment to stand in the storage unit and watch both my brother and my sister tear through these. Nothing seemed to matter to them. Especially the books. Even before I got a chance to say I want it, my brother was ready to put a book in the toss pile. Books that meant a lot to my father and books I wanted to keep. Once, my brother who was trying to send an oversized book into the toss bin, misjudged and instead of the toss bin the book landed on the concrete floor flat open with its spine broken and pages awry. Like kicking someone down the stairs and watching them land sprawled out and hurt. Aggression. Like when the *pogromschiks* entered a synagogue to tear it apart and hurled all the sacred books to the sidewalk to be burnt.

Angry I was, and now nothing much left to do except to say I'll take all his books, his notes, papers and sort through them more leisurely later. "But Annie doesn't want any of this in her house. There might be silverfish in the books or in the papers," my sister Molly says. My sister who took the name of my grandmother, Manya. "You can't take all this there, Annie and Mike don't like clutter."

Silverfish notwithstanding, the whole shebang was now under my gaze in the basement of my brother's house. There were scores of postcards and letters. Amongst those letters was a small notebook

wrapped in pink tissue paper. Written on the pink paper was the word "Ukraine." I opened this small notebook of 68 numbered pages written in Russian and noted the title page: Travel Notes. The pages were brittle but the Russian handwriting was clear enough. I read the first sentence of the entry, dated August 29, 1922. *We left Kiev at 12:00 noon.* I turned to the last page 68 and read the last entry. *We waited on the benches [of Ellis Island] until our names were called . . .* My father, always the journalist, had left me the perfect gift. I'd have him all to myself for quite a while. I couldn't wait to take everything back to Seattle.

Finding so many letters and postcards as well as my father's travel diary in Russian intensified my delight in the art of translation. I knew I eventually would be able to master the various handwritings and gain meaning and context from what I read. Translation was a tool I used in my work: beginning with my dissertation research and also my subsequent writings about contemporary Russia.

Once back at home, I was disciplined and patient. I had just sold my business, a small company publishing commercial intelligence on the Russian Far East. I would have the time. This was going to be a big project and I would start carefully, methodically. The letters and postcards addressed to Eli Brodinsky, my grandfather, in Wilmington



Eli leaves his wife and six children, 1914.

1. A Cache of Letters

Delaware, start just days after Eli's ship (the m/v Carminia) left Liverpool on May 23, 1914, and continued for eight years until the week when those he left behind—his wife and six children (but one)—boarded *their* ship on September 26, 1922 (the m/v Lithuania) to join him.

Eight Years.

Eight very long years.

I could read Russian. But I couldn't read Yiddish and the first letters to Eli were entirely in Yiddish. I could not even confirm the dates. I was helpless amongst these scribbles. I could see that many voices were present. Paragraphs showed distinct handwriting styles—slanted this way, slanted that way. Some timid. Some bold. Yet, still all squiggles. Scribbles. Helpless, indeed!



All Yiddish! I am helpless!

So I sought help. First there was Harry. I contacted Jewish Family Services and together we arranged I'd become a "friendly visitor" for Harry who lived alone, was 90, and wanted company. We agreed that during these weekly visits we'd read a Yiddish letter or two I'd bring. Of course, I enlarged them to make it easier for Harry. But Harry wasn't so interested. Reading Yiddish printed in the *Forward* was one thing, he said, "but all this lousy handwriting?!" He'd rather teach me to play chess. (Or give me a kiss or two.) Finally, it was clear, we weren't on the same page. So we decided to stop these visits.

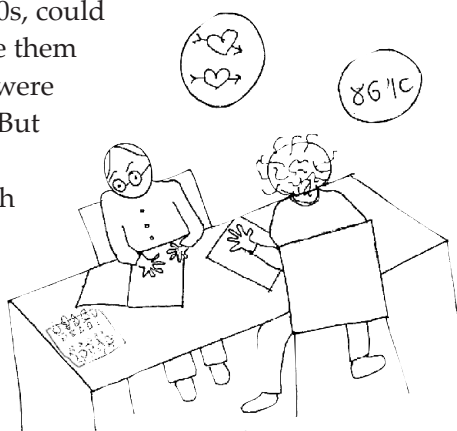
Michal and Sam, in their 70s, could read the occasional letter I gave them in handwritten Hebrew. They were both born and raised in Israel. But Yiddish wasn't for them. They did manage to read one Yiddish letter, and to help with dates and to identify all the letter writers.

Then there was Ayn, age 92, elegant and kind, who taught Yiddish at a nearby temple.

But who was stymied at every turn. She did help me know which end of a letter was right-side-up, the date of the letter and, when on occasion someone had scratched a note in-between others, which note needed us to turn the letter upside-down in order to read it.



Michal and Sam



First there was Harry.

Finally I found, through YIVO (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*), Caraid, a professional translator who had taken up the study of Yiddish in college and was part of a group of young people championing its vibrant literary legacy. These letters—after the usual greetings, after pleas for more correspondence, after God's

blessings and well wishes—reveal details of the family my grandfather Eli left behind: his wife, Manya, six children who ranged in age from the youngest (four years old, my father Niuma) to the oldest (14 years old, my uncle Isor). Manya, I learn quickly, wasn't left alone to cope. Two brothers (Mokha and Veniamin), a sister (Klara), her stepmother Miriam, and her father Liev

1. A Cache of Letters

all lived in the same village as she, the village of Gorodische which was about 100 miles south of the city of Kiev.

There were gaps, important gaps. I wanted to know more. Eli went to America, left his family and his business behind. What was this business he left behind? A shop, but what products did they sell? Was it a general mercantile store? Did the shop carry consistent inventory? Where was it located? In a typical town square type marketplace in Gorodische? Some of these questions were answered later.

What I did learn from these Yiddish letters however is that Eli had debts the family wanted to pay off, and that revenue from the retail shop business had been a traditional source of family income. Manya bought and sold for the shop in Gorodische, and also sold goods at marketplaces elsewhere: in particular the nearby larger town of Smela.

After Eli left, Manya's brother Mokha took on the mantle of responsibility for Manya's family. He knew the shop business. At the same time his position in the local beet factory enabled him to get Manya's eldest son, Isor, a job there as well. So Isor works, Manya minds the shop. The other four children engage in their studies: religious and secular.

From Manya:

Isor is working at the factory as is Mokha. I sit minding the shop. . . I don't know why I have the few little loaves of bread left and bashekles [hooded scarves used by the Russian army] and still twenty pairs of shoes to sell. . . Your children are well. With God's blessing we will be together again.



Ayn: Often she helped me know which side of a letter was right-side-up.



MY CAST OF CHARACTERS

Manya • Klara • Riva • Liev • Ita • Mokha • Veniamin • Isor
Meer • Iosif • Niuma • Me

2. GONE TO AMERICA

The town where Eli left his family is Gorodische. Gorodische is in Kiev Province. The City of Kiev is its capitol. In 1914, Kiev was the regional administrative headquarters for the Imperium's three southern border provinces located west of the River Dnieper (Kiev, Podoliya, Vohlniya). The city of Kiev was also the regional *military* headquarters for the Tsar's Imperial Southwestern Armies. In other words, Kiev was Russia's major city in a border region across which—at that time—was Russia's enemy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire in control of Galicia (allied with a most aggressive neighbor, the German Empire) and readying to attack. And Gorodische, Manya's town, was just south of Kiev, connected to it by a major rail line.



In August 1914, just two months after Eli has left, Russia, provoked by German aggression in Poland, declared war on the German and the Austro-Hungarian Empires, effectively entering the First World War. Tsar Nicolas II sends orders to his military headquarters in Kiev to intensify troop preparations for the tasks of war on Russia's

2. Gone to America

southwestern flank. That meant preparations for an armed offensive against Austro-Hungarian armies bunkered in Galicia (a swath of territory wedged between Russian Ukraine and Russian dominated Poland), and now controlled by the Austro-Hungarian empire.

These early letters to Eli just months after he has left for America are slight on details. Manya evades much mention of the shock of war. But a letter to Eli from a friend doesn't mince words: *It is very bad here.*



They have taken everything they can take. There is no business to be had. Everything is stopped. In the same letter Liev Polonsky, Manya's father (my great grandfather), writes: *What can I write to you that should be good? Nothing is good. It's difficult to write about. Only God, may His name be blessed, can help the children of Israel.* And so, too, Manya reveals her hopes and her fears: *Father says God will help as you will earn money there and send us some rubles.*

It takes four months before members of the family decide to start writing in Russian. They must have guessed that since Yiddish was more difficult, if not impossible, for the censor to read, its use delayed and maybe even prevented their letters to Eli from going forward, or his letters from arriving. There could well have been a bias against Yiddish (the "Jewish language"). Some authorities were all too eager

to believe the wartime rumors that Jews might not be loyal to the Tsar and even might be spies for the enemy. Thus another reason to prevent or delay correspondence.

Finally, in November 1914, Eli received two letters mostly in Russian. On the front page of the letter of November 17 Manya writes in Yiddish. As before, she sticks to events and matters close to her heart and responsibilities: the children's well-being and always the anxieties when letters don't arrive from Eli. *I got the letter that you sent to Meir in Palestine. But your letters are four and even five weeks apart. What suffering this causes us. . . . About the shop, we bought some hand mirrors to sell which will interest quite nicely the little wives whose husbands are scarce and who come in often. . . . I still go to Smela to trade.*

On the back side of this letter to my surprise is *Dear Papa*—in Russian. Six times! There is a paragraph or a sentence or a fragment from each of the children. First, Isor and Meer in beautiful Russian script, then Riva and Ida and Iosif, and then there he was! My dad, a little boy of four, his bold signature, HIOMA (Niuma), capitalized, along with an unsuccessful attempt to copy his older brother's phrase: "I greet you."

The youngest children—Ita (eight years old), Iosif (six years), Niuma (four years)—each write the same sentence: I greet you.



FROM ISOR: *(the oldest now 14 years old)*

'Dear Papa. At the shop trading is little. Mother buys some goods at 10 to 15 rubles and sells them at other marketplaces at sometimes six times their cost. The rest of the goods she sells at good prices. Uncle Veniamin brings her goods from Cherkassy to sell, thus he comes often to Gorodische.'



FROM MEER: *(12 years old)*

'Dear Papa! . . . I am studying with religious teacher and I wish you success, happiness, health and that we can be together again soon.'



FROM RIVA: *(now ten years old)*

'Dear Papa . . . I have a new coat. I wish you good health.'

2. Gone to America

The moment I saw my father's penned sentence, *Dear Papa, I greet you*, written in Russian cursive, I was smitten. Instantly smitten. My Dad had long passed by the time I got to this sentence, but there he was and I was with him! We were going to be together on a most intriguing adventure into another time, era, land, family, and culture. He would lead the way. We had become very close the last ten or so years of his life. He was supportive of my work. We both had the writing habit. Smitten I was. Translation was a trudge: handwriting styles differ, calendars differ, the written alphabet before 1917 differs somewhat from the modern Russian style I knew; places changed names, dates are written differently, the names of any one person vary from the formal, the diminutive, the nickname, to the ways one shows endearment. *All* this sometimes in Yiddish, sometimes in Russian. I was going pretty much solo in terms of real bodies to help me. But this is where I wanted to be, this is what I wanted to be doing: being with my father when he was a young boy; reading the beautiful calligraphy of his oldest brother Isor for content and meaning; finding so many writers sending their greetings on one postcard, putting in sentences wherever they could fit, along the margins, upside down, even in between the lines of another!

Once deciphered, I found patterns emerging from the different letter writers. My grandmother Manya writes matter of factly, and almost exclusively about what is happening in the family. Her siblings and father, and her eldest son, Isor, write about other matters. The rules for the male writers have been established. The letters to Eli are to remain matter-of-fact, calm, and if possible cheery, in order not to worry Eli but also because all letters had to pass a military censor. Isor did this best.

From Isor:

Dear Papa,

*Before I was working at the receiving department of the beet plant,
but now I am in the office where they weigh the juice and the starch/
syrup.*

Sometimes, however, Liev (Manya's father) and her sister, Klara, are more to the point.

When the River Ice Flows, I Will Come Home

From Liev:

Your letter arrived without a stamp. When you write, include the stamp Nothing good is happening. There is nothing to write about the war. Of course you read about it too. And you probably know we are also at war with the Turks. It is very difficult to describe in detail. Only God should help. The want is great and the lack is also great. It is impossible to earn money. Therefore, God, blessed be His name, should help you earn well so that you can send us money. You will send money from America. No money here and no merchandise. We paid off the debts we are aware of.

From Klara:

There are several hundred Jewish reservists here in Gorodische. In February there will be another mobilization after which there will be few young men left. Inflation is terrible. The mood is heavy. War is horrible. No one has mercy for anyone. There is nothing to be done. Everywhere there is only one word heard, war.

Besides reporting facts of managing her household, all of Manya's letters reveal her deep wish to reunite with Eli. *God grant that we see each other soon. God wish you success so that we can be together soon. . . Perhaps you will be able to be here for Passover.* Whether the plans had included Eli returning to Gorodische—permanently or to gather the whole family for a new home in the United States—Manya's wish to be reunited with her husband and the wishes of her children to be reunited with their father were not to be fulfilled for another eight very long years. War. Revolution. Civil War. More war.

Pogroms. Famine. Like the plagues at Passover.



A LETTER TO PAPA

It is Saturday night. The sun had set and the Sabbath had past. But still my mother didn't light the kerosene lamp.

"If I don't write tonight, God knows when I'll have time," my mother said. She reached for the lamp, took it carefully apart, cleaned the wick, wiped the glass chimney with a cloth, and filled the lamp with fresh kerosene. She lit the wick and turned the flame, green and orange and blue, up high. She reached for a piece of writing paper, the inkwell, and a penholder with a steel nib, and placed them on the table.

She and I were the only ones at home.

"Maybe I can have a few minutes of peace to write to your father," she said, and soon her pen began to move across the page. I could hear the scratching. I liked this time of the week. I knew that I would be writing to my father on the same sheet of paper and wondered whether I could stay awake until my mother finished.

I fell asleep.

The next day, my mother asked me to sit at the table, to be careful not to spill the ink nor to splotch the paper with my pen.

"Here, Numele," she said, "add your regards to this letter and then I can mail it."

I looked at the sheet of paper. My mother's handwriting, in Yiddish, filled one side of the sheet. On the other side, I could see the bold handwriting of my brother Mayor [Meer], the fine girlish script of Becky [Rivka] and Ida, and finally the sprawling letters of my brother Joseph [Iosif]. I wasn't too much interested in what they said. I knew their "regards" by heart, and I knew that each week they said the same thing.

Now and then, however, my older brother and sisters mentioned their school work. "I got a 4 in history," Becky might say. And Ida might write, "My teacher gave me a 5 in geography." They were bragging about their high marks.

I looked at the sheet again. As usual, there was just about an inch or two of white space left at the bottom for me. That was enough. I wrote:

"Dear Papa. I am, thank God, alive and well, hoping to hear the same from you. We miss you. Now I'll say goodbye. Your loving son, Benyomin"

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