

Why I Left The Old Country

And

What I Achieved In the U.S.

By

Max Pogorelsky

Los Angeles: 1943, ca 1960

Translated from the Yiddish by Hy Parrell

Edited by Ben Pogorelsky

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For this work, the author received an award from YIVO (Yiddish Scientific Institute) in a competition of several years ago, on the theme below. The document is an important one in that it contains source material toward a history of Jews of this era.

Dedication

Dedicated to the Blessed Memory of: my brother Naftoly, his wife Fanya, and son Lazar; my brother Leyble, his wife Hannah and children, Chaveh and Toly – a partisan; my sister Feygl, her husband, daughter and son-in-law all murdered by the Nazi beasts in Bialystok.

Part I (1884-1940)

Our family – Shmuel Pogorelsky – the saloonkeeper of Yurevtzer Street, consisted of six brothers, two sisters, father, mother and two grandmothers. My mother's father's trade was spinner. His name was Naftoly Herz. He was killed while at work, due to the manufacturer's negligence. My father's father, Aryeh Leyb, died early as a result of heart failure. He was baker in the nearby town of Kinishin.

Before marriage my father was a spinner. After marriage my father's dowry was Grandmother Reysl's home on Yurevtzer Street, opposite Strukover's Street. The house was converted to a saloon, which occupied the front rooms. The rear portion of the house consisted of two bedrooms, kitchen and dining room. Only on the Sabbath and at holidays, did the entire family dine together. The saloon was operated by gentiles during the Sabbath period. On Passover, the door leading to the saloon from our dwelling was boarded up. Passover was the holiday that brought our whole family together. Uncles and aunts and their children would visit us and we visited them for holiday snacks. The saloon was closed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

In 1896, the Russian Government assumed control of the liquor industry, which became known as the MONOPOL, and our saloon was turned into a restaurant. Except for fried fish, and goose giblets on the buffet, the chief source of income was the sale of soup and tea. The price of a bowl of soup and bread – three kopeks, a glass of tea – 1 kopek. Our economic situation at home was very poor. As I remember it, my father was always borrowing money from moneylenders. Before a debt of fifty or a hundred rubel was paid, it was necessary to make a new loan from the moneylenders. In this manner, payments were made on other debts for small bundles of fireweed, shoes and clothes.

My mother, Chaveh, may she rest in peace, was always feeble and had swollen feet. My father would always bring her a footstool whenever she sat down. My older sister, Anna, a girl of 17, fell in love with a young man and went with him to his parent's home in a town near Vitebsk. He presented her with a "gilden", a fifteen Kopek silver coin at betrothal. When our Rabbi, Chain Heozl, ruled that such betrothal was permissible, my parents and sister journeyed to the groom's home, where the ceremony was performed. The young couple found misfortune in every venture to earn a living. Finally my parents decided to send them to my mother's sister in Louisville, Kentucky.

My older brother, Naftoly, had in addition to "cheder" completed Yaffes' four year school and studied bookkeeping via correspondence, from the well known teacher Novak's of Libova. He then became bookkeeper at a cloth and hat factory, until the First World War.

Two other brothers and I learned the weaving trade. My brother, Leybl, became a salesman. My younger brother, Beryl, thanks to the support of his older brothers graduated from a four year school in Bialystok. At the age of four and a half, I entered the primary cheder on Gumiener Street, Yanovsky's courtyard by the river. The cheder was conducted in a second story attic. About fifty to sixty children attended this school and were in two groups. When one group was

in session the other was in the corridor. At the age of six I entered a regular cheder on Gumienier Street adjacent to a poor house. At that time the poor house was converted into a hospital for cholera victims.

Almost daily, we would see the flames arising from the incinerated clothes and bed clothing of the cholera victims. The privies and open sewers of Bialystok were daily whitened with lime during the epidemic. The fruit sellers would sell only boiled pears and apples. The epidemic was so intense and widespread that people died like flies, and the Rabbis permitted the use of boiled water on Yom Kippur. In the courtyard of Pujes Shul, Factory Street, a huge samovar filled with boiled water was available for the public during Yom Kippur.

At the age of eight, I became a student in I. Inditsky's cheder on Yatke Street (Butcher Street), Dolitsky courtyard. My Rabbi, Inditsky, was the author of the first Hebrew textbooks. Here I learned Chumesh with Rashi, grammar, Hebrew, Russian and arithmetic until my Rabbi gave up teaching. He opened a bookstore on Gumienier Street that was well known until World War II.

At the age of Twelve, I became a student at a cheder conducted by Inditsky's brother and studied there until I became Bar Mitzvah. Instead of a Bar Mitzvah speech, I composed a poem about Bar Mitzvah in Hebrew. I then became a reader of Hebrew books and periodicals that I borrowed at Reb Shmuel Niohilever's library on Gumienier Street. I hungrily read the periodicals such as HaMabsher, HaCarmel and HaMashkif.

In Reb Shmuel Niohilever's library, I met the Zionist groups and joined the youth group "PIRCHI ZION". The lectures about "moments in Jewish history" made an important impression on me. They were given by Gedaliah Bublik, later a leader of the American Mizrahi. Every Sabbath afternoon the Adas Yeshuron Shul on Novolipi Street had a packed congregation.

At the age of fourteen, my father made an agreement with Moses Brisker, a contractor on Piaskes Street, to teach me the weaving trade for a six-month period. After this period, I started earning two to three rubels a week. Being short for my age, they placed wood blocks beneath my feet to enable me to reach the foot treadle of the weaving machine and to help me operate the shuttle. Summertime, we would work from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. and in the winter the hours were 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Before holidays, we worked the entire night. The two flickering gaslights on both sides of my weaving machine gave off soot that blackened my nose. At this time, I met a weaver who had just returned from America. He read poems to me, from his notebook, that were a call to battle against oppressors and exploiters, and, as I know now, were the poetry of Bavshever, Edelstat and Rosenfeld.

About 1901, I would receive from time to time, illegal pamphlets and the "Bundist Voice". I then became a preacher of Koticks Library on Povetchizne Street. I started with Shomers novel, then to Mendele Mocher Sforim, Peretz, Graez' Jewish History, Spector, Dineson, "Holiday Notes" by Peretz, Yiddish Folk Library, House Friend, and the periodical "The Jew".

Early in 1903, when publication began of the weekly, "The Friend", in St. Petersburg, I read the article by S. Rosenfeld and Kunin, where they formulated the theory of Poale Zionism. I became one of the founders of the Poale Zionist group in Bialystok. Night after night our group

propagandized their theory in Shmidt's Café on Gumenier Street, near Novolipi. Our group attracted several senior students from Commerce School. They studied together with us, world, political economics, and culture history, thus enriching our knowledge.

I became the chairman of this committee to the "schodke" (central council?) consisting of propaganda group representatives, where I gave our committee's decisions and returned the central council's decisions to my group.

From 1903-07, I became involved, body and soul, with work for the P.Z. Party. The committee sent me to the various torons about Bialystok, to organize P.Z. groups, and was also sent to Minsk, seat of the central executive committee of our party, the Jewish Territorialist Workers Party, to pick up illegal literature. I became one of the organizers of the non-partisan Defenders Group, which during the Bialystok Pogrom, defended and occupied the NEI VELT district of Bialystok. Not only did the hooligans not dare to set foot in this area, but also prevented regular Army units from entering the Gumiener-Neivelt area.

In 1907, my friend Shloimeh Shterenfeld, now in Chicago, and I were delegates at the last convention of our party in Minsk. The Convention decided to unite with the Zionist Socialist Party (S.S.). Six months later, I represented our group at the Vilna 5th Convention of the S.S., because of the reactionary times and the Bialystok Pogrom, "Emigration" became the chief factor in Jewish life. Consequently, our party lost members, as did the other political groups in Russia. Simultaneously, a Jewish cultural movement started growing in our city.

I was captivated by the new periodicals, poetry and prose now being published in Yiddish. It seems like yesterday when Mendele Mochr Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, came to Bialystok, before packed audiences in the Roskosh Theatre. I remember just as vividly the visits of Peretz, Hillel Zeitlen Raisin and Noinberg. We read their works, their meanings and teaching, discussed and argued various points in the literature of our authors, and debated Jewish cultural problems.

I was twenty-two, and in 1908, my friend Sorke (Sarah) the "black one", Goniondski, became my wife, according to Jewish Law. The few hundred rubels my wife saved from her dressmaking, wedding presents and dowry helped us set up housekeeping on Gumiener Street, Neigas Court, in a second story attic type apartment. It consisted of a parlor, bedroom, a small kitchen, and a room where my wife conducted her dressmaking.

I bought a small shop with six hand weaving machines. I spent half a day carrying various articles and goods from manufacturers to my little shop on the third floor. When I completed carrying the goods up, I sat down at my weaving machine. Profits were so low that my wife worked too, at her dressmaking. With all this it was frequently necessary to borrow for daily expenses. Competition from power driven weaving factories compelled me to sell my manually operated machines. Thanks to a three hundred-rubel loan from my brother Naftoly, we rented a four-room apartment on Novolipi Street, at Goldberg's near Topolski Glass Shop.

My wife taught me the dress cutting trade. We bought five sewing machines, cloth, sewed coats, blouses and skirts, in quantity, and on a custom basis. My wife worked very hard, especially during the "season" – from early morning until late at night. My work consisted in cutting the

cloth, buying cloth, keeping accounts with customers. Before each season I would travel to Warsaw and Kalish to buy cloth and samples of the new fashions. In this manner we continued until outbreak of the First World War.

Somehow we managed to get by and earn our daily bread. With the onset of war, business started going badly and decreasing daily. My mother's house – my father died in 1910, on Yurevtzer Street, was rented as a beer place.

With the declaration of war, there was a simultaneous prohibition against alcoholic beverages. The beer house was shut. Bialystok at this moment became a center point in the Russian Army Zone of Communications. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers passed through the city enroute to the fronts. Tens of thousands stopped in Bialystok and after a short rest they were dispersed to various fronts; or other units would return from the fronts for a rest and the baths.

Our house on Yurevtzer Street stood between two bathhouses. I conceived the plan to open a tea shop (Chineh). We installed a large water tank, and sold a cup of tea with sugar for five kopeks. We sold hundreds of bottles of Kvass, fried fish and herring, cigarettes and white bread. When an army unit went to the adjacent baths our teas shop would fill up with soldiers. There were not enough chairs and table to accommodate them and they would sit on the floor drinking tea or Kvass.

Business was good, and went on in this manner for nine months, until the Germans occupied Bialystok in August 1915. In this period, I saved a thousand rubels. My sister-in-law Helen (Chaike) Pogorelsky was a partner and she saved an equal sum. When the Germans arrived the tea house shut down.

When we reopened several months later, the business would not make a profit, due to the severity of the German military occupation. They fined us at every turn. Their fines and levies were greater than our gross income and consequently we closed the tea shop again. Together with several friends (e.g. Zaidl Novinski, Bishke Gdovski, Hershl Lash, Yisroel Geist) and I opened another tea shop in the winter of 1915-16, not for private business, but to advance social cultural activity. In addition to a glass of tea and a snack at cost price we would conduct lectures and discussions on a variety of subjects. The tea house was located at Mazurs Street. We installed a library of Jewish books for the customers.

Within two months, the Germans cleaned Bialystok out of all food products and requisitioned all wholesale houses. The period of the "sack" began – people would go to the rural areas with a sack and buy what food was available – potatoes, carrots, onions, flour, etc. A group of my friends, Zaidl Novinski, B. Gdanski, Herman Frank (now editor of Freie Arbeiter Stimme, in New York), Jacob Pat, and a number of weaver comrades conceived the plan of a consumers Co-op. The Co-op was organized in the Weavers Shul in Bulkenshteins Street. We bought some potato acreage. The comrades dug up the potatoes, sold them to the Co-op members at cost. Then we bought various grains, beets, cabbage, and even fresh fish for the Sabbath.

In April 1916, we (i.e. the above group) organized the I.L. PERETZ CHILDRENS HOME, which later was turned into an eight year Yiddish progressive school.

Bialystok, the city that used to hum with industrial and commercial activity, the city whose factory chimneys smoked from dawn to late night, the streets filled with merchants, salesmen, travelers on foot and on droshkys, where draymen carried heavy capacity loads in the wagon filled with raw materials for the factories, and finished goods from the factories – was now silent and motionless under German occupation. The city was like a giant prison, and no one was permitted to leave or enter except by military pass.

The economic, cultural and social life was strictly controlled by the military authorities. Bialystok, the great factory city the “Russian Manchester”, textile center of Eastern Europe was as quiet as a cemetery. The whirl of the machine and the chimney smoke were gone. The Germans had requisitioned all finished goods, as well as raw materials, even leather transmission belts from the power machinery, as well as food products.

The majority of the rich fled to Russia, before the Russian Army had retreated from Bialystok. The banks and post office had taken all their deposits to the hinterland in the depths of Russia. The workers and the general public were penniless. To buy food, it was necessary to sell ones clothes and jewelry. Epidemics followed malnutrition. We had two sons Munyeh-Shmuel, four years old, and Chaim, one year old. We were all thin and emaciated. No white bread, even for children. Saccharin was substituted for sugar. The Germans did bring with them new food products – dehydrated potato peelings, and dried vegetable refuse.

Out of the savings resulting from the “seven fat months” several hundred rubels remained in my possession. The situation deteriorated daily. At the beginning of summer in 1916, we learned that the Germans were going to permit emigration to America.

I filed out the necessary forms for a visa and at the end of summer we were given permission to leave Bialystok and immigrate to the United States. We sold most of our furniture, household articles and clothing to the peasants in the surrounding villages – Jews did not have any money to purchase these articles. The sale of our possessions brought sufficient money to cover traveling expenses and we had six hundred rubels left over. We packed a couple of pillows and other small items into two small boxes. This was all that we were permitted to take with us.

A week after Succoth 1916, my wife, two children and I left Bialystok, together with about two score other families. The station was packed with hundreds of envious friends and relatives. The next morning, we arrived in Kovno, where we were quarantined for eight days, followed by baths and delousing measures. From Kovno, I wired my friend David Klementovsky (now in New York) asking him to meet us at Berlin Station. He did meet us, but he was only permitted to say a few words to us and station guards forcibly removed him from the station. On the fourth day, we arrived at the Dutch border and we noticed the shelves loaded with white bread. There was a mad rush to buy up this precious item. In a few minutes, the shelves were bare.

We stayed four weeks in Rotterdam. At the shipping company hotel were many young refugees from Galicia and Austria. They told me that my comrade Kaplan Kaplanski was at The Hague (he is now in Israel). We spent a pleasant evening at his home and, upon leaving, he promised me some “food for thought” (i.e. good reading).

On the fifth of December 1916, we arrived at Castle Garden, entry point for immigrants to New York. No one met us upon debarkation. We simply had no addresses of friends or relatives. Thanks to the representatives of Hias (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), and my six hundred rubels, we were released from Ellis Island and turned over to Hias.

We arrived at the East Broadway home of the Hias. We were warmly received and given a good meal. The next day they discovered the address of my wife's Aunt Goldberg. Her sons took us to her apartment at 112th Street and 5th Avenue, in Harlem.

The first Sunday after our arrival in the United States, my wife's cousins came to meet and become acquainted with us, receive news from relatives and friends in Bialystok and give us advice on how to earn a living. When I revealed my desire to become a weaver (i.e. textile mill worker), my wife's cousin, a silk manufacturer, in Patterson, New Jersey, dissuaded me with the characteristic phrase, "You will remain a zedene torbe" (a poor worker). The upshot was that I should take on anything that shows up.

We remained at our aunt's for a week and then exchanged two hundred rubles for sixty dollars, and rented a two room apartment on 107th Street and Park Avenue, on the 5th floor, for twelve dollars a month. We bought a round table, four chairs, an iron bed, sofa, and kitchen utensils and went to the Hias Employment Bureau on East Broadway, looking for work.

My first job was in a brush factory at eight dollars per week, for sixty hours work. After two weeks work, I was laid off – "slack season". The employment bureau then sent me to work in a coffee roasting plant. My work consisted of carrying one hundred pounds of coffee beans, from the warehouse to the roasting ovens. The work was too exhausting and after several weeks I quit.

The first six months, I worked at various trades where hands or feet were needed – hammering, cutting, and sawing. I did "anything" for a living.

My wife went to work as a dressmaker, and earned six dollars a week. My wife's cousin took care of the children until the opportunity came to enter the younger son in the day nursery, and the other son was enrolled in the public school.

Finally, we decided that I should learn a skilled trade, and since I knew something about dressmaking, it followed that I would become a cutter. Then the "union problem" arose. I would work a day or two and then the union delegate would come into the shop and request my union book – no book, no work. Such seemed to be my fate and again I looked for work at "anything".

At this time, I became acquainted with a dress cutter, who worked in a non-union shop. He invited me to the shop and taught me the dress cutting trade. I worked in this shop several months, earned fifteen dollars per week until slack season. Again to the Employment Bureau – this time they sent me to an iron works. It was located in a two story ramshackle building on Houston Street and Avenue C. The shop was on the second floor. It contained several metal presses and cutters. The work consisted of cutting sheet metal into strap iron and punching holes therein. The boss said that if I filled the barrel with finished work I would be raised to fourteen dollars per week. Upon completion of the week's work as agreed upon, the boss gave me only

twelve dollars per week. When I called the boss's attention to this injustice – when he had promised me fourteen dollars per week for work, the others were paid eighteen for – he turned his shrill voice on me, calling me a bigamist, anarchist and socialist. How did I dare tell him how much I should be paid?

My complaints to Hias did not help. I lost a day's work and barely got twelve dollars for the week's work. Between one job and another I would fill in by working as a cutter, until a union delegate would show up.

In 1920, the dressmakers' general strike developed. The non-union shop I was in at the time was taken into the union ranks and I automatically became a union member – Local #10 Cutters Union, ILGWU. When the strike was won, my wages were raised to twenty-seven dollars per week. We had a five room apartment at 110th Street and 5th Avenue (10 E. 110th Street). My wife also did well in her custom dressmaking.

In 1918, when the banks made the first financial contracts with Europe for the dispatch of food parcels, we sold my wife's gold watch (my wedding present to her) and we sent a food parcel to her parents. Later as our earnings increased we sent, regularly, twenty dollars a month to my in-laws, and also sent separate sums to my mother. In 1922, we assisted my brother-in-law in emigrating from Bialystok. In the winter of 1918, I joined the Peoples' Relief. I was one of hundreds that would go door to door with "pushkes" (coin boxes), until it was filled with coins for Peoples' Relief. In the summer of 1918, I met D. Sohn, now executive director of the Old Age Home and Bialystoker Stimme. We met every Sunday and planned how to interest the Bialystoker "landsmanshaft" to help their people of the old home town.

Sohn and I drew the well known Zionist Litman Rosenthal, then a refugee in New York. We conceived the plan of calling a conference of all the Bialystoker Societies, etc., with the slogan "Help for Bialystok". The conference was very successful, an example for other landsmanshaft groups, with its colossal results in relief. Bialystoker Relief had in the early post-war years sent hundreds of thousands of dollars to relatives of American Jews and tens of thousands to institutions and the Jewish Community.

In 1920, I joined the Bialystoker Branch #88 of the Workmen's Circle. After the First World War, a group of immigrants came here from Bialystok who were active in the Bialystok progressive Yiddish School movement, and also in the Sholem Aleichem Library. We organized a Bialystok Culture Group, whose aim was to collect and ship books to the Sholem Aleichem Library. Our apartment was the meeting place for the group and the book collections. We received hundreds of books, even entire libraries, e.g. the private library of Yechiel Weintraub of Patterson, New Jersey, containing the entire Bundist literature, periodicals that were published in the United States – a literary treasure chest.

We shipped great crates filled with books and periodicals to Bialystok. Some of the active members in this project included, Faye Schwartz, Rifke Grun-Hershberg, Bebl Kaplan, Arke Rafalovsky, Babtshe Kagan, Zeydl Chabotsky, Jacobson, Yankl Frankfurt, and my wife. At this time, we organized a large fund raising affair for Bialystoker Progressive Yiddish Schools, and we raised a thousand dollars. The affair took place a couple of weeks before Passover, and I

asked my wife at the affair if she would mind not getting a new outfit for Passover, and give the money saved thereby to the Yiddish Schools. She agreed and I donated twenty-five dollars to the fund. As I did this she told me that a good outfit would cost fifty dollars, and she added twenty-five more to the fund.

Such were the sentiments and actions of those years. The Bialystok Culture Group operated until 1939, sponsored annual fund raising affairs for the schools, raising large sums of money.

In 1921, we were overjoyed by the birth of our only daughter Chavele (Evelyn), named after my mother. We moved to the Bronx. I was earning forty to fifty dollars a week, and my wife quit her dressmaking business.

In 1925, I became a restaurateur in Brownsville. Our economic situation improved considerably, to the extent that in 1927 my wife and younger son of thirteen years, and my daughter, age six, made a trip to Bialystok. In 1930, I made such a voyage, to see my family. Upon my return, business started to downgrade. The depression of the thirty's wiped out five years of prosperity and hard work. My wife and I worked from 5:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. seven days a week. At the beginning of 1930, I was offered twenty thousand dollars for the restaurant. In 1933, business was so bad that I felt lucky to get a buyer who gave me five hundred dollars cash and seven hundred dollars in notes, which he never paid. We said farewell to our many friends in New York, and we moved to Los Angeles, California.

When my oldest son Sam was eight I enrolled him in the "Radical Folk Shul", in Harlem. Later when Workmen's Circle School #1 was organized with Jacob Levine, as teacher, I transferred him to this school. Our oldest son graduated from Hebrew Technical Institute, worked in a machine shop for a short time and became unemployed as a result of the depression. He then worked in a grocery store, became a café owner in Los Angeles, and in 1943, was called to active duty in the Army. I gave my blessing and wish that he return home healthy and victorious. Our oldest son took an active part in the war, marched a thousand miles afoot – France then Germany to the Austrian border, where he came upon the Red Army. He returned home from combat with an outstanding record and healthy to his wife and little son. During his two years service he wrote us letters in Yiddish. Our other two children do the same. We converse and write to each other in Yiddish.

When we moved from the Bronx to Brownsville our younger son Chaim, was enrolled in Sholem Aleichem Shul 11. He graduated here and continued his Yiddish studies for about two years in the Sholem Aleichem Mitlshul. He studied two years at Brooklyn College. We moved to Los Angeles, where he worked for a year in a poultry market. The Depression was severe and he enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps in the mountains near Los Angeles. He saved all his earnings and used them to finance his first semester of studies at Kansas State College, Division of Veterinary Medicine. With our help, he graduated from this school with the degree D.V.M. He has worked since graduation for the Bureau of Livestock Disease Control, State of California, except for the war period. He joined the Officers Reserve upon graduation and in August of 1942, he was called to active duty. He was already married and father of a son. Except for a stay of several months at Camp Roberts, he spent the entire period as Station Veterinarian of San Bernardino Air Force Base. He was responsible for inspection of all foods of animal origin

entering the base, in addition to such other duties as Medical Inspector, veterinary service to war dogs, etc. He was promoted to Captain and just before discharge was promoted to Major. He was in active service over three and a half years.

Our daughter Chavele (Evelyn) graduated from Sholem Aleichem Shul 11 in Brownsville in 1933. In Los Angeles, she enrolled in the Workmen's Circle Shul. At age fifteen, she became a counselor in the Workmen's Circle Camp, and also a member of the Workmen's Circle Chorus, and sang in the chorus for several years. She gave recitations and readings in public in Yiddish. Our daughter successfully engaged in Yiddish theatrical performances, under the direction of the well known actor Alexander Granach, in a drama of Sholem Shvartzbard. She was a student at the University of California at Berkeley, and there met her future husband, a Jewish boy from San Francisco. The past two years she has been a member of the Jewish Folk Chorus.

As you see, this is my only achievement in America and I am proud of it.

Our children have not broken away from the "Jewish Home". They draw inspiration from the "Jewish Home". We always spoke and read Yiddish. There was always a Yiddish newspaper, a magazine and Yiddish books in our home. We always went together with our children to the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York. And now, when a good Yiddish theatrical performance appears in Los Angeles, they go too. This is because of the Yiddish Progressive School that gave them their education. They are now interested in Yiddish Literature in both languages.

It would also be of interest for Jewish public opinion to know that in assimilationist America, I am certain my grandchildren will also receive a Yiddish education. And I believe it is very important for our Jewish people to know that this was not at all difficult to follow such a course – even in America – the "melting pot".

Part II (1940-1958)

In 1943, the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO) requested that I submit an essay on the subject: “Why I Left the Old Country, and my Accomplishments in the United States”. I received an “Exceptional Merit Award” for this essay.

In 1952, the Scientific Committee of the YIVO informed me that the material received from the contestants writing on this subject resulted in valuable contributions to Jewish sociology. The material in the autobiographies was frequently used by sociologists, psychologists and many Ph.D. candidates. Since then, however, ten years had elapsed and many changes had taken place, including the destruction of Jewish life in the old countries and the rise of Israel; these events must surely have had an effect on American Jewish life. Consequently, the YIVO requested the same contestants to bring their autobiographies up to date. This resulted in my receiving a prize from the YIVO for my new work.

1. The Pre-war Period – Jewish Culture Association (Y.I.C.U.F.)

In order to understand the times, let us review the background. I still remember the great propaganda emanating from USSR for “peoples’ fronts” against Fascism and Nazism from 1932 to 1939. We were heart and soul in this Anti-Nazi movement. How innocent we were! The first shock of disappointment came when at the World Jewish Culture Congress held in 1937 in Paris, with 104 representatives from all countries, not even one came from USSR. In fact, not even a word of greeting arrived from Jewish cultural and literary leaders in the Soviet Union. When we review this event in the light of the subsequent history of Jewish culture in the USSR, it becomes clear that in the dark recesses of the Kremlin the fate of Jewish culture and its leadership had already been sealed.

At the end of 1939, I helped to organize a chapter of the Y.I.C.U.F. in Los Angeles. I was elected to the Executive Committee. This group conducted important Jewish cultural affairs. At one of these, 1500 people assembled at a celebration of the “Yiddish Classical Writers”. We even purchased a lot to erect a Jewish Cultural Center on Soto Street in the Jewish district of Boyle Heights.

In October, 1939, at an Executive Committee meeting of Y.I.C.U.F., I stated that since the Central Committee of Y.I.C.U.F. had failed to make a stand against the Stalin-Hitler pact, thus placing all the Jews of Europe in peril, it was a sin and a crime to remain in Y.I.C.U.F. I resigned from Y.I.C.U.F., and was followed out by several other non-partisan cultural leaders.

In 1940, I joined the Jewish Labor Committee. This group saved hundreds of Jewish leaders and intellectuals from Hitler. We became very active in the J.L.C. and helped collect money and clothing for these Jewish refugees.

At the beginning of 1942, when the U.S., Britain and USSR became allies against Hitler, my objections to the Y.I.C.U.F. vanished, and again I became active in this organization. At that

time, we did not know what actually happened to the masses of Jews who remained in Eastern Europe but fled to the areas under USSR occupation. This event took place in late 1939. Now we know what happened to thousands of Jewish refugees. They were placed in freight trains and shipped to Siberia for forced labor in slave camps. Tens of thousands perished from malnutrition, exhaustion and disease.

In 1943, the USSR sent a delegation to establish a united front against Fascism amongst United States Jews. Among the delegates were the famous Yiddish actor Michaelis and the writer Itsik Feffer. I remained in the Yiddish Kultur Farband until 1949.

I awoke from my trance in 1949 when the American English press published the reports from Moscow based on Ilya Ehrenburg's article. Ehrenburg – Stalin's court jester – revealed the "new Stalin line" which states that there is no such thing as a Jewish people or Jewish culture. In 1949, we became aware of the destruction of all traces of Jewish culture and education in the Soviet Union.

This was my cue to cut all ties with Y.I.C.U.F.

2. Bialystok Social Club in Los Angeles

During the spring of 1944, the Bialystok Social Club reorganized, and I was elected as secretary. The first large meeting took place on the historical day in June when the American army entered France. The hall was filled with more than 150 Bialystokers. We raised, at this meeting, the first \$1000, which was to be used for relief work when Bialystok should be freed from the Nazis. At the end of 1944, Bialystok was liberated and, at that time, we were not aware of the terrible tragedy that had taken place there. Of the 200,000 Jews who had lived in Bialystok, 99% were murdered by the Nazi beasts and their Polish friends. At this time, the executive committee of the Bialystoker Social Club began debating as to whether to send relief through the Russian War Relief immediately or to wait for more facts to come through. Finally, our suggestion was accepted that we should send food and supplies stamped in Yiddish with instructions that they were sent from the Bialystokers in America to the Bialystokers in Bialystok. At the next meeting, I made an appeal for funds, and we raised \$1000 for 500 food packages. The Russian War Relief gave us official receipts for these funds. Yiddish letters were enclosed in each package of food and clothing, and to this day not a word of acknowledgement was sent to us by the Jewish Committee in Bialystok, the Russian War Relief or any other agency. In all, we raised \$10,000 through the Bialystok Social Club for relief work in Bialystok and the concentration camps.

We also raised \$500 to help publish two volumes on the history of Bialystok; this was written by A.S. Hershberg. (Ed. Note: Max Pogorelsky contributed two essays to this book.)

The Bialystoker Social Club disbanded when it was found that only a few Jews remained in Bialystok.

In 1952, I wrote an article which was published in the Bialystoker Stimme, condemning a book written by B. Mark about the uprising in Bialystok. He falsified historical facts according to the

Communist line, and I brought out the true facts with quotations from well-known underground fighters.

3. The Destruction of our Family in Bialystok

My wife and I lost all of our families in Bialystok during the Hitler Period (1941-1944). This consisted of my oldest brother Naftoly, his wife Fanya, their son Lazar and his wife; my brother Leibl, his wife, their daughter and their son Tolya. Tolya became a partisan and perished in the woods near Bialystok. Included in this tragedy were my sister Feigl, her husband Moshe Neidorf and their daughter; my uncle Isaac Pogorelsky, his three daughters, their husbands and children; my uncle Joseph, his wife, their four children, spouses and grandchildren; my uncle Jacob Zacharia, his wife and their grandson; my uncle Mordecai Pogorelsky, his wife, married son and children. All of my wife's family perished. This included her sister Rifka, her husband Chaim Binder, their daughter Frieda, her husband and a son. My wife's uncles and aunts, their children and grandchildren all perished. About 50 relatives lost their lives.

All the friends of our youth perished. Among them were my life-long friend Zaidl Novinski and his family. Blessed be the names of these and all others that fell, KIDDISH HASHEM. They are a part of the destruction of the six million Jews by Hitler's monsters.

Unfortunately, I am not equal to depicting my anguished, sleepless nights, the nightmares in which I would see my brothers and sister and their family near Bialystok being herded with the other 20,000 Jews toward the railroad station, waiting three days without food or water and then loaded on to freight trains to go to Treblinka. This was in the summer of 1943. Many times I would dream of their journey to the crematory.

I have read many books about the third destruction. I have absorbed all the cruelties suffered by our brothers and sisters. These horrible pictures will remain with me till my last day. To complete the story of the most painful chapter of my life – the third destruction – I must note the murder of my brother Boris by the Stalin dictatorship in 1936.

4. My Livelihood

When we arrived in Los Angeles in 1933, we purchased a poultry market. We soon found that the business was a poor one. In 1934, after my brother arrived from New York, I purchased a kosher style restaurant (Ed. Note: Famous Café) in the Boyle Heights district. I took my brother-in-law as partner. The restaurant was open from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., seven days a week. We made a comfortable living.

After 1940, business dropped. My children married and my health took a turn for the worse. I felt compelled to sell out to my partner. A short time later, I purchased a large apartment house. This was a period of rent control and rising prices. As soon as I had the opportunity to sell at an attractive price, I sold this apartment house.

Because of my health, we moved to Santa Monica and purchased a small rental property.

5. My Fortieth Wedding Anniversary

On June 29, 1948, we celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary. My wife, Sarah, and I felt that at this critical period, when Israel was in great danger, it was no time to make a personal and private celebration. We interested our friends who were also celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary about the same time in organizing a fund-raising affair for Israel's army, the Haganah. We invited about 200 friends and relatives to this dinner, which we prepared at the Los Angeles Jewish Culture Club. Following the greetings, an appeal was made which yielded over \$2000 for the Central Jewish Welfare Fund.

6. From The Non-Partisan Culture Club to the Peretz Hirshbein Culture Club

In 1945, we moved to Santa Monica beach for health reasons. Here we met with people we had known in the city, and together we formed a non-partisan culture club. We met twice monthly discussing current events and holding lectures, and we read from our Yiddish classical literature. We would conclude with a little wine and song and enjoy ourselves into the small hours of the night. We looked forward with enthusiasm to those Friday nights together, like one family.

With the destruction of Yiddish culture in Soviet Russia in 1949, we began many discussions in the club on this problem and the extreme left-wingers in the group used all means to force the non-partisans out of the club. During this time we organized a non-partisan Yiddish culture club in the Bay Cities Community Center. Our purpose was to acquaint the Yiddish-speaking people by the Pacific with Yiddish literature and culture. Our lectures were always highly successful, with 60 to 100 people attending.

Unfortunately, the nationalistic-minded people in the community stayed away, and the left wingers took control. When I suggested a well-known Jewish writer in Los Angeles as a speaker I was rejected because they called him a Fascist. I resigned immediately.

At the end of 1950, a group of my colleagues and I organized the Peretz Hirshbein Culture Club. We met twice monthly and had large open meetings where we presented well-known Yiddish writers and lecturers. We help all Yiddish Culture organizations; we buy all newly published Yiddish books; and we support YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute.

7. The Peretz Hirshbein Library

In 1951, I suggested to our club that we should make attempts to build a Yiddish section in the Ocean Park Public Library. This suggestion was accepted by the library, and we began to collect Yiddish books. The official opening of this new Yiddish section was celebrated at an open presentation meeting attended by several hundred people. Officials of the Santa Monica Library and of the Board of Education came to give their blessing. Representatives of the Jewish Community Council and Community Center also greeted us. Also on the program was Esther Simiatcher Hirshbein, the well-known Yiddish poetess and widow of Peretz Hirshbein.

According to the statistics of the library for the years 1953-1954, about 100 books a month are taken out, and the Santa Monica Library has assigned \$100 yearly to the purchase of new Yiddish books. The Peretz Hirshbein Culture Club supports the library with a yearly allotment of \$50 to \$75.

8. Our Children and Grandchildren

In our home, Yiddish was the language that bound us together. We received Yiddish newspapers and periodicals regularly, and our home library grew. Our children graduated from the Yiddish Folks Schools. Our youngest son Hyman graduated from the New York Sholem Aleichem Yiddish High School. Our daughter Evelyn excelled in reciting Yiddish poetry and later studied dramatics under the direction of Alexander Granach. She was for several years a counselor at the Workmen's Circle Camp. To this day our children speak and write to us in Yiddish. At home and with their friends, our children speak English, but they read the Yiddish press. My younger son and his wife are active in Zionist organizations, including the San Diego Cottage of Israel. Our daughter and her husband, Mark Kanter, are active in the English-speaking branch of the Workman's Circle. They are founders and active members of the Workmen's Circle Chorus. In recent years, we have celebrated Passover Sedorim at our home with our children and grandchildren. We use the Workmen's Circle English Haggadah, and sing appropriate Yiddish and Hebrew songs. Our grandchildren have studied in Yiddish and Hebrew schools. Their speech is exclusively English.

Our children are Americanized in the best sense of the word. They are interested in Jewish life; they are supporters of all facets of Jewish communal life. Our oldest son, Sam, graduated from the Hebrew Technical Institute in New York. Our younger son, Hyman, graduated from Kansas State College, School of Veterinary Medicine. After receiving his degree of D.V.M., he followed a career in veterinary medicine and is employed by the California Bureau of Livestock Disease Control. Our daughter, Evelyn, studied at the University of California, Berkeley.

9. Interpretation and Summary

Although linguistic assimilation in the United States is proceeding rapidly, it cannot be compared to the assimilation and conversion in Germany and France before and after World War I. Several important factors run counter to spiritual assimilation in this country. (1) Compact Jewish masses are in the largest cities; (2) the emergence of the State of Israel; (3) the great stream of financial and political support of Israel and the warm interest of Jews here in events in Israel and elsewhere; and (4) the two-way exchange of Jews to and from Israel. All this has developed Jewish national feeling. Ties have been developed with Jews from all over the world except those behind the Iron Curtain. The American Jew feels proud of his Israeli brothers and their fight for political independence. One must also mention the impact of new Jewish centers and synagogues that have awakened Jewish national feeling among the native-born. Negative elements have also helped to strengthen Judaism – the Third Destruction – an unparalleled catastrophe in Jewish and world history, in which six million European Jews lost their lives and in which no country attempted rescue except Denmark and Sweden. The cruelty and indifference of the world towards the catastrophe of the six million Jews helped to strengthen the attitude of American Jewry toward the remainder of the European Jews.

I believe that a Jewish life will persist in the United States, in the future, perhaps not the same type as the one we secular Jews expected. The New Jewish life will use this English language and will adjust itself to the American environment. In the religious sphere of Judaism the orthodox, conservative and reform movements will tend to converge.

In a research study done in 1952 in Riverton, a typical middle-sized Jewish town on the eastern seaboard, 80% of the Jewish parents said that one of the chief attributes of being a Jew is adhering to the Jewish religion; 97% of the young people said the same, that religiousness is the most important part of Jewishness.

Of the American population in general, only 57% are members of a church; the proportion is approximately the same in the Jewish population. Of the many parochial schools that were in existence about twenty years ago, there are now 300 day schools where tens of thousands of Jewish children are being taught. The majority of these schools are orthodox, conservative and reform religious schools. But the young people do not follow orthodoxy as it existed fifty or sixty years ago. They are secular, modern and American.

Even in some of the orthodox synagogues, men and women now pray together. They take up sports, buy tickets to a show on Broadway (even of a sexy kind) in order to raise money for the school. The women and girls of the sister auxiliaries dress in the height of fashion - even the wives and daughters of the Rabbis. In short, they behave just the same as other Americans.

The students of Yeshiva University learn secular subjects. It has been observed that a large proportion of those who finish Yeshiva University become members of the conservative and even reform temples.

The Riverton Study, which the American Jewish Committee published in 1958, is the result of a survey which was carried on among a group of Jews outside New York. The percentages of the separate religious groups are: 43% attend the conservative synagogues, 30% the reform synagogues, 16% orthodox and 11% are "passive".

As I said before, even the orthodox synagogues and their rabbis are becoming more and more worldly. It is almost quite clear that the future and framework of Jewish life in America is a religious one, but very far removed from Jewish religion as it was hundreds and thousands of years ago. The shell, the outside is religious, but the essence is worldly, American.

The birth of the Jewish labor movement in the nineteenth century in Europe and the widespread Jewish unionism in the United States resulted in a renaissance of Yiddish literature on both sides of the Atlantic. The Yiddish press reached a circulation of millions and Yiddish books, tens of thousands. Because of the recent Jewish catastrophe in Europe in World War II, which destroyed the heart and soul of the Jewish people in central Europe, and the final destruction of Jewish culture in USSR, I do not see a bright future for secular Jewish culture in Yiddish. Meanwhile, one must not be pessimistic; millions of Jews still speak Yiddish, and the Yiddish press has hundreds of thousands of readers. Voluminous and weighty Yiddish books are still published wherever Jews are located.

I hope and believe that the leaders of Israel will eventually realize that Yiddish cannot and must not be obliterated. It is a language used by Jews for 800 years, a language of creation, that mirrored triumph and tragedy from the cradle to the grave and expressed tears and happiness; the language used by millions as they went to Hitler's crematories; Yiddish was made holy by their martyrdom.

Being Zionists and Territorialists from our early youth, both my wife and I greeted the rebirth of Israel from the bottom of our hearts. We take an active part in all campaigns for the support of Israel. We have bought and are still buying bonds for Israel.

We organized the Peretz Hirshbein Culture Club and are members of the Los Angeles Jewish Culture Club, active members of the YIVO, subscribers to the "Day", a Yiddish daily, "Zukunft" (future), Yiddish "Kemfer", "Freie Arbeter Stimme", "Goldene Kayt", and "Bialystoker Stimme". I read newly published Yiddish books.

I am happy and grateful that I decided in 1916 to immigrate to the United States with my family. I am satisfied with my economic position, even though I am not rich. Most important, my family, children and grandchildren are living in the free, democratic United States. If I were a believer, I would thank God three times a day for having made the decision to leave Europe and for being able to settle peacefully in the United States.

The year 1958 is an important one in my life. At the end of June 1908, fifty years ago, I was married to my "chosen" girl, Sorke Goniondski.

To commemorate fifty years of married life, we decided to see with our own eyes the dream and ideal of our youth, the state of Israel. On March 23 of that year, we arrived in New York on our way there.

It had been twenty-five years since we left New York. It was a great joy to meet with our friends Goodman and his wife Paiya. There at his home gathered ten or twenty comrades and friends whom we had not seen for twenty-five years. It was a very pleasant meeting, one which we shall remember for many years.

We arrived in Israel on April 2. We were there six weeks, and met with comrades we had not seen for forty or fifty years. We became familiar with the cultural state of the land; did a tour over the length and breadth of it; visited cities, villages and kibbutzim.

Both my wife and I have given reports of our visit to Israel to large audiences. They were enthusiastic at the realistic picture we drew for them. The good and positive impressions will remain with us to the last breath of our lives.

We were also in Rome two days, at the world's fair in Brussels, and in Paris four days; we saw the most important historical places in these capital cities.

Returning at the beginning of June, we learned of the surprise, which our children had prepared for us. They had sent out to all of our family, to the members of our culture club and to friends

and acquaintances invitations to our golden wedding anniversary, emphasizing that no gifts should be sent to us personally, but that money might be sent for Jewish social organizations. \$600 was raised for the United Jewish Appeal.

Over eighty people were gathered in a very nice hall (Ed. Note: Rancho Park in West Los Angeles) with artistic pictures, where a first-class supper was served, with abundant champagne, speeches and dancing until late into the night.

Acknowledgement

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(All of the above articles were written by Max Pogorelsky)