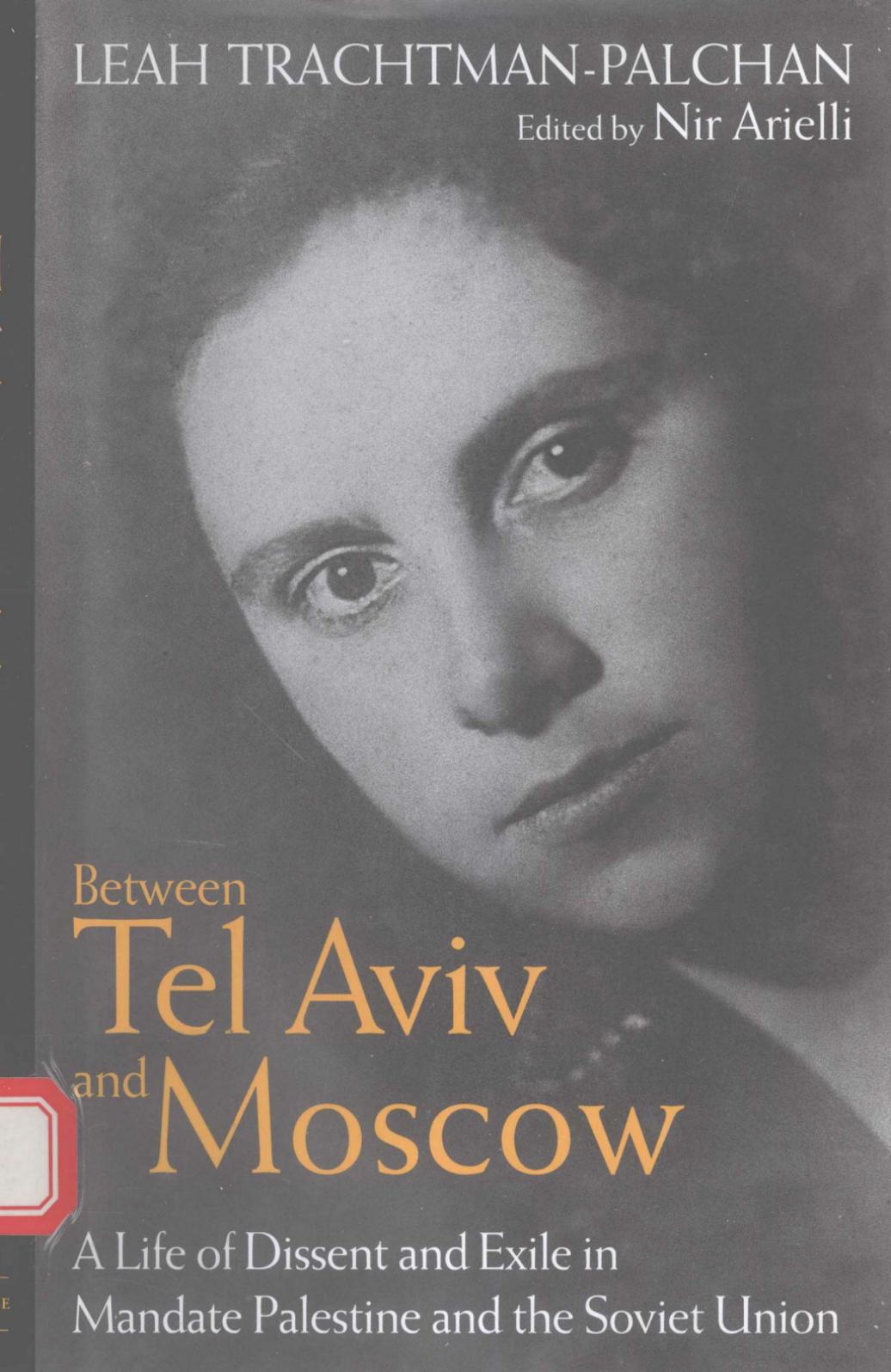



LEAH TRACHTMAN-PALCHAN

Edited by Nir Arielli



Between
Tel Aviv
and
MOSCOW



A Life of Dissent and Exile in
Mandate Palestine and the Soviet Union

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Foreword

Leah was an ordinary woman who lived an extraordinary life. Her story is one of migration, dissent, exile and survival; of great courage and naivety; of human solidarity and disappointments; of anxieties and hopes. She was born in the final years of the Tsarist Russian Empire, and her family was forced to leave their native *shtetl*, in what is now eastern Ukraine, by the repeated pogroms of the Civil War era. A two-year voyage followed, bringing the family, after some hardship, to British-ruled Palestine in 1921.

Here what might seem like a typical Jewish story of migration from Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century takes an unexpected turn. As a teenager Leah joined the nascent Communist movement in Palestine, almost by chance according to her description. Being a Communist, as she soon found out, meant being 'persecuted by the British authorities, the police, the Yishuv [Jewish community in Palestine] and its institutions'. The Palestine Communist Party (PCP) was outlawed and most of its activities were conducted underground. Though party membership never exceeded a few hundred at any given time, the Communists' anti-imperialist propaganda was seen by the British Mandate authorities as a serious threat. Moreover, because of the PCP's anti-Zionist stance, members of the party were shunned by the Jewish establishment in Palestine. Like many of her peers, Leah was arrested, spent time in prison and was eventually deported back to her native country, which had, by now, transformed into the USSR.

The next forty years were spent in the Soviet Union. Leah married, had two children and helped to raise a third after his parents were arrested. In 1956, during the thaw that followed Stalin's death, she was allowed to travel to Israel to visit her ageing parents. Finally, after several requests had been turned down, Leah and her family were granted permission to leave the Soviet Union in 1971. They settled in Israel, where Leah died in December 1995.

Leah was my great-aunt. Like her elder sister Tovah (my grandmother), she had a sensitive soul and an incredible memory for human encounters. Thanks to these attributes her memoirs are filled with

colourful sketches of the people who passed through her life. Leah rarely encountered the high and mighty. Her account is a 'history from below', in which the protagonists struggle to get by. Her description of the pogroms is reminiscent of Isaac Babel's childhood stories. Later on, her memoirs provide a unique peek into the lives of newly arrived immigrants in Tel Aviv of the 1920s, factory workers in Moscow during the first Five Year Plan, peasants uprooted from their lands in the years of Stalinist collectivization and international Leftist dissidents who came to find shelter at the heart of Communism.

The memoirs capture the pitiful fate of the deportees and political émigrés from Palestine in the Soviet Union, many of whom were arrested during the Great Purges of the late 1930s. Indeed, some of the founders and early leaders of the PCP – including, among others, Wolf Averbach, Nahum Leshchinsky, Moshe Kuperman and Ze'ev Birman – were either executed or perished in the Gulag camps.¹ Where possible, brief biographical notes about individual Communists from Palestine who are mentioned in the book have been provided in the footnotes.

Leah depicts the extremely harsh conditions which workers' families endured following the evacuation of factories to Siberia during World War II. She provides a glimpse into the daily routine of the Soviet home front: the struggle to survive and to obtain sufficient amounts of food, the long working hours and so on. Leah also describes the rife anti-Semitism that accompanied the Soviet regime's 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Inevitably, with the years that had gone by since the events took place, the way Leah perceived her own past changed. The Communist zeal of her youth diminished and her rediscovered Zionism grew in stature. In a curious omission, her love for fellow party-member Meir Slonim, which must have played a part in her decision to remain an active member of the PCP despite the risks involved, goes unmentioned in her description of what she calls 'life underground'. Indeed, the love affair only emerges when Meir and Leah are reunited in Moscow in 1931, shedding new light on the period leading up to the deportation from Palestine.

Written over a number of years from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Leah's memoirs were published in Hebrew in three parts. The

1 Jacob Hen-Tov, *Communism and Zionism in Palestine during the British Mandate* (New Brunswick and London, 2012), pp. 32–56.

first of these, 'From Small Tel Aviv to Moscow', covered the period between 1913 and 1931. It was published in 1989, while Leah was still alive. The second part, 'Forty Years of Life of an Israeli Woman in the Soviet Union', was published posthumously in 1996. Despite its title, this small booklet covered only the period from Leah's deportation from Palestine in 1931 to 1939. The remainder of Leah's manuscript was published by her husband, Michael Palchan, in 2003 under the title 'Nostalgia'. It included parts which were not fully edited by Leah before she died.

The English version before you has been abridged, reducing the overlaps between the various parts of the manuscript. It also omits the final years Leah spent in the Soviet Union, between 1956 and 1971. During those years Leah's eldest son, Arik, served in the military and was posted to Cuba during the famous Missile Crisis. Both of Leah's sons later became involved in the clandestine Zionist movement which began to gain momentum in the Soviet Union after 1967. Alas, the text describing these years was incomplete and thus the English edition ends with Leah's visit to Israel in 1956.

Leah was born 100 years ago. Her story is a poignant reminder of how the great ideologies and confrontations of the century since her birth have shaped people's lives in so many unpredictable ways.

Nir Arielli

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All images, courtesy of the Trachtman-Palchan Estate.

Introduction to the Hebrew Edition

During a family gathering in 1985, my eldest son Arik said to me: 'Please sit down Mother, and tell us about your childhood.'

He gathered my grandchildren and turned on the tape recorder. I started recounting in Russian.

I am sitting on the *zavalinka* (a bench protruding from the foundation of the house) and eating freshly cut cucumbers with dark bread from a plate that is sitting to my right. The cucumbers and the bread smell delicious. In my left hand I am holding my favourite doll. Her head is made of porcelain. My doll has a white face, her cheeks are pink, her eyes and hair are black. Her body is a sock stuffed with rags. The acacia trees in the garden of the house across the street are in bloom. The acacia trees grow tall in Ukraine. I can smell the sweet scent of the blossoms. We loved to suck on the sweet-tasting tiny white flowers. The sun is shining.

I remember a feeling that I was not yet able to express in words: from beyond that house across the street, the one with the blooming garden, bandits on horseback may suddenly appear, riding into town.

Then everything will go dark and the killing will begin.

I recall this feeling of contrast, the polar opposition between the beauty of the world and the cruelty of the plunderers; the bewilderment – my inability to truly process these two extreme phenomena that had been revealed before me as soon as I opened my eyes to the beautiful and cruel world. I remember well the insecurity and the fear.

A short time following this gathering, I decided to write my life story. I had come to the conclusion that I should set it down in Hebrew and in chronological order, given that I remember occurrences that

took place before the pogroms, events reflecting the peaceful life of the town.

I decided to write my memoir in Hebrew because my sister Miriam, who was three years old when we left our town, my sister Sarah, who was born in Kishinev, my sister Bat-Ami and my brother Yaakov, who were born in Israel, know nothing about our family's life before we set off. And of course, not all of my grandchildren would be able to understand my story if it were in Russian.

Part One

Childhood Memories

I was born on 24 Cheshvan¹ 1913 in the town of Sokolivka (Yustingrad), to my mother Haya of Kenele and my father Yosef of Sokolivka. I am the second-born daughter in the family. My older sister is a year and ten months my senior.

If you've watched the Streisand movie *Yentl*, you would have seen a town similar to my grandfather's town, Kenele. There is one specific house in the movie that seems like an exact replica of my grandfather Benyamin Tartuta's house.

Our town was named after the neighbouring Ukrainian village of Sokolivka, but its official name was Yustingrad. Most of the houses in the town were built out of mortar. The bricks were made from mortar and straw. The wealthy people's houses, or, shall we say, those of the town's more well-to-do, were made of wood or red brick.

The sweet factory near uncle Chayim's house, facing the synagogue, was built of red brick, as was the public bathhouse that stood across the street from the Dozortz family house. The Rabbi's house behind the bathhouse was also a stone house with steps and a surrounding garden. I remember the Rabbi, in his distinctive dress and *shtreimel*,² descending the staircase into the garden. His house was painted a light colour. There were no paved roads or sidewalks in the town. All through the autumn and winter months the town was steeped in mud

¹ The second month in the Jewish calendar, Cheshvan is an autumn month.

² *Shtreimel*: a traditional fur hat.

or snow. I loved the springtime, when we could run and play on the paths once they dried.

* * *

We always had rent to pay. We did not have a house of our own. I remember we went through three apartments during that period. The first one was in the Dozortz family's house.

The father of the Dozortz family was no longer alive. The mother would go out every morning. Their boys and girls were older than us. In this house my sister Miriam was born; I still remember her birth. The Dozortz family housed another tenant, a young woman who lived there with her little boy. She had some sort of mania about cleanliness and she would always yell at her son while cleaning her apartment. One night I had a dream. In my dream this neighbour was shaking out a blanket with her son near a narrow canal just beyond the fence. She was yelling at the boy.

I was awakened by screaming and saw that in front of me, in my parents' big wooden bed, my mother lay and the midwife stood by the bed, pulling a baby out of Mother's body, all covered in blood, and setting it in the wooden basin that we used for doing laundry and bathing the children. I broke out in tears, screaming. Father came over to me and handed me an empty cigarette box to calm me down. On the box, about the size of half a notebook page, was printed a picture by Repin, the great Russian artist (the picture can be found in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow). And so, at three years and two months old, I witnessed the birth of my sister Miriam.

The Dozortz girls would mind us sometimes. I recall being held in one of the girls' arms: we are standing next to a tree in the garden and I am peeling off the sticky nectar and putting it in my mouth. We would also eat raspberries straight from the bushes near the fence. Mother would take my older sister Tovah and me up to a peasant woman. While she was milking, she would reach into her bucket of milk and hand us two cups, one for Tovah and one for myself.

The Dozortz house and the Rabbi's house bordered the Ukrainian villagers' houses, with some distance between them.

A medic (*feldsher*) would come over to treat us children and give us injections. He was wounded in the war and had some sort of device in his throat. When he spoke it made a sound – 'tik tok tik tok'. I was terrified of him and would start screaming whenever he appeared. We lived in the Dozortz house before the pogroms began.

* * *

Later we moved to a house near the marketplace. You could cross the square into the marketplace, reaching a line of shops, including our father's shop. By the shops there was a large lot where, once a week, a market was held. The villagers would arrive with their carts packed full of wares and sell fruit and vegetables, horses and cows. It was terribly crowded. I remember myself standing between the carts with Father, holding his hand and looking at the tumultuous market.

I recall a specific incident on one such market day: I was standing in a narrow alley – a gap between the shops – and suddenly a tall peasant woman appeared in front of me, a young woman, about my mother's age, with a colourful flowered shawl on her shoulders, her feet in heavy boots. She stepped on my big toe with the heel of her boot, pushing it down until I bled. Such hatred – stepping on a little girl's foot till it bled, just because she's Jewish. Of course there were other sorts of people among the villagers, like those who saved my father's life twice.

The landlord's daughter was a beautiful girl and we liked her very much. I remember her wearing a thin sweater of woven black and white silk, and she was always with a pleasant smile on her face. Sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, we gathered around her. She was already married and we knew her handsome young husband as well. I recall her sitting in that same room, sobbing dreadfully. Her husband had travelled to the county town of Oman to purchase wares and was murdered by bandits on the way. It was the first time I'd heard of Jews being killed.

Our grandmother Rachel, my mother's mother, came to visit us in that house. My mother's parents were divorced, and my father, while still a groom, dealt with their divorce. During this visit Rachel was already married to another man and living in a different city, and here she was at our house. She slept in the big room in the only bed, which stood by the wall facing the entrance. Every morning she got dressed in bed. Her undergarments were pink, her face was pale and her black hair was spread over her shoulders. I was looking at my beautiful grandmother. Suddenly, my father appeared in the hallway coming from my parents' room and the kitchen, and Grandmother lets out an 'Oy!' and covers herself. That is the only memory I have of my grandmother Rachel.

It pains me that Mother, following such a life full of hardship and physical and mental suffering, left behind only a few pages of

memories. She put so much effort into taking care of her brothers and sisters, and how she cared for us! Protecting us, hiding us, saving us from the pogroms. When I was a girl of fourteen or fifteen, she told me that she had wanted to study. She attended the *cheder*³ and studied, but Grandfather took her away from there. He said that for a girl, a woman, it was enough to know how to write letters and pray. She told me she had wanted to be a writer. Walking out into the bright morning light, the sunbeams illuminating the church's golden dome, she was struck by the desire to write, to describe the beautiful view before her. The few pages she left behind are indeed written with great talent. They lay untouched, for it was difficult to decipher her notes, in Yiddish no less. I copied them and translated them into Hebrew for her grandchildren, giving each one a copy. If I manage to finish my memoir, I'll add my mother's memories to mine. I continue to write so that our children and grandchildren will know about the life we've been through, so they can appreciate a life of peace, quiet and freedom. Bat-Ami once revealed to me that no one in our family ever told her a thing about our life in the town. She knows of *shtetl* life only from literature.

In our second house we lived peacefully, without fear; before the pogroms began. Father owned a grocery shop. Mother would make homemade sausages to sell. We loved to eat those sausages straight out of the oven. The house had a cellar, fully stocked. In cherry season Mother would make *vishniac* – cherry wine. She would sit in the cellar with buckets full of ripened cherries. She would pit them, and we ate to our heart's content. I don't remember the entire *vishniac* preparation process, just sitting with Mother by the buckets and enjoying the tasty cherries and the *vishniac*, ready to drink. The cellar also housed barrels full of apples and pickled watermelon. All of these tasted divine. I recall the distinct flavour of our apples, pears and melons. The Soviet collectivization destroyed the gardens by taxing every tree.

When I returned to the Soviet Union in 1931 I did not get a chance to taste all these fruits and vegetables that I once loved. We went hungry. Basic foodstuffs were 'bought' with payslips. They were of very poor quality. I especially remember the herring, too dry and salty. At the same time, in Palestine, fish of all sorts, imported from the USSR, were sold. These were of high quality. Mother used to buy them, as well as fish preserved in tomato sauce. But these were

3 *Cheder*: a traditional Jewish elementary school.

just for export, in order to receive the coveted foreign currency with which the Soviet Union would pay for machinery for Stalin's industrialization.

The Town and Our Relatives' Way of Life

At the edge of town, behind Grandmother's house, lived the 'simple people' – the cart owners (*balegule* in Yiddish). The *balegules* were sturdy folk, with a belt over their coats, boots on their feet and a whip in their hands. They dressed like peasants. Their language was crude as well. They were considered less educated than the serious scholars with their long *capotes* and *peyot*.⁴ Our town thought highly of the Yeshiva students who studied the Torah. When a rich man sought a good husband for his daughter, he cared only if he was a Torah scholar, it didn't matter if he had no money.

The homes of the wealthy people were surrounded with fenced gardens, fruit trees and suchlike. Most of the town's residents lived in houses that faced a square with no greenery. The women would bake their own bread in a Russian oven. Greyish dark bread in flat round loaves on weekdays and *halas* on Sabbath. Buckwheat flour was used to make fried pancakes. I remember Tovah and I in the morning, still in bed, and Mother coming in from the kitchen and serving us these pancakes hot out of the pan.

In the town's centre stood two neat rows of shops. Next to my father's shop and his brothers' shops, all of them fishmongers, were shops selling foodstuffs. In the row across the street, parted by a wide dirt path, were shops selling all sorts of wares.

I once took a stroll with my father along the line of shops; he went into a kiosk to get a glass of beer and he let me have a taste. It tasted so bitter that I couldn't imagine why anyone would drink such a beverage. To this day I don't like drinking beer.

On a different occasion I stood outside a shop that displayed in its window beads of all shapes and sizes: red, blue, green and yellow ones. I especially liked the green beads. As soon as I got home I began pleading with my mother to buy me those beads. Mother promised that once she'd finished cooking she'd go to the shop with me and buy the beads. Later she said she'd take me once she finished tidying the house. When she had finished with the house she started the laundry, me at

4 *Capotes* and *peyot*: long coats and traditional Jewish side-locks.

her side, and promised that as soon as the laundry was done we'd go to the shop. I moped around at her heels that entire day. Eventually I realized it was getting dark and that Mother wouldn't be buying me any beads, and burst into tears.

I still remember vividly all of those times that I cried my heart out as a little girl. Adults sometimes forget how sensitive a child's heart can be, especially to a lie. That incident was a lesson in education. I never promised my children anything I could not give them. I told them the truth: 'This is not for you' or 'We're unable to purchase this for you.'

* * *

Father was light-haired and had a ginger beard. His eyes were grey. My sisters Tovah and Sarah look like Father.

Grandmother Yente, Father's mother, remained a widow with seven boys. Father was ten years old when his father died. As a child I was nicknamed 'Baba Yente' on account of my mallet-like nose, similar to hers. She was a resourceful woman, honest and just, but with a hot temper. That is how my mother described her to me when we received the news of her death. Her sons brought her to America and there she died. Grandmother Yente's house stood on a hilltop, with a courtyard at its front. It was an elongated house, painted a light yellow colour. Like the rest of the houses in town, it had only one floor. I don't recall any house that had two storeys, neither in Sokolivka nor in Kenele.

Right next to Grandmother's house was the apartment of Uncle Mordechai (Motie). Motie was a well-respected man and a successful fish merchant in town. A serious man, with a *yarmulke* on his head and a black beard. I have one memory from Motie's house: Tovah and I are sitting on his porch, which had stained-glass windows, having tea in Japanese or Chinese mugs. Motie left for America following the 1917 February Revolution.

During the pogroms people in the town spoke of Motie. I remember hearing the adults saying: 'Motie told us not to celebrate or go out and demonstrate. He said there would be pogroms against the Jews.' I remember that very rally. When word came of the Tsar's expulsion, the townspeople came out to mark the occasion in the marketplace with flowers of red silk on their clothes. How old was I in February of 1917? I was three years and three months. And, really, each revolution entailed pogroms against the Jews. This happened during the 1905 Revolution, too.

Near my Grandmother's house lived my Father's brothers, Zalman and Shneior, with their families. Grandmother's house bordered a dirt path leading to the next town, a road we would ride or walk on to Kenele, my mother's town, five versts⁵ away from Sokolivka. Zalman's house stood on the other side of this path. I do not recall the exact location of Shneior's house – the only brother who stayed in the Soviet Union – but his children, Berl and Hirsch (Boris and Grisha), would come to play with us from the direction of Grandmother's house. They are the same ages as Tovah and I.

I remember Grandmother sitting on the *zavalinka* and binding brushes for whitewashing houses out of dried reeds. It was said that this was how she provided for the family after Grandfather passed away. The houses were whitewashed with white mortar and the floors of houses that had no wooden floors were spread with brown mortar for Sabbath. In the third house we lived in, Uncle Haim's house, I recall this sort of floor. We were only allowed inside the house once the floor had dried. I saw this type of floor after World War II in Bessarabia, in Kagol, in Shifra's house (my husband's sister).

There was another relative in the town – Aunt Shindel – my mother's aunt. Her house stood over the stream, near the bridge. This bridge was used to travel to Oman. The way by the bridge also led to the town's commercial centre. The stream's water was green, probably because it reflected the trees and bushes surrounding it. We bathed in this stream, behind the bridge. A pleasant scent rose from its clear water. Shindel's house stood on the bank of the stream. Behind her house was a garden, sloping down into the stream. I don't know the name of the stream (in the town it was called Taicha). Fruit trees grew in Shindel's garden. I remember visits at Shindel's because I loved the garden and the food she'd serve us.

The town was also home to the family of Haim, Father's brother. He was already in America. His wife, whom I was acquainted with, died during the pogroms. I will say more about his children later on. We lived in the same house with Haim's family during the last period of our life in the town.

* * *

My maternal grandfather and grandmother divorced after their youngest son fell off a horse and died at fifteen. Father, who as Mother's

⁵ Verst: a Russian unit for measuring distance. 1 verst is slightly longer than 1 kilometre.