

JewishGen

PASSOVER COMPANION



Seder plate of Jozsef and Johanna Toffler. Gift of Lilly Teitelbaum, 2001.A.33

5781 | תשפ"א

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Design: Jen Klor, Jerusalem | jenklor.com

About the Cover Image



This pewter plate was made for the Toffler family of Presov, Slovakia (Austro-Hungary), c. 1770 and was used at the Passover seder meal. The plate is engraved with instructions in Hebrew about how to prepare the meal, and in the middle is an illustration and text about the slaughtering of a lamb. This refers to the biblical commandment for the Passover sacrifice performed at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem on the eve of Passover and eaten on the first night of the holiday. The plate is damaged, with holes in the metal, as it was buried along with other family valuables during the time of the Holocaust. Emma Toffler, one of the family members who survived, retrieved it after the war.

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INTRODUCTION

MARCH 2021/NISSAN 5781



Dear Friends,

As we approach Passover 2021/5781 (beginning Saturday night, March 27), it is hard to believe that more than a year has passed since COVID-19 first began to spread. Our prayers continue to be with everyone impacted, as we remain hopeful for the successful distribution of vaccines throughout the world.

Passover is a holiday synonymous with the transmission of familial and communal memory to current and future generations. Last year, the medically mandated need to isolate within the confines of our own homes, made it logistically challenging to accomplish this. This year, however, our Seder tables will hopefully look different. Access to vaccines allows us to cautiously begin reconnecting with friends and family, and to make up for time lost over the past 12 months. When we recite in the Haggadah “we were once strangers in the land of Egypt” – we can empathize directly with the many people who suffered over the past year, who felt like strangers in their very own homes.

This edition of the JewishGen Passover Companion contains excerpts from the Yizkor Book and KehilaLinks sections of the JewishGen.org site. They focus on how Passover was experienced by our ancestors, sometimes during times of great distress. It also



includes, as in previous years, first-hand accounts about the great effort and personal risk (*Mesirat Nefesh*) Jews took to observe the holiday during the Holocaust.

As you read this Companion, consider how JewishGen provides comfort and hope to the thousands of researchers who turn to us each month, and who consider themselves to be “strangers” in search of their own families. Our work, fueled by volunteers, directly supports the ability of families separated by time and space – strangers in a world filled with people – to slowly reconnect, to slowly discover themselves, and to gradually reclaim their family legacy.

Particularly in such troubled times, we remain ever committed to our important work, mindful of the role we play in revitalizing and strengthening Jewish identity and continuity. And we will continue to devote ourselves to this cause in the years ahead. In the meantime, it is our fervent hope that each of you have a happy, healthy and safe Passover, filled with meaningful moments of connections, happiness, and only good things.

Jack Kliger
President & CEO
Museum of Jewish Heritage –
A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

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COMMOTION BEFORE PASSOVER

Horodetz, Belarus

This excerpt from the Yizkor book of Horodetz, describes the feverish preparations for the holiday undertaken by the Jewish residents of the small Belarus shtetl, as well as how they celebrated it.

In 1921, just 241 Jews lived in Horodetz (Haradzets), then in the Polesie province of Poland. Between the Wars, Horodetz Jews were fated to “drink a very large portion from the bitter cup.” Much of the town was destroyed by the Germans during WWI, who then ruled the town before it was taken over by gangs, and then the new Polish state, which introduced racial purity laws, compulsory public education, and military service. The remaining Jews in the town wished to escape “... but already there was no place to go. There was no longer the possibility of leaving and the Jews no longer had the strength to leave. The few Jews who still remained in Horodetz were the old and the children. The younger Jews had immediately gone to peaceful Brisk and began to escape to America.”

After briefly being controlled by the Soviet Red Army in 1939, the town was occupied by the Germans, who “enslaved, tortured, killed and confined to [the Jews to] a ghetto. The Horodetz Jews did not surrender but rather rebelled, sabotaged and escaped to the partisans in the forests, who were giving the Germans plenty of trouble ... But Hitler was stronger ... Horodetz became empty of her Jews. No more was there Jewish charm in the old Jewish village, no longer is heard the voices of children, Jewish hearts no longer beat there. A quiet cemetery atmosphere is felt in the air, which is soaked with blood. No traveller can stay there because of the sadness which hangs in the air ... it was a Jewish village and now it is no more.”

RIGHT after Purim, there was a great deal of commotion in Horodets. People started right away to prepare for Passover. As you know – it was necessary to have matzo for Passover! There were *shvalniyes* [sewing workshops] in the “market” and in the “street.” The furniture from those houses were taken out and replaced by big tables and other tools that belonged to the sewing workshops. Generally this work was done cooperatively: one would help the other to bake the matzos.

Everybody knew how to roll the matzos. That was done by the women. However, only



The “Cold Shul” in Horodetz, reputed to have dated back to the early 1600’s

a few men knew how to make punctures in the matzos. It was a great honor to make the punctures in the matzos. I was also privileged to puncture, at Israel Yankel’s *shvalnie*, thanks to the grown up children who gave me this

opportunity. When the matzos were ready, they were stacked, right away, in a big *bodniye* (a sort of barrel) and locked until Passover. Nobody was allowed to get close to the matzos, for fear that there would not be enough matzos for Passover. It was impossible to buy or bake other matzos. All the women were busy both by day and by night. In every house, the fire was burning all night, for fear they would oversleep and miss getting up to bake the matzos.

And what about whitewashing the house?

And who will scrape and scrub the benches/ chairs, beds and other household furniture? In short, the women were busy day and night. Is it a trifle? The joyful Passover is drawing near.

Children were also busy: they have to help their mothers – some would hand the *derkatch* (a worn out broom), some would hand the white-wash or just bring down the Passover table-wear from the *boydem* [attic]. Right after Purim we would suffer exile. The tables, chairs and beds were put away in the backyard and in the middle of the house they put a barrel, and

on top of it – a board, to serve as a table. And what about sleeping? Some slept on the floor and some on the oven. Food was not so hot. Therefore there were other good things as a reward: we ran to the tailor to be fitted with

new clothes, and to the shoemaker to be fitted with new shoes.

Thank God, we made it to Passover's eve. There is no *Kheder* now. We are free as a bird, we can go wherever and whenever we wish. The house is clean, tidy and white-washed. Yellow sand was poured on the floor and we prepare for the Seder. There is joy in our hearts and also in our pockets (as they are full of nuts). We are wearing a new garment and on our feet – new shoes or boots. Truthfully, our toes are somewhat squeezed in there but the shoemaker said: “until after Passover it will be OK.” Nu, we have to believe him...

On Passover, after the festive midday meal, the young men would go out to the highway, all of them bragging about their new garments and about their pockets full of nuts. The moment they were farther away from the shtetl, all of them would start cracking their nuts. All were merry and in good spirits.

On *khol Hamoed* [intermediary weekdays between the first two and last days of the holiday], the *melamdim* [*kheder* teachers] started preparing their *kheders* before summer. Each of them made an effort to look well groomed. They combed their beard, twisted their

whiskers, and with a pretty cane in hand they went into the houses to recruit their pupils. This visit was not so agreeable for the boys because the teacher would interview-test them and not all children knew or remembered what they had learned. However, the teacher had found a way to make it appear that the child answered well. After all, he had to have them in *kheder* before summer. The children barely breathed before the teacher was gone. Then, all boys set out together on the way to the train station. That was an old custom in Horodets, to walk to the train station on *khol Hamoed*. All of them returned together from the station to the shtetl with a song on their lips. In a word – it was lively and joyful.

As soon as the holiday was approaching its end, the heart felt gloomy. We had to go back to the *kheder* and nobody liked it. However, what could we do? It had to be like that! Therefore we got some compensation: we helped carry up the Passover table-wear to the attic, and that, in a way, was a continuation of Passover.

Where does one obtain a Horodetser Passover?

To learn more about **Horodetz**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/gorodets/Gorodets.html>

THE FIRST SEDER

Somewhere in Germany

The following is a journal entry written by Staff Sergeant Robert A. Press, of the US Army, on March 30, 1945. It was submitted to us by his son, Dr. Barry Press (San Jose, CA) and it describes the first Seder held “somewhere in Germany” upon the American led invasion.

It’s possible that Sgt. Press was describing the first Seder held in Munich, but he was prohibited from disclosing his location at the time, and did not remember the exact location as the years went by.

TODAY is just an ordinary day, as so was yesterday, but something happened yesterday that proved to me that someday there will be peace again. Yesterday I celebrated the Seder Dinner in Germany. It wasn’t just an ordinary celebration, it was the first Seder held on German soil since Hitler had tried to annihilate the Jews. The celebration yesterday proved how unsuccessful he was.

The candles rested in a Menorah, which had been fished out of a rubbish pile. The crude destruction of some SS man was obvious, one arm was broken off, others were bent, yet this Menorah made history. Oh yes, we had a general there too, he wasn’t Jewish, yet he realized what this celebration meant. We

weren’t sitting around a table, we didn’t have any white tablecloth. We had to “requisition” our furniture, so we could sit. And we weren’t wearing our best clothes. We had our combat uniforms, steel helmets, and our rifles were between our knees. There was plenty of ammunition in our clips – we had come back. We had come back to destroy the fanatics who were, in vain, attempting to destroy us.

The RAF was represented, there were French girls, there was a Jewish Chaplain, a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister ... everyone was in uniform. The civilians were conspicuous by their absence. There was wine, not much, very few got a mouthful. There was food – we ate it in our mess kits, and had to stand in line to

get it. Nevertheless a spirit of festivity prevailed, here was a celebration that will be remembered by everyone who attended it, and maybe it will be remembered by the world.

Around us was destruction – destruction that can't be described by mere words. You cannot visualize the desolation of destroyed buildings, you can only feel it. Every building tells another story, yet in ruins, it retains its own personality. German propaganda was still on the bare walls. The idea which rose to destroy the Jews in Germany told its own story.

And here we were, listening to the ancient words of the *Kiddusch*, celebrating the exodus from Egypt. The American, the Frenchman,

the Englishman, the Christian, the Jew – everybody was listening. These weren't mere words, praising the wine, but rather these were words that proved that we had come back. Were we avengers? Some Yes ... others no. We were proving to the world, and to ourselves that no one can destroy a religion, a people, just because they will to.

Everyone felt it ... this was a privilege that very few people can enjoy. We were proving our point. We are winning this war.

In the year 1945, on the 29th day of March, we celebrated Seder in Germany.



It is estimated that approximately 7,000 Jewish Displaced Persons lived in Munich after the war. Many Jewish organizations maintained offices in the city, and multiple newspapers were published, including the famous *Yiddische Shtime*.

To learn more, visit: <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/MassMigration/mas054.html>



USHERING IN THE FESTIVAL PROPERLY

Motol, Belarus

This piece comes from the Motol, Belarus KehilaLinks page, which is overseen by Debra Wolraich and Charlynn Mikller. As with some of the earlier excerpts, it offers readers a glimpse into Passover within a town and culture that no longer exists.

Motol is located about 20 miles west of Pinsk on the Yasolda River in a region called Polesie made up mainly of forest and the marshlands from the many tributaries of the Pripet River.

In Jehuda Reinharz's book, *Chaim Weizmann: The Making of a Zionist Leader*, two stories are told about the founding of the town of Motol, both having taken place in the mid seventeenth century. In one, the original town was destroyed by Chmielnick's Cossacks and, in the other it was destroyed during the Swedish invasion of Poland. In both cases, a Jew named Motol or Mordechai survived the destruction and erected a building that then or later became a tavern or inn that was frequented by travelers or merchants on their way from Minsk to Pinsk and Pinsk to Minsk. Perhaps it is that tavern that gave rise to the saying, "from Minsk to Pinsk and Motele on Shabbas."

By 1847 the Jewish population grew to 222, and in another fifty years totaled 1,354 among the 4,297 inhabitants of Motol.

THE weeks before Passover were most exciting. A lot had to be done to usher in the festival properly. Right after Purim Mother put up beets to ferment, [Yiddish word] (russle), for Passover herself. She also made mead, a sweet, non-alcoholic drink made of honey, water and hops and put them away in a safe corner,

covered with a cloth, not to be touched to avoid contamination. Then everything in the house had to be washed, polished and scrubbed, the walls whitewashed. Even the books got a good airing. All year-round dishes were put away to be replaced by those reserved for Passover. Some items had to be "koshered:" silver, certain pots

scalded in boiling water; glasses soaked in cold water for three days.

Because there were no matzoh factories, the matzoh had to be baked at home, mostly in our house as we had a large kitchen, dining room and good oven. We also had large brass mixing bowls. (They were taken away by the Russians in the first World War.) Long, improvised tables made of smooth wooden boards for rolling the matzot were put in the dining room. Several

the oven and a carrier to put the baked matzot into a white sheet. The following days we were busy pounding matzotat [sic] in a wooden mortar to make farfel and matsah meal.

When we moved to Pinsk, there was a matzah bakery with hired help. But we had to pitch in, too. We carried the matzah home in a large wicker basket lined with a white sheet. The matzot were kept there for the duration of the holiday.



Photo of the house in which Chaim Weizman was born

families made use of the facilities, and they pitched in because the baking had to be done in haste. The work was divided, a person for each of the following tasks: to measure the flour, pour the water, knead, divide the dough, roll the dough into round cakes, to smooth the cakes with a little cog wheel to prevent its rising in the oven, to keep the oven hot, to shove the cakes in

It was a custom for Passover to have new clothes made for everybody, everything from head to foot. What made us children the happiest was the squeaky sound the shoes made when stepped on, a sign of newness. G-d forbid if it failed! It was almost a tragedy.

Passover was the most beloved and happiest of the holidays, especially for us because our father

was with us to celebrate it. With joy we followed him on the night before Passover as he, with a wooden spoon, stiff goose feather and candle, made the rounds in search of *chometz*, pieces of bread placed beforehand on the window sills and shelves [Yiddish phrase] (*b'diket chometz*, the final ceremony of cleaning the house of everything leavened). The spoon with the bread, covered with a piece of cloth, were burned the following morning, together with any bread left from breakfast.

In the afternoon, the children had to take a nap to be able to sit through the seder, but we could not rest long, as we were anxious to put on our new clothes. Father was busy making the final preparations – horse radish and charoset. Everything was ready now for the big celebration.

When father and the boys returned from shul, we sat down to the seder ceremony. The table covered with the nicest white cloth, sparkling glasses, wine, candles, matzot, the plate with all the Passover symbols, and Elijah's cup all created an atmosphere different from all other festivals. Father, the king, sat at the head of the table on the pillows, his queen next to him, looking a little tired from all the preparations but radiant, happy to abdicate her all-year role to Father. Father conducted the seder with dignity and without haste. He took time to explain and asked us if we knew the background of the Biblical events and where they were mentioned in the Bible. After the meal and Mother's delicious kneidlach, the singing part of

the Haggadah began. We all joined in. Daddy's melodies were beautiful. They reflected the meaning of the words. I remember some of them. They are recorded on a tape.

A little drunk from the four cups of wine, tired and happy with the bargain made with Father for the return of the afikomen they so skillfully stole before from under his pillow, the children participated in an experience they would remember all their lives.

Games

It was traditional on Passover to play with nuts, Brazil and walnuts. The games were numerous. One game was similar to bowling. Nuts were placed in a row. From a distance one had to try to hit them with a small ball or nut. In the boys' favorite game, one put some nuts in his hand, and the opponent had to guess whether it was an odd or even number he held. Another was similar to a marble game played mostly by girls. A little hole was dug in the ground. From a distance with the finger one had to aim the nut at the hole. The one whose nut fell in the hole, or closest to it was the winner. There was an indoor game we called [Yiddish word], *chuk-chek*. Nuts were placed under one in a line of hats or plates; the one who uncovered the nuts was the winner. There were several other games, but I can't recall them. Simple games, but oh! How we enjoyed them!

To learn more about **Motol**, please visit: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/motol/>



THE CHOMETZ CONSPIRACY

Ulanow, Poland

One of the tasks faced by Jewish merchants in the preparation for Passover was dispensing of anything considered to be *chometz* which included food products made from grains like barley, rye or oats that had come into contact with water and were leavened. In this account goings-on in Ulanow, Poland, we read of the travails of Sinai Steiner, an ardent Hasid, who was a whiskey dealer.

But Sinai could not find anyone to buy his goods. Was it a conspiracy? So filled “with insurmountable dread” at being in possession of *chometz* during Pesach, he took a desperate action.

This story was published in the London and New York *Jewish Tribune*, April 1996. It has been reprinted on JewishGen with the kind permission of Dvorah Stone, the author.

WHO would believe this? Who could entertain the possibility of such an occurrence happening to any devout Jew let alone one who was widely recognized to be a *Tzadik* (saint) and a *Talmud Chocho*m (scholar). How did it happen that Sinai Steiner, the *Av Beis Din* of Ulanów, an ardent Chossid and close associate of the venerable Sanzer Rebbe and author of *Sefer Har Sinai*, an impressive collection of original commentaries, did not sell his *chometz* (bread) for Pesach?

The barrage of endless preparations required for Pesach has relegated the selling of one’s *chometz* to assume the appearance of being a technicality that is accomplished with relative ease. To Sinai Steiner, living in a nineteenth century Polish shtetl, selling his *chometz* turned into an ordeal that challenged the very depths of his being.

The relationship between a Jew and his countrymen during the bleak protracted Polish *golus* (exile) was a tenuous one that would erupt with monotonous frequency into a crisis.



Binyan Talmud Torah Be Ulanów (The Talmud Torah Building in Ulanów) – prior to WWII

Sinai Steiner, like many of his contemporaries was a whisky dealer, a common Jewish trade that was carefully regulated and licensed by the Polish authorities. It is not known whether the conspiracy was born out of malice, mockery or mere mischievous intent – but one Pesach, Sinai could not find anyone who would consent to buy his *chometz*. Pesach was rapidly approaching and the prospect of being in possession of his *chometz* filled him with insurmountable dread. There was only one thing that he could do!

Sinai left the doors to his whisky establishment wide open, proclaimed the entire contents public domain and quickly left town. He would bask in the resplendent sanctity of Pesach with a serenity that regarded his financial ruin with impervious disdain.

Sinai returned to his town after Pesach expecting to find his property in a shambles and his inventory completely depleted. He was amazed to find everything in perfect order.

When the Commissar heard that Steiner had fled the town he assumed it was because he owed the townspeople money. When he unearthed the conspiracy that made Sinai a fugitive in his own home, the Commissar took charge and protected his property for the entire Pesach.

From which impregnable crucible of strength did this precious Jew summon the ability to face complete financial disaster and the derisive judgment of those around him in order to fulfill a technicality of his precious Laws?

Then again this was the same man who had once faced imprisonment and a death sentence with equanimity and *bitochon* (trust, faith). When he was finally declared innocent and released from prison, the entire town came to greet him. The Sanzer Rebbe headed the jubilant delegation and asked Steiner how he was able to endure the threat of a death penalty. This precious Jew explained that he was too concerned thinking about a particularly difficult Rambam (Biblical scholar) to think about the impending death penalty.

The same imponderable spirit that animated Sinai Steiner's life was evident decades later when his grandson and namesake, Sinai Gruner, jumped into a raging fire in order to rescue the life of a retarded boy. The same impregnable crucible of strength enable his great-great-grandson, another Sinai Gruner, to perish in

the Holocaust *Al Kiddush Hashem* (Holy Martyr), with a soul unblemished by the horrors around him.

So dear readers, if the task of preparing for the Pesach is too challenging, if you feel as though every crumb that must be unearthed from the crevices and shadows of your possessions is a *chometz* conspiracy that taxes your strength and possibly your sanity, let your burden become a joy. Let us appreciate the luxury of being able to sell our *chometz* with relative ease.

I am indebted to Aaron Yosef Rosen, a descendant of Sinai Steiner for preserving the story of the *Chometz* Conspiracy in order that it will inspire the lives of those who today still draw their courage from the same immutable crucible of eternal strength.

To learn more about **Ulanow**, please visit:

https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kolbuszowa/ulanow/sl_ulanow.htm



SECURING SUPPLIES FOR PASSOVER DURING WORLD WAR I

Kielce, Poland

“The Diary of Rabbi [Moshe Nachum] Jeruzalimski,” from the Yizkor book of Kielce in Poland is an account of the hardships and danger its Jews faced during the turmoil of the war, and the obstacles to preserving their religious traditions. Jeruzalimski recounts in a long chapter, from which this is excerpted, that the “entire pre-Passover period was filled with agony.” Jews in Kielce were unnerved by the heavy cannon fire they heard on the eve of Passover.” But happily (though not under happy circumstances), “The holy community was able to observe Passover in a fitting manner.”

ON Tuesday of Rosh Chodesh (the New Moon) Nissan those who were gathered in were sent to Poltava. Thirteen “zsalasznikes” were sent out of Radom, including eminent rabbis (one of them was my relative, Rabbi Twersky from Pakszownica. Later, my friend, the Staszower Rabbi, Rabbi Graubard, the author of *Chavalim Baneimim*, was expelled.) The latter were deported to Czernikow.

From the news that arrived from there, it seems that the regime lightened their sentence and

permitted them to dwell in the local old age home, under the supervision of the community representatives. In Poltava, they were treated as true prisoners. It is difficult to describe in writing what the situation did to our Jews. Along with this, there was a command from the military authorities that all Jews who arrived in the cities after the liberation from the Germans (that is, after December 22) would be sent away a distance of 200 miles from the front lines. Along with that ordinance, in that pre-Passover period, they began to arrest hundreds of Jews

along with their families. Later, the situation eased, for they decided to deport only those who came from other gubernias, but not those who came from other cities from within the gubernia.



The Looted Synagogue in Kielce, Poland

Later, on account of the many illnesses that took place, an ordinance was issued that the war refugees must leave the areas near the places of battle, and settle in designated places in the Kielcer gubernia. In Kielce itself, where the number of refugees was very large, they permitted refugees to remain.

(Who can describe the difficulties that took place in Kielce due to the illnesses that circulated. People dropped dead, mainly among the refugees. I wanted to do a good deed toward

the convicts who had not been brought to a Jewish burial. The sanitation committee decided that, for sanitary reasons, the corpses of those who were hanged in the city itself, and left to lie in the city in places where people walk, must be removed. Only the police, who were to carry out the ordinance, decided that the convicts should be buried “very deeply.” They decided that even from a sanitation viewpoint, there is no reason to fear.)

As it was – the turmoil deepened. The entire pre-Passover period was filled with agony. I placed a request with the headquarters that they permit the thirteen Torah scrolls that were left behind in Lopuszno to be brought back by Jewish soldiers. (Regarding this, I placed an oral request to the home authorities,

asking them to place a request with the high headquarters.) Two days before Passover, I received a refusal from the highest commander. However, the corps commander acceded to my request to be allowed to send Passover matzo to the soldiers on the front.

He received me very nicely, and issued the appropriate command. In accordance with the order of the high command, matzos were provided to the Jewish soldiers along with their military rations (indeed, two of them sent to

Christians as well). We sent 12 pounds to each soldier[ed – Something seems incorrect here, as this is a large amount of matzo. Perhaps it refers to the entire food ration per soldier for the entire Passover festival.]

They charged a cargo fee of 3,000 rubles. Thus did G-d help our brethren, who are merciful people, descended from merciful people. The refugees were granted a significant sum of money prior to Passover, on the accounts of the committee. The work of the committee (especially for me, the general chairman and the city rabbi) was beyond human capabilities. Then, difficulties arose for the masses of exiles from many Jewish families, difficulties that are difficult to write about.

On the 13th of Nissan during the day, the day prior to the evening of the search for *chometz* [ed – Passover begins on the night of the 15th of Nissan. The evening before, on the night of the 14th of Nissan, the search for *chometz* (leaven) is conducted in the house. Remnants of bread and leavened products are burnt the next morning], as well as the next morning, we heard heavy cannon fire. On the eve of Passover, toward evening, the cannon fire ceased, and Passover was, thank G-d, calm. The holy community was able to observe Passover in a fitting manner.

To learn more about **Kielce**, please visit: <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kielce/kielce.html>



BAKING MATZAH

Dembitz, Poland

Matza is, of course, fundamental to the celebration of Passover. In this chapter from the Yizkor book of Dembitz (Debica) Poland, Yehuda Pechter gives a firsthand account of the baking of *matza shmura* (“supervised matza”) which was put in a special place apart from the regular matzos. The process was a meticulous requiring many steps, and at its conclusion, the community would celebrate with toasts of “*lechayim*” with slivovitz, the plum wine that is kosher for Passover.

MY memories from over forty years ago of the baking of *matza shmura*¹. In Dembitz will certainly add no novel ideas. *Matza shmura* was baked in the same fashion in all of the town of eastern Europe. So what can I add? Did the Hassidim of Dembitz follow any law or custom that was different than the rest of the Hassidim of Galicia? Nevertheless, I feel that my description will add one more line to the portrait of the generations that were annihilated, one small iota of the picture of the sublime and holy world which was woven seamlessly together with the secular life in our city, just as it was in all of the towns of Galicia.

My grandfather of blessed memory, Rabbi Chaim Schlesinger, who was the ritual

circumciser (*mohel*) of Dembitz, would go out to a village close to town already during the harvest season in the middle of the summer, in order to visit the one Jewish farmer in that village and harvest with him from a specially designated part of his field the wheat that would be used for the *matza shmura*. My grandfather and this Jewish farmer were the only ones who would be involved in the harvesting of this wheat.

The wheat was harvested and threshed with holy purity, and was placed in a white cloth. This cloth was not washed with starch, as starch was actual *chometz*². Grandfather brought the wheat home in that cloth, and later placed it in a special place in the attic of the Hassidic

Beis Midrash, next to the house of the Tzadik Rabbi Alter Pechter of blessed memory. There, grandfather spread out the wheat onto well laundered white sheets with his own hands in order to dry it properly.

teacher of the older youths. He owned a hand mill consisting of two round stones one on top of the other, one moveable and the other immovable. There, at the house of Reb Yosef Levi on Lakbencin Street, the grinding would



The old synagogue

Only between Purim and Passover, once they had dried completely, did he sort out the “heads of garlic,”³ which were also considered to be complete actual *chometz*, and those who were extremely meticulous in the performance of the commandments would be very careful that not one “finger” should be found among the wheat that is being prepared for the *matza shmura*.

At this point, the wheat was transferred with great care to Reb Yosef Levi, who was the

take place. Grandfather and myself, his young grandson, would grind the wheat together.

I became quite adept at pouring the wheat into the hole of the moving stone during the time of the grinding. I was very careful not to G-d forbid spill any of the wheat on the ground, since this treasure was more precious than gold. The milled flour was placed again in the above mentioned kosher cloth, and we brought it back home with good luck. We tied it on a nail near

the ceiling so that the active “*chometzdik*” hands of the children should G-d forbid not touch it.

At the night of the 14th of Nissan between mincha and maariv⁴ before the search for the leaven, about twenty members of the Beis Midrash of the Hassidim would go to the nearby brook with new wooden vessels in their right hands and porcelain cups in their left hands in order to draw the “water that rests overnight”⁵ for the baking of the *matza shmura*. This water was brought into the Beis Midrash of the Hassidim and covered over with white clean cloths.

After the congregation finished the maariv service the “water that rests overnight” was brought to the house of Reb Alter Pechter, in order to insure that no drop of *chometz* would fall into it. Reb Alter and his family were trusted to watch over the “water that rests overnight” as the apple of their eye.

On the next day, on the eve of Passover in the afternoon, the Hassidim would gather into a special bakery which had been made kosher and purged for this purpose several days previously, and everything was ready for the task at hand.

The “water that rests overnight,” and the flour had already been brought to this bakery. A large, long table was constructed out of boards supported on a framework. Already from morning, rolling pins made out of strong wood were brought to roll the matzot. Wooden piercers were also available to make the holes in the matzot, as well as baker’s shovels to remove the matzot from the oven. Now the “holy work” of baking the *matza shmura* of the eve of Passover was ready to commence.

Dressed in their silk tunics and armed with their rolling pins under their arms, the Hassidim stood ready and prepared to fulfil the commandment of the baking of the *matza shmura* of the eve of Passover, their eyes waiting eagerly for the first dough to come out of the bowl, so that they can knead it in haste, in memory of the haste with which the people of Israel left Egypt.

As soon as Reb Chaim Schlesinger lifted up the first dough, it was divided up into pieces and distributed to the rollers, who were ordered to take care that from the beginning of the kneading until the conclusion of the baking of the matza, not more than eighteen minutes would pass, in accordance with the law. During the time that they were occupied with this mitzva, they would sing the chapters of Hallel⁶ with great gusto, such gusto that we cannot imagine in our days.

As the pierced matza dough was placed in the oven, each of the rollers would call out loudly “for the sake of the commandment of matza, place the matza in the oven!” in order to goad on the baker.

At the conclusion of the baking of matza, the community would celebrate with toasts of “lechayim” on plum wine (slivovitz) that was kosher for Passover, accompanied by soft boiled eggs. They would bless each other with “Congratulations! May we do this again next year, G-d willing! Next year in Jerusalem!” Each of the workers would be given one or two matzos as a reward for their work.

The *matza shmura* would be brought home in white sheets, and would be placed in a special

place apart from the regular matzos which had been baked about two weeks previously.

Thus did the worshippers of the Beis Midrash of the Hassidim in the holy community of Dembitz bake their matza on the eve of Passover with humility and trepidation.

Notes:

1. Literally ‘supervised matza’. This is the specially supervised matza or unleavened bread which is baked specially for the fulfillment of the commandment to eat matza on Passover. The wheat used is guarded from contact with water from the time of harvesting. It is permissible to eat regularly supervised matza on Passover, however many people prefer *matza shmura* for the seder nights, when the fulfillment of the commandment to eat matza takes place. Some people eat only *matza shmura* for the entire duration of the holiday. *Matza shmura* can be baked anytime before Passover, however it is especially meritorious to bake this matza on the eve of Passover.

2. *Chometz* is the word used for leavened products which are prohibited on Passover. Any grain product that comes into contact with water, and is not immediately baked at a high heat, is liable to become *chometz*.

3. I am not sure what this refers to. The term is given both in Hebrew “*shumin*,” and Yiddish “*knobelach*,” and both refer to heads of garlic. It is probably refers to the inferior grains of wheat.

4. The 14th of Nissan is the day before Passover. Mincha is the daily afternoon service and maariv is the daily evening service. The ceremony of the searching for the leaven takes places on the 14th of Nissan after nightfall.

5. Hebrew is “*mayim shelanu*,” literally “water that rests [overnight].” This refers to the law recorded in the Code of Jewish law that the water to be used for the baking of matza must be drawn the night before the baking, and left to sit overnight in order that it be the right temperature so as not to promote the leavening of the dough.

6. Hallel is the song of praise, taken from chapters 113-118 of the book of Psalms, which forms part of the service on the three festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot), as well as the New Moon (Rosh Chodesh), and Chanuka. According to the Mishna, Hallel was sung during the offering of the Passover offering in the temple on the eve of Passover, and this singing of Hallel during the baking of the matza was reminiscent of that.

To learn more about **Dembitz**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/debica/dembitz.html>



PASSOVER AND ITS CELEBRATION

Lezhensk, Poland

One of the most famous residents of Lezhensk (Leżajsk) was Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum (1717-1787), otherwise known alternatively as the Noam Elimelech (the name of his main work) or simply “Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk.”

From the introduction of the Yizkor Book: “Our Lizhensk was a fortress for the sublimity of the human spirit and its citizens were dedicated to that spirit. Jewish Lizhensk knew many turmoils and bitter twists of faith throughout its existence and its citizens bore that fate patiently. Its uniqueness as the treasurer of the legacy of Rabbi Elimelech, ZTZ”L, charged it with unrivalled duties and strict obligations which it withstood successfully. It became a spiritual symbol and a valuable landmark in the path of Jewish destiny.”

This excerpt on the preparation for Passover and its celebration comes from a longer chapter on “Holidays and Festivals” from the Yizkor book of Lezajsk, Poland. The author takes us through the cleaning of the houses, the stocking of marketplace stalls with fattened geese, the baking of matza, the setting of the tables, and Seders that would continue until 1 am, presided over by the father of the house, dressed “like a king in his white clothes.”

PASSOVER PREPARATIONS

After Purim, the preparations for and anticipation of Passover began. The sun began to shine in the streets. The snow began to melt, and people began to clear out their humble homes. They would throw out straw mattresses, old beds, heavy engraved items, and worn out books. They would clean and hang up their old clothes to air out. They would prepare to whitewash and clean out their houses.

They would bring whitewash from the pit of Zshishele Greenberg or Yosef Guzik, and some paint from Shmuel Langzam, for they would not simply whitewash, but would add some colored paint and decorate the house with various designs and flowers, in modern fashion. Outside, small feathers flew around that came out of the blankets and pillows that were being aired out on the windowsills.

The stalls in the marketplace began to stock fattened geese. They would slaughter them, to prepare rich gourmet food for the festival of the spring. The aroma of frying oil wafted from the houses, the basements were filled with potatoes, the glassmakers went door to door and sold glass pots and bottles to store home made wine. They would make the wine from raisins. Black raisins could be more easily obtained, they were cheaper, however the white ones were larger and sweeter. Everyone prepared according to his means. They would bring down boards, knives, and Kosher Passover utensils from the roofs. Every family cut up raisins. The toddlers would sneak some of the raisins, eat them and choke on the pits.

The gentiles brought wagons laden with straw to refill mattresses with fresh straw, and the

old straw would be put into the old patched mattresses.

Bakers kashered their ovens¹ and prepared them for the baking of matzot. They hired women as kneaders, removers of matza from the ovens, and rollers of Matza. The positions that received the highest salary were the remover of matza from the ovens, and the shaper of the matza. People would set an appointment with the baker as to when their matza was to be baked, and they would bring their flour beforehand to the baker, wish each other best wishes and that they should be well for the next year ...

The family members would also wish each other a good year. Everyone was busy with the baking of their matza, and the bakers would bless the customers and wait for the numbered coins, as everyone came to take their matza.

The kneaders and rollers would be scratched occasionally with broken glass and warned “to roll the matza very thin.” One would shout “roll it thinner,” and the other would shout “pour more water,” the one who puts the matza in the oven would shout “put the matza in the oven,” and the baker would shout “the fire is too high.” The children would see themselves as part of this activity and would shout “wafer-like matzot with many indentations.”

A giant baker’s basket would be lowered from the dusty roof. It would be cleaned, and the matzot would be placed in it so that they would not break. They would quickly be weighed, and the porters would hurry and carry them to the owners. The owners would receive their matzot and shout “good year, good year” to the porters.

PASSOVER ARRIVES

What would be considered a menial task all year is considered an honor on the eve of Passover. In the night prior to the day before Passover, people would go toward the well in song in order to draw the water for the baking of matza, as it is said “they run to where the matzah is.”

On the next day, on the eve of Passover they kneed their dough by hand and sing songs, Hallel, Psalms, as they baked their matzot². The Hassidim would only eat matzot that were

baked on the eve of Passover. The houses were spotless, and the raisins were already squeezed so that there would be an abundance of wine.

After Mincha and Maariv of the evening prior to the day before Passover, they would go about with large wax candles, goose feathers that would serve as a brush, and they would search every corner and crack in the house. The remainder of the leaven (*chometz*) would be swept into a spoon, and the spoon would be covered with a linen net so that the crumbs



Grave of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk

Photo By Emmanuel Dyan, own work: CC BY-SA 2.5. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3765551>

would not fall from it. The next day they would go to the mikva in order to burn the *chometz*.

There was a procession toward the mikva: One went to immerse his new vessels for Passover, for without this immersion they would not be considered fit for use, and others would go with older utensils in order to purge them in the boiler of the mikva. The boiler was ignited on the night before for this purpose.

The tables, kitchen counters and closet shelves would be covered with new liners, nice and clean. The ovens were cleaned with cleanser, and then glowed with a hot fire. The Passover utensils were brought down from the roof and the *chometz* vessels were brought up to the roof for the duration of the eight days.

After the morning prayers, the first-born would be redeemed from their fast³, and the joyous and glorious festival began to appear. Everyone was attired in their new festival clothes, the generally dimly lit rooms were now lit with bright oil lamps and torches, and the table was covered with a white tablecloth and chairs for reclining. Children who lived out of town came home to be with grandparents or parents on the night of the Seder. The tables were set spaciouly; they were adorned with a large Seder⁴ plate; a large matza plate; wine glasses of various colors; and Haggadas of various sizes which were passed on from generation to generation, enhanced by various commentaries and illuminated with various illustrations, embroidered covers and beautiful borders.

People ran around in a hustle, were busy, and everyone waited for the night of the Seder with awe and trepidation. They concerned themselves

with who would be given the role of asking the questions, and worried that the children would not get mixed up in the asking of their questions. The fathers worried that they should not get mixed up with when to wash hands and when not to wash hands. The mothers worried that the Seder meal would not be spoiled. Everyone waited...

“Ma Nishtana” brought joy to the heart, as well as the traditional tears – because of blood libels, frights, evil decrees, etc. The tricksters opened the doors of the houses during the recital of “Shefoch Chamatcha” and placed into the house a small straw manikin like a scarecrow, dressed up as Elijah, and stole and drank the Cup of Elijah.

There were homes where the Seder continued until 1:00 am or later. The children took naps during the day so that they would be able to stay up for the long, drawn out Seder, however the eyes shut nevertheless, and heads nodded backwards. “Woe to the child who falls asleep,” as the children were afraid of the chastisement of their father. The mother would take her young children into a separate room to doze off so “father would not be aware.”

The father was like a king in his white clothes. He ate while reclining and discoursed without stopping, in words that only he, as a scholar, could understand. Everyone fixed his or her eyes upon him.

He would often read the Yiddish commentary of the Haggadah so that the family members including the women would also understand ...

Notes:

1. Utensils that were used during the year for leavened products, or even for products which might contain traces of leaven, must be prepared in a special manner (*kashered*) for use on Passover.

2. On the eve of Passover, it was customary to bake the matzot that would be used for the Seder. The matzot described above, baked prior to the eve of Passover, would have been for general use during the eight days of Passover, as it was only possible to bake small quantities by hand on the eve of Passover itself. Hallel is a selection of Psalms (Psalms 113-117) that are recited on various festive occasions during the year.

3. First born are supposed to fast on the eve of Passover, in commemoration of being saved from the plague of the destruction of the firstborn during the exodus from Egypt. However, it is customary to waive the requirement to fast by attending a festive event, such as the conclusion of study of a Talmudic tractate.

4. The Seder (literally order), is the ceremonial meal taken on the night of Passover, accompanied by the recital of the story of the exodus from Egypt, the eating of matza (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs, as well as many other rituals. The story is introduced by questions that are asked by the children, called “Ma Nishtana”: “Why is this night different from all other nights ...” Haggadas are the books that contain the order of service for the Seder; they are often adorned with commentaries and illustrations. “Shefoch Chamatcha” is the section recited after the meal when the door is opened to symbolically welcome the prophet Elijah to the Seder, and a request is made for G-d to “Pour out his wrath unto the nations who do not know You ...” The cup of Elijah is a cup of wine poured toward the end of the Seder for the prophet Elijah, but not drunk.

To learn more about **Lezhensk**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Lezajsk/Lezajsk.html>



PREPARATION FOR PASSOVER

Bolechow, Ukraine

The Jewish presence in Bolechow (Bolekhiv) dates back to 1612, and it would eventually become known as a Jewish town, with its own Hasidic court. In 1931, nearly 3,000 Jews lived in the town. The Nazis invaded on July 2, 1941 and by the time the Soviet Army liberated the town in 1944, only a few Jews remained alive.

This excerpt from the Yizkor Book of the Martyrs of Bolechow, Ukraine, describes the preparations for Passover and the joy and affection people in Bolechow felt for the holiday.

In addition to the baking of matza, townspeople prepared all types of drinks from berries of the forest, they made borscht, dressed in new clothes for the holiday, and whitewashed and cleaned their homes. All people had their hands full of work – the shoemaker, the tailor, the dyer, the whitewasher, the carpenter, and later on the barber and the bath attendant.

OF all the holidays with which we were blessed, our Festival of Freedom took nine measures of preparation. It was beloved by young and old. It was full of encouragement, and influenced the manner of life for several months before it arrived. People would make wine from raisins. This homemade product was the best of the best.

Our mothers prepared all types of drinks from

berries of the forest: hackberries, cherries, and raspberries that were plentiful in the area. These were preserved in flasks. During times of illness, these also refreshed the longing soul.

In the middle of the winter, approximately at the time of Chanukah, they would slaughter fat ducks. The feathers were plucked. (The plucking of the feathers, performed together by neighbors, was a pleasant episode. It kept the

children busy on long winter nights). After that, they would melt the fat, separate out the tasty, brown cracklings (*gribn*) to be used to spice the Passover foods, puddings and soufflés. This task was done with an air of great importance. The fat was preserved in earthenware pots. This was the custom from days of yore.

THE BORSCHT

With spotlessly washed hands, wearing starchless aprons (due to the *chometz* in the starch), our mothers started their work. They drew the water directly from the well into an earthenware vessel set aside for that purpose. They would chop the beets into pieces. At the end of the job, they would cover the vessel with a clear white cloth, and put it away in a far off corner, hidden away so that nobody would approach. This “red, red” became fizzy, and waited to have its turn to benefit people. Until this day, its sweet taste did not leave my palate.

THE BAKING OF MATZOS

What is the baking of matzos? A communal task.

We did not purchase the “bread of affliction”; we did not get it from nowhere. On the contrary! Every housewife would bake this matzo in accordance with the size of her family, in accordance with a set procedure. Thus was it done: A room was emptied out and whitewashed. The entire room was sparkly clean. They would set up long, smooth tables, as the tables of a Beis Midrash. A flaming oven was in the kitchen beside the room. From where was the staff? Were they hired? Don’t even mention that. They were the children of friends

and neighbors. When Batya Malka was baking, the daughters of Chava Lea assisted her. When Yenta Soshia baked, the daughters of Chancha came to help. Thus it went around. Thus were the youth willingly enlisted to this communal endeavor, without being commanded.

A pleasant sight unfolded before your eyes when you entered the room in which the matzo was baked. Two rows of girls, gleeful, charming and tall, stood next to the tables, wearing white aprons. They were kneading the dough. The rolling pin passed over the dough and rounded it into the shape of a matzo. It was then placed in the oven. The left over dough was baked into tiny matzos (*matzalach*) for the children.

This was an activity filled with conversation, joy, laughter and jokes.

The room in which the bread of affliction was prepared turned rich. With gladness and bubbling life. A large quantity of matzo was baked for the holiday. It was not simply baked in accordance with the number of children, for they did not skimp on eating it. On the contrary, it would be eaten even after the festival.

The baked matzos were placed in large, round baskets, covered well with large white cloths, and put in a corner where nobody would go.

However, “stolen water is sweet.” Did you pass the test? ...

NEW CLOTHING FOR THE FESTIVAL

Who of us did not have new clothes for the holiday? Shoes? During the winter, in particular



Site of a mass grave of 1,000 Jews from Bolechow. The monument was erected by the Soviet government, and made no mention of the Jewish victims buried there.

as the snow was melting, shoes tore quickly, for they got worn out, tattered, and softened. They were repaired with patches upon patches, but new ones were not obtained until the festival.

Who other than us, the children of the towns – towns infused with tradition of many generations that tried through the festivals to improve and glorify the dark, lowly life of the exile, and to grant them grace, beauty and a fine form – felt the meaning of new clothes at Passover.

WHITEWASHING AND CLEANING

Now we reach the final stage of preparations. The most important steps were the whitewashing, the thorough cleaning of the home. If you passed through the streets of Bolechow on one of the days leading up to Passover, you would see a different view before you. On Egypt Street, Rusaki Bolechow, Shuster (Shoemaker's) Street, there was chaos, confusion, like the overturning of Sodom and

Gomorrah. There were household objects, beds and mattresses. Corner beds (small beds that served as a type of bench during the day), *shlabenes* (wider than the above), *taptshenes*, milk benches, meat benches, blankets, pillow, kitchen utensils, dough troughs, baking moulds, etc. Everything was placed outside.

Mothers and daughters were busy working. They would scrub, scour, scrape, and turn over every object to remove any trace of grime or *chometz* from any crevice and crack.

At the same time, the vessels were purged with great deliberation and fanfare. During the whitewashing and thorough cleansing, we would sit on overturned pails, crates and barrels, for the chairs were outside. Thus is pleasant and fitting before Passover.

During the course of the year, if a dish broke, one would use a Passover dish. However, from Rosh Chodesh Nissan they would buy new ones, so as not to impinge of the utensils of the festival of festivals.

The new vessel was immersed in the river before use – a proper custom!

The shoemaker, the tailor, the dyer, the whitewasher, the carpenter, and later on the barber and the bath attendant all had their hands full of work. They worked with full steam. The time came, work became greater, grocery stores were busier, prices doubled. The simple folk earned their wages at one time.

At the conclusion of my tour of Bolechow before Passover, permit me to make one point. The conduct, the communal baking of matzo, the mutual assistance – how pleasant was it. It added to the Festival of Spring a longing for freedom and democratic means.

The matzo, which was not produced by a cold, silent machine, was flavored with the energy of the enthusiastic youth, which was poured into it above all ingredients.

All of the proceedings of the Seder, from the Four Questions to Chad Gadya, etc., are they not written in the Haggadah of Passover.

To learn more about **Bolechow**, please visit:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/bolekhov/bolekhov.html>.



THE HOLIDAY OF PASSOVER AS IT WAS CELEBRATED IN OUR HOME TOWN

Bilky, Ukraine

Bilky was a small town located in the Sub-Carpathian Mountains. There was a large synagogue, which was the center of all kinds of activities, and several other places of worship such as the “Beit Hamidrash.” Everyone in the community knew everyone else from their daily contacts.

The survivors of the town wrote the memorial book so that they could “enshrine in our hearts and consciousness and hopefully in the hearts and consciousness of the coming generation, the yearnings of those who died in despair, helpless and forsaken with the imperishable hope and prayer that they should be remembered forever till the end of time.”

In this excerpt, we learn that the preparations for Passover began during the height of winter. The women in the town searched out the very best quality ducks and geese, and took them home to be fattened. The first steps were also taken to prepare the wheat for grinding into flour for the matza. As the holiday drew near, houses were meticulously cleaned and special “Pesachdikeh” dishes were taken from storage to set the table. The rituals and food of the Seder are lovingly described in this account.

IN our town of Bilke, deep in the Carpathian Mountains, preparations for Passover began during the height of the winter. The women had the first task. On market day, which took place on a Tuesday, the women searched out the very best quality ducks and geese. They were brought home, and for the next few weeks, these birds

were relentlessly fattened. They were actually forced to eat grains far beyond what they would have eaten naturally.

This was not, in truth, a practice in keeping with the Jewish law, which forbids causing any living creature to suffer. In Jewish law it is called

“*Tz’ar Ba’alai Chayim.*” This stuffing called *shlopen* in Yiddish and was never practiced by mother. She was a very kind person and very observant. However, the majority of families in Bilke did it.

When the birds were good and fat, the women took them down to one of the six streams that crossed our town. There they broke through the ice of the frozen stream and washed the feathers of the birds so that they would be good and clean. Then they took the birds to Rabbi Yeshoshua, the *shochet* or the ritual slaughterer. He slaughtered the ducks and geese according to Jewish law. Taking the esophagus of the birds, he would blow it up like a balloon. If there was any scar, or any other evidence of sickness on the tissue the bird would have to be disregarded because it was *treifa*. If the duck or goose was “Kosher,” Rabbi Yeshoshua would cut off one leg and keep it separately. This custom was practiced only during the months of Tevet and Shevat corresponding to December and January in the general calendar, depending on the Jewish calendar. This custom was passed down from generation to generation, that one leg belonged to the *shochet* during those months.

When Rabbi Yehoshua accumulated a number of these legs, he would distribute them to the poor people of Bilke. This gift kept many of them alive. An especially delicious and nourishing dish they would make is called *pe-cheb*. This was a kind of gelatin made from the feet in which the meat was bathed and also preserved.

The ample fat from these birds was most important. It was rendered off and sealed into glass jars, not to be used until Passover. As the winters in the Carpathian Mountains were

very cold, there was no problem of spoilage. As for the feathers, these were used for pillows and quilts. The meat itself, of course, was eaten right away.

About the same time the first steps were also taken to prepare the wheat for grinding into flour for the matzot. On a winter’s night, neighbors would gather in one home or another around a long absolutely clean table covered with a tablecloth. There could be no question or even a single particle of *chametz* or leavened bread being hidden on its surface. Wheat would be spilled over the table. With care the neighbors would pick through the kernels of the wheat, removing the impurities, chaff, stones, something or a bug. Even a split kernel was cast aside. In this way they ended up with the very best wheat available. There were some families in Bilke who bought regular wheat for Passover.

But the more observant like our family bought only special wheat which had been literally watched over from the moment it was cut in the field until the time it came out of the oven. Above all, this wheat had to stay dry so that it would not accidentally start to rise or leaven. The matzah baked from this special wheat is known as *matzah shmurah* which means guarded matzah. Among those who bought only this kind of wheat were my family and of course the family of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Weiss and a few others.

Before the matzot could be made for the Jewish community of Bilke, it had to be decided who would get the concession to produce the matzot. This was a decision which was put to a vote by the elders of the community. They gathered for that purpose at least two months before Passover



Main Street and the Main Market in Bilky

in the side chapel of the Great Synagogue. The advantage of this chapel was that it was heated, unlike the synagogue itself, by a wood-burning stove. This chapel served in winter time for worship, study and also for community meetings and affairs.

In Bilke we had about six different families who competed for the concession to bake the matzot for the community. In Hebrew they are called *ba'a'ley bat'eem* – or members. They were Reb Meshulam Friedman, Reb David Aharon Reissman, Reb Noach Mechlovitch and others. These men would submit by sealed bid the price

per kilo at which they would deliver the matzot to the community.

A low price was essential because so many of the people were poor. Yet the eating of matzah, which symbolized the bread of affliction and the journey from Egypt, was a *mitzvah*, a good deed, which had to be made affordable to the poorest of the poor.

The sealed envelopes were opened by the *rosh hakahal*, the president of the community Chaim Isaac Rosenbaum. All the bids were read aloud. That year the lowest bid had been submitted

by Reb Meshulam Friedman. In addition to the low price, this was a man who had other good qualities and points in his favor. He was a *melamed*, a teacher in one of the better *chadarim* – the Hebrew schools. He also was a religious man, a *yareh shamayim*, one who feared heaven.

With six streams flowing down from the mountains and through Bilke, there was no lack of water-powered mills. Each year, the Jews of our town negotiated the rent of these mills, a month or two before Passover, so that the holiday wheat could be ground into flour. Since most of these mills belonged to gentiles, the negotiating could be delicate.

Some of the owners did not want to give up their mills for such a short period of time as was required to grind the flour. Others, although they never explicitly said it, didn't want to rent to Jews.

That year, the community did rent a mill. It was in the outlying suburb of Kolbasovo. Early one morning, a small group of Bilker Jews set out in a wagon to go to *kasher* – make the mill fit – for Passover use. There was Reb David Aharon Reissman, the *shamash* (sexton), Reb Meshulam Friedman, the *melamed* (teacher), who had the concession to bake the matzot and the sons of the *shochet* – Chaim Leib and Shlomo Yeshayah and also after crying and begging, the youngest son Mosheleh was finally allowed to join. For him it was an occasion which he never forgot.

All the machinery of the mill and especially the grinding stone wheel itself were thoroughly scrubbed so as to be utterly free of any taint of *chametz* (leavened bread). This meant not only sweeping and scrubbing every surface but also

burning the surface of the grinding stones with hot coal. That is how thoroughly it had to be done.

When the process of kashering was complete, the Rabbi of our community, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Weiss, was called to inspect the premises if everything is according to *halacha* (Jewish Code of Law). Once he gave his okay the grinding of the Passover flour commenced. The first wheat to be ground was the wheat for *matzah shmurah*.

The reason for it was because if the regular wheat had been ground first it would obviously bring down the *matzah shmurah* to the level of the regular matzah through contact and contamination. So the purest was the first ground.

This process of preparing the mill took all day and into the night. It was very late when our wagon finally returned home. Little Moshele was bragging to the other boys of Bilke, how he alone had been allowed to take part in the important mitzvah of that day.

One of the nice things about Reb Meshulam Friedman's winning the concession to bake the matzot was that he had to dismiss his school a few days earlier than usual so that he could commence the preparations for the baking of the matzot. We students were full of joy that the *cheder* school was ending earlier. Moshele was in the habit of wandering around the building where the community oven was located. In the community building three activities were going on. The *bait hashchita* (the slaughterhouse), the community oven, and a *cheder* (Hebrew school). Moshele like to observe how the matzot were baked and so on. Sometimes he was even given a little piece of matzah to nibble. He was also

allowed, from time to time, to pierce the holes in the rolled out dough which kept the matzah from rising.

The oven, which served all year round, for cooking the chulent, by the way was kashered as thoroughly as the mill had been. Besides being swept clean all over and around the rooms, the oven was fired up a full twenty-four hours to make sure all the *chametz* (leavened bread) was burnt out.

After a while, Moshele got up his courage and went up to Reb Meshulum his teacher, who had the concession to bake the matzot, and said, “Rabbi, I have a request, maybe you could hire me to make holes in the matzot; here you can see I did it a few times already.” To Moshele’s surprise, he said yes.

The process of producing the matzot started immediately after Purim. Only pious women were chosen to roll out the dough. Any young woman who was not, from a moral point of view impeccable, was passed over. This was a decision which Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Weiss himself made on each woman who applied for work. The kneading of the dough was hard work and it was done by the men. No juice, no slat or any other material was added to the flour. This was to fulfill the commandment in the Bible: “Seven days shalt thou eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction: for thou camest out of the land of Egypt in haste.” (Deut. 16:3).

The water for making the matza dough had to be drawn from spring water the night before because of the possibility for the water to become *chametz*. It says in the Talmud tractate Pesachim 94, “In daytime wells are cold and warm at night.” This water which is drawn

before evening is called *mayim shelanu* – water which has stayed the night in a cistern. As a double precaution, when this water was poured into the barrel, it was strained to be sure that no *chametz* got into the water.

There was a *mashgiach* (a supervisor) who watched over the women as they rolled out the dough. He hurried them up because after eighteen minutes from the moment the dough was ready to roll and to put into the oven, the dough becomes *chametz*. It happens very fast. Once the dough was brought to the table where it was pierced, it was folded over a very long stick and brought to the oven.

The man actually in charge of the oven was Reb David Aharon Reissman. It was the job of a young lad to bring to Reb David Aharon the unbaked matzah on a paddle at the end of a very long narrow rolling pin. The matzot would be laid across the paddle side by side. Reb David Aharon would then thrust this paddle deep into the hot oven wiggling and rolling it so that the individual matzot would come off and lie in an orderly row. This took quite some skill. But he had done it before for years and he knew what he was doing.

The baking lasted no more than two minutes; maybe even less. The oven was very hot and the matzot very thin so that was all the time it took. Then Reb David Aharon used a wooden spatula, also with a long handle, to slide out the matzot. Each family brought its own flour, which they ground in the kashered mill, to the community oven and paid Reb Meshulum Friedman for the baking. The family to whom a certain batch belonged would hold out a large basket and in it the hot baked matzot would go

and then took them home. This was a procedure by which the Jews of Bilke prepared the matzot for Passover.

In the house of the *shochet's* family there was a big commotion before Passover. The entire house was painted. From each room, all the furniture was removed and the house was cleaned thoroughly, and the entire house was in every way renewed. From the 13th day of Nissan, one day before Passover began, nobody would go into the house without first removing their shoes. That's how strictly things were done. It was Miriam, one of the five daughters of the *shochet* who was in charge of preparing the house for Pesach. She devoted herself to this task, not only putting the house in order before the Passover but also before each Shabbat and other holidays. She did it not only with attention to tiny details, but also with enthusiasm.

Two days before Pesach we took down from the attic the special *Pesachdikeh* dishes. These were well covered and locked in a trunk so that G-d forbid no *chametz* should sneak in. From the oldest to the youngest, the whole family stood in a line beneath the ladder leading to the attic door, as item by item, the Passover plates, pots and other utensils were passed down. Each member of the family had some dish or other that was personally favored. In the case of Moshele, it was the salt water dish, made from crystal. Each year when this bowl was handed down from the attic, he was so happy with it. It was as if he had found a treasure all over again.

The Passover dishes were washed and dried and put on the table as if on exhibition, so that everyone could see these beautiful dishes.

In the house of the *shochet* there were two ovens – one for cooking meat and one for dairy. Mrs. Pearl Doft, the wife of the *shochet* allowed no crossovers, G-d forbid that a dairy dish should be put on the meat oven, or vice versa. Before Pesach Mrs. Pearl Doft kept the ovens going for twenty four hours, just as the matzah oven in the communal building, in order to make it absolutely kosher for Passover. Such kinds of cleaning, nobody saw in any house in Bilke. If even one granule of *chametz* had been left after cleaning of the ovens, it was surely burned away by this long period of firing.

Also the tables were washed and scrubbed. Then, to protect them, a thin, tin cover was put over them which was stored in the attic from year to year. Although the home of the *shochet* was always very clean year round, at Pesach time there was a special brightness, a special whiteness.

On Passover Eve, Reb Yehoshua came home from shul and performed *bedikat chametz* – the search for the leavened bread. This meant that he went around the house checking to see if any *chametz* had accidentally been left. In order that one does not pronounce a blessing in vain, someone in the family placed small crumbs here and there. With a candle, a feather and a wooden spoon, he recited the blessing “*Al Biur Chametz*” – meaning that we were commanded to clear out the *chametz* from the house.

All the *chametz* that had been collected was wrapped in a cloth and put away until morning. Then before 10:00 am (this was a very strict limit of time), Reb Yehoshua and his sons went out in the yard and made a fire. Into the flames

they tossed the wooden spoon, the feather and the cloth with the crumbs. As it burned, they recited the formula of “*Kol Chamira*.” It is a vow that any *chametz* still in the house that had somehow had escaped notice, should now be declared not to exist. It is a kind of legal declaration similar to selling the *chametz* to a non-Jew.

In the afternoon on Erev Pesach (Passover Eve), a group of men, the elite of the community, gathered at the communal oven. They included the Rabbi of Bilke, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Weiss, Reb Yehoshua and his six sons, Reb Laybush the Dayan and his sons, Reb Yaacov Weingarten, who was also a *shochet* but was not practicing, with his sons, Reb David Aharon Reissman and his sons, Reb Meshulum Friedman and his sons, Reb Naftali Schwimmer and his sons, and other important members of the community. There were there to bake the *matzot mitzvah*. At this time, only men did the entire work, the rolling of the dough, the perforation of it, so that it would not rise, and the cutting. As they worked they were singing *Hallel* – the songs of praise to G-d from the Passover service. In this way the men themselves have had the experience of baking the Passover matzah which is a great mitzvah. Of course, Reb Yehoshua and his six sons, who had lovely voices, were singing most of the time, and the whole atmosphere was very beautiful and very uplifting. When the baking was done each family rushed home with the *mitzvah matzot* that he had baked.

Reb Yeshoshua Doft did not forget to send some of these *mitzvah matzot* to some *baalei batim*, the important members in the community. Moshele and his older brother Yoseleh, who was

two and a half years older, would bring packages of *mitzvah matzot* to these *baalei batim*.

Moshele especially like to make these deliveries because he would get a tip from the recipients of these packages.

In the meantime, the women of the Doft family were at home preparing the Passover Table. All the fine dishes were there and polished candlesticks with special large candles – so they would last throughout the Seder, the red sweet wine for the *arba kosoth* (four cups), the *ka'arah* (Seder plate), and *kos Eliyahu* (cup of Elijah the Prophet). There was also a cup for each member of the family, as well as salt water and *Mitzvah Matzoth*. At the head of the table a couch was placed with pillows. This was to enact on the part of the leader of the Seder, the mitzvah of *hasavah* (reclining). It is to symbolize that we are free people.

When the sun set into the trees, Mrs. Pearl Doft lit the candles. She wore a beautiful white dress with a kerchief on her head that always matched her dress. She looked like a real queen. She did not cover her eyes with her hands before she made the blessings – for on a holiday you are not required to cover your eyes, only on Friday night. Her lips moved in a silent prayer. When she completed reciting *Lehadlik Ner Shel Yom Tov* and *shechecheyanu*, she said “Good Yom Tov” – a happy holiday.

Reb Yehoshua put on his silk garment always made new for Pesach by Naftali Schwimmer the tailor. He put on his *shtraimel* – his fur hat – also special for the holiday. His six sons were also specially dressed, though only some had new clothes. Then the men went to the

great synagogue which was rapidly beginning to fill up. The children of Bilke, meanwhile were roaming around comparing their new holiday clothes. Moshele was proud of his new shoes for Pesach.

At the moment of sunset, the congregation prayed Mincha, the afternoon prayer. Then Reb Yehoshua, who was the cantor as well as the *shochet* of the community, approached the pulpit with his six sons. There in his loud sweet voice he sang the *Barchu* using a special ornate melody that is designated for the three festivals in the Jewish calendar. Reb Yehoshua and his six sons were a choir known not only in Bilke but in the surrounding towns. Since this was *Lail Shimurim* – a night when the guardians of Israel watch over the Jewish people, as well as a night when a Seder had yet to take place, lasting into the wee hours of the night, Reb Yehoshua actually finished the service with a bit of extra speed. As soon as the Marariv evening service was over, the synagogue quickly emptied out as each one rushed off to his home to start the Seder. Burning candles were seen from all the Jewish homes, which created a spiritual atmosphere.

As the men entered the house, they sang *chag sameach*, a joyous holiday; the women answered with the same greeting. Reb Yehoshua put on a white robe that symbolized freedom and sat down on the couch at the head of the table. Mrs. Pearl sat on his right, dressed in white; they looked like a king and queen. In fact, on Passover night they are called *melech* (king) and *malkah* (queen). Their faces were shining as they looked with joy at their clean house, their beautiful table and their special family.

Reb Yehoshua now turned to those seated around the table. “Pesach is a holiday that unites our people, wherever they may be, now and throughout the generations,” he said. “The cup of Elijah symbolizes the announcer of redemption and the hope of our people. The melodies we sing have likewise been passed on to us from previous generations. The symbols of the Passover table and the stories told in the Haggadah emphasize this continuity of our people. The suffering we have undergone throughout the generations has strengthened our resolve so that even as enemies rise up against us anew, G-d saves us from them.”

Then Reb Yehoshua said Moshele, since you are the youngest in the family, now you begin with *Kadesh*. This is a listing of the ten parts of the Seder, a sort of index of the Seder ritual. Moshele sang *Kadesh*, then he explained that it means that one fills the first cup of wine and a blessing is recited over it. Chaim Leib, the oldest son in the family then filled up all the cups. Reb Yehoshua stood up and all in the family also rose. He sang the Kiddush over the wine according to the Passover melody. “G-d chose us over all other peoples,” he said, “to celebrate this holiday with joy – a holiday of the matzoth, a holiday of freedom.” After Reb Yehoshua had recited the Kiddush, each son also recited the Kiddush, one after the other.

Then Moshele announced the next part of the Seder: *Urchatz* – washing of the hands. All the men went to a bowl and washed their hands. Moshele went on saying the order of the Seder. *Yachatz*: Reb Yehoshua took the middle matzah, symbolizing the tribe of Levy and broke it in half. The larger half, he put into a cloth and

hid it away for the afikoman. (Until it is found at the end of the Seder, the service cannot be concluded. It is the children who search for the afikoman – the hidden matzah, and a prize is awarded to the one who finds it. From this *afikoman matzah* a piece is given out to each person at the table).

Then they all recited together the *motzi* and also the blessing *al achilat matzah* – meaning that we were commanded to eat the matzah. *Magid*: Reb Yehoshua lifted up the matzot and said, “This is the poor bread of affliction...” and he continued reading in the Haggadah as the entire family broke out in singing a sad melody. It was a melody that hovered all over Bilke in the night air from all the Jewish homes as the gentiles of the town slept their peaceful sleep.

Reb Yehoshua now turned to his youngest son Moshele with great love and said to him, “My son, ask the four questions.” With a sweet voice and a twisting melody, he did so in the Yiddish language. “My dear father,” he began, “I want to ask you four questions. The first one is why is it that on all other nights we eat either *chametz* or matzah but tonight we eat only matzah?” Then he asked the second question, and so on down through the four questions. Then he said, “I have asked the questions. Please, father, give us the answers.”

Reb Yehoshua answered, “*Avadim hayinu le’faroh b’Mitzrayim*” – “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...” and he continued to read that paragraph which explains why we were celebrating Passover. Each person at the Seder table read to themselves silently. From time to time, Reb Yehoshua explained interesting

passages that sweetened the entire evening. He also mixed in stories and sayings that tell of wonderful things that happened to the Jewish people. The important points he emphasized by standing up which added special feelings. The melodies and stories that were heard at the Passover Sedarim had all be passed down from one generation to the next. That’s how Reb Yehoshua learned from his father and how his father learned it from his father. Who knows? Perhaps these melodies go back to the *Beit Hamikdash* – the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Each one of the men at the table sang certain sections as a solo. They embroidered the melody especially when they wanted to emphasize a particular passage. Chaim Leib, the oldest son of the family, liked very much to emphasize this passage, “If G-d would not have given us the Torah, and if he had not brought us into the land of Israel, *Dayenu* – it would have been enough.”

And Shmuel Ztvi, the second son in line, called out, “And in each generation, each person has to see himself as if he was the one who came out from Egypt.”

“*Marror*,” Moshele announced, and they passed around two different types of *marror*, or bitter herbs. One type was larger pieces and the other was ground. The women and youngsters only ate that which was ground a little bit milder. The men ate both. After quite a long time, Moshele finally announced *Shulchan Orech*, meaning set the table for the meal!

When the women heard the signal, they began to serve all the courses. At this moment a very relaxed atmosphere existed in the house. With

great satisfaction the women listened to the praises and compliments they received from the men with each new dish that they presented. When the meal was at last finished, Moshele announced: *Tzafun*, meaning that the *afikoman* the hidden matzah should be presented and each person should eat a piece from it *ke'zayit*, at least the size of an olive. Then Reb Yehoshua turned around to look for the *afikoman*, which he hid. He suspected that Moshele, who was sitting on his left probably took it. Reb Yehoshua turned to Moshele and said to him, "Okay, what should I give you to get back the *afikoman*?" Moshele thought about this for a moment and then said, "For Passover you bought me new shoes. For Shavuot which is coming in seven weeks I want you to buy me a new suit." "Let it be so," said Reb Yehoshua. Moshele brought forth the *afikoman* from the place where he hid it. Only then was the family able to continue with the Seder ritual as it is supposed to be.

When the Doft family reached the paragraph, *shfoch chamatcha* – meaning "Pour out thy wrath at those who have been persecuting the Jewish people," Yosele was asked to go to the front door and open it for *Eliyahu Hanavi* – Elijah the Prophet. It is believed by the Jewish people that at this moment at the Seder, Elijah comes into Jewish homes and takes a sip of wine from the cup designated for him. The entire family rose to their feet, and with great feeling recited this passage in the Haggadah which tells of the tremendous injustices that have been brought upon the Jewish people throughout the generations. The children looked to see, during the recitation, if Elijah had really been drinking from the cup. The door was closed and the Doft family continued to recite and sing the rest of the Haggadah.

When it came to the sentence, *Leshanah Habaah Beyrushalayim* ("Next year in Jerusalem") the entire family joined in the singing with a special feeling. From all the Jewish houses in Bilke, such passages could be heard as, "G-d build soon your house! The mighty one will soon build his house! Soon, you will lead the afflicted ones to Zion in Joy and in song!"

It was much after midnight when Reb Yehoshua and his family completed the Seder in high spirits.



During Passover, the elders of the community in Bilke recounted events that had happened in Bilke many years before, events that left a tremendous impression. Here is such a story. It happened on Passover holiday some years back when the Christian Easter holiday coincided with Pesach.

This always caused tension in the Jewish community. The Jews tried, during this period, not to show themselves too much in the eyes of the gentile population, in order not to arouse them. All the Jewish celebrations were a little restrained, so that there should be no pretext for trouble. This was something that in Jewish history happened more than once.

The Christians in Bilke had a legend that during Easter week, the bells of their big church flew away to Rome. Obviously during the entire Easter period no bells rang in Bilke. Now there was a certain Jewish family in Bilke that had been there for many generations and had grown prosperous. One branch of the family owned a store, another a bank, still another handled

big real estate transactions involving fields and vineyards.

In short, they were well to do. The name of the family was Friedman.

They lived not far from the great synagogue. One of the sons of the family was Yitzchak. One would say that he was not “all there.” He had to be kept on a chain in order not to run away and perhaps hurt people. By nature, he was so violent that not even his closest family members could control him.

Only Reb Shmuel Mayer Klein who had been a teacher of small children could handle him at all. Being very old he had retired. But he found a way of handling this young man Yitzchak. This Yitzchak actually liked the old man.

Reb Shmuel Mayer would help him get dressed, feed him, and in general attend to his needs and handle him very gently. Although Reb Shmuel Mayer was not a doctor or a psychologist, he knew how to deal with the disturbed young man. He was a man simply born with a knack for it. He was easy going and a jokester. If you asked him how old he was, he would tell you in terms of “Bar Mitzvahs.” “I was already six times Bar Mitzvah.”

On the first day of Pesach of that year that was also the first day of Easter week, Reb Shmuel Mayer came, as usual, to Yitzchak the insane one. When he came into the room, he saw at once, or rather sensed that there was some change that had come over Yitzchak. What this change was, however, he was not able to say.

“Take off the chain from my leg,” the insane Yitzchak said suddenly. “Only for a few minutes.”

Reb Shmuel Mayer was afraid to oblige him, fearing that he would run away. But Yitzchak suddenly hit the old man on the head and then grabbed one of his *payot* (side curls), and tore it out. “If you don’t unchain me, I’ll rip out your other *payah* (side curl),” the insane man said.

The old man saw that he had no choice. He unlocked the chain that bound Yitzchak. The insane man began running like a wild animal. By the time Reb Shmuel Mayer had fetched the other members of the family to search the grounds, it was as if the ground had swallowed him up.

On this first day of Pesach of that year, the Jews of Bilke gathered in the great synagogue to give thanks the Almighty for their freedom. It was spring, of course, and the weather was already beautiful. The leader of *Pesukai Dezimrah* (the preliminary service) had just finished when Reb Yehoshua began the Shacharit service according to the special festival melodies. The entire congregation had been waiting for this, and each word, each melody, elicited in them great joy.

Reb Yehoshua was also a composer of melodies. For each holiday he would try out new tunes. The members of the community listened carefully, and afterwards each one gave his opinion. Reb Mayer Berger, who was also a bit musical said, *L’eyla U’leyla*, meaning “superb, superb.” During Shacharit (the morning service), Reb Yehoshua especially showed his strength in the prayers called *Yotzrot* and in the *piyut* (poem) called *Brach Dodi*. When he reached the *Hallel* he poured out his heart to G-d. Each line had a special rhythm, a certain musical meter. When he reached the passage

“*Yisrael, Yisrael B’tach Ba’shem*” (“Israel trust in G-d”) he would twist it and ornament it with the trill of his voice with various innuendoes and shadings. In certain of these passages, Reb Yehoshua and his sons sang in harmony. Chaim Leib and Shmuel Tsvi sang the bass, Nachum Uri and Shlomo Yeshayah were the baritones, and the two youngest, Yoseleh and Moshele, were on the high notes. Above the, however, was their father Reb Yehoshua.

After the Torah reading, Reb Yehoshua sang a special melody for the paragraph called *Ya-Eyli*, (“You are my G-d”) It was in the form of a march, as if we are marching toward G-d. Before Musaf (additional service), Reb Yehoshua put on a white gown for the singing of *Tefilat Tal* (the prayer for dew). He introduced this prayer by saying, “I am trying to express the secret existence of our people.” And by this he actually prayed for dew for the land of Israel rather than there in the Carpathian Mountains which did not count on this source of water for crops. In Israel, this was the date that the dry season usually began.

Reb Yehoshua continued with the passage that asks that this should be a year of blessing and not curse, of life and not death, of bounty and not hunger. His voice echoed through the synagogue and it was heard all over. Twice a year Reb Yehoshua would sing this special melody on Pesach, the prayer of *Tal* (for dew), and on Shmini Atzeret for *geshem* (for rain). At the end of the service, each person came up to Reb Yehoshua to shake his hand and tell him their delight in his singing of the prayers.

It was noon. The Jews were just leaving the synagogue. The gentiles were going about their

holiday business. Suddenly, the bells of the church began to ring. The town was filled with the echo of the bells. Everyone was stunned. People looked up to the church tower and asked, “What was happening!”

Because everyone, Jew as well as gentile knew that according to the legend the bells were supposed to be in Rome. Not for three more days, at the end of the Easter week, were they supposed to return to Bilke.

The people of the town ran towards the church where the bells continued to ring wildly. This was no melodious, gentle ringing as usual, but rather a wild urgent cacophony as if the devil himself was in the bell tower. The young, the elderly, everyone crowded around the front of the church. There was a sense of fright and also anger among the gentiles.

Abruptly the ringing stopped. The sextant of the church, accompanied by several of the gentiles, climbed up into the tower. There they found Yitchak Friedman, the insane. Roughly, they brought him down. As the crowd saw who it was, hate welled up in them. They were ready on the spot to lynch the offender. The *goyim* (the gentiles) were expressing hatred of generations that had accumulated in their hearts. They began to beat Yitzchak.

Suddenly shouts of the police were heard. “Keep away! Keep away!” They broke through the mob and rescued Yitzchak, who by now was beaten nearly to death. But he still had the strength to shout in a clear voice, “I am a Jew! You see the bells of the church did not fly to Rome!” Having shouted this with his last effort, he fell to the ground.

This incident shook up all the inhabitants of Bilke. The gentiles were totally confused. The Jews feared that this incident would cause even more hate for them than had been felt before. Who knew what the next day would bring upon them?

The holidays ended without further incident. All continued about their usual business as if the whole bizarre thing had never happened. But the Jews of Bilke saw in Yitzchak the insane – or *meshugener* – something of a wonder. Who can evaluate a Jewish soul! Some asked and wondered.

Those who pondered on the happening a little deeper also asked, who knows? Perhaps this Yitzchak is the reincarnation of a soul from a previous life who had sinned and who had to do this act of *Kiddush Hashem* – the sanctification of the name of G-d in order to redeem himself. This story was told to the young, year after year, during the holiday of Passover.

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THE UNFORGETTABLE PASSOVER OF 1943

IN AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim, Poland

The following excerpt from the Yizkor Book of Jedwabne, Poland, was written by Rabbi Chaim Yitzchak Greengrass, and describes how Jews imprisoned at Auschwitz-Birkenau managed to conduct a Seder. He writes: “The celebration of this Seder night left imprints on my soul. Now, when I perform the Passover service, I understand the meaning of the statement that each man in every generation is obliged to consider himself as if he personally was redeemed from slavery into freedom.”

Jedwabne was in the Lomza province before WWI. In 1897, there were 1,941 Jews living in the town, which is located 11 miles from Lomza and 18 miles from Kolno. By 1940, that number had dwindled significantly. After the Nazis invaded in 1941, the town became infamous for the Jedwabne pogrom on July 10, 1941, when approximately 300 Jewish residents, men, women and children, were murdered and buried in two mass graves. The following day, the Nazis rounded up the remaining Jews and transported them to a ghetto.

THE Baal Hagadah says: *B'chol dor v'dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo k'eelu hu yatzta m'mitzrayim*. "In every generation we are obliged to consider ourselves as having personally participated in the exodus from Egypt." All my life I could not grasp the meaning of this passage until the advent of World War II.

Among the many experiences during the terrible period of time under the furious German Nazi rule in Europe, when millions of Jews, young and old, were mercilessly persecuted and destroyed, we, a group of Jews from all parts of Europe, made careful preparations to celebrate the Holiday of Freedom, Passover. Passover of 1943 was an experience that I shall remember always. The observance of it took place at Birkenau near Auschwitz, one of the largest annihilation camps, built by slaves to exterminate themselves and the innocent people that would follow. Planning and preparations started right after Purim. There were many things to be taken care of. The main problem was how to get the two most necessary items, matzoh and wine for the Seder.

Greece, an independent, peaceful nation, was seized and brought under the terrifying Nazi yoke. Many Jews were living there, especially in the harbor city of Salonika. They did not expect to be removed from their homes to be killed. They prepared matzot, raisins and other things for Passover. The Nazi machine took these unfortunate people out of their city just two weeks before their Holiday of Liberation. Many transports of Jews, squeezed into unbearable sealed freight cars unfit even for animal, reached the last station of their lives – Birkenau. Their

total possessions were in the small package each tied on his or her shoulder, and they were accompanied by lovely children, many of whom were carried in the arms of the parents. They were separated from their poor worldly goods by force, and the parents and the children were sent to the gas chambers.

At that time, I was assigned to a special unit, called by the peculiar name of "Canada," whose job was to assort the belongings of murdered Jews. Thus the worldly goods of the slain Greek Jews came to our place of work. We opened the miserable packages and to our surprise found hand-baked matzot, raisins, and other necessary Passover products carefully prepared for the Seder. With trembling hands, knowing how meaningful these items were to the dying Jews, we hid them in a secret place to make good use of their sacred purpose. After hard and dangerous preparations in order not to be caught by the S.S. men, we finally accomplished our first task and hoped to celebrate the lovely Holiday of Freedom while being slaves in a concentration camp under the yoke of Nazi Germany.

Erev Passover 1943 was a very busy day for our special small group.

All products accumulated for the Seder and piled up at our working place had to be brought to the camp. There was great danger that the Nazi guard might search through the unit and confiscate all the things that we had so carefully saved, and in addition would administer severe punishment. Therefore, we needed the cooperation and help of our Cappo (group leader) who was also a Jew. He gladly accepted sharing the responsibility. He also advised us



Children in Auschwitz after liberation

to make very small packages and to distribute them to many people, and he would see to it that everything reached the camp in the best order possible.

first cup and made kiddush by heart without any hagadot.

A young boy, twelve years of age, asked "*Mah Nishtana*" saying, "Why are we Jews different from other people?"

With joy and thanks to G-d that we had succeeded in our undertaking, we came to the camp. The profound holiness of Passover made us feel neither hunger nor weariness, although we had worked very hard all day without food. We did not touch anything that was prepared for us by the camp kitchen. Our block leader, a split personality and a Pole, was informed in advance of our intention to celebrate the Passover Seder, and he promised not to interfere with our observance. Nevertheless, we had to give him a big bribe beforehand, besides a share of our meager food.

When night fell and darkness covered the earth and no other light was permitted in the block, we managed to light several candles and distribute them among the people lying in the bunks. A man guarded the door in case an S.S. man should come unexpectedly. We filled the

Tears flowed from everyone's eyes and question after question found each one pondering why it is so. And since we had no hagadot, each one tried to give his own interpretation of the eternal question of why do we Jews suffer so much more than any other nation. Some brought out the idea that the *maror* (bitterness) that we suffered is due to the fact that we tried to run from one *Galut* (place of exile) to another *Galut* because we thought that what happened to our brethren yesterday will not reach us in the new places today.

All night long we were discussing the history of our people and what we expected in the future and what would happen if some of us would come out alive. No one slept and all celebrated the Pesach the entire night with tears and hopes. The discussion did not end until the gong rang that it was time to get up and go to work. And as it rang, we wished each other that we live to

come out of this hell and again celebrate the Passover as free people.

The celebration of this Seder night left imprints on my soul. Now, when I perform the Passover service, I understand the meaning of the statement that each man in every generation is obliged to consider himself as if he personally was redeemed from slavery into freedom. I have some garments which I wore that Passover as a reminder of *maror*, "*ze sh'anu ochlim, al shum mah?*" This garment that I keep, why? Because of the Holocaust that befell the Jewish People during World War II.

To learn more about the Jews of **Jedwabne**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/jedwabne/Yedwabne.html>



About the JewishGen Yizkor Book Project

Yizkor Books (Memorial Books) were traditionally written to memorialize the names of departed family and martyrs during holiday services in the synagogue (a practice that still exists in many synagogues today).

Over the centuries, as a result of countless persecutions and horrific atrocities committed against the Jews, Yizkor Books (*Sefer Zikaron* in Hebrew) were expanded to include more historical information, such as biographical sketches of famous personalities and descriptions of daily town life.

Following the Holocaust, the idea of remembrance and learning took on an urgent and crucial importance. Survivors of the Holocaust sought out other surviving residents of their former towns to memorialize and document the names and way of life of those who were ruthlessly murdered by the Nazis.

These remembrances were documented in Yizkor Books, hundreds of which were published in the first decades after the Holocaust. Most of these books were published privately, or through *landsmanshaftn* (social organizations comprised of members originating from the same European town or region) that still existed, and were often distributed free of charge.

Sadly, the languages used to document these crucial histories and links to our past, Yiddish and Hebrew, are no longer commonly understood by a significant percentage of Jews today. It is our hope that the translation of these books into English (and other languages) will assist the countless Jewish family researchers who are so desperately seeking to forge a connection with their heritage.

To learn more, and to access the translations at no cost, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/>



About the JewishGen Yizkor Books in Print Project

This is an initiative to print and publish Yizkor Books that had been fully translated, so that hard copies would be available for purchase by the descendants of these communities and also by scholars, universities, synagogues, libraries, and museums.

These Yizkor books have been produced almost entirely through the volunteer effort of researchers from around the world, assisted by donations from private individuals. The books are printed and sold at near cost, so as to make them as affordable as possible.

To learn more, and to access a list of all published Yizkor Books, please visit:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/ybip.html>



About the JewishGen KehilaLinks Project

KehilaLinks aims to create virtual Yizkor Books online, where anyone with an interest in a place where Jews have lived can commemorate that community.

To learn more, please visit: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/>



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