

To Samuella and Berel, Davidah, Rella and Ziva.

Love from

Aunty Dorie

The Autobiography of Miriam Sheinbaum as told to her niece in 1973

Doris Hersch

I was born more or less 73 years ago on a dairy farm hired by my parents from the Polish Graf Ptolsky, in a Lithuanian village Birzar, part of the Russian Empire. The type of farming was usual in our family many of whose members were fully qualified rabbis (with "shmichas rabonis") but never drew any salaries or remuneration whatsoever in providing religious services to their fellows. My great grandfather Yankel the "Gute" initiated this tradition saying any service rendered to God must not be paid for. He was a man renowned for his piety and wisdom. My father studied with a rabbi in Lubavitch and even after his marriage and six children later was still a rabbinical student.

My mother ran the farm in his absence, naturally with the help of servants. The house had 5-6 rooms with a big stove in the kitchen extending to another room. Thus in the winter this stove heated with wood emitted enough heat to warm the entire house. The stove was built of bricks and between the stove and the roof there were shelves on which 3 or 4 people could lie and keep themselves warm. There was one oven for baking bread and next to this another smaller one for cooking meals.

I was the 12th of 13 children but four did not survive. The elder children helped to rear the younger ones. There was always at least one servant in the house. My parents kept a shop, very much like the general dealers in the South African rural areas, which sold a consortium of general amenities. The eldest of the family, Yacha, did not attend school but shared lessons with a neighbour's family who employed a governess. She learned German, Polish and fancy needlework. For the four sons that followed Yacha my father engaged a teacher-rabbi who taught the boys together with the sons of relatives and close friends the Talmud and Yiddish reading and writing. the girls learned to read and write Yddish too.

Later the sons went to big towns like Tukum and Panevez to Yeshivas. There they "ate days" (ie poor students were invited to different homes each day for meals) at rich people's residences.

My eldest brother Yankel, was conscripted into the Russian army where he was taught to play a brass instrument and played in a military band. He bacame ill and was sent home. When he recovered he met an American girl whom he married and then left to settle in the U.S.A.

Zalman, the second oldest brother, studied in Tukan until he qualified as a rabbi. Hilke (Harry) the third brother, studied in Panerez and then ran away in protest of the days eating out. He then immigrated to South Africa his uncle Meishe and tante Roche were now living.

My brother Judke (Julius) celebrated his barmitzvah and then worked in a shop in Kurland in Latvia. He wasn't registered in Latvia, so he decided to immigrate to South Africa as well. He was a good son and sent money regularly to the parents.

My father had been adopted by his childless aunt and was known throughout his life as Reb Meishe Katz, although his real name was Meishe Rubin. This adoption also excused him from military service, as only sons were exempted.

By this time we had moved to Shosht, a little village about 7 "verst" from the Latvian border and roughly 14 miles from Biers (Birzen). In Shosht we lived in my mother's father's "kretzmer" (inn) which we bought from my grandparent. We had been fairly well off until the following incident occurred.

One day while my sister Liebe, still a young girl, was cutting cabbage for the winter, accidentally the knife shot out and landed in my eldest sister Yacha's eye. For an entire year Yacha stayed in the home of the specialist Mandelstein in Riga and though her eyesight was saved, the medical expenses cost my parents their farm and thus the move to Shosht.

Liebe grew into a beautiful, clever girl who immigrated to America where she stayed with unty Masha, my mother's brother's wife.

In Shosht we lived fairly comfortably. The building was and had a shop and stables where the wagon cart, animals and fodder were kept. There were 2 cows, 1 horse, sheep and chickens. We were never short of food. Vegetables were home grown and with apples were stored in an underground cellar for the winter. In the season we were able to gather nuts, berries and mushrooms from the nearby forest. Cherries, yellow and black, as well as other fruits were also available. Clothes were made by dressmakers from cloth spun and woven at home and then sent away for dyeing. Shoes were bought twice a year, a pair for Pesach and a pair for Rosh Hashona. In winter we wore "Volokers" knee-length boots. A gentile woman did the washing once a week. At weddings professional musicians were hired.

Yacha married late for those times at the age of 28 years. Shmuel Kessel, her husband, was well educated and had spent many years in America but resented the lack of religion among many Jews there. He knew many languages and acted as interpreter and translator of documents for anyone needing these services. He was introduced to my sister by the Roms, relatives of Yankel Shocheta, the brother of Rifka Kook. After the birth of Yacha's baby who died a day later, the couple left for South Africa, as Shmuel, being a Kurlander, wasn't allowed to remain in Lithuania.

Liebe and Raichke, Mirke and Nochum all attended government school where we were educated through the Russian medium. We also attended a "cheder" where

we learned to write "Yiddish." The atmosphere in the Russian school was friendly and not anti-semitic. Later I attended a gymnasium, ie a high school. This was in Latvia, in Steinberg, about 7 "verst" from Shosht.

In 1905 my brother Zalman whom my father forbade to practise as a rabbi because my father deemed his son not pious enough, had a big business dealing in linseed and linen. Because he was a revolutionary, he was about to be arrested by the Russian police. The Roman Catholic priest who had warned my father about this, saved Zalman by hiding him in the roof of the church. That night the yokels in the village smashed the window panes of our house which they tried to set on fire. Raichke, Nochum and I were carried in blankets to a culvert nearby. It was Rosh Hashona and three other Jewish families were staying at our home where the services were held.

The following day at the order of the priest, the yokels had to replace the panes the glass being previously from the hall adjoining the church. This priest was our guide, counsellor, doctor and faithful friend. It was he who looked after my father's books, my mother's copper and brass ware when we had to flee from our home at the command of the Russian government who accused the Jews of collaborating with the Germans in the First World War. In 1918 when my father returned to his home, he found those possessions intact.

After many revolutionaries had been killed or exiled to Siberia, the government in 1905 granted the people a "duma" in which the populace had some representation. But though for the moment the situation seemed brighter, the former dictatorship gradually re-established itself. During this time Zalman married Chaitse Guinsberg, a member of a wealthy family in Kupershik. Zalman had a big drapery shop.

In 1914 war broke out. The Russians fared badly on the battlefield and the Jews became the scapegoat. An uncle of the czar, Nicholai Nicholayitch, ordered all Jews living within a hundred miles of the battlefield to leave their homes at (24 hours' notice) and travel further to the interior of Russia. This was a dreadful catastrophe for the Jews as besides having to leave most of their possessions behind, there was no public transport available in these villages. Most people, carrying what they could, had to walk. We were more privileged having a horse and cart. Relatives came running to us for help but with only one horse, what could we do? They had to hire carts and horses from the peasants. A poor old woman, holding her 10 beigels in the air as she forded a stream on her walk out of her village cried in despair, "These are all I own now. Of the 3 Jewish families in Shosht I was most friendly with Rivka, the daughter of Berel the Shuster (bootmaker) and throughout my life my brothers called me Shuster.

When war came nearer we had to leave. One morning Mrs Shmetona (later her husband became Prime Minister of Lithuania), a refined, educated Gentile whose father was a great friend of my father, came on horseback to warn us of the

Cossacks' approach. Actually no harm was done when they did arrive but so terrified were we when we heard the name Cossack that we left immediately. My mother and Nochum, the youngest, sat on the cart and Father, Raichke and I trudged alongside. We met many other fugitives, Christians as well, all on their way to the nearest railway station, Friedrichstrasse in Latvia, 40 miles from Shosht. We made our way to the house of relatives but found them ready to leave. Then my cousin Roche-Laika (my father's brother Mendel's daughter) and I went to the station where there were representatives from the government, ready to give us train tickets in exchange for our horse and cart. I had only seen a train in picture books and as we approached the railway line and heard the puffing of the engine, I thought guns were being fired and so threw myself onto the ground.

My father through his contacts with rabbis tried to let my brother Zalman know we were heading for Nevel. Zalman, Chaitse and their two children, his mother-in-law and Chaitse's sister Rivka had travelled with all their possessions in a cattle train to Nevel which is on the boundary between Lithuania and Russia. We had heard that the Kupershik Jews had left from Nevel. We travelled very slowly in a truck and arrived in Dvinsk where we met on the station Aunt Rivka and Uncle Bertzik Kook and their family. They were on their way to Elizabethgrad and were keen on us joining them but my mother was insistent on us joining Zalman in Nevel. At each station the train stopped for a long time as villages en route were being evacuated. Eventually we reached Nevel and had a joyous reunion with Zalman, Chaitse and their family.

We stayed with Zalman for six months, sharing living expenses. Raichke and I had to wash by the riverside and we were ashamed of being seen doing this. In Nevel we met the family of the Chassidische Rov Halperin and became friendly with another family, the Lifschitzs. The only Lifschitz son had been wounded in the war and he received many visitors. I was attracted to the Rov Halperin's son, a young student and the only place we could meet was at the Lifschitzs where a young crowd assembled. Rivka, Aunt Chaitse's sister, tried to interfere and make our visits to the Lifschitzs impossible. Then Zalman decided to leave for Tambov in Russia proper and we left Nevel with him.

It took us months to reach Tambov where it was very cold. The two families decided to separate. Zalman established a business and we moved to a small house near the gaol. There were German and Turkish prisoners-of-war, the latter with huge moustaches. We were very much afraid of them. Raichke and I both started looking for jobs. My sister found a job at a high class food shop and I worked in a bakery selling bread at 6am when the soldiers were watering the horses. The woman owner of the bakery sent me back to sleep at 7am to her home where I shared a room with her daughter who helped in the bakery. This daughter fancied the POW's and she kept me awake discussing the latest tit-bits of news about them. I was well fed working for the baker who felt sorry that I had

a long distance to walk to the bakery from my home. My employer made available to my parents two rooms nearer the bakery and centre of town.

Because of the war I hadn't been able to complete my matric, so I took up Bookkeeping at the school in Tambov. Raichke studied Chemistry. My father worked on various committees, refusing to a job as a rabbi. My parents left Tambov for Shosht in 1918 but I left only in 1921. Shosht had been burnt to the ground but my father's possessions were safe with the priest. From Shosht my parents went to Bierz where there was a kretzmer belonging to my mother's father. They stayed there in two rooms and lived on the money they received regularly from their sons in South Africa. Their youngest son was still with them.

In 1918 before they left Tambov, my parents received a letter from the Lifschitz's in Walloda near Petrograd, formerly of Nevel where we had met them. They were rich, had a fur business and the only son, Shabse, very good looking, wished to marry me. I wasn't interested and thought he was mad. The revolution had broken out and we were very poor. I thought seeing Shabse would make him more attractive to me but after visiting the Lifschitz's in Walloda, I found I had nothing in common with him and, saying good bye, I hurried back to Tambov. The financial position had worsened and my mother informed me that I was ruining the whole family by refusing to marry Shabse Lifschitz. So the Lifschitz's came to Tambov and the wedding took place. I remained in Walloda in Walloda for a few months in a beautiful house but I wept all the time. Then I heard that my parents were returning to Shosht. I told the Lifschitz's I had to visit Tambov to say good bye. After my arrival in Tambov, I was determined not to return to Walloda. Shabse kept on writing to me but I ignored his letters. Thereupon he asked for a divorce; came to Tambov and the marriage was dissolved. My parents who had departed by then knew nothing of this. Before My brother Zalman left Tambov, he told me I mustn't shame the family by obtaining a divorce.

Raichke and I were the only two members of the family left in Tambov. We speculated to support ourselves and we made plans to study further. I decided to become a doctor but naturally this was difficult during a revolution. Raichke eventually completed her studies in analytical chemistry. In Tambov the White Army, mainly composed of Russian hooligans under English officers, arrived. All they did was kill Jews. We lived with the Rabbi and his wife, a fine intelligent couple. Fortunately we were in Moscow when the White Army entered Tambov. The Rabbi and his wife were stoned to death. They sacrificed their lives rather than divulge where their fellow Jews had hidden themselves. He was in the synagogue when they arrested him and his wife refused to leave him. In Tambov at the time there was Berke Rubin, brother of Hilke (father of Harold and Bernice Rubens and Taifka Schulman) who had arrived from England to join the Red Army. He was carried off to be hanged but, not knowing Russian, he made his protestations in English. The English officers then ordered the Russians to release him because he was an Englishman!

We were then in Moscow because of a certain man Lerman who had come to Tambov. He stayed not far off and had fallen ill with influenza. Both Raichke survived the epidemic and we nursed Lerman. He told us he was a "big shot with the Eshevikes (Mensheviks?)," was a secretary to Chernov and had a truckload of cotton which was rare and which he wanted to sell. When he recovered we all three went to Moscow to try to find buyers for the cotton. There was a student, Josselit, who was also interested in the deal. Raichke, Laike Marass, a cousin, and I proceeded to Josselit's house. For some reason or other, Raichke left us. We had been eating blueberries and my handkerchief was stained with the juice of the fruit. On that Sunday when we reached Josselit's apartment, the whole building was surrounded by the Red Army. The men who arrested us spoke Latvian which I understood very well. They accused us of being spies, swore at us and said we would be shot on the spot.

Only a year later did I discover why I was arrested. I was involved in the trial of the sisters Kostonova. Apparently much fighting had taken place at Kursk station. A White Army soldier was captured and after being tortured he divulged a plot whereby the White Russians had decided to take Moscow and destroy the Bolsheviks. The latter appointed a man, red-bearded Adelman, to discover who was involved in the plot. He had lots of addresses and everyone caught in these places was arrested. The aristocrats who had fled to France formulated plans which were all written in French as they thought the ignorant Reds wouldn't know the language. Josselit had been approached by the two aristocrat sisters, the Kostonovas, who lived in the same building to translate the French as he had been a student in Paris. Adelman made contact with the sisters all the time pretending to be a White Russian. Everyone in the building and even casual passers-by going through the two entrances were arrested.

We were taken to the biggest and oldest gaol in Moscow, the Butirky, mentioned in Tolstoy's Resurrection. I was under great suspicion because of my blueberry stained handkerchief which they thought was a code statement. I was put in a single cell containing an iron bed and a big bucket. A tiny window high in the wall allowed light to enter. In the door was a tiny aperture through the guards could watch me. The prison was like a self-contained town, even running to factories where goods were manufactured. The political prisoners were separated, were not allowed to mix with other prisoners, nor to work. There were 4 separate buildings with winding staircases and on every landing was a cell. I was in the one called Pugachovka Vasniya.

The cell was named after Pugachov, a Cossack from the Volga. He was a leader of a plot against Catherine the Great. He was successful for a while, gaining the support of the peasants and many aristocrats, lots of whom were killed. Eventually Pugachov was caught and hanged. Pushkin wrote about this period.

After 6 weeks I was taken from the cell and put in a dormitory where there were about 100 women, mostly aristocrats from Petrograd and Moscow. I was the

youngest and tiniest. My clothes became torn and I was reduced to wearing a pair of bloomers and an overblouse. In the middle of the dormitory was a plentiful supply of hot water. Two little rooms off the dormitory contained buckets served as toilets. Every morning four criminal prisoners came to empty the buckets and leave clean ones behind.

The worst aspect of prison life was the shortage of food from which people were suffering throughout Moscow. I was lucky since Raichke brought me occasional food parcels. The menu for the day consisted of half a pound of bread with hot water in the morning; a dirty concoction which went by the name of soup for lunch - and that was all for the entire day. Twice a week boiled tripe (not cleaned sufficiently) was given. We organised a food strike, broke windows and stopped eating altogether. Many inmates became ill and after five days the authorities promised to improve the rations. But there was simply no food, in spite of the addition of potatoes to the menu, we were so starved that we resorted to eating plaster from the walls. The Swedish Red Cross appointed Kamenov and Maxim Groky's wife to investigate conditions. When they saw me, how young, frail and tiny I was, they decided to press for my release from gaol with the authorities.

There were many celebrities in my dormitory. Anna Veerbova was involved with Rasputin and the Tsarina. She wouldn't speak to the rest of us as she deemed all of us beneath her. Professor Skvortsoff's wife (he was from the White Guard) and Madame Kapil (General Kapil's wife) were inmates too. Madame Kapil was saved from the firing squad because she requested a divorce. They were beautiful and friendly women. Among the prisoners were actresses too. The prison had a wonderful library as many prisoners donated their books for the use of the inmates. One could read to one's heart's content. Two people were sent to collect the books and give out others every morning.

Then came rumours. General Yudenich was closing on Moscow and any day the Red Army would fall. We were told that if Moscow fell to the Whites, the prison would be dynamited. One night the Cheka came and 800 prisoners were taken away. We never heard of them again. We thought they had been shot but this was never verified. Then slowly the Red Regime established itself, and order was restored.

I was the initiator in starting a correspondence between the women and the men prisoners. Our letters were harmless exchanges of love. Notes put under the buckets were passed to and fro. Letters were written in many languages. I regretted later the loss of these missives which I was too frightened to keep.

One morning among others my name was called out and I was transferred to the Prokovsky Monastery, now a concentration camp. Political women prisoners worked in the hospitals and offices. There were about thirty ex-prostitutes who did the washing. These prostitutes were rounded up from the streets by the Red Army. Chitroth Rinik, the red light quarter was burned down. The women who

refused to leave the site were arrested and sent to the concentration camp. Most of them were addicted to doses of cocaine and morphine.

There were eight of us from Butirky Prison. I was one of the two working in the office while four others, Laike Maross among those, helped in the hospital. Two others dished out the food which was better now. Many of the men were hostages, fine people mostly from Finland and Sweden. The Red Cross sent them parcels of food which came our way too. The flu epidemic spread rapidly and we eight formerly from the Butirky had to drag four prisoners of war on sledges to the big hospital. Onlookers in the street made us cry out to them that we weren't criminals and were forced into degrading tasks.

This was the last period of my two years' stay in prison. The Red Army being stronger, the Djinsky government issued an amnesty and among many released prisoners (political), I found myself free.

While I was in Butirky gaol, I caught glimpses of Graf Pruskevich who instituted the case against the poor little Jew Beiles in the town of Kiev. Bernard Malamud's "The Fixer" is based on this case. Beiles was accused of killing a child for using the blood in the making of matzos, such a monstrous lie, against all ritual and moral laws of the Jews. Prostitutes, rogues and thieves were paid to testify against the Jew. When the Bolsheviks came into power, the case was re-opened and Pruskevich was arrested. The same witnesses who testified against Beiles admitted they were paid to say lies about Beiles. I saw Pruskevich exercising in the prison yard and I wondered that this distinguished man resembled a tall, good looking English officer could stoop so low as to manufacture lies about a poor, harmless, little Jew.

In Butirky there were two Kaplan brothers, cousins of Josselit. They found out I was in gaol in connection with the same case as Josselit. They must have been completely innocent, as I was. They sent me a piece of dried bread to break my fast on at the end of Yom Kippur.

When I was released from prison, I decided to stay on in Moscow and study further. I knew a family, the Blochs who lived in a road on the corner of which stood a statue of Pushkin. There I obtained clothes and Raichke came from Tambov to see me. She told me she wanted to return to the parents. I wanted to remain in Moscow where I had many friends. Ulrich Kersvret, an engineer, encouraged me in my studies. One Friday afternoon I wrote the entrance examinations after which I was questioned on my background. I took good care to tell them my father was a worker and not a rabbi. I passed the exam, receiving papers for entrance to the medical faculty.

Arriving at my residence after this I found a telegram from my sister asking me to come to Tambov as she had been arrested. I left immediately for Tambov where Raichke was in gaol she tried to bribe the gaoler to release her friend. I ran

around from one official to another trying to obtain her release. I was afraid for her health. In gaol she met her future husband Grisha Bark. After a few months hard work I managed to obtain Raichke's release. She then changed her mind about joining our parents as she wanted to marry Grisha Bark. When I returned to Moscow, it was too late to begin at Medical School, so after obtaining forged papers, I left for my parents' home in Bierz in the now independent state of Lithuania.

My parents were under the impression that both Raichke and I had been killed. I found my parents two old people who were now totally dependent on the financial support of two elder brothers in South Africa. I was disappointed in the absence of my youngest brother Nochem who had already left for South Africa.

Before I was imprisoned in Moscow I had met Rachmiel Sheinbaum in Tambov where he was secretary of the Bootmakers' Union. I now began corresponding with him. I asked him to meet me in Bialystok in Poland but it took two years for us to get together.

In Bierz I did absolutely nothing. The house we lived in was old and delapidated, a building which had belonged to my great grandparents. I realised I had made a mistake by leaving Moscow. The younger people had left and the Lithuanian government was very Fascist. My parents said they would rather see me dead than in Russia which was so anti-religion. Rachmiel decided that because I could not go to Russia, he would go to Bialystok where we would get married.

After much hardship Rachmiel found his way to Bialystok, even suffering a severe attack of typhus on the border. He went to his brothers in Bialystok. I crossed secretly the border between Poland and Lithuania, so reaching Bialystok. Three weeks later we were married. Rachmiel decided to open a wholesale linen business which we bought from a family that had decided to immigrate to Israel. Three months later the former owner returned declaring the sale wasn't legal as his wife had sold the business to us. They gave us goods in lieu of the money we had paid in. We sold the goods cheaply to raise money. We returned via Latvia to Bierz where we tried to obtain passports for South Africa. In the meantime my brother Hilke with his wife Annie and son Johnny arrived from South Africa to visit our parents. They helped us with money for our fare to South Africa. On the 28th March 1924 we arrived in South Africa, my son David having been born five months earlier.