

קציר אבן

תולדות משפחת קומיסרוק (קומיסרוב)

מאת: חיים פרידמן



OUR FATHERS' HARVEST

A HISTORY OF THE KOMISARUK (KOMESAROFF) FAMILY

BY: KEITH FREEDMAN

ק צ י ר א ב ו ת

O U R F A T H E R S ' H A R V E S T

A history of the Komisaruk (Komesaroff) Family

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"Children's children are the crown  
of old men;  
And the glory of children are their  
fathers."

Proverbs 17,6

חולדות משפחת קומיסרוק (קומיסרוב)

מאת היים פרידמן

נדפס פתח תקוה, תשמ"ב

"עטרת זקנים בני בנים,

וחפארת בנים אבותם"

משלי י"ז, ו'

## INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The task of compiling the history of the Komesaroff family began some twenty two years ago when as a youth of Barmitzvah age I began to develop an interest in my 'roots'. From an early age I was exposed to stories told by my late grandparents KHANA-REIZEL and ZALMEN Komesaroff (Kaye) as well as many other relatives of their experiences in Russia. So I decided that I should record these anecdotes for the sake of posterity. I can recall many family gatherings when my grandparents would talk of their youth in Russia and of their parents and other relatives. A place of particular honour and affection was held for stories of their grandfather Rabbi PINKHAS Komisaruk.

Unfortunately my recording of these stories was delayed too long and the untimely deaths of my grandparents deprived me of a rich source of information. With the help of my mother I began to piece together a family tree. My mother spent many patient hours as I picked her brain trying to draw out all her memories of relatives and events connected with them.

My early family trees were based on charts my brother NEVILLE had compiled with my grandmother's guidance. One day I discovered a box full of old letters and documents that had belonged to my grandfather and albums full of photos taken in Russia. Letters written in Yiddish my mother was able to translate. The Russian ones posed a problem so I began to teach myself elementary Russian and with the help of a dictionary I was able to translate them.

My first communication with the many branches of the family living around the world was in 1964 when I wrote to an old address of the Luban family in Seattle. Thereafter ensued a fruitful correspondence with the late ROKHEL Luban who filled in many gaps in the family tree.

I was now determined to write an overall history of the family. Of immense assistance was my greatuncle WILLIAM (KHAIM-VELVEL) Komesaroff whose vivid memory provided me with details of my greatgrandparents, their brothers and sisters and hordes of cousins. Since he was already thirteen years old when he left Russia, he was able to recall many details of Graftskoy, the Jewish agricultural colony where the Komesaroffs lived, even to the extent of reconstructing a map of the village. His descriptions of life there are a valuable source of information on the history of the Jewish agricultural colonisation experience in Russia, a fragment of Jewish history so sparsely recorded. Likewise his recollection of the suffering the family underwent during the Russian Revolution and Civil War had to be recorded lest the future generations forget them.

From Australia an extensive correspondence with relatives throughout the U.S.A. and Canada provided a wealth of material and I was able to crosscheck stories of events from different sources.

After arriving in Israel in 1977, considerable source material became available and many hours were spent at the libraries of Tel Aviv University, the Diaspora Museum, and the Rambam Library. There I was able to sift through rare source material of the period involved. Of particular value was my discovery of a history of the town of Rassein in Lithuania wherein details are recorded of Rabbi PINKHAS Komisaruk, his father and grandfather. Sources on the colonies in Southern Russia were hard to come by, but I found two rare books in Russian which provided detailed statistics of the colonies, enabling me to expand the history of the family to encompass a general history of the colonies.

Having settled in Israel I had the opportunity of meeting my former source, ROKHEL Luban, and was able to enlarge on the information of the Russian period.

A subject which required considerable research was the family's connection with the Gaon of Vilna. I made contact with members of the Rivlin family and of particular value were several books sent to me by BENYAMIN Rivlin of Jerusalem, including the genealogy of the Rivlin family and the Gaon of Vilna, written by his late father ELIEZER Rivlin.

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people for their assistance in providing information. But I could not have seen the project through to its conclusion without the encouragement and patience of my wife JANE who was prepared to give up all the time necessary for my research and writing. Of practical help I must thank her for editing and

proofreading.

Next I want to thank my parents and brother NEVILLE for their encouragement; in particular my mother for providing the framework for the initial research and much information she recalled from my grandparents. Likewise my brother for several items he had heard from my grandmother, as had also my uncle PETER Kaye. My richest source in Australia was my greatuncle WILLIAM Komesaroff. Details of the Zmood family were provided by MOSHE (MORRIS) Zmood and the late RAYMOND Grinblat.

Of the relatives living in the U.S.A. and Canada, after ROKHEL Luban my next source was VELVEL (WILLIAM) Komisaruk of New York. He confirmed aspects of the origins of the family as well as providing details of his branch of the family. Through him I was able to contact YOKHVED (EVA) Karlan of New York, MOSHE-KALMEN (MORRIS) Winnikoff of Los Angeles, VELVEL (BILL) Comisarow of Viking, Canada, PAUL Comisarow of North Vancouver, LUBA (LILIAN) Wainberg of Montreal, ROSE Greenberg of Winnipeg, ARLA Strauss of Winnipeg, ED Komisaruk of Sacramento, RICHARD Komisaruk of Lafayette, California, BEN Winnikoff of Redwood City, and CLARA Berchansky (who provided much information on the relatives in the U.S.S.R.)

Of considerable support from the time of our arrival in Israel was MOSHE Luban who, aside from providing information, was ever ready to assist in assessing and interpreting information.

Since most of the information available concerned my own branch of the family, this is reflected in the history. However their experiences and descriptions of their way of life were common to other branches of the family where I was unable to obtain the same detailed information.

I would hope that this history will serve as a memorial to all those of the family whose strivings to improve their lot merited recording, and to the many who met their death *לפי ק"ו* both during the Russian Civil War and at the hands of the Nazis.

Above all I dedicate this history to the memory of my grandparents KHANA-REIZEL and ZALMEN Komesaroff who contributed so much to my formative years.

#### הקדמה

בס"ד פתח חקרה תשמ"ב

חולדות משפחת קומיסרוב הוא פרי מחקר של יותר מעשרים שנה. כנער בגיל בר מצוה החתלתי להתעניין בעבר המשפחה. כל שנות ילדותי נזכחתי באירועים משפחתיים רבים שבהם התאספו קרובים שונים ומפיהם שמעתי סיפורים ואגדות על בני המשפחה שלא הכרתי מעולם ולא ידעתי מיהם ומה היו מעשיהם ברוסיה הרחוקה. בהערכה רבה ביותר דברו וספרו סבא וסבתא ז"ל על סבא שלהם מוהר"ר פנחס קומיסרוק זצלה"ה. לצערי דחיתי את רישום הסיפורים האלו עד למאוחר מדי, ורק לאחר פטירת סבא וסבתא ז"ל החתלתי לשחזרם. בעבודה זו תחילה עזרה לי אמה שתה"י. יותר מאוחר יצרתי קשר עם הרבה מענפי המשפחה המפורזים ברחבי תבל. דודי זקני ר' חיים זאב קומיסרוב נ"י תרם בהרבה בזכרונותיו מרוסיה, ובעזרתו הצלחתי לבנות תמונה שלמה של צורה חייהם של תושבי המושבות החקלאיות היהודיות בדרום רוסיה שבהן גרו בני המשפחה.

למעשה, תולדות המשפחה אינו רק איסוף של סיפורים נחמדים, אלא גם רישום יקר של פרקים בהיסטוריה היהודית, של שמחה ושל סבל, ושל מאורעות שראויים לא להשכח, כגון הקמת המושבות על ידי אבות המשפחה, בעיקר מוהר"ר שלמה זלמן הלוי קומיסרוק זצלה"ה בשנת ת"ר, תקופת הפוגרומים, גלי המהגרים שברחו לארצות הברית, קנדה ואוסטרליה, סבל והרג בימי מלחמת האזרחית הרוסית ועל ידי הנאצים, ומאמציהם של כל ענפי המשפחה להתבסס בארצות מגוריהם החדשים.

ראיתי לנכון לשמור את כל הפרטים שהצלחתי ללקט למען הדורות הבאים ולעילוי נשמותיהם של כל בני המשפחה שמסרו את נפשם על קידוש השם בימי המלחמה האזרחית ועל ידי הנאצים.

יתרה על כך, הנני מקדיש את חולדות המשפחה לזכר סבאי וסבתאי ר' שלמה זלמן כן ר' מנחם מנדל הלוי זצ"ל וחנה רייזל בת ר' מאיר הלוי ע"ה שתרמו כל כך הרבה להתפתחותי ושערכי חייהם ישפיעו עלי לנצח.

חיים קאפל ב"ר יעקב ראובן פרידמן

## CHAPTER FOUR: A NEW LIFE

~~At this time~~ political events were taking place in the Russian capital which were to change the whole course of the lives of the Komisaruk and Zhmood families. Towards the end of his reign Tsar Alexander I had reversed all of his liberal policies and proceeded to place numerous restrictions on the Jews. The Pale of Settlement, an area which had been established in 1772 and in which Jewish residence was confined, was further tightened and many areas were withdrawn from it. When Tsar Nicholas I came to the throne he continued Alexander's policies towards the Jews with added vigour. In 1827 he instituted Priziv: compulsory military service for all male Jews over the age of twelve, for a period of twenty-five years. The object of this policy was to uproot young Jewish boys at an impressionable age from the Jewish influence of their homes, and either convert them to Christianity or kill them off. To implement this policy, the Jewish communities were constantly being raided by the Tsar's Cossacks who captured all the young boys they could lay their hands on, regardless of age.

Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN and YOKHVED were frantic with worry about the safety of their four sons, as were DAVID and KHANA-REIZEL Zhmood. They were constantly on watch for news of an impending raid by the Cossacks in order to collect their children from the streets and confine them to the comparative safety of the house. Time and time again they heard of the grief of their neighbours whose children had been swooped up while at play in the streets. Such was the case with the Pogorelske family who were later to intermarry with the Komisaruks. The Shokhet of nearby ~~Mir~~, SAADIAH-MEIR Pogorelske, lost a six year old son SELIG at the hands of Cossack abductors.

Then a means was found to save the family from a terrible fate. In an attempt to persuade the Jews to leave the cities the Tsar offered to give land to any Jews prepared to farm it. Usually this land was in remote areas far from the main centres of Christian settlement. Many Jews, amongst them the Komisaruks and the Zhmoods, saw this as an opportunity to escape from persecution. The decision to give up his life in Kovno was not an easy one for Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN. There he was surrounded by family and friends and most important, there he had access to the great centres of Jewish learning. But even though it meant giving up all his home comforts, even though it meant travelling to a region about which he knew nothing and where up to date there had been no Jewish settlement, Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN realised that there was no alternative if he was to save his sons from forced conversion and even death.

Following a statute which was put into law in 1804, Jews were permitted to engage in agriculture. To encourage them to leave their urban existence, monetary loans and tax reliefs for lengthy periods were offered. In 1807 the first settlements were founded in Novorussiya (New Russia), that vast area of the south-eastern Ukraine which had only recently come under Russian dominion. The first region to be opened up was in the Government of Kherson where 300 families were settled (16). By 1810 their numbers had grown to 600 families spread over eight colonies. To maintain these settlers 145,000 rubles had been spent by the government. Then a change of heart on the part of the ministry responsible halted further development. Contemporary reports stated: "The Jewish colonists are dying of hunger and cold in the midst of the steppes. 5000 out of 10,000 died in a few years."(17).

(16) The history of Jewish agricultural colonization in Russia has been sparsely recorded. Thus the experiences of the Komisaruk family provide an invaluable record of a little known aspect of Jewish endeavour.

(17) The only English sources are 'The Jewish Encyclopaedia'- Funk and Wagnal; and 'The Russian Jews- Emancipation or Extermination', a translation of a work written in 1893 by L. Errera.

Following the unrest in the cities caused by the institution of military service in 1827, it was suggested that agricultural development recommence as an alternative means of getting more Jews out of their urban way of life. It was not until 1833 that a further contingent of would-be settlers set out from the northern cities. This time they were directed towards Siberia in order to populate another newly developing area. 1317 families were settled there by 1837 when further emigration was stopped.

A new site for colonization was found in the Government of Yekaterinoslav. Under Tsar Nicholas I, the minister of Domains Count Kessler urged Jews from Lithuania and Courland to settle in Yekaterinoslav. Between 1846 and 1855 seventeen colonies were established in the region. Amongst these first settlers heading for the Yekaterinoslav colonies were Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN and YOKHVED with their five children. Travelling with them were DAVID and KHANA-REIZEL Zhmood as well as Rabbi (MOSHE Yuval) from ~~Swit~~ <sup>PUNGBIAN</sup> and SAADIAH-MEIR Pogorelske, both of whose families married into the Komisaruk and Zhmood families.

The journey was a lengthy and arduous one. Public transport in 1846 (18) in Russia was virtually non-existent. The new settlers travelled in large wagons laden with their household possessions along the rough roads leading south. They were exposed to the weather and to the dangers of attack by thieves and bandits. Periodically the journey was hastened when the travellers were able to transfer to river barges. Food was difficult to obtain and disease was rife. Many died on the roadside. Months passed as the fragile caravan wended its way south following the Dnieper River and finally arrived at the city of Alexandrovsk. This was the gateway to the wide unknown plains of Novorussiya. From there they once again boarded wagons and headed east for 70 miles until they finally reached their destination — the colonies (19).

Vivid descriptions of the experiences of the colonists of those times are given by Rabbi Yaakov Lipshitz of Kovno in his book 'Zikhron Yaakov'. Sections of a chapter entitled 'The Yekaterinoslav Movement in the year 5604-5605 (1844)' are quoted as follows:

"In those days, His Majesty the Tsar Nicholas the First published his noble desire to enlarge the settlement in the region of Yekaterinoslav, whereby all who desired to settle there the government would give land, freehold gratis, as well as assistance and support for the needs of settlement on it, such as : oxen, ploughing harvesting and sewing tools. And another advantage the government would give to advance the cause of settlement and preparadness there: all settlers in the plains of Yekaterinoslav would be given freedom for their sons from army service for the twenty-five year service period.

"Those who absorbed from the atmosphere exaggerated rumours, related of the great cheapness there, whereby the price of a chicken was a coppeck and a half; a goose's price 10 coppecks and so on, according to these values. The values of the masses in those days were to praise the essence of cheapness of all commodities .....

"And even though the truth of the matter was peculiar in view of the essence that in labour of the soil they had not engaged at all, but because of the great pressure which prevailed in those days, and more so relieve their sons of army service, many flocked to register themselves on the government lists, to qualify for work on the land on the plains of Yekaterinoslav.

(18) The date of 1846 is held to be the year of the families' migration as written in an inscription in a book which belonged to MENAKHEM-MENDEL Komisaruk: "This book Khokhmat Adam belonged to the distinguished and wonderful, my father and teacher - from the year our teacher the Rabbi PINKHAS, the son of our teacher the Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN of blessed memory, Segal, (came to) Kolonya Grafskoy in the year 5600 (1840) from Lithuania."

(19) RAYMOND Grinblat of Melbourne related his mother's recollections of stories told by elderly relatives, probably her grandfather KOPPEL Zhmood, recalling the events of the journey from Lithuania.

"In those days there were no steel railways, no stone roads in our land. To transfer a complete family over such a vast distance, by means of carts from city to city, took several moons, and the outlay would be an exorbitant sum. So the settlers bought horses, prepared wagons for themselves with hoods of cloth, and so arrayed, family after family set off for Yekaterinoslav. And all who saw the wagons immediately recognised that they were the travellers to Yekaterinoslav. And those of wisdom and knowledge had great reservations in the depths of their hearts and discreetly said: would that their return be as their exodus - because they knew in advance what would be their fate."

Before leaving Lithuania the new settlers had been assured by the officials that they would be given every assistance during the initial period of colonization to build houses and establish their farms. They were led to understand that some sort of dwellings already existed on the colonies and that agricultural experts would advise them and teach them farming methods. How great was their shock when they arrived to find nothing but the rolling plains to greet them. The colonies were merely names on a map: no buildings existed and no officials came to welcome them. What were the settlers to do? They had come almost one thousand miles; they could not turn back now. So they settled down and made the best of things, living in their wagons and in the open.

Eventually an official did arrive, bringing with him tents, sacks of grain, and a few primitive tools. He informed the settlers that they would have to live in tents until they built their houses themselves from the surrounding trees. As for his agricultural advice, he merely handed over the seed, told them to plant it, and left never to be seen again. The settlers had no option other than to struggle on in their ignorance. Being city dwellers they knew little of planting crops or building houses. However they set to work, pitched their tents, ploughed up the land and planted the seed, praying that by some miracle their efforts would be rewarded by a successful crop. Then began the long wait. The weeks and months passed. The settlers were exposed to the rigours of the weather in their flimsy dwellings. Besides the physical discomforts there was the inevitable mental strain due to the complete metamorphosis in their way of life. For centuries their ancestors had lived in cities, rarely seeing green fields or an unbroken skyline. Now they had given up all their urban habits and comforts and transferred themselves to a remote and isolated region. Many settlers simply could not adjust to the change.

Lipshitz continues with a description of the development of the communal structure:

"On their arrival at their destinations there came not rest nor settlement, and immediately it was obvious that their freedom had been taken from them because they were placed under the rule of clerks of the realm, according to the regulations which were enacted by the government, to supervise them and to sustain the settlement there. The clerks behaved towards them almost according to military regime and style of that time, and also physical punishments were not lacking for all misdemeanours and slight errors in the order of behaviour and labour, to which they had not yet become accustomed to the need for.

"Menashe Margolis tells in his memoirs and relates the words of Russian reporters and commentators, that the clerks did not pass on to the colonists the support which the government had allocated to them; to buy animals, to plough, to sow and to plant, and so on. And so they were forced to eat the remnants of their toil which they had brought from their homes. By these means the clerks stood over them and behaved towards them with all the severity of the law. For example, those returning from there relate: by law it was the duty of the men to engage in field work and upon the women fell the work of the house, to draw water and cut wood and so on. Once a colonist woman weakened and a clerk saw that her husband was carrying water home. So he beat the woman with a whip before the eyes of her husband and sons, one of whom fainted from distress at his mother's pain and cries."

For Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN in particular the change in life-style was particularly marked. He had spent all of his life entirely within the walls of the Yeshiva. Rarely, if ever, had there been the need to do any physical work. Now he found himself in the position where, if his family were to survive, he would have to personally provide them with the food to do so.

Disappointment came early in the new life of the settlers: the crops failed resulting in famine and many deaths. Many families despaired. Once again they packed their belongings, left the colonies and headed for the nearest towns or villages, there to pursue a life they had been accustomed to as traders and craftsmen. This was the case with the Zhmood and Yuval families who settled in the village of Andreyevka. There DAVID Zhmood and his son KOPPEL served the community and the surrounding settlements as Shokhetim.

Lipshitz's summing up of the early agricultural endeavour is almost entirely pessimistic:

"So many of the settlers on the plains of Yekaterinoslav escaped from there and returned naked and bereft of everything. From much stress of the journey and their great troubles, their faces were blackened. And all who saw them lamented for them the dirge of the mourner: 'their exodus from Courland and their return from Yekaterinoslav'. Only isolated remnants stayed there. After a number of years their messengers moved about to gather them books, and also money for support to establish their schools to teach Torah. Only after the passage of many years did the condition improve a little of those who had the means to remain in their places."

But there were many who were determined to make a success of their farms. Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN, being the religious leader of the small community in Kolonya Graftskoy, and of the whole Kolonya region for that matter since it was many years before other rabbis arrived, used the position of respect in which he was held to unite his fellow settlers in their resolve to succeed. Strengthened by the spirit of optimism which Judaism had provided its adherents for thousands of years, Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN urged his community not to give up hope since only their determined efforts and their faith would enable them to triumph eventually. As the years passed the flimsy dwellings were replaced by more permanent structures, crops began to flourish, and by trial and error the city dwellers learnt the skills necessary to transform them into farmers.

At this time legislation, which had previously been enacted compelling Jews to adopt surnames, was enforced on the Kolonyas. When Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN went to the official responsible for registering surnames, he was given the name 'Komisaruk'. This was derived from the term 'Komisar' meaning an official. The 'uk' suffix converted it to a diminutive form, indicating a minor official. This arose from Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN's leadership of the Kolonyas. In later years some of his descendants changed the name to 'Komisaroff', the 'off' suffix being adopted to give some distinction to the name since the diminutive form conveyed some derogatory connotations. This change took place particularly when members of the family moved amongst Russians in the towns and cities, and not solely amongst the insular Jewish communities of the Kolonyas (20).

Since the Kolonyas were a rich source of food, the military authorities required that they supply the army with a set quota of their harvests. In order to administer this arrangement the army ordered the farmers to appoint their own official who would be responsible for ensuring that the quota was filled. The choice of such an official was obvious; there was only one man capable of bearing such an onerous task: Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN Komisaruk. Upon him fell the task of having the grain quota from all the farms in the Kolonya region collected and delivered to the army.

(20) Various traditions explain the origin of the surname. It seems that the form 'Komisaroff' or 'Komesaroff' was not exclusively a Jewish name as there are instances of Russian families bearing it, including a Tsarist police officer renowned for his involvement in the activities of Rasputin.

*x name of father  
1876 census*



Realising that dire consequences lay in store for the Jewish farmers if the quota was not filled, Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN applied himself diligently to his task. So successful was he that a local official who was amicably disposed towards the Jews praised Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN in his reports to the government and recommended that his diligence and service to the country be suitably rewarded. Despite the prevailing anti-Jewish attitude of the authorities, they had no choice but to comply with this request from an official who must have been influential. Thus Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN was called before the local potentate and ceremoniously decorated with a gold medal which was inscribed with a commendation for his services to the Crown (21).

Grafskoy, the colony on which the Komisaruks had settled, was one of seventeen colonies in a region located about 50 miles north of the city of Berdyansk, a port on the Sea of Azov. This land had once belonged to a German absentee landlord and then passed into the hands of the government. This explains the origin of the name Grafskoy; being derived from the German term for a nobleman - Graf (22). The total area of land was 910 desyatins (2457 acres), of which the Komisaruk family received 30 desyatins, the statutory allocation for each family consisting of at least six persons (23).

The names of the other sixteen colonies were:

Bogodarovka  
Gorkaya  
Khlebodarovka  
Krasnoselka  
Mezhirech  
Nadyezhnaya  
Nechayevka  
Novozlatopol  
Priyutnaya  
Roskosnaya  
Rovnopol  
Sladkovodnaya  
Trudolyubovka  
Veselaya  
Zatishye  
Zelionoepole

Many of the colonies were known also by other names, usually in Yiddish. These included:

Trudolyubovka - Engels  
Zelionoepole - Myadla  
Nechayevka - Peness  
Nadyezhnaya - Dvilne  
Sladkovodnaya - Kobilnye  
Bogodarovka - Kovailevskaya

Others were simply known as 'Pervenumer' - the first one, since it was the first colony established. Likewise were the 'second', 'third' and 'fourth'. To many of the colonists, the official names were often completely unknown through common disuse (24).

In the year 1847 the colonists were smitten by a severe outbreak of scurvy. This was a result of a poor harvest which in turn failed to provide a balanced diet. The outbreak reached epidemic proportions and many died. Amongst them seems to have been Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN Komisaruk. Although the cause of his death has not been known in family tradition, the date of his death coincided with that of the scurvy epidemic. Since he died at an early age, in his thirties, it is reasonable to assume that the causes were not natural.

(21) This medal is in the possession of the Usher (Ushkatz) family of Detroit. It passed to Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN's son VELVEL, then to the latter's daughter HENIE Ushkatz who took it to the U.S.A.  
(22) WILLIAM Komesaroff, Melbourne. (23) Errera (24) RAKHEL Luban

The sudden loss by the colonists of their spiritual and communal leader must have been sorely felt. He had been held in high respect for both his scholarship and his efforts to encourage the establishment of the colonies on a sound basis. He had made many sacrifices to further the wellbeing of his family in leaving his home in Kovno and setting out for the unknown. Such a move must have taken great courage. Even the Christians whom he came into contact with held him in great respect as evidenced by his decoration by the Crown with a gold medal. The name and reputation of Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN Komisaruk was remembered and treasured not only by his family, but by the colonists for as long as the colonies continued to exist in southern Russia.

The death of Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN placed a heavy burden on his sons. Barely having reached the age of independence, they were faced with the task of managing their late father's land and supporting themselves and their mother. At the time, the eldest PINKHAS was only seventeen years of age and the youngest son YOSEF was about eleven. With limited experience in the agricultural skills necessary to keep the farm functioning, they had to unite their energies in what was a struggle for survival.

By 1856 there were 766 families on the Yekaterinoslav colonies. A comparison of some statistics for the years 1851 and 1865 gives an indication of the rate of growth: (25)

	1851	1865
Public buildings	2	98
Private houses	269	922
Expert farmers	58	295
Oxen	-	4
Horses	499	1034
Cows and calves	788	1668
Sheep	-	1230

In 1869 the Russian government inspector Clauss reported:

"How much better the foreign colonies of Germans and Bulgarians were treated than the Russian Jews. 60 desyatins were allowed and new lots were allocated on family growth. For the Jews, each family of six persons had 30 desyatins allocated by the administration. No foreign colonists of other nationalities would ever have been willing to settle under these conditions. Later 7 desyatins were removed. No further land was allowed with familial increase and augmentary occupations were forbidden" (26).

The Komisaruk family seem to have managed to overcome the land problem to some extent since we know that in the early twentieth century at least five members of the family each possessed 30 desyatins. Therefore the original 30 desyatins given to Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN must have been increased by the acquisition of land from families who left the Kolonya.

Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN's ~~eldest~~ son PINKHAS was educated by his father and became a rabbi. He was also trained as a Shokhet. Despite the efforts of his parents to save their sons from military service, Rabbi PINKHAS was conscripted into the army in the early 1850's, even though farmers were supposed to be exempt from such service (27). Although the duration of service had been shortened from the original twenty-five years, it was still a harsh fate as it compelled Jews to serve for long periods which were often drawn out to over ten years. Rabbi PINKHAS was particularly unfortunate in that his service was lengthened by the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854. In one respect he had been fortunate: he had not been required to serve in a combatant unit but had been assigned to the commissariat corps, responsible for feeding and clothing the troops.

At the outbreak of hostilities the Russian army was desperately in need of recruits. In an attempt to fill these needs, thousands of Jews were conscripted, often being abducted in large groups during raids on Jewish settlements by the military authorities.

(25) Jewish Encyclopaedia, Funk & Wagnal. (26) Errera

(27) Rabbi PINKHAS' army service and activities during the Crimean War were related by his granddaughter KHANA-REIZEL to her son PINKHAS (PETER Kaye) of Melbourne.

These Jews found themselves in an awkward situation with regard to acquiring Kosher food and fulfilling their other religious duties. In the absence of any authorised person, Rabbi PINKHAS took it upon himself to attend to these needs. It was very difficult to obtain the cooperation of the Russians in these matters, but Rabbi PINKHAS managed. It must be remembered that the provision of food for soldiers in those days was rarely a concern of the military commanders. The soldiers had to rely on the countryside to support them, much to the misfortune of farmers who had their crops and livestock pillaged by the troops. This method of obtaining food was an advantage to the Jewish troops in that they could get live animals before they had been killed by Christian butchers. One of Rabbi PINKHAS' activities was acquiring animals for slaughter, he himself being a Shokhet.

During this period the Jewish troops would have been in need of much moral support. Rabbi PINKHAS did his best to fulfil this need. He travelled around the battlefields wherever there were Jewish soldiers, gathering them together for religious services. He soon became a familiar figure, wandering around the battlefields of the Crimea, Alma, Balaclava, Sevastopol; searching for Jewish soldiers, tending to the wounded, burying the dead, and doing his utmost to relieve the misery and suffering which surrounded him. He spent two years going about his self-appointed mission until the war ended in 1856.

It appears that Rabbi PINKHAS was not released from the army immediately on cessation of the war since he did not marry until about 1861. After returning to civilian life he rejoined his brothers in Graftskoy and resumed his work on the land. In addition he was appointed by the community as its rabbi and Shokhet.

In c.1861 Rabbi PINKHAS married KHAYA-SARAH Levin. She was the daughter of ~~ZEV~~ and ROKHEL Levin who lived in the town of Mariupol, a port on the shores of the Sea of Azov. The origins of the Levin family have not been traced, but it would seem probable that, like the bulk of the Jews living in Mariupol, they had come from Lithuania in the 1850's to found this urban community (28).

Rabbi PINKHAS and KHAYA-SARAH bore their eldest son in c.1862. <sup>1855</sup> He was named ZALMEN to perpetuate the memory of his grandfather. The second son, born in 1864, was named MENAKHEM-MENDEL after his great-grandfather, Rabbi MENAKHEM-MENDEL, the cabbalist of Rassein. Then followed MEIR in c.1868, ESTHER in c.1868, and SINKHA in c.1870. Then tragedy struck. In 1872 KHAYA-SARAH gave birth to a daughter and died during childbirth. The daughter was named DINA.

Grief-stricken as he was at the loss of his young wife, Rabbi PINKHAS had little time for sorrow as he had to concern himself with the problem of raising six children deprived of the benefit of maternal care. Furthermore, tradition prescribed that the rabbi of a community was not permitted to remain unmarried (29). Therefore Rabbi PINKHAS set about seeking a second wife as soon as the period of mourning was over. His second wife's name is not recalled, or perhaps the family chose to wipe it out of their memory for reasons soon to follow.

Rather than fill the place of the deceased wife and mother, this woman was soon revealed to be a shrew (30). She set about making life a misery for Rabbi PINKHAS by her behaviour. As far as the children were concerned, she treated them most cruelly. The evilness of this woman culminated in an attempt on the life of her husband. A bottle of poison was found under her bed and when confronted with it, she admitted her plan to poison Rabbi PINKHAS. He soon put a stop to the family's suffering by divorcing her.

(28) The Levin family - recollections of RAKHEL Luban as related by her mother DINA Namakshtansky. The name of ZEV Levin is to be found in an inscription recording his daughters death. See appendix.

(29) WILLIAM Komesaroff, Melbourne. (30) RAKHEL Luban.

incorrect  
MEIR

Once again he was faced with the need to find a suitable mother for his children and this time he made a wise choice. His third wife was a widow called BASSIE. She was to prove both a devoted wife and a loving stepmother. She and Rabbi PINKHAS had one child together, a daughter REIZEL born in c.1874. BASSIE took up the task of raising the children as if they were all her own and was regarded by her stepchildren as their true mother (31). The enlarged family also included a son from BASSIE's first marriage who was simple-minded.

The landholding of the Komisaruk family was divided amongst the sons of Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN following his death. It appears that there was insufficient land to support the four of them since the youngest YOSEF left Graftskoy and settled in the nearby village of Tokmakh (32). The remaining brothers, PINKHAS, LEIBL and VELVEL set up their homes in Graftskoy.

Graftskoy was located between two small rivers, the Gaytsur and the Yanchul, on a fairly flat countryside with sparse vegetation. The nearest settlements were Kobilnye, Engels, Myadla, and Peness - all Jewish Kolonyas, and Marenfeld, a German Kolonya.

The roads passing through Graftskoy were not of any great importance as major routes for transportation. In fact, the entire Kolonya region was completely "off the beaten track". The nearest towns were Berdyansk (50 miles south), Mariupol (50 miles south-east), Yuzovka (70 miles north-east) and Alexandrovsk (70 miles north-west). The nearest railway station was at Rozovka (formerly a German Kolonya Rozenberg) 20 miles from Graftskoy, where there was a regular market and flour mills.

To reach Graftskoy by train one alighted at Rozovka where a wagon would have to be hired to reach the Kolonyas. Approaching through Marenfeld, the boundary of Graftskoy was marked by a large plantation of trees (33). Immediately inside the plantation the road was flanked by a number of houses. It led to a small bridge which crossed the creek. This creek flowed from a reservoir (Stavok) located on the outskirts of the Kolonya which supplied water for the farms. The creek ended in a marshy area in the centre of the village. Soon after crossing the bridge the road branched at a T-intersection. Heading right towards Myadla, the fifth block of land on the right belonged to the Komisaruk brothers. In the opposite direction, towards Engels, in the centre of the village was an area of land called Kolsher. It was owned by the Crown and was the location of the communal buildings such as the school, synagogue, post-office and courthouse (Prikaz), animal pound (Hok), communal orchard (Sod), and a water well (Brunim). A road branched here to Kobilnye. The cultivated land surrounded the village and was divided into family holdings, except for an area which was set aside for common grazing. On the outskirts of the village, on the road to Engels, was the cemetery.

There were few home comforts on the Kolonyas. In most cases the men built their own houses which, although small, were hardy enough to withstand the rigours of the Russian climate. Water had to be drawn from wells or from the creek. Lighting was provided by oil lamps and heating from fires which burned wood if it was in good supply, but more often, dried animal manure mixed with straw.

The three Komisaruk brothers led similar lives spending most of the daylight hours on the land and the evenings with their ever-increasing families. The <sup>second</sup> LEIBL married earlier than his elder brother PINKHAS, and had only one son SHABBESAI (known by the diminutive forms of SHEPSEL or SHEPA) in about 1855. The third brother VELVEL married FEIGEL Winnikoffsky from Kobilnye whose family had emigrated from Lithuania at the same time as the Komisaruks. They had six children: BEREL in 1861, HENIE in c.1863, LEAH in 1869, KHANA in 1871, ESTHER in 1873 and MEIR in 1878.

(31) RAKHEL Luban, WILLIAM Komesaroff.

(32) RAKHEL Luban, who recalled a visit of YOSEF to Engels.

(33) Descriptions of Graftskoy according to WILLIAM Komesaroff and RAKHEL Luban. See map.

YANKEL  
remained  
in Lithuania  
his son  
lived in  
Tokmak

YANKEL'S son ABRAHAM-DOV-BER

In 1881 Tsar Alexander III came to the throne and issued his infamous Ukase known as the 'May Laws'. These were proclaimed on May 3rd. 1882 by Count Ignatieff:

"The Committee of Ministers, having heard the report of the Minister of the Interior on the execution of the temporary orders concerning the Jews, resolved:

1. As a temporary measure and until a general revision has been made in a proper manner of the laws concerning the Jews, to forbid the Jews henceforth to settle outside the towns and townlets, the only exceptions admitted being in those Jewish colonies that have existed before and whose inhabitants are agriculturalists.

2. To suspend temporarily the completion of instruments of purchase of real property mortgages in the name of Jews; as also the registration of Jews as lessees of landed estates, situated outside the precincts of towns and townlets, and the issue of powers of attorney to enable them to manage and dispose of such property.

3. To forbid Jews to carry on business on Sundays and on Christian holidays, and that the same laws in force, about the closing on such days of places of business belonging to Christians, shall, in the same way, apply to places of business owned by Jews.

4. That the measures laid down in paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 apply only to the Governments within the Pale of Settlement.

His Majesty the Emperor was graciously pleased to give his assent to the above resolutions of the Committee of Ministers, on the 3rd. of May, 1882."

This Ukase, which provided for the further segregation of the Jews and placed them under constant surveillance, had been seen by the Tsar as a precursor to a wave of government-aroused anti-semitism. Due to the appalling living conditions, the Tsar needed something to divert the peasants' discontent. The Jews provided just such an ideal diversion. Spurred on by government-backed rabblers who spread anti-semitic propaganda throughout the Jewish Pale, numerous pogroms broke out. The Jewish settlements were constantly at the mercy of ignorant 'moujiks' (peasants) who were ready to blame the first available scapegoat, namely the Jews, for all their misfortunes. On realising the success of his policy, the Tsar saw a further benefit in the pogroms: the eradication of the Jews from the Russian Empire. His plan, expertly enunciated and administered by his advisor Pobedonostsev, was to rid 'Holy Mother Russia' of the Jews for all time: one third by conversion to Christianity, one third by emigration, and one third by starvation. Hundreds of thousands of Jews fled overseas, but the vast majority would not leave the country which they considered to be their homeland.

With the upsurge of the pogroms, in the absence of practical aid the Jews were in constant need of spiritual solace. Once again Rabbi PINKHAS answered the call of his people, dedicating himself to helping the persecuted. Since his sons were old enough to manage the farm, he was free to go about his duties as a rabbi. Over the years since he had left the army and established himself as rabbi of Grafskoy, he had gained a valuable reputation amongst the surrounding Kolonyas. With the frequent occurrence of pogroms, he became a familiar figure as he travelled around the south-eastern Ukraine (36).

Whenever word reached Grafskoy of a pogrom in one of the settlements, Rabbi PINKHAS would saddle his horse, pack a few necessities, farewell his family, and ride off as quickly as possible to the devastated settlement. On arriving he would behold a shocking sight. What had once been a thriving community had been reduced to ruins. In one foul swoop a mob of moujiks, spurred on by a government agitator or the hate-filled sermons of the local priest, and filled with liquor, had fallen upon a helpless Jewish settlement and proceeded to murder

(36) Rabbi PINKHAS's activities during the pogroms were related by his granddaughter KHANA-REIZEL Komisaroff of Melbourne.

and pillage everyone whom they could lay their hands on, without consideration for age or sex. Such pogroms usually lasted for a few days before the moujiks took their leave, laden with loot. There was little that Rabbi PINKHAS could do of a practical nature to relieve such suffering. His immediate task would have been to assist in the burial of the dead. Once the dead had been taken care of, his attention turned to the living. What could he say to console them? He sought suitable words to inspire these innocent victims of bestiality to rebuild their homes and to start life afresh. Throughout the Pale, wherever pogroms occurred, inspired men like Rabbi PINKHAS restored the faith of their people and urged them not to lose hope. With the loss of material possessions, the only remaining source of strength for the Jews was their faith with its optimistic hope for a brighter future. Without this faith, and without men like Rabbi PINKHAS to keep it alive, The Jews of the Russian Empire would have given up all hope and doomed themselves to utter extermination.

During the period of the pogroms many outside Russia felt that the Jews were depressed to such an extent that all advancement had ceased and the community had become reactionary. In reply, Rabbi Moshe Reines wrote in 'Otsar Hasifrut':

'He who claims that a spirit of reaction has affected our people as a whole is greatly mistaken. That the children of the poor from whom learning cometh forth still forsake their city and country and acquire knowledge, that societies for the spread of Haskalah are formed every day, that strict and pious Jews send their sons and daughters to where they can obtain enlightenment, that rabbis dayanim and maggidim urge their children to become proficient in the requirements of the times, write for the press, and deplore restrictions regarding admission to schools, all this proves convincingly that they do not see right who complain that our entire nation is going backward.'

In the early 1880's the death occurred in Graftskoy of YOKHIVED Komisaruk, the widow of Rabbi SHLOMO-ZALMEN. She had led a hard life, having to flee from her birthplace and start a new life in such a remote and primitive region. The early years in Graftskoy were arduous ones for her, raising her family after the early death of her husband. Even during her last days she must have been grieved to see the place she had considered to be a haven from persecution being turned into the same sort of hell she had escaped from in Lithuania. She must have been a strong woman, possessed of a pioneering spirit which enabled her to overcome the trials which had beset her.

Often Rabbi PINKHAS would be away from home for long periods, riding from village to village. His wife BASSIE and children had to become accustomed to such long absences as they were aware that their needs were of secondary importance to those of the suffering. However Rabbi PINKHAS was compelled to turn his attention to a pressing family problem at this time. In the early 1880's the spectre of conscription began to hover again over the family since the eldest son was of a conscriptable age. Yet it was not clear who was liable for conscription. On the one hand Rabbi PINKHAS's eldest son was ZALMEN, from his first marriage. However BASSIE's son from her former marriage was older than ZALMEN and since the children were considered as being of one family, it was assumed that he would be conscripted as the eldest son. On the other hand this son of BASSIE's was a simpleton and for that reason would have been disqualified from army service. This might have resulted in ZALMEN being conscripted in his place.

Already at a young age ZALMEN excelled himself as a scholar (he was later to become a rabbi). His father feared the effect army service would have on his son's scholastic advancement and so sought a means to ensure that he would not be conscripted in his stepbrother's place. The only course open to him was to take action to prevent ZALMEN being considered a brother of the simpleton and hence liable to stand in for him. Rabbi PINKHAS and his wife agreed to undertake a 'conditional divorce' (Tnai Get) whereby a bill of

divorce was drawn up which provided for their divorce to become operative on condition that the simpleton son be conscripted. Until this condition was fulfilled the divorce had no effect. If they were divorced then ZALMEN could therefore not be considered a brother of the simpleton.

Despite Rabbi PINKHAS's legal intrigue, fate thwarted his efforts. The simpleton was not called up and ZALMEN himself, being his father's eldest son was conscripted in his own right. Despite the family's distress at the turn of events, ZALMEN adjusted positively to the situation. He was assigned to the supply corps, like his father had been 30 years previously. He exploited this opportunity to serve the needs of Jewish soldiers. Despite difficulties in obtaining official approval from anti-semitic officers, ZALMEN was able to set up a Kosher kitchen in the city of Nikolaev which helped to ease the dietary problems of Jewish conscripts. He also served as a medical orderly. On the completion of his military service ZALMEN returned to Graftskoy, resumed his studies and was ordained as a rabbi. (37)

As Rabbi PINKHAS's sons reached adulthood a problem arose in connection with the future ownership and farming of his land. Since he possessed only a small area of land and could not acquire more, it was inconceivable that his few desyatins could support the future families of his four sons. This situation did not concern his daughters because it was customary for couples to live in the husband's town after marriage. The only solution to this problem was for several of the sons to live elsewhere. It is not known how Rabbi PINKHAS decided which of his sons would remain on the land; it was probably a matter of mutual agreement. It was decided that there was only sufficient land to support two families.

As the eldest son ZALMEN was by then a rabbi he was able to support himself by means other than farming. He left Graftskoy and settled in the town of Vasilkovka where he was appointed Rabbi. There he married MINDL and they had seven children: KHAIM-SHOLEM, MOTTEL, KHAY-ROKHEL, LUBA, MEIR-YITSKHOK-ELKHONON, ITKA and another daughter.

Rabbi PINKHAS's second son MENAKHEM-MENDEL remained in Graftskoy and received a half share of his father's land. MEIR, the third son settled in the village of Andreyevka where he was a butcher. The youngest son SIMKHA remained in Graftskoy and received the other half share of his father's land.

The same situation did not confront the families of Rabbi PINKHAS's brothers to the same degree since they had fewer sons. LEIBL had only one son, SHEPE so his land did not have to be divided. SHEPE farmed his father's land as a whole until his sons grew up and needed shares in the land.

The third brother VELVEL divided his land equally between his two sons BEREL and MEIR. In addition BEREL operated a small general store, the only one on the kolonya, so he farmed his land with hired help.

~~As mentioned previously, the fourth brother YOSEF had left Graftskoy and settled in the village of Tokmakh.~~

Rabbi PINKHAS's second son MENAKHEM-MENDEL married in 1882. His wife BEILA-REEVA was the daughter of VELVEL Pogorelske, a son of SAADIAH-MEIR HaLevy Pogorelske who had accompanied the Komisaraks from Lithuania and settled on Kolonya Kobilnye where he and his family were Shokhetim. MENAKHEM-MENDEL and BEILA-REEVA's eldest son KHAIM-VELVEL was born in 1884. He was followed by SHLOMO-ZALMEN in 1886, YAAKOV-LEIB in 1888, a child who died soon after birth in c.1891, YOKHVED in 1893, BENYOMIN in c.1895, BASSIE in c.1896, PINKHAS in 1897 who died in the same year, ZLATR (LOTTIE) in 1902, another PINKHAS in 1905, and another KHAIM-VELVEL (WILLIAM) born in 1908 after his eldest brother's death.