

Kalinovka
Jewish Farmers on Russian Fields
(translated from Hebrew)
by Brynne Lichman
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Kalinovka was in the province of Podolia, close to the town of Litin, that in the eyes of the residents of Kalinovka was thought of as a “big city”. Vinnitsa, the closest city to Litin was in their eyes one of the cities of the realm – a metropolitan. Although in the eyes of the rest of the world, Vinnitsa wasn’t a big city, and when it was captured by the Germans they didn’t bother to boast of its capture and just announced that “their armies had advanced”.

There was one street in Kalinovka with 20 houses, but even though it was tiny it was “all the world” for its residents. I was 12 years old when I left it, and all her residents left it.

The settlement was founded in the times of the “cantonists¹”. A group of Jews settled there, that had served a long period in the Czar’s army and they were promised as owners of land their children would not be kidnapped to serve in the army.

My mother, Feiga Adler “blessed be her memory”, was the third generation in the settlement. Her sisters married and moved to other settlements, and my grandfather’s land was divided between her and her brother. My father, Meyer Astitas, came to the settlement from Berdichev. He learned farming from my grandfather, married his daughter and settled there. My parents had a parcel of land the size of 25 desyatins², of which 50 dunun³ was marshland and the rest was good farmland. Our house was surrounded by gardens of fruit trees and vegetables, and a parcel of fields crops. We had a barn with 12 cows and geese and chickens. We grew sugar-beets that were sent to the sugar factory in the city Lizni. In comparison to the neighboring villages Bagrynovich (maybe Voronovicja), Majdan, Novoselizza and Lesarka, Kalinovka was a prosperous settlement.

Those villages supplied the hired workers for the season when many hands were needed and for the picking of the beet harvest. The cow herder also came from one of those villages. We sent the milk to Litin, and the milk products (butter and cheese) were bought by merchants from Odessa and Kiev. Except for oil and salt we didn’t need a thing; our farm supplied all our food: wheat, grain, vegetables, fruit, milk and even meat. The surplus fruit of our land was pickled in barrels in the basement for use through out the year. During the long winter days we would sit in the houses, we force feed the geese and prepared barley and crushed food for the cows. In the evenings we would gather in the house of one of the residents: the hosts would bring up from the cellar a pail full of “kovasnitsas⁴” in honor of the guests. The

¹ “cantonists” when the quota required for boys to serve in the army was not filled, boys were kidnapped, sometimes as young as the age of 12. Their years of service in the army were counted only from the age of 19.

² “desyatins” - 1 desyatin = 2.9 acres; they had about 70 acres

³ “dunum” - 1 dunum = 1,000 square meters. The marsh was about 15 acres.

⁴ “kovasnitsas” – some sort of pickled delicatess

women baked potatoes that were served with saurer kraut or pastry filled with cabbage. The children sat near the adults and prepared their lessons. All the children learned to read and write, Torah and arithmetic (in yiddish), from the “melamed”⁵. The “hedar”⁶ and the melamed moved from house to house. Each resident hosted them for 4-6 weeks. (One of our melameds, the elderly Shlomo Kotin, lives today in Haifa.). All the children from the ages of 3 to 18, sat on long benches and studied together. The special thing in this “hedar” was that boys and girls studied together.

Those among us that were thirsty for knowledge continued their studies in the public school in the village of Meidan and after that went to Litin and even to Odessa. One of the boys, the son of the Strangus family, studied medicine in Kiev and when he finished his studies he immigrated to America.

In addition to their studies, the children had tasks to do on the farm: feeding the cows, harvesting and hoeing, and mainly bringing water from the well in the valley and bringing it all the way up to the settlement on the mountain.

On Shabat and “good” days⁷ the residents would change from their work clothes to “kaputas”⁸ of satin and gather at the synagogue that stood in the center of the street, with the ark covered with a red velvet curtain embroidered in gold and decorated scrolls of the Torah. The residents were orthodox and conscientiously keep all the “mizvot”⁹.

Once in a while there would be a visitor with a “blue collection box”¹⁰. Under this influence my father put up our land for sale and wanted to immigrate to *Eretz Israel*. In the meantime, the first world war broke out, and all those who were of age were recruited. My brother Shmuel served two years at the front and returned to the settlement at the time of the revolution. When he returned he organized a self defence group.

The outbreak of the programs could be seen on the horizon. One evening the neighboring villages of the settlement were attacked. They gathered all the residents in one house and locked them in. One of the children escaped through a window and called the defence group. They had only three rifles, but their shots scared the ruffians away. Three days later, eight members of the gang came and demanded the weapons. Because of the fear of them, the settlement gave them their weapons. A few days later we were attacked. It was evening, and some of the residents succeeded in fleeing to the forests. Before our eyes they stole everything from our house by dawn. They sat us on a bench in another room when my father refused to answer their exagerant demands: to put all the members of the family in the basement and explode a grenade. My father knew the ruffians and said to them: “I can’t believe that you, our own people, would do such a thing to us”. The ruffians ignored him and said: “We are strangers here, we came from Kiev.” Towards morning the ruffians killed my father and my two older brothers, “*May the Lord revenge their blood*”. That same night the ruffians killed ten residents of the settlement. The adults flee to the forests and only the women and children remained in the settlement.

⁵ “melamed” – a teacher, not necessarily certified, usually taught young children.

⁶ “hedar” - one room schoolhouse

⁷ “good” days - reference to holdiays

⁸ “kaputa” - coat

⁹ “mizvot” – there 613 commandments that are kept by the orthodox Jews

¹⁰ “blue collection box” – the money collected was to buy – redeem land in *Eretz Israel*

For three months the ruffians stole the property of the entire settlement: crops, livestock, seeds for sowing – were moved to the neighboring villages. We wandered to the forests. When from time to time we came home for a short time to pick fruit from the trees, the ruffians from the gangs would come and chase us back to the forests.

We all were sick but we didn't dare lie down for a day and we didn't get any medical care. When we recovered, we dressed as farmers and worked as laborers in the fields of the villages. After a while, we moved to live in the city. When the government changed hands, and the "Reds" came – the murderer of my father was arrested. My mother demanded to come to the trial and be a witness. The deputy of the court came to our house on the Shabath. My mother was scared to give testimony and refused to violate the Shabath – the rabbi of the town Litin demanded that she find courage and allowed her to travel on the Shabath. After her testimony, the murderer was condemned and shot in the courtyard of the court.

Many of the non jewish residents tried to build on our ruins. In the town of Litin there was a constable (Gorodovoy) that offered that we come and live with him. He offered mother his help in taking the dishes for Passover from the attic, and when mother arrived with him at our place, "by coincidence" some ruffians appeared , that tried to hurt mother. She survived because the horse of one of the ruffians went wild. A few days later, Gordovoy brought mother pictures that he "found" in our house, where he he went to claim his property, as if it was with our permission.

My sisters and I decided to leave that country. In Litin a group was organizing to immigrate to *Eretz Israel* – "The Sixth Group" of the Ukrainian "Hehalutz"¹¹. I joined them. Many years later I found out, that one of my sisters returned to the settlement of Kalinovka that had been turned into a soviet "kolhoz"¹², and she remained there until the Jewish population of the Ukraine were exterminated by the Nazis.

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¹¹ "Hehalutz" – a Zionist group – the pioneer

¹² "kolhoz" – a communal settlement, set up by the Russian government