

Memoirs of
William Comisarow
(1906 – 2002)

Vancouver, B. C.

December 10, 1997
and
March 11, 2015
and
June 16, 2018
and
January 14, 2022

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ABSTRACT

This memoir describes the life of Bill Comisarow, starting with his 1906 birth and childhood in Southeastern Ukrainian Jewish Agricultural Colonies, his survival of the 1912–1922 deprivations in the region, his migration to Canada in 1922 and his subsequent life in Alberta. Bill Comisarow was an articulate individual with a superb memory of his early life. This memoir was derived from interviews conducted by his son, Mel Comisarow, mainly in the late 1980s. Some additional material, deriving from recorded interviews on 9 November 1996, 6 March 1998, 23 April 1998 and Fall 1999, is also incorporated into the memoir.

Mel Comisarow, prepared the written memoir, the in-text citations, the family photos, the aerial reconnaissance photos and the indexes at the end of the file. The January 14, 2022 edition has the additional material in Footnotes 53, 54 and 56, that became available at the end of 2021.

MEMOIR

In the early part of the twentieth century, many Jews left Russia. Usually they went to a relative or friend in Canada, the U. S. A., South Africa or Australia. The journey of my family was precipitated when my father, Mayer Comisarow¹, went to a town some miles away from his home in Grafskoy² to buy a cow, and encountered a policeman who claimed the area was forbidden to Jews. He was arrested and the cow confiscated. This incident confirmed his decision to leave Russia for the New World. He was in correspondence with his cousin, David Moshe Comisaroff³, who lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and my father left Grafskoy for Canada in 1912. My mother, Riva Zelda Lev Comisarow⁴, and we four children, Lillian, Sam, Avrom and me, moved to Novozlatopol⁵, that was 25 viorst⁶ from Grafskoy, to live with my maternal grandfather, Boruch Leib Lev. My mother's uncle, Hersche Wiseman, Baruch Lev's brother-in-law, was the shochet and acting rabbi in Novozlatopol. We received tickets for boat passage to Canada, but then, the First World War started so we could not travel. We remained with my grandfather until 1922, when a man finally came for us and we travelled to Canada via Poland.

I have only a few memories of my early life in Grafskoy, as I was only six when we left. I remember once when I was five when I was in my Uncle Berel Komisaruk's⁷ store and he gave me "confekt", a candy wrapped in paper, and said lovingly to me "Du bist ein klieiner hunt", "You are a puppy." I looked up at him and replied, "Eob ich bin ein kleiner hunt, bist du a groiser hunt", "If I'm a little dog, you're a big dog". He grabbed me, gave me a hug and sent me home. I ran home to tell my mother, who was appalled that I had called my uncle a big dog.

Once, my father took me to Mariupol⁸ and I saw a movie for the first time. When I saw a colt on the screen I ran from my seat toward the screen to catch it, but was

1 Mayer Comisarow (1879–1958)

2 Grafskoy, Jewish Colony No. 7, is located at (47.52, 36.83). Sometime between 1922 and 1927 its name was Bolshevized to Proletarsky. Grafskoy was the birth place of Mayer Comisarow and Bill Comisarow. Circa 2010, Proletarsky was deBolshevized to Novozlatopil, causing confusion with the 25 km distant, existing Novozlatopol of ref 5.

3 David Moshe Comisaroff (1876–1954) was the first of the Komisaruk/Comisaroff family to come to North America. In 1904 he emigrated to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he worked as a blacksmith for the Canadian Pacific Railway. David's father, Shepe (1850–1921), was Mayer's first cousin.

4 Riva Zelda Lev Comisarow (1875–1969).

5 Novozlatopol (Russian name)/Perervnumer (Yiddish name), Jewish Colony No. 1, is located at (47.67, 36.57). Novozlatopol's Town Hall is located at (47.6631, 36.5669).

6 1 viorst = 1.06 km = 3500 feet = 0.663 mile.

7 Berel Komisaruk (1861–1931) was the older brother of Mayer Comisarow.

8 Mariupol, located at (47.12, 37.57), is a port on the Sea of Azov.

stopped by my father. I was friendly with the Freedman family of Grafskoy, who offered to adopt me when my father left for Canada.

When in Grafskoy, we lived⁹ next to the family of Mendel Komisaruk¹⁰, my father's paternal-paternal cousin, and we shared a well with them. There was considerable animosity between us and Mendel and his family and I regarded Mendel as "my enemy". He was an eccentric man with a quite a temper and I recall that I was afraid of him. One day Mendel got into argument with someone and kicked the other man. Since that day we called Mendel "Mendelbrick", as brick is Yiddish for kick.

I never learned the origin of the ill will between my family and Mendel's, but I recall bad feelings about the use of the shared well¹¹, where we watered our animals. "They" took too much water, "their" cows made a mess on "our" land, "we" had to stand in line waiting for "them" to draw water because "they" were so slow, and so on. Also, because of a surveying error, "their" saray (barn) was partly on "our" property. Both Mendel's family and we raised ducks and one day when I was five or six I caught a duck and because it was Mendel's and Mendel was my enemy, I proceeded to pluck the feathers from the duck. The duck was still living and eventually escaped from me. Later, I found out that the duck was one of ours.

Our other next-door neighbor in Grafskoy was the Berel Bruser family. Berel's brother, Chaim, and Chaim's sons, Calman and Mike, along with their families, immigrated to Western Canada early in the twentieth century.

When in Russia we knew that Mendel had children in Australia, that Berel Komisaruk had sons in New York and that my father and his cousin David Moshe were in Canada, but we had no idea of where any of these places were.

Shepe Komisaruk¹² of Grafskoy, the father of David Moshe of Winnipeg, was an old man when I knew him. Although very poor, he had a jolly disposition and liked to tease me in friendly manner. A daughter, Esther, of Shepe Komisaruk married a son of Berel Bruser. Esther had two children¹³.

9 Mayer's land is located at (47.5151, 36.8311), next door to his cousin Mendel Komisaruk's land at (47.5153, 36.8315).

10 Menakhem Mendel Komisaruk (1864–1919).

11 According to Bill, the well was located on the Mayer-Mendel boundary between their plots. In 2002, Mel Comisarow visited Grafskoy and the well location was identified by Mr. Fiodyr Dinisonov, the then current occupier of Mendel's land.

12 Shabbesai/Shepe Komisaruk (1850–1921). According to Anna Komisaruk Vestfrid (1929 –), a granddaughter of Shepe, as told to Mel Comisarow in Donetsk in 2002, Shepe died of starvation during the 1921 famine.

13 According to Anna Komisaruk, as told to Mel Comisarow in Donetsk in 2002, Esther was murdered in the Holocaust.

My paternal grandfather, Velvel Komisaruk¹⁴ of Grafskoy, died several years before I was born and I know little about him. I do recall my mother saying he was a fine man and was well respected. Since he died, each branch of the family usually has one son named after him. Velvel Komisaruk had two sons, my Uncle Berel and my father Mayer, and four daughters; Leah who married Berel Winnikofsky, Esther, who married Velvel Pogorelsky, Khana, who married Avraham Amiton and Henie who married Gershon (Charlie) Ushkatz (Usher). The Amiton family and Charlie Usher left Grafskoy early in the twentieth century and I only came to know them well in Canada. Henie Usher and family lived in Mariupol and left for Canada sometime after 1913. The pictures we have of the Amitons and other relatives that date from early in this century were pictures that I saw only after we arrived in Canada.

My maternal grandfather, Baruch Lev (1849–1929), had two brothers and one sister in Novozlatopol. His wife, Rochomary Wiseman Lev, was very ill and died a couple of years after we arrived in Novozlatopol. The brothers were David and his family and Aaron and his family, both of whom were farmers. The sister married one Mates Michel; I don't remember his last name, who was a "feldsher", a first aid attendant, who learned his skill, as it was, as a medical corpsman in the Russian army during the Russo-Japanese war. All he had for medicine was iodine and Epsom salts, which he used for everything. Mates Michel was also a Hebrew teacher. Boruch Lev had three daughters, my mother Riva, who was the oldest, Perel, who before her death lived in Hulaipole¹⁵ with her husband, a barber, a low class occupation in Orthodox tradition because he shaved people, and Raisa (Raina), who married Chaskel Svirsky. When he was drafted into the Russian army during the First World War, Raina and her two children lived with her husband's family. Raina then died and her boy remained with the Svirsky family and the little girl, Genia, came to live with us. When her father returned from the war and remarried, Genia went to live with him. I remember we all cried when she left us as she had become part of our family.

My brother Paul/Peretz is named for his Aunt Perel.

Novozlatopol was the largest of the Jewish colonies in the area with a population of about 1,000; about twice the size and population of Grafskoy. Life was similar to that in many of the smaller Jewish colonies, but we had a state-supported policeman and a telephone, that Grafskoy, for example, didn't have. I have pleasant memories of our early

¹⁴ Wolf/Velvel Komisaruk (1838–ca. 1900).

¹⁵ Hulaipole (Ukr)/Gulaipole (Rus), located at (47.65, 36.28), is the nearest larger town, 25 km from Novozlatopol. In 1999 it was the county (rayon in Russian) seat. The Newhouse family of Edmonton emigrated from Hulaipole, circa 1905.

years in Novozlatopol. My grandfather was kind, intelligent and devout. Our lives were largely self-centered and we had little contact with the surrounding Ukrainian people. I have the feeling now, that while we were poor, we had a more secure life than the majority of Jews in Russia who were in constant contact with other ethnic groups. Although our educational level was low, we had an active Yiddish cultural life. Occasionally, local groups would put on concerts and plays, probably performed in the cities years before. We couldn't afford to purchase copies of the scripts, but we could rent copies from someone in the cities for the actors to use.

My grandfather was active in local civic and religious affairs. A lot of meetings were held in our house^{16,17} and I enjoyed listening to the discussions. On Saturday afternoons, my grandfather and Hersche Wiseman¹⁸ would often have discussions on the fine points of Jewish law and tradition. They would arrive at some point of disagreement and then reach for the appropriate passage in one of the many leather-bound books my grandfather had, in order to resolve the issue. My grandfather Lev was self-taught, but Hersche Wiseman attended a Yeshiva somewhere, perhaps in Mariupol. I have had little formal religious education and most of my knowledge of Jewish law derives from my listening to these discussions.

While religion played a major role in our lives, so did superstitions. These superstitions were believed by all of the people in the area, not just those in Novozlatopol. Some of these superstitions, such as not proceeding on a path crossed by a black cat, are well known today. All were taken by most people to be the truth. Certain days of week, I don't remember which, were suitable for trips; other days were not. Certain days were "lucky" days. If a child were attractive, it was dangerous to so state, because the "evil eye" would then find out and strike the child. If something got lost we would consult a Kishuf (clairvoyant) for advice. We had several in town. I recall once when my mother was repairing a button on my trousers, that I was wearing, I had to bite on a rag, because biting the rag would prevent my mother from accidentally sticking me with the needle, that she used to attached the button. One day a neighbor came crying to my grandfather, begging him to say a prayer for her sick child. My grandfather didn't believe that prayer would have such an effect, but at the woman's pleading he agreed to her request. When the woman went home the child was better and the woman, who was then convinced of the power of my grandfather's prayer, came back to profusely thank

16 Boruch Lev's house is located at (47.6600, 36.5645).

17 In 1999 and in 2002 Mel Comisarow visited Novozlatopol. At that time the Baruch Lev house was occupied by a cousin of the Deputy Mayor. Prior to this occupancy the house was occupied by the "Lev family". One member of this Lev family became a physician in Moscow.

18 Hersch Wiseman's house is located at (47.6631, 36.5666).

him. After we moved to Canada, we gradually lost our superstitions, but I remember that my mother retaining some of them for many years.

My grandfather had little to do with his brothers David and Aaron. He was more scholarly than they were and also I sensed that there was some longstanding dispute with them.

My brother, Paul, was born in Novozlatopol shortly after we arrived there. Paul's birthdate, like mine, is not recorded in original document that we have. Births were remembered relative to some event of the time. I recall one boy in town, who was born, according to his mother, "two weeks after we harvested the flax". My brother, Avrom, died in Novozlatopol of some chest infection in about 1914, at the age of about four.

About once a year we would make a trip back to Grafskoy, to visit with my Uncle Berel Komisaruk and his family. We would travel by horse cart through Svatodukhovka¹⁹ (Holy Spirit), a Ukrainian village, then through the Jewish colony, Kobilnye²⁰, whose Russian name was Sladkovodnaya (Sweetwater)^{21,22} before arriving at Grafskoy. We were always fearful passing through Svatoduchovka and were relieved to arrive in Kobilnye where we would stop and water the horses.

When we passed through Ukrainian villages we saw that Ukrainian women were the workers. The Ukrainian villages were like rabbit warrens and had been lived in for many years. In contrast, the Jewish and German colonies had straight roads as these towns were planned communities.

Ukrainian, German and Jewish women dressed differently. Ukrainian women wore clothing that was made from home-spun cloth made from canople, a hemp-like plant. This clothing was off-white in color. Both Jewish women and German women

19 Svatodukhovka is located at (47.65, 36.68), 10 km east of Novozlatopol. Its modern name is Lyubimovka.

20 Kobilnye is located at (47.55, 36.762).

21 Sladkovodnaya, Jewish Colony No. 14, is located at (47.57, 36.764).

22 Jews from Grafskoy tended to say that Kobilnye and Sladkovodnaya "were two names for the same town". This is not true; they were two separate towns. Sladkovodnaya was much larger than Kobilnye. Kobilnye was the primary name used by both the Komisaroffs who went to North America and the Komesaroffs who went to Australia. Bill Comisarow passed through Kobilnye, which he said, "was small with houses on only one side of the road", on his yearly trips to and from Novozlatopol. This is a correct description of the town even in contemporary satellite images. Examination of the 8 September 1943 Luftwaffe photo on page 64, (US National Archives RG373 GX 13115(SK)-#2 exp 597) clearly shows footpaths from Grafskoy to Kobilnye which veer to the northwest towards Novozlatopol, completely bypassing Sladkovodnaya. Bill almost certainly was never in Sladkovodnaya. Yet the Sorokin family that went to Canada, always said their home town was Sladkovodnaya, never Kobilnye. A possible explanation of these differing naming conventions is that Kobilnye was the original settlement which expanded to include Sladkovodnaya. So people who lived in Sladkovodnaya said Sladkovodnaya, whereas people who lived elsewhere used the original name, Kobilnye, long after Sladkovodnaya was established. People who lived in Sladkovodnaya considered Kobilnye to be the khutor (nearby, small settlement) of Sladkovodnaya.

wore clothing made from store-bought fabric. The Jewish women wore dark colored clothing. The German women wore bright colored clothing.

I think that German women were better workers than Jewish women. German women kept the gardens and at harvest time they followed the men with a rake. One rarely saw Jewish women working in the field.

On one of these visits to Grafskoy I met a man named Avrom Stein who was friendly with my Uncle Berel Komisaruk and who was somehow a relative. In 1995, I learned from the memoirs of his daughter Esther Stein Meidler, that Avrom Stein was a maternal, maternal first cousin of my Uncle Berel and my father.

I had no relatives my age in Novozlatopol and I always looked forward to these trips to Grafskoy where I would see my cousins, Velvel Komisaruk and Meishel Winnikoff. While we were in Grafskoy, we would also spend some time with our other relatives in town, but we never visited with the family of Mendel Komisaruk although we would talk to his children when we saw them.

There was a Luban family²³ who sometimes visited Mendel Komisaruk. The Lubans were wealthy and they would often give used clothing or even the clothing they were wearing to Mendel K.'s family when they visited Grafskoy.

My paternal grandfather, Velvel Komisaruk (1838 – ca. 1900), had forty desyatin²⁴ of land that upon his death were split 50-50 between each of his sons, my Uncle Berel and my father Mayer, with each getting twenty desyatin. When my father Mayer left Grafskoy in 1912 my mother wanted to retain ownership of her husband's 20 desyatin, but my grandmother Feigl (Velvel's wife) claimed the land should revert to her. The compromise was that my Uncle Berel farmed Mayer's land and paid Rebecca, Mayer's wife, the rent. I recall that my mother received a regular income from Berel. Normally land was left in the family.

In Grafskoy, Berel Komisaruk was the acknowledged leader of the Komisaruk family. (This was confirmed by Willy Komesaroff²⁵ of Melbourne. According to Willy, "the same role that Rabbi Pinchas played at the end of the nineteenth century.") Berel was a wise and kindly man who because of the store that he owned was financially better off than other family members in Grafskoy. Because of his business, Berel traveled to neighboring cities more than others in Grafskoy and this made him more knowledgeable about affairs outside of Grafskoy. Due to his kindness and his prosperity, Berel's

²³ Mendel's sister Esther (1868–1929) married Khaim Moshe Luban (1864–1928).

²⁴ 1 desyatin = 1.09 hectares = 10,900 square meters = 2.9 acres.

²⁵ Willie Komesaroff (1908–1996), the youngest child of Mendel Komisaruk of Grafskoy, emigrated from Grafskoy to Melbourne, Victoria, Australia in 1922.

widowed mother, Feigel Winnikofsky Komisaruk, lived with him as did his widowed mother-in-law, Chiah Golesoff, and his widowed sister, Esther Komisaruk Pogorelsky. Berel also supported another widowed sister, Leah Komisaruk Winnikofsky and her two children, who lived in a house that he owned.

German farmers from Marenfeld²⁶, a German colony near Grafskoy, would shop at Berel Komisaruk's store in Grafskoy about twice a year. They typically purchased cloth and leather. Berel K., who spoke German, got along well with the German farmers from Marenfeld. As far as I know there was no store in Marenfeld. Whenever an unfamiliar horse and wagon in excellent condition was parked in front of Berel K.'s store, the owner was a farmer from Marienfeld. The German team of horse's was perfectly matched as to size and color, with a harness in excellent condition and a well-kept wagon. Some Jewish wagon teams were also in excellent condition but some Jewish horse-and-wagons had one small grey horse and one large brown horse teamed by a tattered harness pulling a wagon that had seen better days.

Everyone in Grafskoy with relatives in the New World, "zagranitza", beyond the border, periodically received letters from these relatives and the information in these communications was shared with all in Grafskoy. Berel's sons Zalman (Saul) and Leibl (Leon) wrote more often than others and this enhanced Berel's knowledge of outside affairs. (Willy Komesaroff (1908–1996) of Melbourne also remembers Berel reading letters from Berel's sons in New York.)

We knew that Berel Bruser had relatives in Western Canada, where my father was. Because of the First World War, we had no communication from my father after about 1914 and when visiting Grafskoy we always checked with Berel Bruser to see if he had any news about my father.

When the colony at Novozlatopol was founded, some German farmers were brought in as "meistervierten" (master farmers) to teach the Jews how to farm. Some of the descendants of these original German farmers were living in Novozlatopol when I was there. The five German families all lived on "Diche Gass" (German Street)²⁷, a side street off the main street, that was also the street on that we lived. We spoke in Yiddish to the Germans and they understood. I don't recall the names of the German families but surnames were rarely used in Novozlatopol. One man was named Hans and another was named Hannes (Johannes?)

²⁶ Marenfeld, German Colony No. 26, is located at (47.33, 36.83), 2 km SSE of Grafskoy. Its modern name is Marionpol.

²⁷ Mel Comisarow visited Novozlatopol in 1999 and 2002 and was told that the side street is still called German Street, even though the Novozlatopol Germans, who were evacuated in 1941, never returned. I. e., there are now no Germans in Novozlatopol.

The German farmers were admired by the Jews of Novozlatopol. German horses were of high quality and Jews would often take their mares to German stallions to stud. German tradesman like carpenters were also held in high regard.

Every house in Novozlatopol had a picture of Baron Hirsch²⁸ who supported the establishment of Jewish Colonies in the Ukraine. The houses were constructed of bricks made from dried mud and straw, with walls about two feet thick. The roofs were made of various materials. The main part of our house was roofed with shingles, with an extension roofed with slate. Adjacent to the living quarters and part of the same building was a shed and a barn. The second story of the building was used to store grain. This storage area had dividers made of mud bricks for separating different types of grain. Mice would invade the storage areas and make their burrows in the mud bricks.

Other houses had thatched roofs made from wheat straw or "ochiret", a weed that grew on river banks. The ochiret²⁹ straw was stiffer than wheat straw. Occasionally, Ukrainians would come around sell to us bundles of ochiret. My Uncle Hersche's house was made from bricks covered with tin sheet roof that required occasional painting. I spent a lot of time at Hersche's house, that I would help him paint. My mother could always tell when I had been painting as I would come home with green spots on me.

We had a well on our property, but its water was bitter. We used its water for watering our animals. The well in the center of the town was sweet. The pump for this well could be operated either by hand or by horses. Someone who needed water would hitch his horse to the pumping mechanism and the horse would go around in a circle pumping water to the surface.

Each day in the winter, except Saturday, we would clean the manure out of the animal sheds, and pile it in a heap. In the summer, we would spread the manure on a flat piece of ground to let it dry. After it dried we would compress the manure with a horse-drawn roller and then cut the manure into bricks. These bricks, "kerpitch", were the fuel we used for heating during the winter. We used straw for cooking. In most years we had to use all of the manure for making kerpitch and had none left over for use as fertilizer.

The heating systems in the houses consisted of a chamber defined by two walls about two feet apart, built along the long axis of each house. This chamber had a couple of horizontal dividers and a chimney at the top. The walls, the dividers and the chimney were made of firebrick that we had to purchase in Hulaipole, 25 viorst away. We would

²⁸ Maurice de Hirsch (1831–1896), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_de_Hirsch.

²⁹ Ochiret could be bog rush, *Schoenus nigricans*.

build a fire from kerpitch and straw and the hot air and smoke from the fire would travel back and forth in this heating chamber and exit at the chimney. The thermal radiance from the firebrick walls would heat the living quarters on either side of the walls.

The region around Novozlatopol was prairie, with almost no native trees. The few trees we had were all planted by the original settlers or their descendants. As a consequence, lumber had to be imported and was as valuable as iron.

The soil in Novozlatopol was productive. Two good rains per year ensured a good yield. Wheat was our dominant crop and was sold commercially, mainly to the steam-powered flour mill in Hulaipole. We also grew barley, some of which was sold, flax, millet, buckwheat and sunflowers and tobacco. There was a diesel-powered oil crusher in town that crushed the oil seeds; sunflower seeds for sunflower oil for cooking and flax seed for linseed oil for paint. We children would say "put, put, put, put", in imitation of the sound of the diesel engine. We kids loved the oil cake from the mill. So did the cattle. Some years we would run out of sunflower oil and had to use linseed oil for cooking. It didn't taste so good. We also grew potatoes, radishes, turnips, carrots, cabbage, cucumbers and tomatoes. The tomatoes were converted to tomato paste from which we made borscht during the winter. We grew several varieties of "dinyas", melons. Cantaloupes were the first to be harvested, with other melons, that had a longer growing season, harvested later. During the summer, we ate a lot of melons. We made pickles from cucumbers, green tomatoes and small watermelons. Each family had three or four pickle barrels. The cabbage was made into sauerkraut. We made "kvas", a drink, by fermenting stale bread. We would purchase vinegar and "limon sol", lemon salt, tartaric acid, in the store. We made sweet wine from raisins. Liquor was available in the store. There were a few cherry, pear and apple trees in the "sod", the orchard, in the school yard, but the yield from these trees was poor. There was a weed, "tutran", that we would chew, like chewing gum is used today. It had a sour taste.

While the soil was good for agriculture, it was terrible for roads, which were just dirt with no gravel or pavement. A two-hour rain would make the roads impassible for days. All travel came to a stop after a rain.

The road from Turkenevka³⁰ to Hulaipole was a good road, since this was used by farmers from the surrounding area to take their goods for sale in the markets in Hulaipole.

In Novozlatopol the Jewish farmers kept seed from the previous crop. We used our own seed for watermelons, tomatoes and peas. For these vegetables, the seeds are large and can easily be harvested from the edible part of the plant. For carrots and

30 Turkenevka (Rus)/Turkenivka (Ukr)/Novoselivka/Malynivka (47.68, 36.47).

cabbages, where the seeds were small and harder to handle and to obtain, the Jewish farmers routinely purchased these seeds, "Diche zot", from their German neighbors. Seeds for other plants would occasionally be purchased from Germans in Marenfeld and "Diche zot" was considered to be of superior quality.

Baruch Lev owned several different plots of land. His best plot was 1 desyatin (1 desyatin = 1.09 hectares = 10,900 square meters = 2.9 acres) in size that was located 7–8 viorst east of Novozlatopol on the road to Svatodukhovka. This land was very productive and crops planted there didn't need much attention. In the spring we would spend one day seeding this plot of land we didn't return to it until harvest time. In the fall we would cut the grain with a "kosarka", a mowing machine, and then gather the cut stalks into a pile. After about a week of drying in the sun we would return to the plot and transport the cut stalks to town with a hay wagon. We then spread out the stalks on a dry piece of land to dry further. After drying we would shake the stalks with a wooden fork. This separated the grain from the straw. Barley and oat straw would be used for cattle feed, wheat straw was used as a cooking fuel. We then put the grain through a "putsmil", a cleaning mill that removed the husk and any remaining straw from the kernels. The wheat husks and straw could be mixed with barley chop for cattle feed; the grain was stored in a granary.

The sugar that we purchased in the store was not granular or powdered, but in the form of a cone about two feet high with an 8-inch diameter base and a 2-inch diameter top from which we chipped off pieces of sugar as needed. The merchant would wrap the cone in canvas and strike the cone with a hammer. At the top of the cone was hole, presumably from the manufacturing process. I once asked about the origin of the hole and in jest was told "That's where the Tsar drinks his tea."³¹

There was no bakery in Novozlatopol and each family prepared its own baked goods. For Pesach, two or three families would get together and jointly prepare matzoh. The group would mix flour and water to make dough, roll out a round piece with a rolling pin, make holes with a tool and bake it in an oven. The hole-punching tool was made by attaching a handle to a gear wheel from an old clock. The rolling pin would be used as a guide when the tool was moved back and forth. We made sort of a picnic out of this preparation.

Originally, the practice at Novozlatopol was for each farmer to contribute 1% of his grain to a communal pool, stored in the "Magazin", a large brick building, that was

31 A picture of these cones of sugar can be seen on page 107 of "The illustrated atlas of Jewish civilization: 4,000 years of Jewish history", consulting editor Martin Gilbert, Josephine Bacon, Arka Cartographics Limited, McMillan, New York, 1990.

used as seed for next year's crop. This practice had died out by the time I was in the colony, as individual farmers kept their own seed.

Much of the summer's activity was devoted to preparing food for winter. Potatoes and tomato paste were stored in cellars. Our cellar was dug into a hill in our yard with its entrance covered by a shed. Eggs, if stored in flax seed, would go stale but not rancid, and could be eaten throughout the winter.

In the summer, we would make cheese from milk, so we would have some dairy products in the winter, when the cows gave no milk. We had no mechanical centrifugal milk separator so we would let the fresh milk stand in a clay pot called a "kreigle" and let the cream rise to the top and separate on its own. There was an elderly widow in Novozlatopol and on Shabbos we would take a kreigle of milk to her. After four or five days, we removed the cream and allowed the skim milk to ferment into yogurt. The cream was churned into butter. The yogurt was placed in a sack and hung to dry. The liquid dripped out leaving cottage cheese that was allowed to dry further. The dried cottage cheese was then formed into a ball, called a "gomulka".

In the winter, we would buy salted herring and "prosol", a dried fish from the city of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov. These were sold in the store and by itinerant fishmongers. The best quality herring was "Kerch herring" from the Crimean city of Kerch.

In the summer, we prepared "tulkess", a dried sardine. We would purchase the fresh fish and then thread them onto a string and then place the strung fish in the hot sun to dry. Apples were dried in the same manner.

We never experienced corned beef or pastrami in Russia, "Voorsht", probably the same as salami in Canada, was experienced and was delicious. It was not made in Grafskoy or Novozlatopol. Voorsht came from the city, where there was a factory or maybe a butcher who prepared it.

Pickles were prepared and were similar to the garlic pickles, aka "kosher style" pickles, in Canada. Pickled tomatoes were also available.

"Lokshen", noodles, were home-made in the summertime. The wheat was made into flour at the mill in Hulaipole and then water and flour were mixed to make dough and the dough was flattened into a sheet with a rolling pin. Then the dough was cut into strips with a knife. In Canada the variety of wheat used for noodles is different from the wheat variety used for bread, but in Russia each product used the same variety of wheat.

Kasha, which means porridge, was made from various grains; barley or buckwheat (arechka in Russian), which were grown, or hersh which is a grain with small

seeds that grew by itself. Hersh could also be used for making latkes. We also ate potato latkes, which were like the latkes we eat in Canada.

There was no butcher shop in Novozlatopol. The butcher, katsev in Yiddish, got the animal from the shokhet, the slaughterer, on Thursday. Everyone knew that his meat would be ready on Friday morning. He sold the meat in a building and the meat would be all gone by Friday afternoon. The katsev only cut up the meat. He didn't pickle it or smoke it.

The windmill in Novozlatopol, normally used for chopping grain, could be adjusted to make a coarse flour from rye. Our wheat flour was ground in a mill, owned by the Kerner family, in the city of Hulaipole, about 25 viorst away. This mill was also the principal customer for our wheat. Our plows were purchased in Hulaipole, that had a plow factory, "Litainae Zavod" (metal works) that made simple metal articles, plows, shovels and the like, and that was also owned by the Kerners. The Kerners were a family of wealthy Jews from somewhere in the Austro-Hungarian empire and were referred to as "Austrian Jews".

Our mattresses were made out of feathers. The floor of our house was made of dirt. It was always dusty. We put sand on top of the dirt. There was only one floor in the house. There were gravel pits and sand pits in the area.

There was no professional matchmaker in Novozlatopol. The families arranged the marriages. Some elderly women took it upon themselves to find marriage partners. It was a mitzvah.

When the railway came through the area the route was planned in Moscow³². The route missed the center of Hulaipole³³ and this created a business opportunity for those in transport. Jewish farmers would contract to transport goods from the railway station to the market area of Hulaipole and from the town to the station. This is what some Novozlatopol farmers did if they had say a week off from farming. In addition, they would act as contractors and hire Ukrainian farmers to do the transporting. Other Jews were horse hair buyers or potato sellers if there was a market in the cities. So a man would hire several horse and wagons and go out into the fields and buy up potatoes. He would then sell the potatoes to someone else. The Ukrainian farmer would find out that the selling price was greater than what he was paid and he would accuse "the Jews of cheating him". Ukrainians would not go out and try to hire people and be middlemen like the Jews did.

32 Bill probably misspeaks here. In the nineteenth century, when the railway was built, St. Petersburg was the capital of Russia.

33 Missed by 7 km.

In the winter, there was little to do except take care of the cattle, so often men from the colony would leave for a few weeks with a wagon and team of horses and go to Yuzovka, now called Donetsk³⁴, eighty viorst away, where there was a coal mine, to haul coal between the mine and other points.

For the Jewish harvest holiday of Sukkot, an esrog, a variant lemon, was needed. These were imported from Palestine to port cities such as Mariupol or Berdyask³⁵. Usually someone from Novozlatopol had a child in one of these larger towns, who would supply an esrog for people in Novozlatopol.

Except for the young men who regularly travelled to places like Yuzovka in the winter, most of us rarely ventured outside the colony. For example, I was never in Hoopalov³⁶ even though it was only 3 viorst away. Although Driternumer³⁷ and Ferternumer³⁸ were only a few viorst away I was in Driternumer only once. The only time I was in Ferternumer was when we passed through on our way to Polohie³⁹ when we escaped from Russia. Geography was not taught in the schools, we had no maps and our knowledge of even nearby towns came only from stories told by people after their few ventures outside. My current recollections of the names of towns in the area derives only from traveler's tales that I heard.

The German kids probably also went to the state-supported Russian school. Also, there was a German man, not a professional teacher, who taught German to the German kids.

Although our family status was high in the community, our income was lower than most because my grandfather could not do the extra work that younger males undertook to supplement their family income. Some would harvest extra feed by cutting grass at road sides or river banks and so be able to feed an extra cow over the winter. Some people in the colony kept bees and harvested the honey.

To supplement his income when in Grafskoy my father would purchase a cow and then have it transported to another town in the area or sometimes to Odessa. This was a common method to supplement income, like transporting coal at Yuzovka. The Bruser family memoirs record the same income supplement technique.

34 Yuzovka/Stalino/Donetsk (48.00, 37.80).

35 Berdyansk, a port on the Sea of Azov (46.76,36.80).

36 Veselaya, Goopolov (Russian names)/Hoopolov (Yiddish name)/Hoopolovka (Ukrainian name), Jewish colony no. 2, is located at (47.67, 36.61).

37 Krasnoselka (Rus)/Krasnoselivka (Ukr)/Driternumer (Yid), Jewish Colony No. 3 is at (47.61, 36.57).

38 Mezherich (Rus)/Ferternumer (Yid), Jewish colony no. 4 (47.60, 36.42).

39 Polohie (Ukr)/Pologie (Rus) at (47.48, 36.25) is the nearest railway station to Novozlatopol.

In addition to the Jewish colonies in the area, there were also colonies of Greeks, Bulgarians and Germans. In the fall, the Bulgarians would come around and trade red and green peppers, tomatoes, cabbage and dinyas for eggs and butter. The Bulgarians seemed to specialize in garden vegetables. Although we also grew vegetables, their produce was of greater variety. Later in the fall, the Greeks would sell us prune plums and grapes. We had little contact with the Germans. Several times each summer, "Tziginer", Gypsies, would set up a tent on the edge of town with a huge bonfire. Metal pails were valuable and the Gypsies had tinkers who could repair them. The Gypsies would also tell our fortunes, sell us trinkets and try to sell us horses.

In the area of Russia around Grafskoy and Novozlatopol, Jews were "vechni aradatora", "renters forever". The land was leased indefinitely from the government and could be passed on to offspring but could be neither sold nor bought. My grandfather had fifteen desyatin of land. This was a typical plot size. Some families had only a small amount of their own land and had to rent land from others. This was because of the division of land amongst the sons of the original settlers. My great uncle, Hersche Wiseman, owned some land, that he rented out. The usual arrangement was half the crop for one year's rent. He was fortunate in that he was the only one left of his generation in his family and he had the entire allotment of 40 desyatin of land given to his family in the 1840s.

Hersche Wiseman was well off by the standards of Novozlatopol and could afford to send his two sons, Avrom and David, to university in Vienna. Avrom became a doctor and practiced in some city. David became a lawyer and ended up in Palestine. Hersche had two daughters; Raina (Raisa) who lived with him, and another who lived with her husband in Colony Engels⁴⁰.

In my time, 1912–1922, there was no rabbi in Novozlatopol. Hersche Wiseman acted as the rabbi.

The colony hired a Ukrainian man as a "tabunchik", a herdsman. His house was by the dam. Each morning we would milk the cows and then chase them out into the street. They would wait until the herdsman picked them up and took them to the common pasture. Twice a day, at noon and in the late afternoon, he would take them to the "stavok", the reservoir, formed by damming the "balka", the creek⁴¹, for watering. At the end of the day we would see him marching the entire herd down the street with the individual animals turning off the street at their owner's yards. At the end of each winter,

40 Engels (Yid)/Trudoliubovka (Rus), Jewish Colony No. 5 (47.47, 36.74).

41 The dictionary meaning of "balka" is gully, not creek.

before the spring floods, each household had to contribute a load of straw to maintain the dam that created the stavok.

The stavok was once stocked with fish that were harvested with nets but we overfished the fish stock.

There was pit in Novozlatopol in which ice was obtained from somewhere and then kept year round. I know this ice was used for medicinal purposes because occasionally a doctor would be summoned from Turkenivka, where there was a hospital, and the doctor would order ice to be applied to the patient. Our family never stored food in this ice pit but others, who lived near the pit, may have.

Some households, those that were a little better off, would often hire a Ukrainian girl from the territory as a housemaid. Except for the herdsman, these housemaids and the German families, we had no constant contact with Gentiles.

One fourth or so of the colony's land was devoted to pasture. The land set aside for pasture was rotated each year amongst the land owned by the residents. The landowners were paid for their use of the land as pasture and owners of cattle were charged for use of the pasture and for the salary of the herdsman. This led to complicated accounting, that was handled by my grandfather with the aid of an abacus. Some families had little land but several grazing animals. Other families had more land but few cattle, and so on.

In addition to cattle, we also had horses and sheep, chickens, ducks, turkeys and geese. The ducks and geese were particularly valuable because they have more "schmalz" (fat) than chickens or turkeys and because their down was better. The horses and sheep were not gathered by the herdsman but were kept on the individual owner's plots. The sheep had huge tails that I never saw on Canadian sheep. I recently found out that these sheep were a Middle Eastern breed, whose tails were a fat reservoir, consumed in period of drought. There were also a few Persian sheep with tight curls in their black wool.

In the winter, cattle were fed a mixture of straw and hay. The hay was cut with a scythe in the fall. Horses were fed straw and barley chop. The digestive system of horses is not efficient and chopping up the barley allows the horse to get more nutritional value from the grain.

We ate little beef or mutton. What we did eat was from the whole animal, not as in Canada where the shochet only slaughters for the front quarters. The butchers were qualified to remove the vein from the hind quarters, that is prohibited by Jewish dietary law. This isn't done in Canada because the "trayburn" process is very labor intensive and results in many small bits of meat. My uncle, Hirsche Wiseman, the town shochet, would

slaughter animals on Thursdays, so that that fresh meat would be available for the Friday evening Shabbos meal. Word would get out that a farmer would be bringing him an animal and townfolk would come around to purchase pieces of meat. As part of his fee for slaughtering the animal Hirsche kept the liver and intestines (kishkas) for himself and he would give us a piece of liver and kishkas. As a result, the most common meat that our family ate was liver which we had about once per week.

The poorer people in Novozlatopol normally ate brown bread, but everyone had white bread for Shabbos.

Novozlatopol had a "Prikas", a town hall, in which worked a Russian man paid by the Government. I don't know what he did. As far as I know, there were no land titles kept in Prikas. Land title was by oral tradition and there were occasional disputes about land ownership. The state also paid the salary of another Russian man, who was the town policeman. Although the town had an elected "Starosta", a mayor, as far as I know, there were no taxes. The colony owned a patch of land that was rented out. The income from this land was used to support maintenance of the cemetery, the town well, and a shvitz (bathhouse). The bathhouse was maintained by the shames from the shule and was used on Fridays before Shabbos. It was equipped with branches that the inhabitants would use to swat themselves. When the bathhouse was operating, it was full of steam and no one could see. When so protected from identification, the children would run around the bathhouse whacking the adults with branches.

The women's mikvah was next to the shvitz.

There were some deciduous trees but no evergreens in the area. Even if there were evergreens, we would have only used deciduous trees for swatting branches. Evergreens were decorated at Christmastime by Christians, so evergreens were "traif".

Religious services were held three times each day. Not everyone would attend. Shabbos services were attended by everyone⁴². My grandfather would often be the cantor. For the High Holiday services, another man in town, Shmuel Matas Kahgan, who had a better voice, would be hired as the cantor.

There was some rule in ancient Israel that the owner of a cow had to, after feeding it for one year, donate the first male calf of this cow to the Temple. In Novozlatopol, the tradition was that the calf had to be donated not to the shule but to the Cohanim. A nice racket. Once in Novozlatopol, a poor villager had a bull calf by his young cow, but was understandably reluctant to feed it for one year only to then donate it to the Cohanim; more specifically to the oldest Cohan in town, Shmuel Matas Kahgan. However,

42 The pre-revolutionary synagogue was located at (47.6633, 36.5662). The land is now vacant.

tradition also held that the gift calf must be perfect. So, the villager cut the tail off his calf, rendering it imperfect and thus unsuitable for donation. The local consensus was that the villager was justified. Kahgan's reaction went unrecorded.

In 1995, I learned that Kahgan had a great grandson descendant, Frank Kegan, who lived in Palm Springs, California. Frank sent me a picture of him, that I immediately recognized. My brother Paul recalls that Kahgan was also a melamed, a Hebrew teacher.⁴³

There was one telephone in town, in the prikas, connected to (G)Hulaipole. To call Hulaipole one would turn the crank, yelling "Centralnaya, Centralnaya" (central, central) until someone answered. As far as I know, the telephone was used only for official business, but not personal business.

There were no coopers, cartwrights, or wheelwrights in town. Barrels and carts would be purchased. Wagons were made in Hulaipole and were sold by local dealers. We had carpenters, a blacksmith, shoemakers and tailors, all of whom worked full time at their trades. Between the two of them, a carpenter and a blacksmith could repair barrels and horse carts.

Houses were made by farmers who were part time bricklayers using bricks made from soil and straw. They got their jobs by reputation. Carpenters would make the doors and windows. One of the farmers was a part-time thatcher. Several of the women in town acted as midwives.

Babies were bundled up, Russian style

There was a hospital, 3 viorst away in the town of Turkenivka. I was taken there once after a horse stepped on my foot.

There was some religious law or tradition that one religious official shouldn't interfere with the operation of another official. At one time, there was some problem with the Driternumer shokhet and kosher meat wasn't available. When people from Driternumer approached Hersch Wiseman, the Novozlatopol shokhet, Wiseman, following the regulation/tradition, refused to cooperate. Sometimes, when people from Driternumer came on horseback to Novozlatopol with some chickens in a sack they would offer any small kid they encountered double the normal rate if the kid would take the chickens to the shokhet and then return with the killed bird. The implication was the kid would claim the chickens belonged to his family when he went to the shokhet. I lived on Diche Gass, German street, which was on the road from Driternumer so people from

43 In 2002 Mel Comisarow made his second trip to Novozlatopol and met Martha Sopleniak, an elderly Ukrainian woman, born 1910. She remembered Kahgan and recalled his home as "the second house past (i. e., east of) the post office". This is at (47.6627, 36.5682).

Driternumer regularly passed our home. Upon encountering me they offered me ten kopeks, double the normal rate, for killing the chickens if I would go the Novozlatopol shokhet and ask that the chickens be killed. Since the shokhet was my great uncle, I could get the killing done gratis. Double profit! So I took the chickens to Wiseman. Wiseman knew what was happening. "Does your mother now have grey chickens? I thought she only had black chickens." I knew from the beginning that I was wrong. The trouble with the Driternumer shokhet lasted for one summer. After that, I was always afraid of Driternumer.

The state-supported school in Novozlatopol taught us Russian. Three or four local men and one women, my mother's cousin, Raina Wiseman, were hired as teachers. After school we would go to chader in the teacher's house for Hebrew lessons. The teacher was a cranky old man who believed that students were best inspired by swearing at them. I hated chader. Although we lived in a predominantly Ukrainian area, Ukrainian was not taught in the schools. After the Revolution, and its associated spirit of equality, Ukrainian was taught in the school. We found the sound of Ukrainian to be humorous, just Russian, pronounced funny. I only had a few lessons in Ukrainian, as the school closed shortly after the Revolution.

When the First World War started, Government agents came to town to draft some of the young men. In my family, my cousins, the sons of David and Aaron Lev were drafted, as was my uncle, Chaskel Svirsky. Except for the draft, the early part of the War had little effect on us. The battles were far away and the only effect it had on us was when Government agents would come by to purchase horses or grain. They had a list of specifications that had to be met and paid good prices. A farmer could always use the government payment to purchase a horse of equal or better quality.

During the First World War, some Jewish prisoners-of-war from Austria and Poland were sent to our colony as laborers. Some of them were more educated than we were. One of them, Sholom Zelevianski, was a Hebrew teacher, who taught us to speak modern Hebrew and some of us became fluent in the language. He was an excellent teacher who could relate to us. When the weather was good he would take us out into the countryside for lessons. He married my mother's cousin Raisa (Raina) Wiseman and they later went to Poland. Some Chalutzim, Jewish teenagers from Mariupol, who wanted to move to kibbutzim in Palestine, spent some time with us to learn agricultural techniques. They didn't know how to harness a horse or even how to milk a cow. How could someone be so ignorant as to not know these simple things?

One day, Avrom Wiseman visited us when he was on leave from the army. As a doctor, he was an officer and I remember being impressed by the elegance of his uniform.

Avrom was clean-shaven and his Orthodox father Hersche, when speaking to his wife, Sarah, referred to Avrom's shaving equipment as "that chazeri". When word got out that Avrom had returned, everyone in town came by with their aches and pains. There were some diseases going around and Avrom told us to boil our drinking water, which we did.

There were hundreds of wild pigeons around Novozlatopol and a common pastime was feeding these pigeons. This feeding seemed to be most popular with the Germans. I don't know why this was, maybe because they were better off and could better afford this hobby. During the First World War an edict came down from the Government demanding that we destroy the pigeons because the Government was concerned about the use of carrier pigeons for espionage. It was impossible to destroy the pigeons as there were too many. We kids would make a trap out of propped-up box and place a trail of seeds leading to the box. When a pigeon got under the box we would pull a string attached to the prop and the box would fall. Usually the pigeon sensed what was happening and escaped. Adults had more success trapping pigeons and would take the captured pigeons to the town shochet for slaughter.

Later in the war, an army came by; I think it was the Austrian army. This was the first time we saw a motorized truck. It had solid rubber tires. I remember one man who couldn't understand how the truck was steered. "Where's the dishel?" he kept asking. The dishel was the mechanism that turned the front wheels of a horse cart.

As the war progressed, life became more difficult. We were very poor and even when we had money we could not buy much, as the war effort used up most supplies and little was left for the civilian population. The clothing and footwear that we had was made over or patched up. We could not get cigarette paper or kerosene in the store, and we made our own candles and our own matches. We got some sort of special wood that we sliced into sticks and dipped in a solution, that when dried formed the match head. These matches had to be struck on a special surface in order to light.

In 1918, the boys from the colony, who had been drafted, came home at the end of the war. When the soldiers came home, their uniforms provided us with the first new cloth that we had for some time. The uniforms were converted into other articles of clothing for the people in the colony.

We then heard that the Tsar had been overthrown⁴⁴. The Russian Revolution, that followed, affected us greatly. Most of the younger Jews were in favor of it and were actively engaged in promoting it, especially the promise of equality for Jewish people. This was unheard of in Russia. Some of the older Jews were opposed to the revolution,

⁴⁴ Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in March 1917. He was murdered on 17 July 1918.

as the Communists opposed all religions. The discussions of the new politics were sometimes heated, resulting in fistfights.

In retrospect, we lived in a backward, ultrareligious society. Anyone who spoke against religion was not worth listening to and was a traitor to the cause. The anti-religious character of Communism was troubling to religious Jews. How can they say anything believable when they say, "There is no God." "They're not reliable. You can't talk to them."

The 1981 movie, "Reds", has a scene where members of various tradesmen's guilds sit around debating the new politics. This scene accurately portrays the atmosphere during the early stages of the Revolution.

After the Tsar was overthrown, there was a period of enlightenment in the colony. Meetings were held and we would have elections to pick delegates to represent us at meetings in other towns. Elections? This was unheard of.⁴⁵ Often speakers would arrive by horseback and hold rallies to speak of the new politics and how the future would be better. We always felt good after hearing these speeches.

One night a speaker named Stein from Hichur⁴⁶ a Russian town near the Jewish colony Peness⁴⁷, spoke to us. He was an outspoken and enthusiastic Bolshevik. My grandfather, Boruch Lev, proudly introduced him as a relative of his daughter's husband. At one point in Stein's speech he said "God is no more". Someone in the audience shouted, "Well, where is God?" Stein answered sarcastically, "God is in Hoopolov.", a neighboring town. At the second meeting, the next night, my embarrassed grandfather said nothing about his Stein relative and kept a low profile during the discussions.

In 1995, I learned that this Stein was probably named Moishe Stein (1897–1958), and was a son of Avrom Stein of Hichur, who was friendly with his first cousin, my Uncle Berel. Moishe's grandmother, Sarah Winnikovsky Stein, was a sister of my paternal grandmother, Feigel Winnikovsky Komisaruk. Moshe/Moisey Stein later became a professor at Rostov State University.

The time of the Revolution was difficult for us. The civil war raged on in our area for two years. The White Guards got support from some Ukrainians, some ethnic Russians (such as the nobility), Central Asiatic people from the southeastern part of the Russian empire, (such as Kazakhstan and Kirgizia), and got financial support from the Western Allies.

⁴⁵ In the 1860s, mayoralty elections were held in the Jewish colonies. For example, page 5 of file 21030 of the Odessa Archive has the record of the 1861 election for mayor in Sladkovodnaya.

⁴⁶ Hichur (Ukr)/Gaichul (Rus)/Novoukrainka is at 47.42, 36.69.

⁴⁷ Nachaevaka/Peness/Gorki, Jewish Colony Number 6 is at (47.50, 36.77).

The Central Asians rode camels, not horses. When a camel got sick, the soldier would just leave the camel and take one of our horses. Some people in town ended up with dead camels. They were bigger and stronger than horses. We didn't know how to feed camels. When they got mad, they spit at us.

The Red Guards consisted of Russians and some Ukrainians and were supported by the new government. Both armies, the "Whites" and the "Reds", took most of our food, clothing, horses and anything they could use. All the civilian population suffered, but the Jewish population suffered more.

My mother's cousin, Esther, the daughter of Mates Michel, the feldsher, was killed during the Revolution. There was a battle between the Reds and Whites in the street and she looked out the window of her house and was struck in the forehead by a wayward bullet.

The memoirs of Paul Comisarow mention that the 1918–1919 influenza epidemic killed many people in Novozlatopol. “We didn't know what it was. If you were lucky, you survived; if not, you didn't.”

I had my Bar Mitzvah during the Civil War. On that day, the armies were fighting in the streets of Novozlatopol and I recall that we had to go home from the shule via the back alleys in order to avoid the fighting.

One day, we heard that a buyer for tobacco, that we normally grew only for our own use, was in Driternumer, a colony about three viorst away. I took a sackful of tobacco on a horse and took it to the buyer. I was then accosted by a Red soldier in town, who claimed that I was a "Shpekulant", operating in violation of the new law, that reserved commerce for the state. He took my tobacco and my horse, gave me a kick and I had to walk home. The horse came home on its own the next day.

The end of the Revolution was followed by a complete collapse of civic services. In addition to the closing of the school, the colony lost its state-supported policeman, postal service and telephone.

After the Civil War, some of the Jewish colonies suffered from nighttime raids organized by bandits who lived in the area. Our colony at Novozlatopol was fortunate in this respect as we had an organized "samo-ochrana" a self-defence group, operated like a regular army. We had lots of firearms and ammunition, left by the retreating armies during the civil war. Also, many veterans of the First World War had returned to the colony with their military experience. The armies also left many large coils of copper wire. I don't know what this was for; maybe for the telegraph or telephone. When we heard of attacks on other colonies, meetings were held to discuss what we should do.

Many favored doing nothing as this passive response was characteristic of Jews over the centuries. The veterans felt otherwise.

One night, one family's house, shed and barn was set on fire. The rumor was that a disgruntled former employee of the family sought revenge. This incident convinced the majority that the veterans were correct and our militia got organized.

Novozlatopol had one main street and each evening on the hour, two two-man patrols would start out from the Town Hall in the center of town, going in opposite directions down the main street, heading towards the periphery of the town. This was repeated until daybreak. It took an hour to reach the end of the street and an hour to return to the Town Hall, so that at any one time, eight men were on patrol. I remember one incident in 1919, when I was thirteen. I was on patrol with an adult and in the middle of the night we heard approaching horses and prepared to repel an attack. I was carrying a "Fransuske", a French-made cavalry rifle, that was smaller and lighter than the Russian rifles that the adults used. We called out in the direction of the approaching horses, "Who goes there?", and when no one replied, we fired and then heard the sounds of retreating horses. The next morning, we saw blood on the ground. I don't know if this was horse or human blood. Several similar attacks on us by bandit gangs were repelled.

While our samo-ochrama could protect us against the bandit raids that occurred after the Civil War, it lacked the firepower to protect us from the warring armies during the Civil War.

In 1919 Hersche Wiseman's daughter and her family moved to Novozlatopol from Colony Engels when her husband was killed in the 24 December 1918 pogrom in Engels.

One day I saw the bandit, Machno, who was from Hulaipole, in Novozlatopol with several of his horseman. He was a short man, shorter than the men who were with him. He was also lame. The rumor was that he was in town to negotiate an agreement to leave us alone.

The Jews blamed Machno's gang for every raid in the area, for which it may or may not have been responsible. A delegation from Novozlatopol once went to Machno to discuss his raids against the Jews. Machno's reply was "What can I do? They're just a bunch of ignorant peasants", referring to his own men.⁴⁸

By 1920, the armies were gone, but the Jewish colonies were left with no food and no horses or cattle. The armies brought with them some animal disease, "chuma",

⁴⁸ Nestor Ivanovich Makhno (1888–1934) was the dominant warlord in the area. At the height of his power his peasant army controlled all of Yekaterinoslav Gubernia. He, himself, was a pro-Semite, but many in his peasant army were not. In 2002, Mel Comisarow was told by both Jews and Ukrainians in Novozlatopol that the firearms used by the Novozlatopol militia were donated by Makhno. These people would have heard this directly from their parents, who were alive in Makhno's time.

that translates into English as plague or an infectious disease, that killed the few animals that were left. I now know that this was hoof-and-mouth disease. We had no seed and no animals to pull a plow. Even if we did, there would have been no crop, as no rain fell in 1921. My grandfather said that 1921 was the only year he could recall that there was a complete crop failure. There was famine and many people starved. People ate cats, dogs, and whatever they could find. My mother once boiled some old corn cobs, the kernels of which had been eaten years before, in the hope that there would be some food value left in the cobs. I recall scrounging in the mouse burrows in our upstairs granary for grain kernels that mice had stored but not eaten. We went looking for "tutran", the weed we used to chew on, but because of the drought, there was none to be found. Occasionally, we would get some food from my Uncle Hersche Wiseman. We slept most of the time and thought about food when we were awake. One memory, that I still recall, is wishing for a kreigle of milk. The famine had the greatest effect on the old and the young. In our family, this was my grandfather and my younger brother Paul. I remember Paul having the swollen legs we now know is characteristic of kwashiorkor, protein deficiency. (Paul's recollection is that while others were emaciated from the famine, he was doing fine as indicated by his fat belly.) The news coverage of the famine in Ethiopia in 1983–1985 showed people in the same condition that we experienced in Novozlatopol in 1921. I cannot explain how we survived these times.⁴⁹

Some families had more food than others. Generally, these were families with young men, who had buried sacks of grain in previous years. The hidden grain was not taken by the armies during the Civil War.

Leaving Russia required the services of "agents". They spoke several languages, could arrange for communications where there was no working postal service, could arrange transportation where there was none, bribed government officials and so on. All for a price, of course. The usual arrangement called for 50% in advance and 50% on delivery of one's relatives.

My father in Alberta corresponded with his nephew in Detroit, Leon Kay, and they decided that Kay should go to a country bordering on Russia to try to get us and other members of the family to a neighboring country that had communications with the outside world. In 1921, Kay went to Romania and contacted an agent who disappeared with the money Kay had given him. Kay then went to Poland and arranged with another

⁴⁹ As Bill describes, his family survived the First World War, the Russian Civil War, the post-revolutionary raids by bandits, the 1921–22 famine and a typhus epidemic. In addition, as mentioned in the memoirs of Bill's brother, Paul, the family also survived the 1918–19 world-wide influenza pandemic. Cannibalism was common during the 1921–22 famine, but Bill never mentioned it.

agent who came to Novozlatopol on horseback and advised us to meet him and other members of our family at the railway station in Polohie, about 25 viorst away. We had no advance knowledge that the agent was coming and his arrival was a miracle for us as we had not heard from my father for seven years. Our agent had advised us to tell no one of our plans and to not sell anything to raise money, as this would raise suspicions. The only ones who knew we were leaving were my Uncle Hersche and the man who carried us in his horse cart to Polohie. This man had one of the few horses left in Novozlatopol. We left with only some food, some extra clothing and pillows. We took none of our family records, such as pictures.

I still remember the morning when we left the Novozlatopol colony. In the street we saw the bodies of several people who had died of starvation. Most of the still-living were not strong enough to pick up the bodies to bury them. When we got to the railway station in Polohie, we met the other members of our family, my Uncle Berel Komisaruk, his wife, Sonja, his sons, Velvel (Bill) and Shmilik (Saul) and his daughter, Nechamke (Ami), his mother, Feigel, Shmilik's fiance, Sonja Komisaruk, who was a daughter of David Moshe's brother Shlomo-Reuven, my Aunt Leah Winnikoff, who was a widow, and her son Meishel and daughter Rose and my Aunt Esther Pogorelsky, who was also a widow, all of whom travelled from Grafskoy to Rozovka⁵⁰, where they boarded the train to Polohie, and together we travelled with our agent in a railway freight car that had no heat, light, or other facilities, to the city of Berdichev⁵¹. There were also people from other families in our railway car, a total of 21 people.

The journey to Berdichev, about 400 miles away, took about a month, a distance that normally took two to three days. There was no regularly scheduled train service, so our agent arranged with the railway staff to take us in a Northwest direction. The train would take our car some distance and leave us at some siding, and then we had to make arrangements with the next train that travelled in the desired direction. This was repeated many times until we arrived in Berdichev. We had no money so we would trade clothing and pillows for food in the towns where we stopped. For some reason, pillows were especially valuable.

The famine we experienced in Novozlatopol was common throughout the southeastern Ukraine. Even for those with money, food was often impossible to purchase. Many people on our train were escaping the region. Once we travelled about a hundred miles from Polohie, we noticed that conditions seemed to be better.

⁵⁰ Rozovka (Rus)/Rozivka (Ukr) (47.40, 37.07) is the nearest railway station to Grafskoy.

⁵¹ Berdichev, Ukraine (49.90, 28.58).

During the train journey to Berdichev, were rehearsed the story that our agent had told us to tell any official who questioned us. We were "Poles" from some town in Russia⁵² I've forgotten, who were returning to our ethnic homeland under the terms of a recently negotiated treaty between Poland and Russia. This treaty provided for the free migration of Poles, resident in Russia, to Poland and Russians, resident in Poland, to Russia. Except for this rehearsal, we slept most of the time. This treaty probably was the 3 March 1918 Treaty of Brest Litovsk, the armistice treaty between Russia and Germany.^{53,54}

Our agent left us in some kind of guest house in Berdichev and then disappeared. He came back about a month later. During this month we starved as we had no money or food. While we were in Berdichev, my cousins, Will Komisaruk (Berel's son) and Meishel Winnikoff, and I got a job sorting potatoes in a storage cellar. The family was hungry, so at the end of the day we tried to smuggle some potatoes home, inside our clothing. The foreman caught us, confiscated our potatoes and made us return the money he had paid us.

In Berdichev, I saw electric lights for the first time. While we were there, my grandmother, Berel's mother, Feigel, who was very frail, was placed in a "meshev zkaynim", an old folks home. She died several months later, after we had left.

In Berdichev in Spring 1922 I saw Jewish women selling potatoes in the market and warming their hands over a small fire. Their husbands were in the Shul studying Torah while their wives were working. I never saw that in the colonies.

We finally moved to the Polish frontier, that we had to cross to get into Poland. We had to get to Poland because Russia had no contact with Canada or the U. S. A. When our agent came back from Poland, where he met with Leon Kay, who gave him some more money, he arranged for us to travel by horse team to a town named Ostrog⁵⁵ about fifteen miles from the Polish border. We walked all night and crossed the border as both the Russian and Polish border guards, as previously arranged by our agent, looked

52 Bill's grandmother, Faigel Vinikovsky Komisaruk (1844–16 June 1922), was born in Dombrova, Poland (53.65, 23.35) and this might have provided the legitimacy for the claim of the Polish citizenship. The memoirs of the Komesaroffs who went to Australia also mention that they had Polish citizenship. As mentioned in a 1981 interview of Esther Stein Meidler of Winnipeg, a daughter of Avrom Stein of Hichur, the Stein family also held Polish citizenship. Esther's grandmother Sarah Winnilovsky Stein was a sister of Faigel Vinikovsky Komisaruk.

53 Bill is mistaken about the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. The right to Polish citizenship was a feature of the 18 March 1921 Treaty of Riga between Poland and the Russian Bolsheviks. By Fall 1921 over 300,000 "Poles" moved from Russia to Poland.

54 "In the Midst of Civilized Europe The Pogroms of 1918–1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust", Jeffrey Veidlinger, Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., Toronto, © 2021, page 303.

55 Ostrog, (Rus)/Ostroh/(Ukr), Ukraine (50.33, 26.52)

the other way. Russia did not want to let us out and Poland did not want to let us in⁵⁶. We walked several more miles until we came to a farm yard, where we hid in the barn. At daybreak, an agent came and took us to a store in the town of Rovno⁵⁷ to buy new clothes and footwear and to discard our old and dirty clothes. That night, we travelled by train to Lvov and from there to Yanov⁵⁸, where we stayed until we left for Canada.

Yanov was a summer resort town near the larger city of Lvov. There was a lake nearby and cottages that could be rented. We stayed in a cottage owned by a Ukrainian lady. We stayed in Yanov about three months until my father made arrangements for us to travel to Canada. Our agent told us to keep a low profile during our stay in Yanov as we were there illegally. The police, of course, knew that we were there, but our agent had previously "arranged" with the police chief to do nothing about us.

In those days, Britain represented Canadian interests in Poland. When my father was notified that we had finally arrived in Poland, he made arrangements with the British Consulate in Poland for our travel to Canada. After a few days, the British Consulate arranged for temporary residency permits and we were able to move around in Yanov.

I had nothing to do with the arrangements being made on our behalf. Leon handled all the paper work and periodically gave money to my mother for us to spend.

Conditions in Poland were much better than in Russia. As long as one had money, everything was available. In particular, we could purchase food and we all rapidly recovered from the famine.

I had contracted typhus in Russia and my hair started to fall out. A doctor in Lvov told me to keep my head shaved until I recovered. Every couple of weeks I would go to a barber to have my head shaved. Eventually, my hair grew back normally and I quit going to the barber. This this is why I am bald in photographs of me taken in Yanov.

Poland at the time had large communities of Jews and Ukrainians. I felt some sympathy for the Ukrainians in Poland, whom I got to know a bit during our stay in Yanov. Although I knew no Ukrainian, Ukrainian and Russian are similar enough that when I spoke to them in Russian and they replied in Ukrainian, we could understand each other. The Poles were Catholic and Roman Catholicism was the state-supported religion. The Polish Ukrainians were Orthodox and resented this state support of Catholicism as much as the Jews did. One day as I was walking down the street, I saw an old Polish

⁵⁶ Although the Riga Treaty gave Bill's party the right to enter Poland, Poland, then suffering a typhus epidemic, imposed border quarantines to exclude would-be immigrants infected with typhus. See ref 54, page 315.

⁵⁷ Rovno, Poland (50.62, 26.26).

⁵⁸ The modern name of the town at (49.92, 23.72) whose Yiddish name is Yanov, is Ivano-Frankove. It is 23 km from Lvov (Polish)/Lviv (Ukrainian) at (49.84, 24.02).

woman approach the local Bishop, who was walking towards her. The Bishop was a tall man dressed in his elegant black habit. The woman bent over to kiss the Bishop's ring, as was the Catholic custom. The Bishop didn't break stride and virtually ignored her. I didn't know the Catholic tradition and thought she had tried to kiss his hand. I was full of the revolutionary spirit of equality and I was revulsed by what I thought was an example of deference to privilege, that was so characteristic of the old days.

In those days Poland operated under the feudal system. The local blueblood, a Graf (Lord) Potofsky, who lived in Spain or Italy, where it was warm, owned the neighboring lake and surrounding forest. One day, Will Komisaruk, Meishel Winnikoff, and I went into the forest and picked some wild berries. A local gendarme arrested us and we were fined and our berries confiscated for trespassing on the Graf's property. In 1990, I saw a television program that mentioned that Graf Potofsky owned 100 villages in Poland.

While we were in Yanov, I met David Nemetz, of Watrous, Saskatchewan⁵⁹, who was originally from near Odessa⁶⁰, who had come to Yanov to take several relatives back with him to Canada. According to David Nemetz⁶¹, the cost to bring out one relative was \$1,000 US and he was expecting six relatives to meet him in Yanov. When he arrived, he found out that ten relatives were expecting to go to Canada with him. He needed an extra \$4,000 and Leon Kay, then going by the name Komisaroff, was able to lend it to him. This incident with Leon is recorded in the history of David Nemetz of Vancouver. I met David Nemetz again in the 1950s in Edmonton and 1980 in Radium Hot Springs, British Columbia. One of Nemetz's relatives was his sister, Chova Nemetz Wosk, who was a young bride with a child in Yanov, and whom I did not meet again until 1987, when I met her in Vancouver.

⁵⁹ Watrous, Saskatchewan (51.68, -105.46).

⁶⁰ According to an announcement in the 17 March 2017 issue of Jewish Independent, a Jewish newspaper in Vancouver BC, the Nemetz family is from Svatatroske (Rus)/Troitske (Ukr) (46.54, 30.02), 52 km west of Odessa.

⁶¹ Recording of an interview of David Nemetz, July 24, 1974, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Provincial Archives of British Columbia reference number 3883:92. Nemetz also first considered taking his relatives out through Romania, but he was told that crossing the border with Russia was dangerous, whereas crossing the Russia-Poland border was easy. According to Nemetz, one had to have a passport from one's country of origin to emigrate to Canada, but forgeries of Polish passports could be easily purchased in Poland. Nemetz also states that after their relatives had arrived in Poland and had obtained temporary Polish residency permits, and "Polish" passports, he and Leon Komisaroff had to go to Danzig with these passports to get transit papers, so the relatives could leave Poland via Danzig. When they tried to return to Poland, Leon was denied entry because he was an American. After paying a \$10 bribe, Leon was able to smuggle himself into Poland, disguised as a locomotive fireman on the train that took him and Nemetz into Poland.

Berel Komisaruk, Esther Pogorelsky, and Berel's family were going to the US and Leon Kay was able to make arrangements with the American consulate for travel papers for them. They left Yanov for New York, several weeks before we did. When our papers for Canada were ready, my family and the Winnikoffs left Yanov via a train to Lvov, and then another train to Warsaw, where we stayed a few days to finalize our papers. On the day we left Warsaw we started to carry our bags from the hotel to the train station, some distance away. Some Hassidim approached us and demanded to carry our bags as they claimed to have the concession for bag-carrying in that part of Warsaw.

We took the train from Warsaw to Danzig⁶², which then was in a free zone, administered by Germany. Most of the people on the train were either Jews or Ukrainians, who were leaving Poland. From Warsaw to the border, each car of the train had a Polish policeman to maintain order. When we stopped at the border, the locomotive was changed and the Polish policeman was replaced by a German policeman. As soon as the Polish Policeman left, some Polish Ukrainians in our car started singing "Poland has not disappeared, but it must disappear", that was a parody of the lines "Poland will not disappear, while we are still alive", from the Polish national anthem.

We boarded a boat in Danzig, that took us to London. The journey from Danzig to London was on a small ship and the journey was uncomfortable as the North Sea was rough. Many people got seasick. From London we travelled by train to Liverpool⁶³. While on the dock in Liverpool, we were approached by a Jewish convert to Christianity, who tried to foist pamphlets on us. I tore up the pamphlets and made quite a mess in the street. A constable came by and separated us. In Liverpool, we boarded the Cunard steamship, Andania, sailed across the Atlantic and arrived in Quebec City⁶⁴ eight days later, on 21 October 1922.

There were a lot of Jews on the Andania travelling from Liverpool to Quebec. Some like us were in steerage but others were had more luxurious cabins. We would go to upper decks to eat. Kosher food was served on board and the Jews ate separately from other passengers. We ate a lot of rice and salt fish and herring on the Andania. I ate margarine for the first time on the Andania.

In Quebec, we boarded a Canadian National Railway train in Quebec City and arrived in Winnipeg⁶⁵ on October 31, 1922, where we were met by David Comisaroff.

62 Danzig (Ger)/Gdansk (Pol) (54.35, 18.62) is a port on the Baltic Sea.

63 Liverpool England (53.41, -2.99).

64 Quebec City, Quebec (46.82, -71.21).

65 Winnipeg, Manitoba (49.88, -97.14).

My father, Mayer, was in Leader, Saskatchewan⁶⁶, that was on the Canadian Pacific Railway line, so in Winnipeg we took a streetcar from the CNR station to the CPR station. Some people boarded the streetcar dressed in strange costumes and started to paint the people in the streetcar. We thought they were crazy. This was our first experience with Canadian Halloween.

On the way from Winnipeg to Leader, the train stopped in Swift Current, Saskatchewan⁶⁷ and a man who lived in Swift Current got on the train and introduced himself as Louis Comisaroff, the brother of our cousin David, of Winnipeg. Louis gave us some bananas to eat. I had never seen bananas before. The fruit was delicious, but the skin was horrible.

From 1918 to 1920 Mayer owned a kibbitzarnia, a sort of minimart, in Leduc Alberta⁶⁸, that was successful enough to support one person but not a family. This kibitzarnia was purchased from Volodya Wilner, a son-in-law of Mayer's cousin Avrom Stein.

At the urging of his sister, Hanna Amiton, whose family was living in Prelate, Saskatchewan⁶⁹ and wanted Mayer's family to be nearby, Mayer had purchased a store in Mendham Saskatchewan⁷⁰, fifteen miles from Prelate, that was on a CPR branch line from Leader Saskatchewan to Medicine Hat Alberta⁷¹. Unfortunately, there was a drought in 1921 and 1922 and fewer settlers than expected arrived. Mayer didn't have enough money to hang on in Mendham and had to close his store shortly after his family arrived in November 1922. So we moved to Leader and lived with brothers Louis and Saul Stein⁷², sons of Avrom Stein.

After arriving in Leader, I enrolled in the local school for a few weeks. Not knowing any English, I was placed in grade one or two. I was sixteen and the desks were made for six-year-olds. The other children made fun of me and called me "greenhorn". Shortly after I started school, my father's business closed and I had to go to work. My job was as a delivery boy for a local store, called Eskin and Naimark. The wages I received, \$40 per month, were the only income our family had.

66 Leader, Saskatchewan (50.89,-109.54).

67 Swift Current, Saskatchewan (50.22, -107.85).

68 Leduc, Alberta (53.27, -113.55).

69 Prelate, Saskatchewan (50.85, -109.41).

70 Mendham, Saskatchewan (50.77, -109.66).

71 Medicine Hat, Alberta (50.03, -110.71).

72 In 1912, shortly after immigrating to Canada, Mayer Comisarow wrote to his cousin, Avrom Stein, and urged Avrom to send his two sons, Saul and Louis, to Canada. They came in 1913.

We lived in Leader until the fall of 1923, when we moved to Leduc, Alberta, where Mayer re-opened his Leduc store. Newhouse Wholesale of Edmonton⁷³ provided the stock.

Ben Margolis of Edmonton had a store on 101 Street and felt sorry for Mayer so he offered a job to me. Ben operated on the “Polish” style of business where the customer was dragged into the store and a high price was quoted as the starting point for haggling. I couldn’t adapt to this style of business and I only lasted a couple of months. I then got a job with Leo Nozick in Mundare, Alberta.⁷⁴

Louis Stein, who had opened a store in Bladworth, Saskatchewan⁷⁵, wrote to my father that he need a boy in his store and so I stayed with Louis Stein for two years until 1925. In the Fall of 1925, at the age of 19, I opened up a store in Stony Plain, Alberta⁷⁶. Newhouse wholesale of Edmonton provided stock and also the first month's rent. The rest of the family (parents Mayer and Riva and siblings Lillian, Sam, and Paul) from Leduc joined me in the Spring of 1926. We lived upstairs above the store building that we rented. In 1928 we were able to purchase our own home. In 1934 I left Stony Plain and established a store in Viking, Alberta⁷⁷, where we lived until 1983 when we retired and moved to Vancouver.

After we moved to Canada, I had to obtain a birth certificate and my father had to swear that he was present when I was born. Ever since, I have used October 17 as my birthday, because my mother remembered that I was born several days after Succoth. We consulted an old Hebrew calendar and my birth date corresponded to October 17, 1906. Similarly, my brother Paul uses January 1, 1913 as his birthdate, because my mother recalled that he was born several days after Chanuka.

We maintained mail contact with my great uncle Hersche Wiseman, until his death, in Russia, in the late 1920s. He wrote in one of his letters that he regretted not helping us more during the famine, but at the time he did not know how long the famine would last.

In the 1920s or thirties, my paternal cousin, Leon Kay, came across my maternal cousin, David Wiseman, the lawyer, on one of Leon's trips to Palestine and we thus reestablished contact with David. Leon was an active Zionist and David was active in local politics. Palestine was poor at that time and I periodically sent food packages,

⁷³ Edmonton, Alberta (53.55, -113.49)

⁷⁴ Mundare, Alberta (53.60, -112.34)

⁷⁵ Bladworth, Saskatchewan (51.37, -106.14).

⁷⁶ Stony Plain, Alberta (53.53, -114.00)

⁷⁷ Viking, Alberta (53.10, -111.78).

mainly canned butter and cheese, to David up until his death in the 1950s. David had one son, who was killed in the Israeli War of Independence⁷⁸. David Wiseman never mentioned his brother, Dr. Avrom Wiseman, and I don't know what happened to Avrom. Leon Kay once purchased paper in Sweden for David Wiseman to publish a book on David's solution to the Arab-Israeli problem.

When in Russia, I knew we had some relatives named Luban⁷⁹. I knew that there was animosity between us and the Lubans, but I didn't know why. I also knew that we had some relatives, the Namakshtanskys, but I didn't know anything about them. Only after moving to North America did I learn that the Lubans were Hassidim and that this was the origin of the ill will. My father's cousin, David Comisaroff of Winnipeg, also knew that we had relatives named Namakshtansky and discovered that they were in Winnipeg, going by the name of Namak. Through the Namaks, he learned that the Lubans were in Seattle. In the early thirties, my sister, Lillian, was living in Vancouver, BC. One of the Lubans came from Seattle to Vancouver for a visit and I met her at Lillian's place.

My brother, Paul, joined the reserves of the Canadian Army in 1940. He was called up and shipped overseas as a member of the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps in 1942 and stationed in England until the invasion of the continent in 1944. He landed at Juno Beach on 9 June 1944 and along with the rest of the Canadian units in Europe, his unit participated in the liberation of France, Belgium and Holland. After the liberation of the town of Tilburg, Holland, Paul discovered that there were 35 Jews from Tilburg who had survived the war, hidden by friends in the countryside. The local synagogue had been used as a warehouse by the Germans and Paul arranged for a Rabbi Brody from the British army to come to Tilburg to rededicate the synagogue. The British army supplied a set of prayer books, that were signed by Paul and other members of his unit and taken home by the remnants of the Tilburg congregation. Paul also helped these people survive the famine in Holland in 1945. In 1986, a descendent of one of these Tilburg survivors organized a reunion in Toronto of the members of Paul's unit and the Dutch Jews from Tilburg. Paul and the other Canadians were located from their names and addresses in the prayer books they had signed in 1945. (Canadian Jewish News, December 5, 1985, p 11) Paul has maintained friendships with these people from Tilburg to this day. In 1946,

78 Nadav (ben David) Wiseman (17 Mar 1927–12 Jul 1948) is listed with a picture in Israeli veteran's records.

79 Esther Komisaruk (1868–1929), a paternal-paternal first cousin to Mayer Comisarow, married Khaim Moshe Luban (1864–1928).

Paul was discharged with the rank of Sergeant with five service medals. In the same year, he married Esther Simkin. They are retired and now live in Vancouver.

The Andania, the ship that took us from England to Canada, was sunk by a U-boat during the Second World War.

My mother, Riva, and father, Mayer, retired and moved to Edmonton in 1946, where my father was active in the Gmilas Chasodiam, the Hebrew Free Loan Society. He was Treasurer of the Edmonton Talmud Torah for many years.

Sophie Ratner and I were married in 1938. We have two sons; Mel, born in 1941, a Professor of Chemistry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and Rick, born in 1944, a surgeon in Toronto. In 1967, Mel married Ruth Wilson and they have a son, Jeffrey, born in 1971, who graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1993 and is now a medical student at the University of California, Los Angeles⁸⁰. In 1972, Rick married Sandra Burnard. They have three children, Michael born in 1975, who just graduated from Queens University, Sarah, born in 1976, who is attending the University of Western Ontario, and Sam, born in 1984.

My grandfather, Boruch Leib Lev, died in Edmonton on October 27, 1929.

My father, Mayer, died in Edmonton, October 9, 1958. My mother, Riva, died in Montreal, April 4, 1969.

My father Mayer emigrated to Canada in 1912 and was naturalized as a Canadian citizen in 1920. When I came to Canada in 1922, I assumed, that as a dependent of my father, I automatically became a Canadian citizen. When I registered for the Canadian military draft in 1939, I was informed that I was not a Canadian citizen, so I applied for Canadian citizenship and as a 17-year resident I good standing, I received Canadian citizenship in due course.⁸¹

For many years up to the 1980s, transborder movement between Canada and the US was trivially easy for Canadian and American citizens, with only a verbal declaration of citizenship being required for entry into the non-citizenship country. Over the years my wife Sophie and I made many trips to the US, and never had any problem with entry into the US or re-entry into Canada.

In the 1970s Sophie and I planned a trip to Israel and since passports were required for travel to Israel, each of us applied for a Canadian passport. Sophie was then informed that although she was born in Winnipeg and never lived outside of Canada,

⁸⁰ In 2001, Jeff Comisarow received joint MD/MBA degrees from UCLA, and since then has worked on Wall Street in New York City.

⁸¹ The 13 May 1940 Canadian Naturalization Certificate No. 183422 of Bill's brother Sam Comisarow lists Sam as a citizen of USSR and his parents as subjects of Great Britain.

under the citizenship laws at the time, she lost her Canadian citizenship in 1938 when she married me, a Russian citizen. As a non-Canadian, if she ever left Canada her entry into Canada was problematic. The only way she could get her own Canadian passport would be to leave Canada, apply to become an immigrant and after immigrating to and residing in Canada for three years, she could apply for and subsequently, in due course, become a naturalized Canadian citizen. However, she could leave and quickly re-enter Canada as a “wife of” entry in my passport. So, as the wife of a Canadian citizen we made our trip and returned to Canada.

In the 1980s, there was a newspaper item that mentioned that there were a few thousand elderly Canadian women, who, although born in Canada, each lost their citizenship by marrying a foreigner. The husbands had since died and so the women couldn't be “wife-of” entries on their husbands' passports. These women could not travel outside the country for fear of having their re-entry denied.

My sister Lillian married Saul Wainberg. They had two sons, Allen, a Professor of Dentistry at McGill University in Montreal and David Carmel, who is in Kibbutz Yodfat in Israel. Lillian died on February 15, 1983. Allen married Marilyn Shmukler in 1962. They have three children, Michael, born in 1965, who graduated in Medicine in 1990, Jamie, born in 1969, who is attending the University of Montreal and Deborah, who is attending school in Montreal. In 1990, Marilyn was elected as the first women president of the B'nai B'rith of Canada. Alan and Marilyn divorced in 1991 and in 1992 Alan married Harriet Steinwold. David married Avah Naslun in 1967. They have three children, Raam, born in 1972, who is in the Israeli Army, Yotam, born in 1974, and Yamina, born in 1981, both of whom are attending school in Israel.

My brother, Sam, married Esther Naiman of New York City. They have both passed away; Sam on January 5, 1966 and Esther on April 8, 1988.

William Comisarow
Vancouver BC
December 10, 1997

POSTSCRIPT –

In May 1995, Bill suffered the first of a series of strokes that eventually killed him. After his second stroke in April 1996 he went to a hospital and then was transferred to a rehabilitation center. As part of the discharge procedure from the rehab center, the staff administered a test to assess Bill's mental abilities. This is the test: "Here's a list of items. Pick out those that are vegetables." Bill took the test and this is followup conversation:

"Well Mr. Comisarow. You did very well. You made no false identifications and you got all the vegetables but one. You missed corn. You didn't identify corn as a vegetable."

"Corn isn't a vegetable. Corn is a grain. Only minicorn is a vegetable."

That's what happens when you spend your first sixteen years in a Jewish Ukrainian agricultural colony and the next sixty years in rural Alberta.

ADENDA

Bruser family of Grafskoy -- Kalman Bruser of Grafskoy, who authored the obituary of Rabbi Pinchas Komisaruk that was published in Hameletz, no. 59, March 24 1897, (Our Father's Harvest, p 34, supplement to Our Father's Harvest, p 184), emigrated with his family and his father Chaim to Western Canada in 1907 and settled in Humbolt, Saskatchewan, where Kalman owned a store. He became quite prosperous. Kalman's uncle, Berel Bruser, Chaim's brother, remained in Grafskoy. Berel Bruser's son, Louis also emigrated to Canada with his uncles Kalman and Mike. Kalman had a sister who married Mendel Golosoff, whose sister, Sonja Golosoff Komisaruk was the wife of Berel Komisaruk. Mendel Golosoff emigrated to Western Canada early in the twentieth century. Daughters of Mendel married into the Newhouse and Goldberg families of Edmonton and the Finkelman family of Winnipeg. Kalman had another sister who married Paul Wolochow of Edmonton. I met Chaim Bruser in the 1940s when he was residing in the Jewish Seniors home in Winnipeg.

Stein family of Hichur -- The Stein family lived in a Russian town, Hichur/Gaichul/Novoukrainka, where they owned a store. The senior Stein, named Abraham/Avrom, whose mother, Sarah Winikovsky Stein, was a sister of my paternal grandmother, Feigel Winnikovsky Komisaruk, had four sons; the Bolshevik (Moshe), Shmilik whom I didn't know about until 1996, Louis, and Saul and daughters, one of who married Volodya Wilner. In 1917 my father, Mayer, moved from Winnipeg to Leduc, Alberta where he purchased a small store, a kibitzarnia, from Volodya Wilner. Following an urging by my father to Avrom Stein, Louis and Saul Stein emigrated to Western

Canada in 1913, where Louis had a store in Bladworth, Saskatchewan and Saul had a store in Leader, Saskatchewan.

Tokmak Komesaroffs -- Around 1950, a man named Moe Brody (Zabrodsky) of Edmonton, who was originally from Tokmak⁸² asked me and my brother Paul Comisarow if we were related to the Komesaroff family of Tokmak. Neither of us knew of such a family, so we asked our father Mayer, who replied that the Komesaroff family in Tokmak were relatives. Mayer lived in Grafskoy from 1878 to 1912 and would have had first hand knowledge of the Tokmak relatives. Mayer's 1950 statement is the most direct evidence that the Komesaroff family of Tokmak was related to the Komisaruk family of Grafskoy. My recollection today is that Mayer was reluctant to talk about the Tokmak relatives, which is consistent with other inferences that there was some dispute between the Grafskoy and Tokmak branches of the family. According to Brody, the Tokmak Komesaroffs were in business there and were quite prosperous.

In 1997 I learned that some members of the Tokmak family had recently migrated to Israel and thus after 80 years we re-established contact with that branch. They gave us a family tree of the Tokmak family. Later, using Russian census records, that became available after the collapse of the Soviet regime, we learned that the senior Komisaroff of Tokmak, Abraham K., was a son of one Yaakov K. of Rassien, Lithuania and so a first cousin of my father Mayer.⁸³

⁸² Tokmak (47.24, 35.71), is a larger town about 90 km from Grafskoy.

⁸³ In 2011, Mel Comisarow located Lucy Komisar of NYC, a great granddaughter of Avraham Dov Ber Komisaruk, the Tokmak Komisaruk patriarch. Avraham's son, Lucy's grandfather, Viktor, was the only one of the Tokmak family to come to the New World.

PICTURES



Feigel Winnikovsky Komisaruk, front. (in possession of Toby Glickman)



Photo of Feigl Winnikovsky Komisaruk, back (in possession of Toby Glickman)

Translation of the original Russian writing by Joe Komissarouk --

"A remembrance for my brother I. Venkel (Y[udel] Weinkle) from loving sister Faigl Komisaruk, 13 August 1906."

Faigl's brother, Yudel Winikovsky (1840–1917), emigrated to the US in 1895, changed his name to Yudel/Jerome Weinkle and became the ancestor of a large number of Weinkles, mainly in the US South.

So, this photo was sent to Yudel Weinkle, and high quality photographs were made of each side of the photo and these photographic copies were sent to other members of the family. These people could be Toby's grandfather, (Yudel's nephew) Berel K. (1861-1935) in NYC and (Berel's sister) Esther K. Pogorelsky (1873-1950) also of NYC.

Since Berel and his sister Esther didn't immigrate until 1922, i. e., after Yudel's 1917 death, the duplication and distribution of the Faigl W. K. photo must have been conducted by Yudel's offspring.



Riva Lev Comisarow, taken in Mariupol, ca 1912. This photograph was in the possession of her husband, Mayer Comisarow. The photograph probably was taken from Russia to Canada by Mayer when he left Russia in 1912, as no Russia-Canada mail service existed between 1915 and 1922 and no photographs were taken out of Russia by Riva and her family when they left Russia in 1922.

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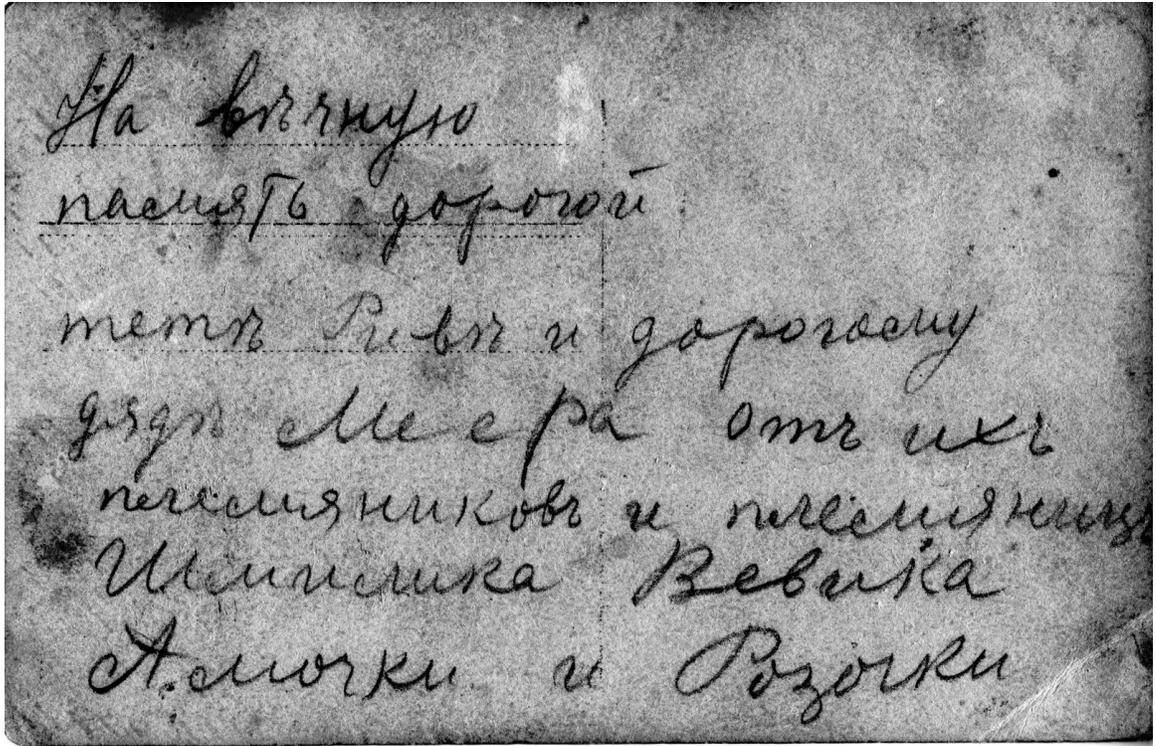


Mayer Comisarow, taken in Mariupol ca. 1912



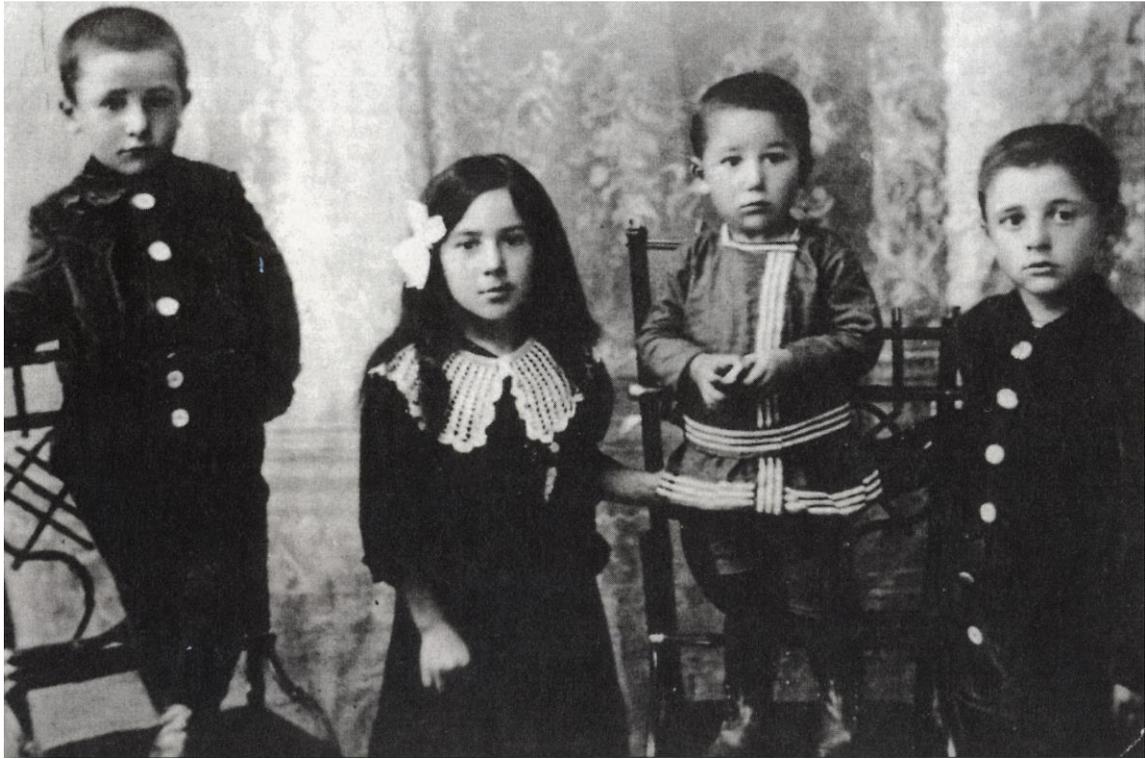
Front of photo - Children and niece of Berel Komisaruk, Grafskoy, prior to 1912.

Back row, left to right - Shmilik Komisaruk, niece Roza/Rose Amiton, daughter of Khana Komisaruk Amiton, Velvel Komisaruk. Front Row – Nachamke/Ami Komisaruk. The Amitons left Grafskoy prior to 1912 so this photograph can be dated as prior to this departure.



Back of photo - Children and niece of Berel Komisaruk, Grafskoy, prior to 1912.

The Russian writing on the back is "As a keepsake to our dear Aunt Reva and to our dear Uncle Mayer from their nephews Shmilik and Vevik and from nieces Alachaka and Rozachka". Vevik is the diminutive of Velvel. Alachaka is the diminutive of Alla. Rozachka is the diminutive of Roza. This photo was given to Mayer and Reva Comisarow of Grafskoy when they were still in Ukraine. The photo was brought to Canada by Mayer when he immigrated to Canada in 1912. Ami appears to be about two years old, so the picture can be dated to about 1908. All information from William Comisarow, circa 1985.



Children of Mayer and Reva (Lev) Comisarow, Novozlatopol, 1912
Left to right – Shmilik/Sam (1909–1966), Luba/Lillian (1905–1983),
Avrom (1911–1916), Velvel/William (1906–2002)



Shmuel Matas Kahgan, the oldest Kohen in Novozlatopol



Boruch Leib Lev (left) and Berel Komisaruk (right). Both seated.
Probably taken in Lvov, Poland 1922.



Family of Riva Comisarow, Yanov, Poland, March 1922

Back row left to right --- Lillian, Bill.

Middle row – Reva.

Front row, left to right --- Sam, Paul.

The facial appearances suggest that the effect of the 1922 famine in Novozlotopol is most evident in Paul and Reva. This observation was confirmed in 1985 by Bill Comisarow



Bill Comisarow and Boruch Lev, Yanov, Poland 1922



Yanov, Poland, Date - probably 3 August 1922
Back row -- Rose Winnkoff, Velvel Komisaruk
Middle Row -- Lillian Comisarow, Sonia Komisaruk, Shmilik Komisaruk,
Nechamka Komisaruk
Front Row --Meishel Winnikoff, Unknown



Yanov, Poland, Date – probably 3 August 1922

Clockwise from 11 o'clock – Nekhamka Komisaruk, Leon Komisaruk/Kay, Rose Winnikoff, Sonia Komisaruk, Lillian Comisarow The back of the photo has the writing 3VIII22, which is probably the date of the photo.



Family of Berel Komisaruk, taken in the Yanov yard of Esther Pogorelsky

Back Row – l to r: son Shmilik Komisaruk, fiancée Sonia of Shmilik,
son Leon Komisaruk, daughter Nekhamka, son Velvel,

Front Row – Sister Esther Pogorelsky, Berel, wife Sonia

Date – probably 3 August 1922.



Yanov Lake photo, Yanov, Poland, March 1922

All rows defined by heads and named left to right.

Front row -- Leon Kay/Komisaroff(uk), Sam Comisarow.

Second row -- Unknown, Paul Comisarow.

Third Row -- David Nemetz, Shmilik Komisaruk.

Fourth Row -- Sonja Komisaruk, Meishel Winnikoff, Nachamka Komisaruk.

Back Row -- Unknown, Bill Comisarow, Lillian Comisarow, Rose Winnikoff, Velvel Komisaruk.

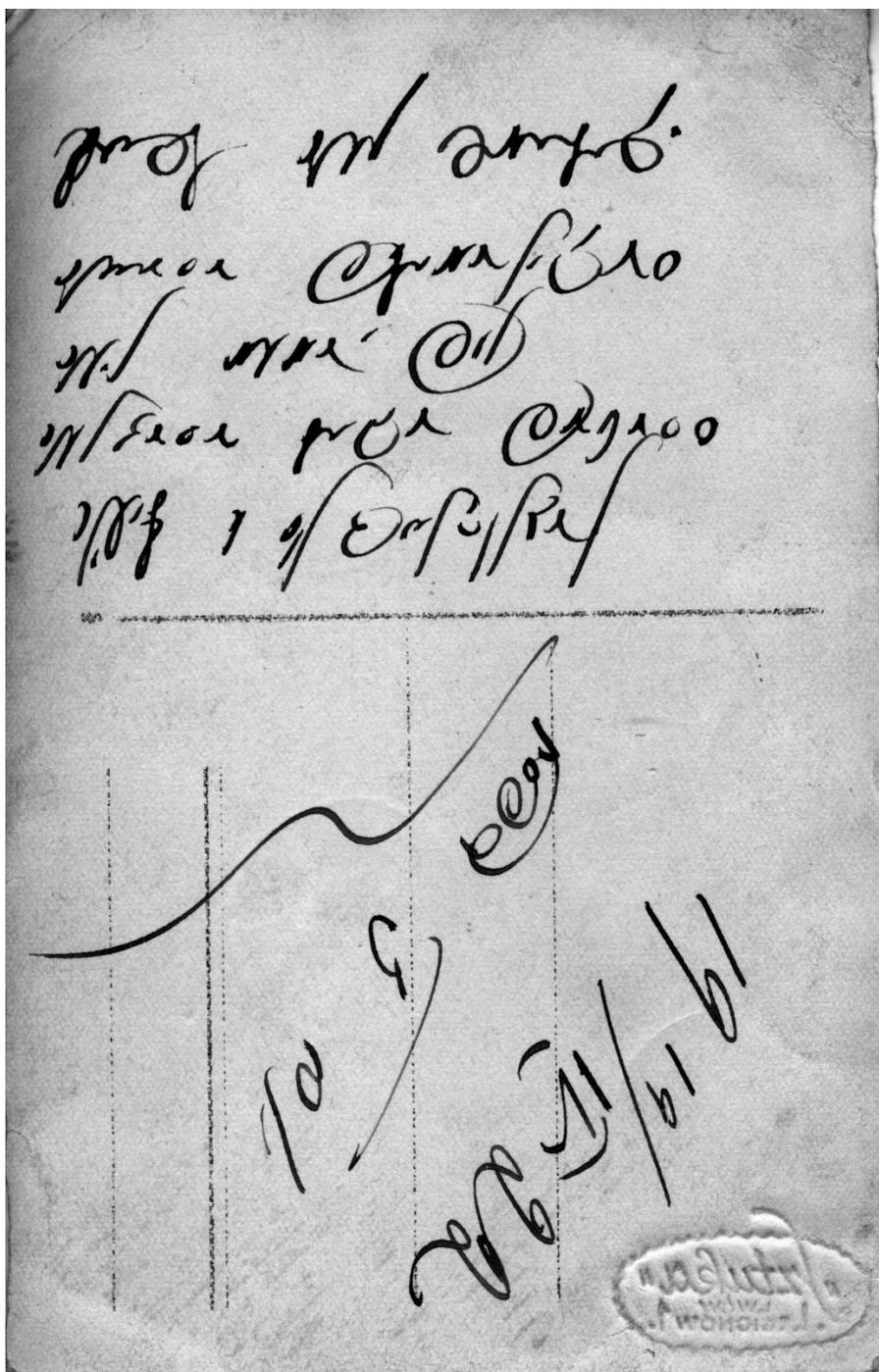
The lake in the background was owned by Graf Potofsky. People would surreptitiously go fishing in the lake at night to avoid paying the fishing fee that was charged during the day. The Novozlatopol Comisarow family is showing the signs of the 1921–22 Ukrainian famine that they barely survived.

The Grafskoy Komisaruk family looks healthier, perhaps because father Berel had money to purchase food. Hymie Sorokin (1907–1984) of Sladkovodnaya and Edmonton, in 1921 was a student at Mariupol Agricultural college. He told his niece, Sora Satanove (1938–2007) of Edmonton, that during the 1921 famine he brought food to his family in Sladkovodnaya. He also said that some of his food was given to the Komisaruk family of Grafskoy. This could be the reason that the Grafskoy Komisaruk family appears to suffer less from the famine than the Novozlatopol Komisaruk family.

Another Sorokin-Comisarow anecdote communicated by Sora Satanove is the following: In the late 1920s in Edmonton Hymie Sorokin was dating a girl from the Hardin family and wanted to get married. Hymie claimed to be a college boy, who had attended Mariupol Agricultural College. This was of concern to the Hardin family. What sort of Jewish boy goes to college to become a farmer? He's not Jewish! Now Hymie's mother, Chana Shlachter Sorokin (1877–1940) was originally from Gafskoy and in the 1880s attended khader (Hebrew school) with Mayer Comisarow. Bill Comisarow recalled that in the 1920s and 1930s in Edmonton, his father Mayer was very friendly with Chana Sorokin. So Mayer Comisarow was called upon to legitimize Hymie Sorokin's pedigree and his suitability as a groom. Mayer was successful and so this anecdote beautifully illustrates the crucial role the Comisarow family played in the establishment of the Hymie Sorokin dynasty of Edmonton.



Leon Kay (Leon Komisaroff) (left) and Shmilik Komisaruk, (right)
sons of Berel Komisaruk, Lvov, Poland, 19 April 1922.

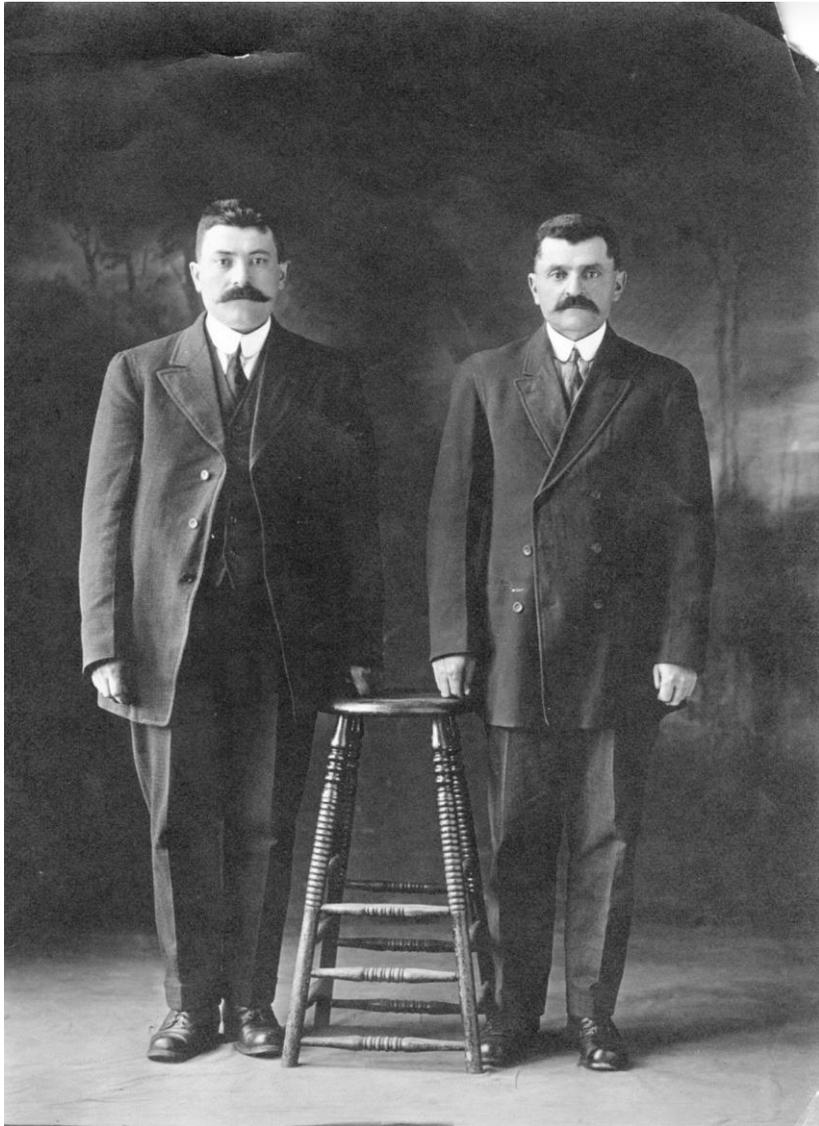


Back of photo. Leon/Leibl Kay/Komisaruk (left) and Shmilik Komisaruk, (right) sons of Berel Komisaruk, Yanov, Poland, 19 April 1922 .

The Yiddish on the back reads - A memento to our dear uncle and aunt, from their nephews, Leibl and Shmilik. (These people would be Mayer and Riva Comisarow.)



Left to right - Lillian Comisarow, Shmilik Komisaruk, Nachamke Komisaruk, Sonja Komisaruk (fiance of Shmilik), Lvov, Poland, 1922.



Valodya Wilner & Mayer Comisarow, Edmonton, Alberta, 1917. In 1917, Mayer moved from Winnipeg to Leduc, Alberta and purchased a kibitzarnia (a minimart) from Wilner. Wilner's father-in-law, Abraham Stein, was a maternal-maternal first cousin of Mayer Comisarow.

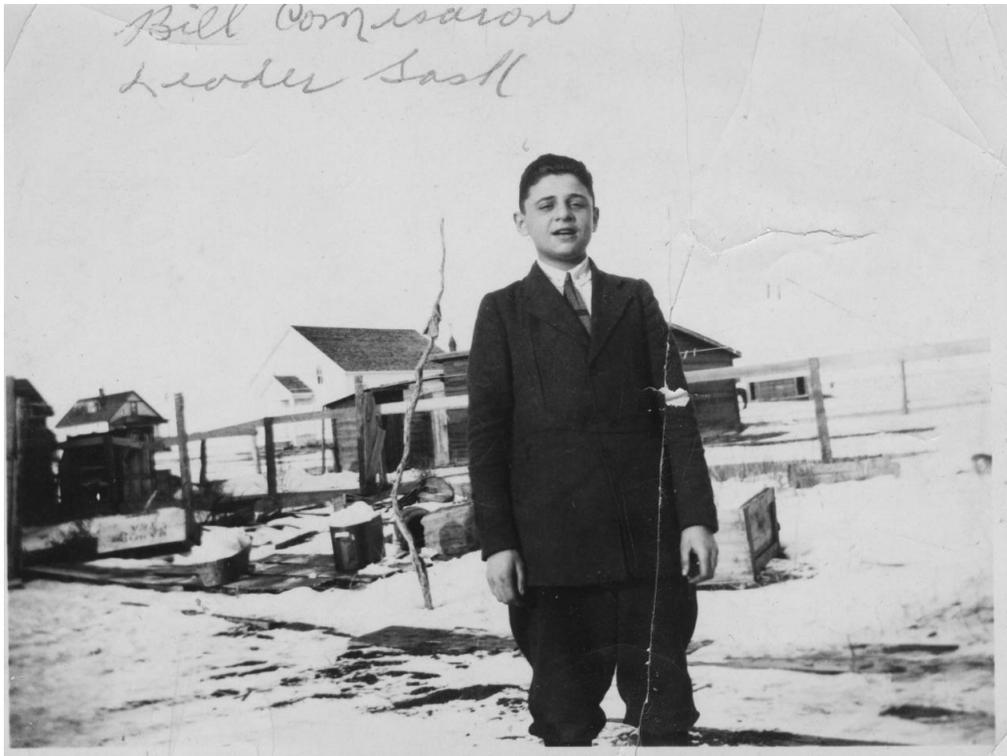


l to r. - Jehuda Ushkatz, Bill Comisarow, Lillian Comisarow, Rose Winnikoff, Abraham Amiton, in Prelate Saskatchewan. Jehuda and the others were visiting the Amitons in Prelate. Bill and Lillian were living in Leader, Saskatchewan with Saul Stein, who had a clothing store in Leader. The Winnikoffs had a grocery store in Leader, Prelate is about 10 km east of Leader. Jehuda was living in Hanna, Alberta, which is 220 km from Prelate. The Amitons left for Portland, Oregon a few months later. Jehuda was a son of Tsala Ushkatz, who was a brother-in-law of Henya Komisaruk Ushkatz/Usher, the sister of Mayer Comisarow. Jehuda had just emigrated to Hanna and died by drowning in Hanna on 1 July 1923. He is buried in the McLeod Trail Jewish Cemetery in Calgary as Jehuda Yscat.

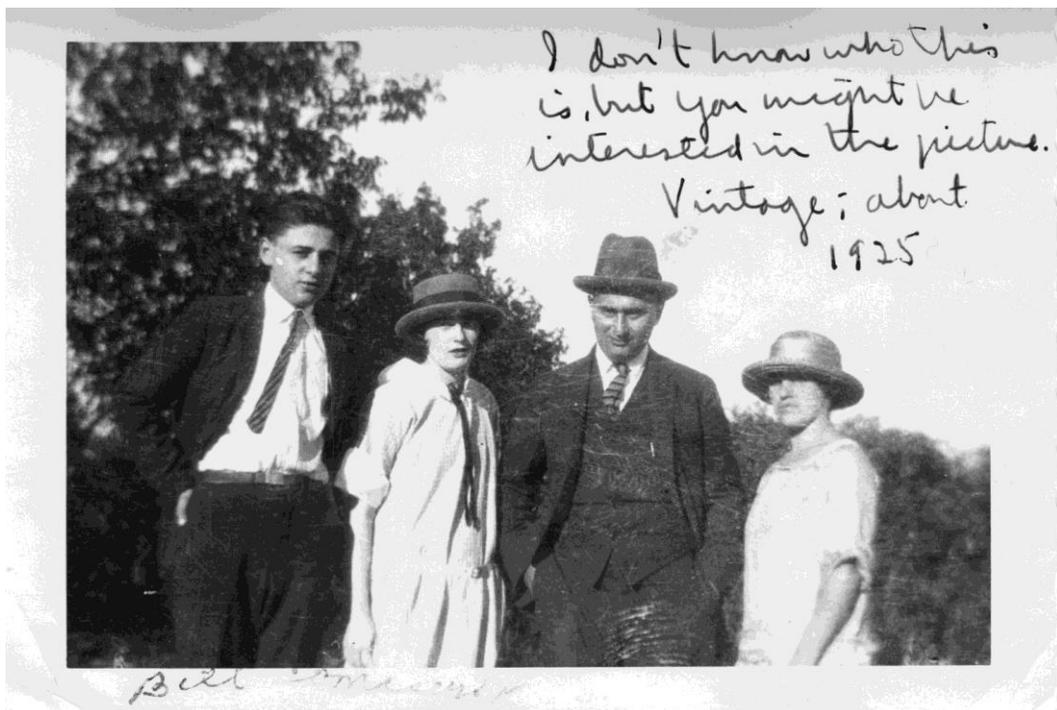
On the back of the photo is written Dec 26/22, which presumably is the date of the photo. All information from Paul Comisarow July 2, 2003.



Hersche Wiseman and wife, Sarah. Taken in Russia, 1920s. This photograph was sent to Canada after 1922. The child is unknown but probably was a grandchild.



The writing on the back is "Leader, Sask, Feb 12, 1923, Bill Comisarow"



Bill Comisarow, Bladworth Sask, circa 1925

Mayer & Riva Comisarow, 50th Wedding Anniversary, Edmonton, Alberta, July 1954

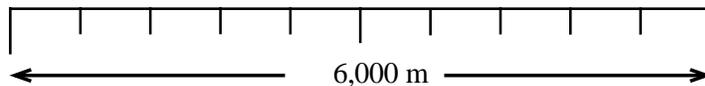


Front Row -- David Wainberg, Riva Lev Comisarow, Mayer Comisarow, Hanna Komisaruk Amiton, Rick Comisarow.

Back Row – Saul Wainberg, Allen Wainberg, Lillian Komisaruk Wainberg, Sam Comisarow, Esther Naiman Comisarow, Bill Comisarow, Sophie Ratner Comisarow, Mel Comisarow, Esther Simkin Comisarow, Paul Comisarow.



NARA photo RG 373 GX 131 15 (SK)-#2
Exp 415, Sept 8, 1943



Scale = 1:60,000 1 cm = 600 m

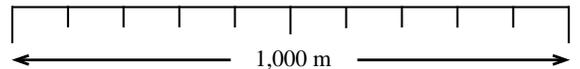
This photograph was taken by the Luftwaffe on 8 September 1943, just a week or so before the region was liberated by the Red Army. In 1945 the photo was seized by the American Army and placed in the US National Archives. Circa 2000 the photo was scanned to a digital file by a commercial service and the lettering to the digital file was added by Mel Comisarow using the graphics program Macromedia Freehand running on a Macintosh DP 1.8 GHz G5 computer. The “Judenkolonie” in the picture was indicated on the 1941 German map, file no. G6965s 300.G4, in the map library of the US Library of Congress. This village was mentioned in the memoirs of Paul Comisarow, who noted that “Achtsen”, colony 18, was the nearest Jewish colony to Novozlatopol. The 1941 German map and Paul’s mention are the only known references to this village.

Novozlatopol



NARA photo RG 373 GX 131 15 (SK)-#2
Exp 415, Sept 8, 1943

Scale = 1:10,000 1 cm = 100 m

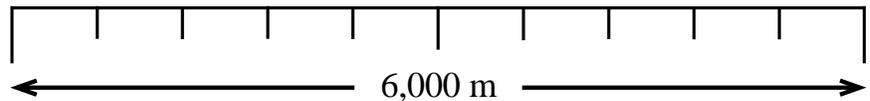


This lettered photo is a X6 blowup of a section of the preceding “415” photo.

597 Photo



NARA photo RG 373 GX 13115 (SK)-#2
Exp 597, Sept 8, 1943



Scale = 1:60,000 1 cm = 600 m

This photo was produced per the preceding "415" photo

Grafskoy



This photo is a X12 blowup of a section of the preceding 597 photo

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THE FAMILY NAME

Bill always claimed that the family name was KOMISAROV in Lithuania and further that this name was changed to KOMISARUK when the family migrated in 1846 from Rassein, Lithuania to Gfatskoy, Ukraine. This change supposedly occurred because many Ukrainian names end in "uk". However, 1816 Russian census records show that the original family name in Rassein, Lithuania was KOMISARUK. In some cases in Ukraine both names were used by the same individual. For example Avraham KOMISARUK of Tokmak is mentioned with this name in Hebrew language Russian newspapers and other times he is mentioned as Avraham KOMISAROV. In the New World, various spelling changes for both names have occurred. COMISAROW AND COMISAROFF in Canada, KOMISARUK, COMISAROFF, KOMISAR and COMIS in the US, KOMESAROFF and KOMISAROOK in Australia.

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