



ECHOS FROM
MIZOCZ:
A SHTETL LOST

Long-forgotten letters and the story
we never knew about our grandparents
and the family they lost

by Laurence Broun

COVER: Mizocz town square, circa 1939.

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Washington, DC

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First edition.

*To my grandparents,
Zelig (Jake) Cotel
and Sarah Spanover Cotel
and the memory
of their families ...*

*... and to all who suffered with them,
all who resisted,
and to all who fight
for a better future.*

PREFACE

My *zadie* (grandfather) Zelig Cotel emigrated to Chicago in 1908 and my *bubbe* (grandmother) Sarah Spanover Cotel followed in 1910. Their families remained behind. I knew little of my roots in Mizocz, except that unknown horrors beset our family during World War II and left my maternal grandparents broken. An overwhelming but unspoken admonition had been laid upon me, my sister and our cousins regarding my grandparent's life: it existed in a dark void that we could not enter. It was not our place to ask questions. Only pain would result from learning more.

From an early age, we realized our grandparents' families had been lost in the Holocaust. Except for a few overheard conversations, that is all we knew. We were shielded from the pain. My cousin Ronna Daniels recently related a fragment of a memory about a visit after the war to our grandparents by Borys Trachtenberg, a "landsman," or fellow villager. Trachtenberg, said Ronna, escaped to the edge of the forest and witnessed the villagers -- including our grandparent's siblings and their children -- being marched to a trench and shot. After the visit from Trachtenberg, said cousin Ronna, my *bubbe* Sarah did not rise from the chair she was sitting in for weeks and never spoke of her family again, with the exception of suggesting names for grandchildren.

As a young teenager, I once overheard my mother Dina and my aunt Ida discussing in hushed voice the fate of my grandmother's sister, who was machine-gunned with her baby in her arms as she chased after her husband who was being taken by the Nazis. I dared not inquire more or repeat that story.

For the most part, the lives of the Cotel and Spanover family in Mizocz remained a mystery to our generation. From time to time, there would be a fragment of information about life at the early part of the 20th century before they emigrated. As *bubbe* aged, my father reveled in drawing childhood memories from her, stories of winter, of salted fish in the cellar, of country life. Those early memories are precious, but did not include recollection of siblings or family. My father knew not to go there.

My sister, cousins and I never considered ourselves as families of Holocaust survivors. We did not know the names of those who had perished in our family. We knew nothing of our grandparents' childhood in the shtetl. We were all Chicagoans, our parents Chicagoans, and the weight of the Holocaust was borne alone by our grandparents. In an age before the

internet, my cousin Glenna Hecht (Ida's daughter) brought us lists from Yad Vashem of Cotels and Spanovers who perished in Mizocz and the surrounding region, but we were not aware of family relationships with these faceless victims who shared our family name. My late Uncle Charles Cotel also attempted to probe the family history, but with little avail.

In retrospect, the weight of the unknown was more daunting than we realized. Decades later, in my own retirement -- in the next century -- I feel compelled to learn what was hidden to me. With the help of computerized databases and communities of Holocaust researchers, it was time to learn more about the fate of Mizocz. A cache of letters scribbled in Yiddish to my grandparents from their siblings provided a very personal echo from the past.

History is bittersweet. My grandparents were blessed to have emigrated when they did, but did not achieve the economic success they dreamed of in the "*goldene medina*," the promised land of America. Zadie died at age 74, when I was five years old. My only memory of him is of a feeble man who spoke Yiddish, sitting in the corner of the apartment where they lived with my aunt Esther and her family. But what a brave man he must have been to leave the shtetl and emigrate when he did. Bubbe was more resilient. She lived another 26 years to age 95.

While *bubbe* and *zadie's* fortunes were limited, their children thrived and made good lives for themselves. For the siblings my grandparents left behind, life was a hardscrabble struggle. Several were able to aspire to meager success as merchants, but the measure of their success was limited and fading, as reflected by ongoing entreaties for help from their relatives.

My grandparent's lives were molded by the fate of their families in the Old World. This book will recreate the chronology of their family's life in Mizocz and the surrounding area based upon the recovered letters, fleshed out with narrative and images from historic sources.

The history of Mizocz is complicated. When my grandparents were born, it was part of the Russian Empire. After World War I, Mizocz became part of Poland. In the turmoil between, the region suffered the throes of the Russian Revolution, World War I, and terror from occupation of a Ukrainian army. Under Polish rule, as under the czar, discrimination persisted against Jews. The Depression began in 1929, further complicating life and impoverishing the shtetls. With World War II came 21 months of Soviet occupation followed by the final onslaught and annihilation by Nazi Germany.

The focal point of this book are the letters written in Yiddish to my grandparents from their relatives in Europe, letters which sat untranslated for 80 years. Both their content and format are revealing. Embedded in Yiddish-language letters were Russian, Polish and English addresses for reply, based on requirements of postal authorities at the time. Town names and spellings varied as the political fates shifted: Mizocz or Mizoch, and the nearest large city where

(Continued on page 8)



Sarah Spanover Cotel

*Born: February 15, 1886 - Mizocz
Died: November 11, 1981 - Chicago*



Asher Zelig (Jake) Cotel

*Born: November 10, 1881 - Mizocz
Died: November 7, 1955 - Chicago*

many of my grandparents nieces and nephews moved, Rovno or Rivne or Rowne, all the same place. Lost letters and missing addresses might result in severed communications for years with families across continents.

The letters from Europe ceased in 1939, months before Germany invaded Poland, but life was grim for the family long before the war. In the latter part of the decade, nationalistic and anti-semitic forces gained control of the Polish nation, driving the shtetls into abject poverty.

From histories of the Holocaust, when the end came for Mizocz on October 13, 1942, it was more desperate and horrible and painful than we dare imagine. The scenario of their death was quite unlike but just as diabolical as the end suffered by Jews in concentration camps. In Mizocz and other communities in Eastern Europe, Jews perished in a “holocaust by bullets.” I could never fathom either the inhumanity of my relatives’ persecutors or the apparent acquiescence of victims to march to their deaths without resistance -- and I still can not -- but this journey has given me a small window into their lives. The horror that occurred in Mizocz was captured photographically in some of the most iconic images of the Holocaust.

There is no present day Jewish community in Mizoch. All that remains is a memorial at the site of the massacre. Mizocz and Rovno fall within the borders of present day Ukraine.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks are due in re-creating this family history. First and foremost, I thank my new friend Jeri Spanover Crystal for her unceasing help with this project. She enlisted volunteers to translate my long-lost family letters and taught me how to use genealogy tools in *Ancestry.com* and the *JewishGen* websites. She magically found links in the genealogy when I found only dead ends. Jeri has researched the roots of her Spanover relatives from nearby places in Poland and I hope that someday we will find a link to connect each of our branches of the Spanover family tree. Most of all, I thank her for her support and sharing the emotional roller coaster of Holocaust genealogy with me.

Working with Jeri, translators Geraldine Tsiporah and Leah Cohn did much of the heavy lifting in decyphering the scribblings of the cursive Yiddish letters. They probed the nuances of the language to provide meaningful translation, and like Jeri, lived through the emotions of discovering long buried family secrets.

It is immensely sad that many of the discoveries about our family – including names of my grandparents' nephews and nieces – were only possible with the Holocaust records collected by *YadVashem* from testimony of fellow villagers regarding the massacre of their relatives, neighbors and friends.

The *JewishGen* website provided invaluable resources in tracking names of our ancestors and information on the places where they lived. The *Rovno Yizkor Book* published on the JewishGen website has been translated into English and was a key source of information about the Jewish community in these times. As a family, we are taking on a project with *JewishGen* to translate the *Mizocz Yizkor Book*, published in Jerusalem in 1950 and containing recollections by emigres and survivors of that shtetl. I thank the New York Public Library and the Yiddish Book Center for their dedicated efforts to archive and digitize the Yizkor Books from communities across Europe that perished in the Holocaust.

Thanks to my cousins Ronna Daniels and Glenna Hecht for sharing their memories of this history with me. Special thanks also to my wonderful sister Marcia Broun, who shared her recollections and reviewed numerous drafts of this work. Thanks to my late Uncle Charles Cotel for saving the invaluable family letters and passing them to cousin Ronna, who safeguarded them before passing them to me.

I thank Sidney Stillerman Royer for information on her great-grandfather Benjamin and his uncle Isador Stillerman, who married the sister of my great-aunt Chasia's husband. That

connection may be hard to follow, but the Stillermans and my grandparents corresponded for years, sharing information and providing support to their relatives in Europe, as mentioned several times in this book.

There are other volunteers who pitched in via the *JewishGen* website to assist with translation of specific documents, including Joel Hirsh who identified and translated the *tenoim* (marriage contract) and unlocked the long lost names of my great-great-grandfathers. Yitschok Tzvi Margareten translated from Hebrew the story of Yeshayahu Kotel from the *Mizocz Yizkor Book*, and from the name of its author, signalling there had been a survivor from that branch of the family. Jonathan Michael Wien translated the Russian-language documents, my bubbe's Russian passport and a letter certifying her identity, informing me she was "had fair hair" in her youth. Sharon Helen Pozner pitched in to translate the draft of a letter my bubbe was composing to her sister in Mizocz, the closest we ever came to seeing outbound correspondence from my grandparents to their siblings.

As I began to write about my grandparents and the families lost in the Shoah, it was clear that the translated letters would not be enough to tell this story, so each chapter begins with background material for historic content. Being a family project and not an academic treatise, I apologize in advance for the lack of footnotes and citations. Primary sources for background materials include the *Rovno Yizkor Book* and *Mizocz Yizkor Book*, as well as other materials found on the *JewishGen* website.

I relied, as well, on reference materials from numerous websites that focus on the study and memory of the Holocaust, including the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, Yahad-in-unum.org, a blog by Christian Herrman titled Vanished World, and the website of the Mizotsky City Library featuring an exhibition by Rivne State Humanities University professor Roman Mykhalchuk, with materials from the Office of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation.

I offer thanks to everyone in the Wikipedia universe who work together to freely share information across the world, especially those who contributed to materials regarding the Mizocz and Rovne ghettos.

And finally, to Judith Horak, a swell writer and editor, and friend for half a century, who reviewed this manuscript and corrected the many errors I could not spot. Thank you, Judith, for both your friendship and your keen eye.



ויאמר לדבק טוב
מצא אישה מצא טוב



יעלה ויצמח כגן רטוב
ויפק רצון מהאד הטוב

דגמיו מלאים לחיות הוא יתן שם טוב ואורח אורח דברו הנכונם והקרה שגברו ופוטנו בין בני היו הכריזים
עליו אלה הים הים לא יזכר שם יצאק ב'ר' שלם להקנה עבדו בגן המזורה הטלה יום שרבו חיל
עבדו הים הים הרצני יולד ויחיה יחיה ב'ר' ארבעה עשר יום בחיור הרמש כמו אלף דאל
האלה פ' יאורה הן

ה'ה הים המון כמו יולד דאל
הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה

ליוס המרחת צון בקורס קן שולטו בכנסיהון שנה בשנה ויבדו באהבה ובחבה באורח כל ארץ
הים הרצני לא יזכר שם יצאק ב'ר' ארבעה עשר יום בחיור הרמש כמו אלף דאל
הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה

הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה
הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה

הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה
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הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה
הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה

והכל שריר וקיים

הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה
הנל במחפץ ומוסין כבה עבד ושאלו ואלו יברחו ואלו יקראו לא זה מה ואלו י זה

נאום
נאום החתן
נאום הכרה

GRANDPARENTS' MARRIAGE

Bubbe Sarah Spanover was born on February 15, 1886. *Zadie* Zelig Cotel was born on November 10, 1881. Both came from the shtetl of Mizocz, where the population was recorded in 1897 as 2,662, of which 44% was Jewish. Jews owned factories for felt, oil and sugar production as well as flour mills and sawmills. The shtetl was located in the province of Wolhynia, in the Pale of Settlements, an area within the tsarist Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to live, but beyond which Jewish residency was forbidden, except for the university-educated, wealthy artisans and merchants, and those in the military.

The Mizocz Memorial Book describes it as a traditional town, tolerant and far from religious fanaticism, but it is doubtful there was a single house that did not follow Jewish law nor respect tradition. While young people might visit Christian restaurants and were not prevented from doing so, no one would desecrate the Sabbath. Although it was said some bachelors might skip Sabbath services, everyone attended during holidays. There were three houses of prayer in Mizocz.

The earliest family document we found was a tenoim, or contract between the parents of a groom and bride. From it we learn our zadie's full name Asher Zelig, son of Oavrohom Yechiel, son of Tzvi. Sarah is the daughter of Avrohom Yizchok, son of Shulem. Because of patriarchal naming conventions, the names and lineage of their mothers is not recorded. The contract was signed on 24th day of Teves and Mezritch (October 30, 1905) and the date of the wedding was scheduled for the 2nd day of Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan 5666 (January 1, 1906.)

From the letters and documents contained in this book, we surmise that neither *bubbe's* family, the Spanovers, nor *zadie's* family, the Kotels, were wealthy. They practiced orthodox Judaism and kept kosher all their lives. *Zadie's* uncle, we learned from other documents, was an adherent of the Trisk Rebbe, a branch of the Hasidic dynasty of the Grand Rabbi Twersky of Chernobyl.

Bubbe Sarah would have been 19 years old when she married and *zadie Zelig*, age 24. We know *Zelig's* uncle danced at religious gatherings and can only assume there was dancing and merriment at the wedding -- but any such history is lost.



*Russian currency, in 5-, 10- and 25-ruble denominations, all printed in 1909. The 25-ruble note contains an image of Tsar Alexander III. This money may have been taken by *bubbe Sarah* on her journey to America.*



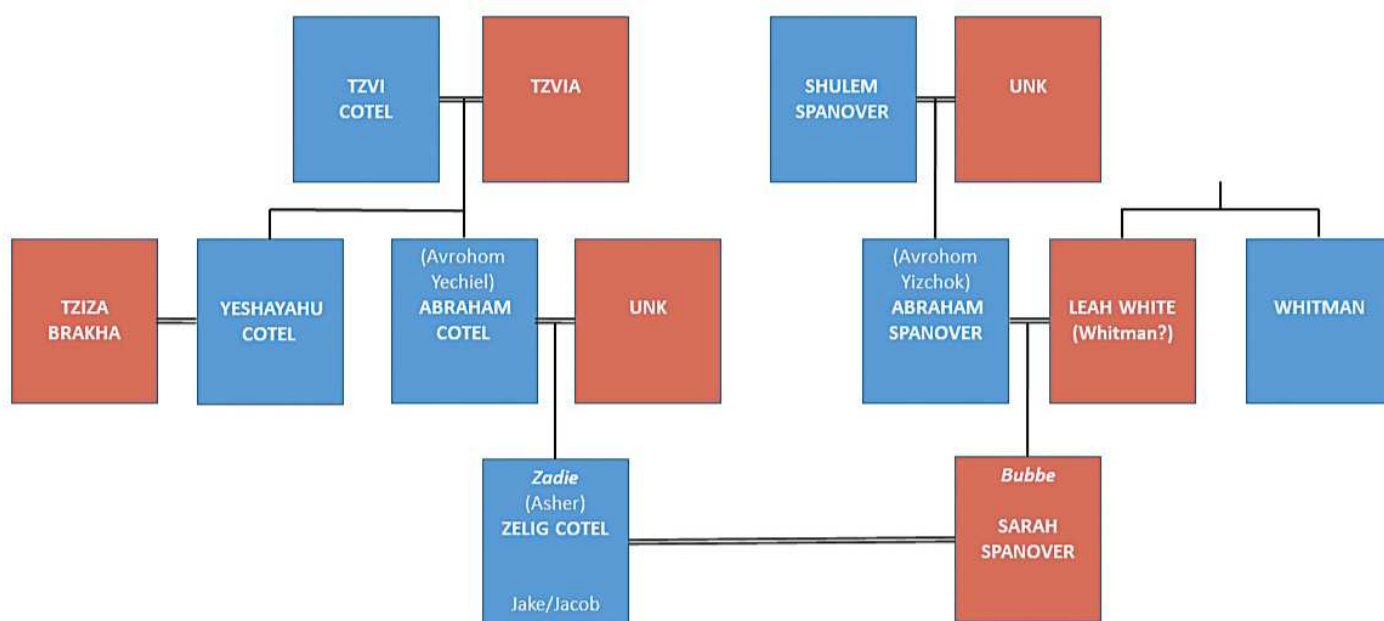
Leah White Spanover

Labeled "bubbe Spanover" by my uncles Charles, this is our great-grandmother and the mother of our bubbe Sarah Spanover Cotel.

Genealogy and Family Notes:

There is little we know about bubbe Sarah and zadie Zelig's forebearers in the time before my grandparents emigrated from Mizocz. The names of their fathers and grandfathers come from the tenoim displayed on the previous page.

Zelig's uncle Yeshayahu was born in 1860 and perished in the Shoah. From Yad Vashem records, we learned the first name of his mother Tzvia and his wife Tziza Brakha, but not their family names. (More information on the family of Yeshayahu will be provided later.) Less is known about the other patriarchs and matriarchs who passed away before the Holocaust.



The name of bubbe Sarah's mother comes from Sarah's death certificate and so must have been known to Sarah's daughters.

Along with cache of letters saved by our family were several photographs, one of which is displayed on the facing page.

Throughout my research, names of relatives were difficult to understand. References might be to the Hebrew names they were born and buried with, Yiddish names they used in the Jewish community, or civil names used in business or communications with Russian, Ukrainian or Polish neighbors. For instance, Tzvi, Gersh and Hershah are the same person. My maternal grandfather's name was spelled Kotel in Europe, and my grandmother's name Szpanover or Shpanover. Jewish families do not name children for the living, but frequently honor those who have died, so names often repeat through generations, sometimes leaving bread crumbs helpful in tracing ancestry.



Whitman - Ma's aunt, uncle and daughter

The only connection we have to the family of bubbe Sarah's mother is a picture which may be our great-grandmother's brother and his family. The photograph was labelled by my late uncle Charles. We could find no further reference to these people in genealogy or Holocaust records. The tree on the facing page assumes the last names of White and Whitman were forms of the same name and the blood relation was with the pictured man, but the phrasing of uncle Charles's caption and the resemblance of the woman to Leah White Spanover alternately suggest the woman could be Leah's sister.



Few images exist of Mizocz before World War II. This landscape was published in the Memorial Book of Mizocz, published in Jerusalem, 1950.

SHTETL LIFE AND EMIGRATION

The first decade of the 20th century was tubulant for Russia and its Jews. The defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) prompted civil unrest and strikes. With these events came more than 600 pogroms. Notable were the pogroms in Kishnev (1905), Kiev (1905) and Białystok (1906). By 1906-1907, much of Russia was under marshall law. There is no evidence of political engagement in our family, but Jewish groups began to arise supporting self-defense, socialist and Zionist goals.

Zadie Zelig had a brother Chaim (Hyman) who emigrated to the United States and settled in Chicago. In 1908, Zelig emigrated to join this brother, arriving in Montreal, Canada, on November 28 and onward to the United States by rail through Port Huron, Michigan, on December 3. His occupation was listed as “clothes presser.” He settled in Chicago. His immigration papers indicated his wife remained in Debna, Volhynia, but probably meant Dubno, a city six hours walk from Mizocz, which was about 40% Jewish.

By 1910, interactions between Jews and non-Jews in Volhynia were mostly neutral, but animosities were rising with the Polish population, which began devising ways to boycott Jewish merchants. Mizocz has a population of 2,662 at the turn of the century, including 1,175 Jews, most of whom identified with Turzysk (Trisk) Hasidism.

Bubbe Sarah departed Amsterdam on the ship *Nieuw Amsterdam* in 1910 to join her husband. She arrived in New York on December 5. Her immigration papers noted she was blonde with grey eyes.



Bubbe Sarah's passport, issued in 1910, listed her name and the names of her father and husband. It noted she was 23 years old, taller than average with fair hair, and illiterate.

Zadie Zelig and bubbe Sarah first lived at 1910 Lytle Street in Chicago. By 1920, they had moved to a rear apartment at 1408 Elburn Avenue by 1920, then to 1329 Millard Avenue and later to 1553 Millard Avenue. My mother, Dina, was born on October 2, 1911; her sister Esther on June 19, 1913; Ida Geraldine on June 20, 1916; and brother Charles on February 18, 1918. Another brother David was born on May 1, 1925.

The only other member of the Cotel or Spanover family known to emigrate was Zelig's brother, Chaim (Hyman), who took the spelling of Cotell for his name. Chaim and his wife Anna (Enia) listed Rovno (the nearest city to Mizocz) as their place of birth. Their sons Benjamin, Harry and Nathan were all born in Rovno and emigrated to America with Anna in 1921 to join Chaim.

Meanwhile in Europe, World War I erupted in 1914. Thousands of refugees were reported to have sought shelter in Rovno. As Austrians approached Volhynia, much of the population fled to distance themselves from the front. Those who stayed suffered food shortages and attacks from the Russian armies passing through the town.

Jewish author Shloyme Zanzl Rapoport (*author of The Dybbuk*) travelled through Rovno as a relief worker on New Years Day, 1915. His diary, later published under the pseudonym S. An-sky, said "The new year was born in profound melancholy. Neither desires nor hopes, as though you were standing before a corpse. I spent the day in a miserable state. At night I went to "Yiddish Theater" and saw *Khontse in America*." ... The audience was in ecstasy.

In February 1917, news of the Russian Revolution was welcomed by many in the Jewish community; on March 21, the new government cancelled Czarist restrictions on granting equal rights to Jews and other minorities. Many Jews in Mizocz and Rovno became active in socialist and Zionist activities. However, Ukrainian nationalists under Symon Petliura broke with Russia and aligned with Poland, with outright hostilities erupting in 1919 -- the Soviet-Krainina War.

It was rumored Petliura's soldiers received permission to take what they wanted from Jews. A wave of pogroms washed over Jewish communities in Volhynia and Podillia in the summer of 1919. Either organized or permitted by Petliura's armies, these pogroms killed around 150,000 Jews. In Rovno, groups of soldiers from Petliura's army attacked Jewish households in several parts of the city. They robbed, beat and raped indiscriminately and without pity.

Our family was undoubtedly caught in the conflicts surrounding World War I. A letter from Mizocz admitted the family was dispossessed.



Refugees streaming through Rovno, 1920.

As the fortunes of war turned, the Soviets briefly occupied the area until the Polish army took over half of Volhynia, and Rovno became a Polish city.

In 1920, following the agreement reached after World War I, most of Volhynia passed from Russia to independent Poland. The Jews of the area became Polish citizens and their relationship with Polish Jewry was renewed and lasted 19 years. Social and economic conditions of Polish Jewry were in even worse shape than the Jews in Volhynia. The Polish government excluded Jews from receiving government bank loans, public sector employment, and obtaining business licenses. However, there were no violent abuses in Rovno. There, it was possible to make a living; though impoverished, Rovno was the hub of local commerce. New stores were opened with Jews coming and going, and communications established with Warsaw.

**UNDATED LETTER FRAGMENT
FROM BUBBE SARAH'S SISTER CHASIA.**

[Address for aunt in Dorchester, Massachusetts]

I ask you, dear sister, will you write to our aunt, she's very much interested to know how you are doing.

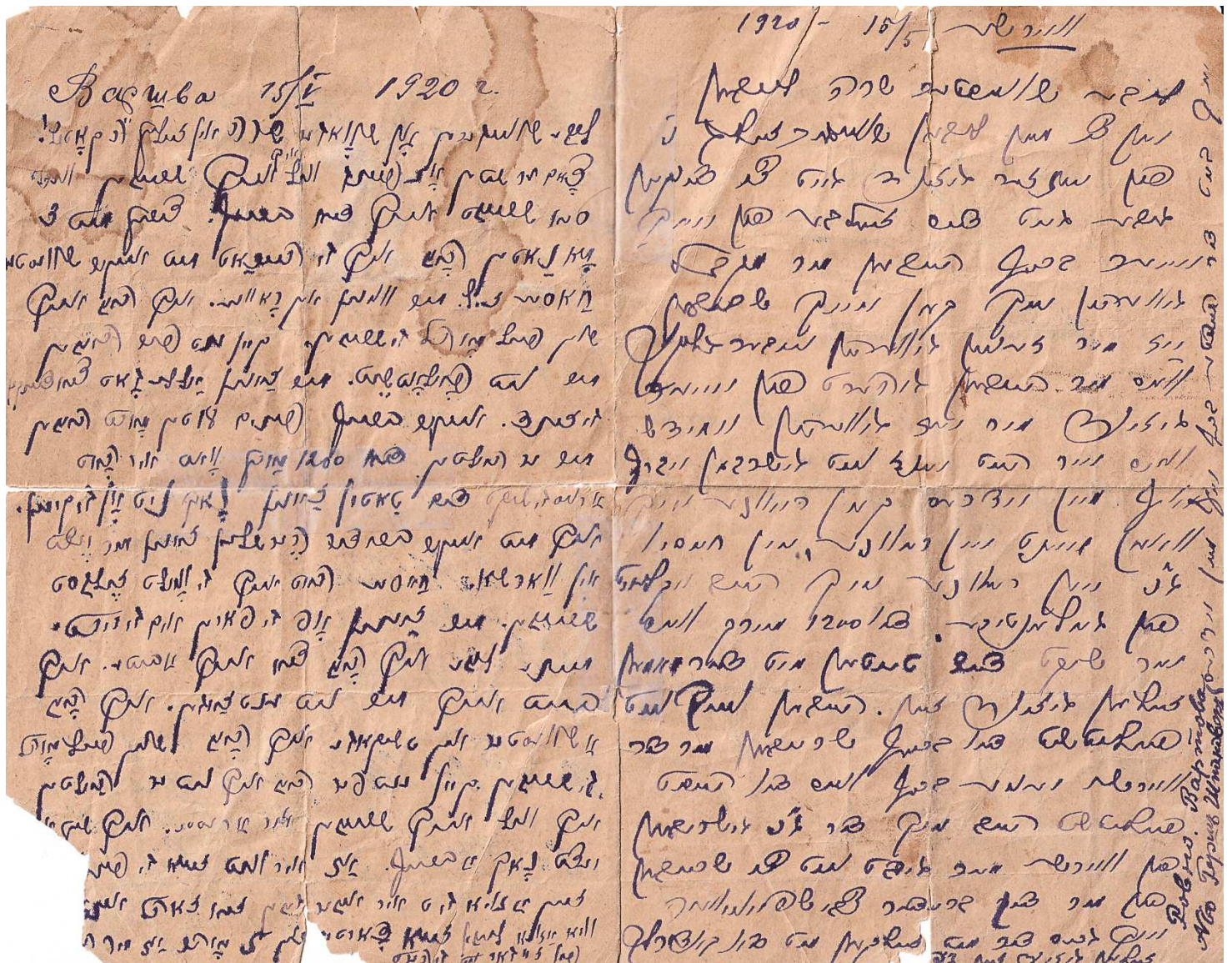
I don't understand dear sister why it's so hard for you to write. You don't understand you almost cost us our health for not writing for so long.

We can't explain to ourselves what is happening. You surely know that getting letters from you is our only pleasure. Dear sister, I send you Chaya Rachel's picture. She's going to write you, she's still in Rovno by the doctor, God only knows where else she's going to take our brother to.

Dear sister, I have sent a feather with a ribbon for Dinele. May she wear it in good health on her little head. She deserves better, but what can we do, we are dispossessed, and I can't buy her another feather.

Dear sister, how happy would I be were I to see you through a crevice. I ask you to write us often and about everything. I don't have many good news to write you about me. May God help us. I end my letter here. Be well and happy. From me, your devoted sister Chasse, I kiss you many times and kiss Dinele for me. I send greetings to my dear brother in law.

I would really like to know how the ribbon suits Dinele.



**FROM BUBBE SARAH'S BROTHER
TZVI (GERSH) SPANOVER**

Warsaw, 15 May 1920

Dear sister Sarah and brother-in-law Zelig, We are all well, thank God, and hope to hear the same from you. I can write you that we have rejoiced upon hearing you are well. We have written you a letter from our address in Rovno.

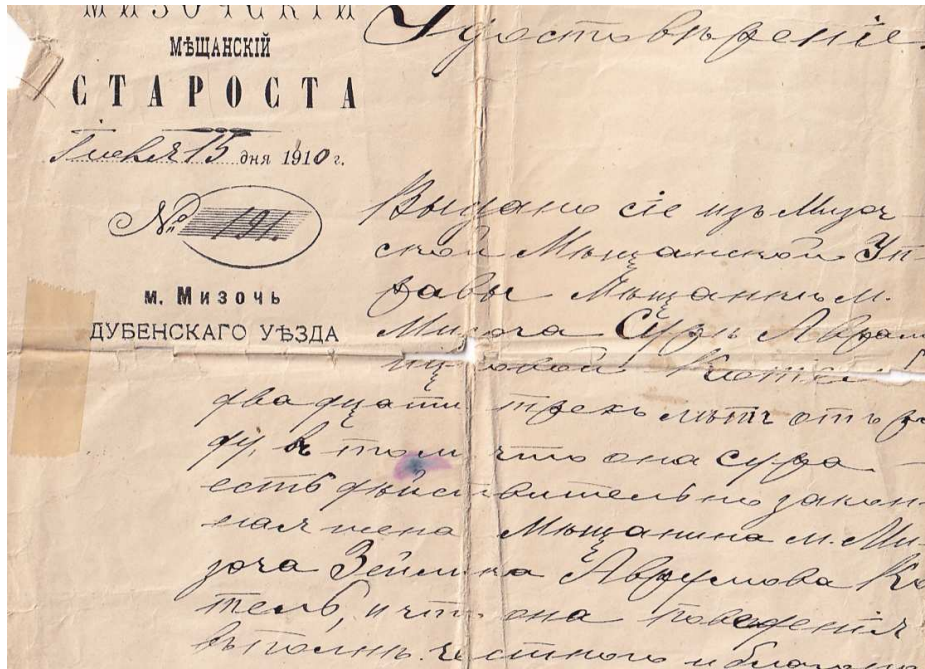
I have a small haberdashery shop in Rovno. The 1200 marks you have sent to Papa with your letter, may he be well, we have not received. I'm writing you this letter from Warsaw.

From your brother, Tzvi Shpanover

I send you my greetings and to your husband and children.

Genealogy and Family Notes:

To the best of our knowledge, zadie Zelig Cotel and his brother Chaim (Hyman) Cotell were the only members of the Kotel family to emigrate from Volhynia. Bubbe Sarah Spanover Cotel is the only member the Spanover family to have emigrated.



Document from Mizocz, 1910, verifying Sarah's identify, perhaps required for her to obtain a passport.

The first letter from Sarah's sister Chasia refers to an aunt in America and provides an address presumably to the aunt's husband, Mr. J. Rich in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Any connection to this aunt is lost to our present-day family, but through Ancestry.com we found a Morris Rich in Dorchester who listed Wolyn as his place of birth, another name for Volhynia. His wife, perhaps Sarah's aunt, was also originally named Chasia Birman but took the name of Anna in America. She hailed from Berezna, a town 60 km from Rovno.

Chasia refers to Dinele, an affectionate name for Dina, my mother, who was then a small child, to whom she sent a feather as a gift (perhaps a form of barrette for her hair.) She also refers to Chaya Rachel (referred to as Rachel in other letters) who has married their brother Tzvi (Gersh.) It can be inferred that Chasia and Tzvi were living with their family in Mizocz at the time, but Tzvi was travelling to nearby Rovno where his wife was getting medical care. Chasia, it seems, has not taken to Tzvi's new wife.

The next document is actually two separate letters written on the opposite sides of the same sheet of paper. Sarah's brother Tzvi (Gersh) writes he was then living in Rovno where he has a haberdashery shop. The second letter is from Tzvi's new brother-in-law, Szmuel Wygrajzer, who has married Chasia. It appears Tzvi and Szmuel were on a trip together in Warsaw and perhaps were business partners as well as in-laws.

The letters are written in Yiddish, but a return mailing address is scribbled in the margin in Cyrillic. Mizocz and Rovno passed to Polish jurisdiction in 1920, but at the time the letter was written, the post office was probably operating under Russian control.

Szmuel pleaded with bubbe Sarah and zadie Zelig to help find Szmuel's sister, with whom he has lost contact. His sister, who will later be identified as Sema, married someone named Stillerman and emigrated to Chicago where he had a grocery store and delicatessen. Szmuel shares their addresses, copied in English to the best of his ability.



This picture was clipped from a Yiddish-language newspaper and found with the cache of family letters. Tzvi was in the haberdashery business, perhaps with his brother-in-law Szmuel Wygrajzer. It is unknown if this portrait is that of either man, but the image does bear resemblance to a photo of Wygrajzer on page 37.

LIFE IN POLAND -- THE DEPRESSION

In 1921, there were 845 Jews in Mizocz, two-thirds of its population. Rovno, the nearest large city to Mizocz, served as a center of the economy for a large part of Wolyn. The Jewish community sustained itself by commerce with other Jews. In 1924, in an act of revenge for the Petliura's massacres of Jews five years earlier, three Jewish activists in Rovno assassinated Petliura's henchman, Ataman Askilko.

Civic pride grew in the Jewish community, as did Zionism and youth movements such as Gordonia, Beitar and Hashomir Hatzair. In Mizocz, there was a Zionist-oriented network of educational institutions, including a kindergarten, as well as Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew libraries. As far as we know, our grandparents' families were aligned with Zionism, but otherwise went about their religious and mercantile lives.

When the worldwide depression struck in 1929, it had dramatic impact on the nascent Polish nation and its Jews. Income declined annually. At the time, 10% of the Polish population was Jewish. The Polish government restricted university enrollments of Jews and admissions into the legal and medical professions. Far-right Polish movements organized anti-Jewish boycotts.



Shkolna Street in Rovno, 1925. (Memorial Book of Rovno.)



Handwritten text in Hebrew, appearing to be a letter or a list of names, written in a dense cursive script.

Handwritten text in Hebrew, appearing to be a letter or a list of names, written in a dense cursive script.

FROM ZADIE ZELIG'S SISTER ITTA, TO ZELIG AND BUBBE SARAH

This postcard was written from Itta (Ida in English, Hudes in Yiddish) and mailed from Rovno. The front contains a message to her brother and the back to her sister-in-law. The return address in Rovno is the same general area as the letter a decade earlier from Sarah's brother Tzvi and her brother-in-law Szmuel, who married Chasia.

Postmarked: April (1?), 1931

(Front side, to Zelig)

"I don't know how people can live with themselves knowing that they have only one old 'Tateh' [Dad], and yet they completely forget about him, just don't want to know. I can understand that with a sister one can lose interest. But with 'Tateh'? I beg of you, answer, at least a letter. About Frume: she has a very fine husband and two little children. She will write you. Be well, all. Your sister, (Itta?) Lerner. I send you all regards."

(Reverse side, to Sarah)

She complains to her sister-in-law that her brother has no interest in her, but she hopes at least to receive a letter from her. She just had a serious operation and is still very weak. She also says she "has no bread to eat which doesn't help her get better. She has two fine children a daughter of 11 and a son of 5."

She hasn't heard from Zelig and doesn't know whether he's alive or dead. Chasse gave her their address. She doesn't know about Chaim (Shimon or Chaye?) or Henele, either.

"Don't tear yourselves away from us all"... "Times are bad now. I used to be a very good 'balabuste' (housekeeper)..."

FROM SEMA WYGRAJZER STILLERMAN TO SARAH AND ZELIG

Aug. 29, 1933,

Mr and Mrs Cotel and your dear family, Pardon me, dear friend (f.), for not having answered your letter in such a long time. [There's a bit of snow ... that's why... to write for years.] Thank you, dear Sara, for the invitation to be your guest. Unfortunately, it is not possible. If one has a business, one is "sold" (enslaved?) to it, be it great or small. Tied to it. One has to wait...

Page 2 ...what the time is going to bring, dear friend. Have you received letters from Chasse and Shmuel? From Shmuel we have not received an answer, and it has been long we have had a letter from you. We have received nothing from anyone for all that we have sent. My brother told me he hasn't received anything from her for a month.

Page 4 ... (with) us here Beni Stillerman with his family. Also Rachel Sherman, Avner's wife, were also at our cousins in San Antonio visiting Pesach. They said that in Chicago it's the same like here. Some things are better, some are worse. It's like people are used to say "the world is just a small town". It pains me to hear of your sister in law's misfortune. That's how it goes with the world! People work, people run around, people tear up the world (with their prayers). People want to be protected (save up) for the future. But when it came to living it there were no more...

Page 5 ... years left. A pity he was such a young man! Dear, do not concern yourself with my delay in replying to your letter. And write me quickly everything and if you received letters from our relatives in Rovno, tell me what they write. I want to end here my writing. May you all continue to stay healthy and happy.

Your Stillerman friend.

Hearty greetings to your family and thanks to your acquaintances for their greetings. We send them our greetings too. Hearty greetings to all.

(Note: page 3 of this letter was lost.)

J. Szerman
Ronne Hob.
Wartowa 2.

KARTKA POCZTOWA



TATRY — Les TATRA
Hala Gąsienicowa La vallée „Gąsienicowa”
Schronisko L'Abri

Mr. J. Cotell
1553 S millard ave
Chicago ed
U. S. A.
America.

M. P. i T. (III-1935) 9.600.000. Ser. III.—9.

Handwritten text in Yiddish, appearing to be a list or a collection of names and addresses, possibly related to the postcard's recipient or sender. The text is dense and covers most of the lower half of the page.

FROM ZADIE ZELIG'S BROTHER-IN-LAW ISRAEL SZERMAN

Postmark: February 28, 1936

“To my unknown brother-in-law, Zeylik. I talk to you with faith. I am forced to share not very good news. Your father passed away on the 3rd of Adar and you must say Kaddish for him. My brother-in-law and I are saying Kaddish in the meantime, but I believe you will want to pay debt to your father. I’ve already written to Itta [written in Yiddish as Hodes/Hudes.] I await your reply.

Your brother-in-law, Fruma’s husband, Israel Sherman

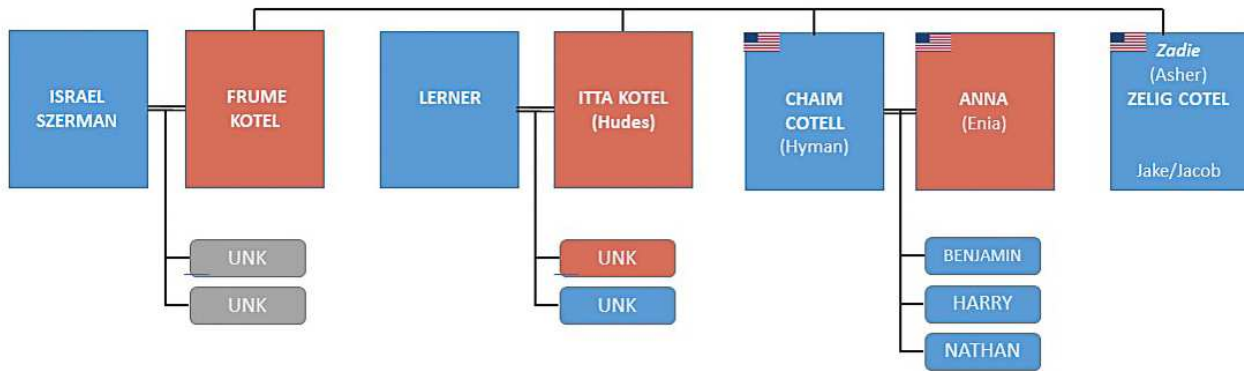
Your father was 81. If anyone else finds this, please give this to intended recipient immediately as he is a son and is indebted to say Kaddish.”

(Note: There is no apparent significance to the picture of the Tatra mountains on this post card.)

The Cotel Family

During this period, there were three communications, two of which were from zadie Zelig's family. It is the last time we see a communication from them until 1939, the last letter in the cache.

From these letters to Zadie, we can build the picture of his family. He had two sisters in the "old country," Itta (Hudes) who married Mr. Lerner, and Frume who married Israel Szerman (Sherman.) Itta's health was poor. She had two children, a girl born in 1926 and a boy born in 1932. She also writes that her sister has two children. Gaps in the chart below were completed using data from Vad Vashem (for Europe) and Ancestry.com for the USA.



Israel Szerman's letter notifies the family of Zelig's father's death in 1936 and underscores Zelig's religious obligations in that regard.

These letter raise a recurring "kvetch," or complaint, about the failure of my grandparents to correspond regularly with their relatives. This is vexing, but I can only reflect my grandparents had five children of their own and were struggling through the Depression themselves at this time, as well as issues of postal reliability. Itta's kvetch extends to her other brother in America, Chaim, as well as to Zelig and her sister-in-law Sarah.

Israel Szerman's postcard underscores the importance of the Jewish religion in their lives. He enjoined anyone who might see the postcard regarding Zelig's father's death to facilitate its delivery so Zelig could fulfill his obligation to recite the Kaddish prayer, and to provide the date of death on the Hebrew calendar for purposes of annual commemoration.

The Stillerman and Wygrajzer Families

In 1920, Szmuel Wygrajzer, husband of bubbe's sister Chasia, asked for my grandparents' help in locating his sister Sema. Sema and her husband Isador Stillerman emigrated to Chicago, but moved to San Antonio, Texas, in 1927. This time, Sema was asking if bubbe Sarah had heard from Szmuel and Chasia as they had fallen out of touch with them.

Sema and bubbe Sarah must have kept in touch as Sema refers to an invitation to visit the Cotels in Chicago, but tells Sarah they are too busy with their business to make a trip. In her letter, she refers to Beni Stillerman, who is Isador's nephew, and a visit from his family for Passover. She also refers to Rachael Sherman, Avner's wife, whom we have not identified.

Sema also tells bubbe Sarah of her sadness regarding the misfortune of Sarah's sister-in-law. This is probably a reference to the death of Zelig's brother Chaim, who died in 1932 at the age of 55.



Chasia's husband -- Wygrajzer

(Spellings and name variations abound in family documents. Uncle Charles labeled this "Viegriser, Chansey's husband.")

YESHAYAHU MAYER KOTEL

Zadie Zelig's uncle Yeshayahu (*introduced on page 16*) was a brother to Zelig's father, Abraham (Avrohom Yechel.) There were no letters from Yeshayahu or mention of these cousins in the letters from my grandparent's siblings. Fortuitously, a description of the family was found in the *Mizocz Memorial Book*. Written after the World War II by Yeshayahu's daughter Chaya, this description provides a memory of the family in a time between the turmoil of the World Wars.



The Yeshayahu Kotel Family

My father -- Mr. Yeshayahu Mayer Kotel -- was a known name in Mizocz and the vicinity. As a well doing and honest businessman, his business dealing extended beyond the town borders and went till the capital city Warsaw and even past the country borders. He was also accepted by the government and was liked and honored not only by Jews, but also by the peasants in the vicinity.

Our house was open to all. Paupers who went begging at doors ate there to satiation. Needy received support and loans. And for a poor bride, our house took care ... her to the wedding ... creating a livelihood for her husband. My mother of blessed memory and we the children helped with giving charity and support to the needy.

continued...

Despite his many businesses, father was integrated in community work and gave much of his time for community needs. He was the Gabbai (*assistant to the rabbi, helping to run services*) in the Shul of the Trisk Chassidim and a great activist in the founding fund. He worried for the traditional and religious education and head of the Trisk Chassidim. The Trisk Rebbe, when he came to our town, he was always hosted by us. The biggest and nicest room in our home, was given over to him and the whole house became public property for the chassidim.

The days of the Rebbe's stay in Mizoch became a holiday for the chassidim. Our home what then full of song and joy. The meals continued unabated and Torah and chassidic songs filled the house. The meal on Shabbat eve, was especially joyful and combined with chassidic dancing with the Rebbe's participation. Father used to take off his shoes, and dance on the tables with white socks till exhaustion.

His children went in his ways. We were all raised in a traditional religious spirit and we were connected to the Zionist movement.

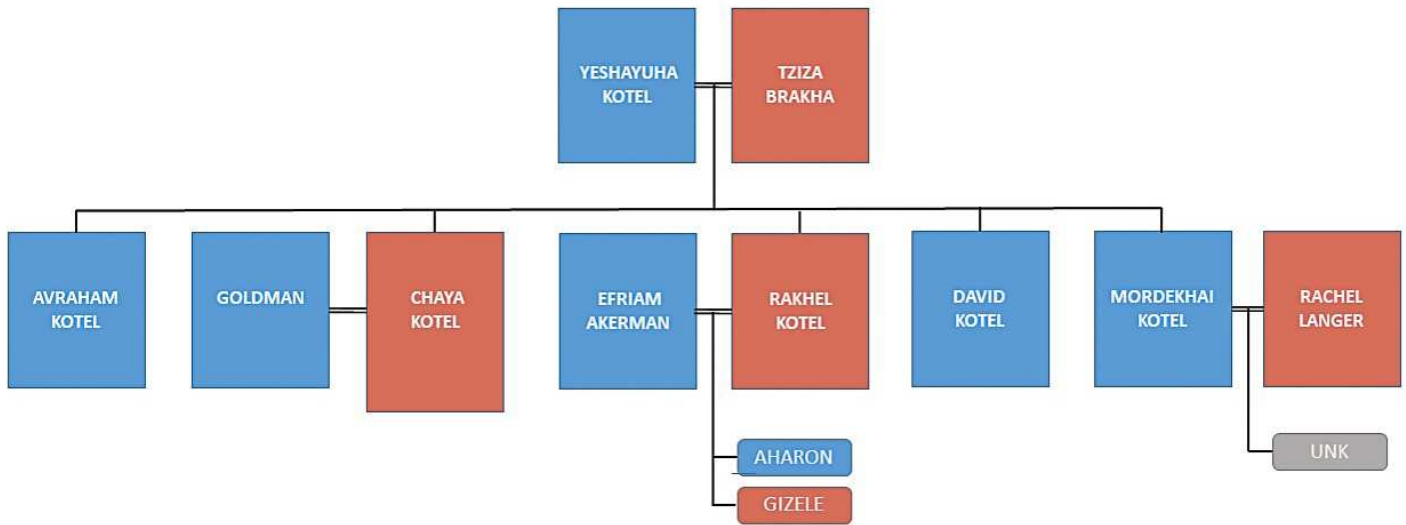
Chaya Goldman-Kotel

Genealogy and Family Notes:

Yeshayahu Kotel Family

The beautiful description of the Yeshayahu Kotel family was written after the war by his daughter. We have not been able to locate her or her descendents or records of the original publisher of the Mizocz Yizkor Book.

The linkage between Yeshayahu and zadie Zelig was accomplished by matching details of his grandfather's name from the wedding contract (tenoim) with the parents' names of Yeshayahu identified in documents from Yad Vashem, where Yeshayahu's death in the Holocaust is recorded.



Chaya closed the description of her family with the following: "With the destruction of Mizoch, our house and our family fate was destructed as too as the fate of all martyrs. Should the memory of my family members be blessed and bound in everlasting life."

MORE HARDSHIPS TO BEAR

Although Polish leader Józef Piłsudski did little to curb anti-semitism in the 1930s, his death in 1935 unleashed extreme right-wing forces. Nationalist political parties advocated removal of Jews from social, economic and political life in Poland and anti-Jewish sentiment in Poland grew in the years leading up to the Second World War. Between 1935 and 1937, 79 Jews were killed and 500 injured in anti-Jewish incidents.

Violence was frequently aimed at Jewish businesses. At the same time, persistent economic boycotts, harassment, and property-destroying riots, as well as the Great Depression, reduced the standard of living of Poles and Polish Jews. Jews in the cities and shtetls focused inward as they became isolated from the rest of the Polish economy and poorer than their brethren in most of Western Europe.

The main strain of anti-Semitism in Poland during this time was motivated by Catholic religious beliefs and centuries-old myths such as the blood libel. This religious-based anti-Semitism was joined with an ultra-nationalistic stereotype of Jews as disloyal to the Polish nation. The Polish government condemned wanton violence against the Jewish minority, fearing international repercussions, but shared the view that the Jewish minority hindered Poland's development.

In an ironic historic twist, the Polish government sought to lower the numbers of the Jewish population in Poland by promoting mass emigration. It embraced close and good contact with Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of Revisionist Zionism. The government pursued a policy supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine and provided the Haganah and Irgun with support and weapons in hopes that emigration to Palestine could reach 100,000 Polish Jews a year. Zionist and socialist organizations thrived in Mizocz and Rovno. Communists published and posted pamphlets on telephone poles. Youth groups thrived, including the Zionist Youth National Guard, Gordonia based on labor Zionism (*shown below*), and Betar. As Chaya Kotel-Goldman said in the Mizocz Yiskor Book, the family supported Zionism.



Gordoniya, a socialist Zionist youth group in Mizocz.

**FROM BUBBE SARAH'S MOTHER LEAH WHITE
AND BUBBE'S SISTER-IN-LAW RACHEL**

Postmark: April 20, 1936

From Leah:

"Dear Sarah, Zelig, and the children.

May you be healthy. We are, thank God, well. May our letter reach you in the best of health. I don't know, my dear child, how I could have sinned so badly that you do not write me at all? Rochel Leah's grandchildren write to her all the time. She must be worthy. The last letter you wrote to Chasse was brought to me by Malka from Rovne. She was by Chasse's for a week. I imagine that your life isn't perfect, that you are occupied with making a living so you are forgetting to write. But even so, you ought to take a few minutes to write me a few words. Rochel Leah's grandchildren sent her \$10. But from you, my dearest ones, I can't manage to get that. I imagine you could not arrange it because if you could have you would have done it. But a letter doesn't require big money. Can you not even spare me this little pleasure? If I have not written, it is because I have been unwell in bed. If it is not my destiny to see you again with my eyes, may I at least hear good things from you by letter.

How are your children doing? Do they already earn something? We have written you about everything. I will end here my letter and wish you much good and happiness. Your faithful mother who wishes you much luck. Now your dear, as yet unknown, sister-in-law would like to write you a few words."

From Rachel:

"Now, may I ask you a question? Why do you not write us a few words? It would make us so happy and does not involve any hardship. I trust that now you will not only write to Mama, but also to us. We will promptly answer all letters. Be well and happy.

Heartiest regards to your husband and children. Your sister-in-law who wishes you much happiness. Hearty greetings from Hershel and our children. May they be healthy. Hearty greetings from Malka and Moshe and their children. Greetings also from Chasse and Shmuel with their children. Please answer quickly."

From Leah:

"Your mother holds you deep in her heart always and thinks about you every moment, and I pray that you will be protected from all bad things.

Your mother."

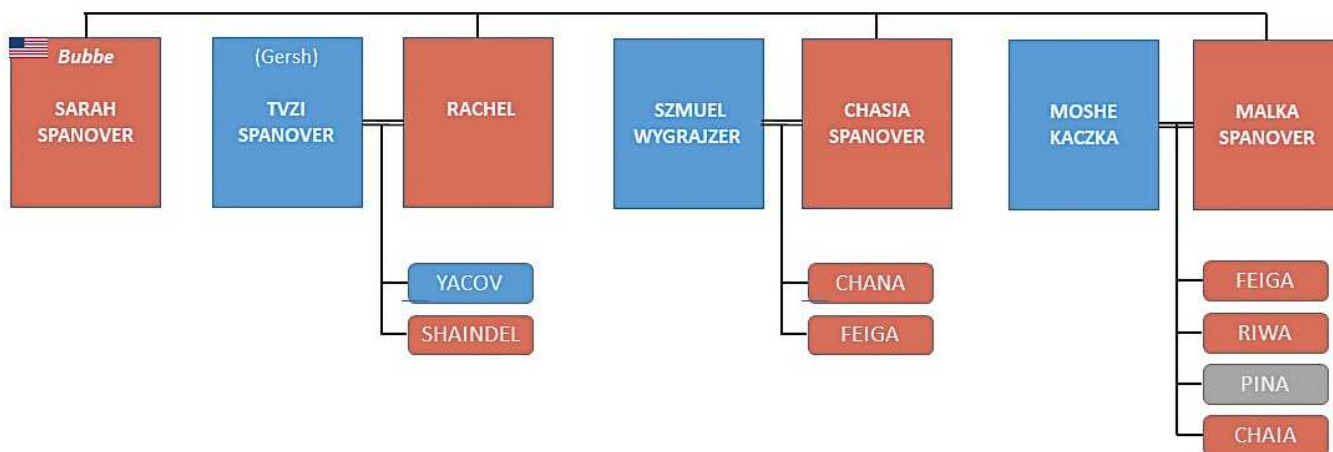
The Spanover Family

The letter of April 20, 1936, completes our knowledge to identify bubbe Sarah's siblings.

It is also significant as it is the only letter from Sarah's mother Leah. Like the earlier letter from zadie Zelig's sister, it contains "kvetches" both from Leah and from Sarah's sister-in-law Rachel complaining that Sarah does not write often enough. Rachel is the wife of Sarah's brother Tzvi, whom she calls Hershel. We were introduced to Tzvi earlier as the writer of the first letter in this book. The letter was written in one hand, not two, by someone with good penmanship.

The letter also mentions Sarah's two other sisters, Malka and Chasia. We already know Chasia, who married Szmuel Wygrajzer, but this is the first mention of Malka. Malka was cited for bringing to her mother a letter written from Sarah to Chasia. Chasia and Szmuel live in Rovno and apparently Malka and her husband, along with Sarah's parents, live in Mizocz. Letters were precious and shared among family members. The letter from Leah and Rachel to Sarah was posted from Mizocz by Malka's husband, Moshe Kaczka, the first evidence of him.

The letter also mentions that each of Sarah's siblings have children. With this information and data in the YadVashem database, we can complete the diagram of bubbe Sarah's siblings and their families.



Leah White also mentions Rochel Leah, someone whose grandchildren sent \$10 to Rochel Leah. This, too is a "kvetch," but underscores the economic condition of the family in 1936. Rochel Leah has not been further identified.



Tzvi and Rachel Spanover's Baby

This photo was labeled "Hershal's baby" by Uncle Charles and is probably Shaindel. (A later letter from the Stillermans refers to a picture that was sent of "Chanale," diminutive form of the name we now know, Chana. There is no certainty regarding whom of my grandparents' nieces is actually shown in this picture.)

continued...

May our dear father's merit work in our favor so that we may be healthy and be able to eke out a living by slaving away. You ask (where?) father was: he was with me for four years. May God requite me so that I may be taken in by a child if I should need it. Shmul is a good man, he treated father with great deference.

We did a lot to save him. You ask if there were doctors involved. We did enough to save him, but the Almighty decreed otherwise. Our dear brother knew from nothing, even though, as a son, his obligation was twofold.

Mother is with Malka. I send her often... Hershl pretends to know from nothing. But at least his health is better. Malka and her family are doing well. They struggle to make a living. She has two lovely little girls. Mother is already barely alive, but your and your children's names do not part from her lips. She talks about you always. Hersh is well, he has beautiful children. And it rips my heart apart to see this. I have pleaded with God many times for help, so that, God-forbid, it is not 'keylen-shtil' ('throat-silence' muteness?)

"...you ask, dearest sister so far away, why we have not written to our sister, Shtillerman. It's because we are guilty. They have given us so much, and we have not repaid them. You see, we are ashamed to write them. They must be thinking why we, like they, didn't emigrate to America and work ourselves to the bone so that we might have made a little money and accomplished something. It is because of how much we owe them that we cannot write to them. It costs us a great deal of our health, our indebtedness to the lovely, dear Shtillermans.

Oh, how thrilled I would be if we were able to come to you. It's bad here. If it's not too difficult, dear sister, could you send me some photos of yourselves. That would be the sweetest present of all. Be well and happy, all of you, and may God grant that this letter find you in the best of health. From me, your faithful sister, Chasse, who wishes you the best from the bottom of my heart.

Shmuel would add his regards, but he is away from home. Is due back in a few days. My children also send warmest regards and a thousand kisses for your children and husband.

I beg of you to write to our brother & sister Shtillerman and convey our heartiest regards. We feel unworthy of asking them to write us. Write back soon, about everything. Be well and happy, all. You can't imagine how..."

KARTKA POCZTOWA

na odpowiedź



ADRES NADAWCY:

Ch. Wygrajzer
Poniatowicz 90
Rovne - Kholm.
Poland

M.

J. Cotel
1553 S. Millard Ave
Chicago Ill
America
M. S. A.

Handwritten vertical text in Hebrew on the left margin.

Handwritten Hebrew text in the bottom left corner, including a postmark: M. P. I. T. (1-1937) 300,000.

A large sheet of handwritten Hebrew text, likely a letter or document, written in a cursive style.

A POSTCARD FROM CHASIA

Postmark: April 22, 1937

Front

“**Mother, z'l**, (z'l usually means “of blessed memory,” but in this case, Chasia uses Zol Leben meaning “may she live.”) **has what to eat, thank God. May she only be well. If it is not too hard, send me some pictures.**

We send you all our heartiest regards.

**Your sister,
Chasse”**

Reverse

“Dear beloved sister and brother-in-law and dear children. May you all be happy and content. Your dear letter we have received and thank God you are well. Won't you send the 5 dollars? Why has there been no letter? Maybe later, we'll receive two letters together. Mother is well, thank God. Malka with her husband and children are also. Hershel and his wife and children are also well, thank God. So you write that you are not in the best of health, God shall send you a refua (be healed). May you be healthy and have good things happen. You must understand times are difficult here. Will you not send the 5 dollars?

PAYEE'S RECEIPT NOTIFICATION Liberty National Bank OF CHICAGO ROOSEVELT ROAD AND KESBIE AVE. CHICAGO, ILL.	N^o 94417 DATE MARCH 15 1937 AMOUNT OF PAYMENT RECEIVED \$5.00	PAYEE SE. WYGRAJER ROWNE WOLYNSKY UL. KLASATORNA 33 POLAND	Amount of Foreign Remittance \$5.00 AMOUNT PAID \$5.75
The official payee's receipt showing that the remittance described hereon was duly delivered to the payee. <input type="checkbox"/> IS ENCLOSED HEREWITH <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IS ON FILE AT THIS OFFICE	THIS ORDER SENT BY MAIL ORDER TAKEN BY TOLSON	NAME MR. JAKE COTEL Address 1503 S. MILLARD AVENUE City CHICAGO, ILL.	TELLER'S STAMP

Receipt from Liberty National Bank in Chicago

This receipt, dated March 15, 1937, was presumably for the funds that had not yet reached Chasia Wygrajzer. This amount would be about \$90 today.

**NEWS FROM SEMA WYGRAJZER STILLERMAN
CHASIA'S SISTER-IN-LAW IN THE USA**

November 18, 1938

Dear Mr and Mrs Kotel, with your dear family,

We thank you many times for your and Chasse's letter. I am sure that you know that we have received a letter from Shmuel and Chasse and also a picture of Chanale. Chasse wrote me that she has also written to you, therefore I have not found it urgent to write you. But when I saw your letter I see she has not written and I didn't know, since we have already received from her thank God. I apologize for not letting you know. Write me all that you are doing and how you are feeling.

It pains us to hear that Dina (Dania) has been operated. Write us how she is feeling now, I hope she's going to be alright. Nothing special by us. We are well but business is very bad. We have a second hand store of old shoes and clothes....., but we are not selling anything now.

Dear Sara, what our brother and sister are writing that their 4 year old daughter can not yet speak. That she can not hear is not a concern, if she would only speak. God preserve us it would be sad. May God use His power that she should be happy with all her children. When is Chanele travelling to America? Can't I say something? As San Antonio is not really the place for such a young girl. And Chicago, I don't know.

Your girl must know that Chasse is longing for her and has given the right answer.

Nothing special by us. Hoping that my letter reaches you in the best of health. I remain your best and merry friend, Sima Stillerman.

My most hearty greetings to your family. We ask you do not delay writing, we will answer. We are sending you back Chasse's letter and Chanale's picture, because we have already the same.

Genealogy and Family Notes:

Life continued to be difficult for the Spanovers in 1937-1938. Chasia's letter from Rovno in January 1937 refers to a horrible event that family lived through, but the nature of the event remains a mystery. Chasia says it is difficult for her to eke out a living, and that her sister Malka -- who lives in Mizocz with their mother -- also struggles to make a living. She seems to follow up in desperation for assistance in April, inquiring about \$5 that the Cotels were going to send from Chicago. A receipt in the cache of family memorabilia shows Zelig did remit the money in March.

There is discussion regarding the deaths of both zadie Zelig's father and bubbe Sarah's father. Chasia kvetches their brother Tzvi (Hershl) did not pay sufficient attention to their late father or the condition of their mother and of Malka in Mizocz. The strong religious beliefs of the family are evident in stern admintions to observe "yahrzeit" customs on the anniversary of their father's death.

In apparent reply to a question from bubbe Sarah, Chasia explains she has not written the Stillermans because she is ashamed of being unable to repay them for their generosity. It is interesting that Chasia is now on the receiving end for not keeping in touch with someone. I continue to wonder if, at least in part, some of this behavior is the result of beliefs regarding the "evil eye" and not speaking of things that will bring bad luck. Even when mentioning the horrible event the family lived through, she said, "Better not to write about it, may God grant that we be healthy." (Bubbe Sarah heeded numerous superstitions we would classify under the rubric of "bubbe meisis.")

Sema Wygrajzer Stillerman seemed to be exchanging letters with bubbe Sarah on a regular basis, keeping up with each other's families, and sharing information about Chasia and Szmuel. Not only are they in-laws, they are "landsman," both born in Mizocz. The Stillermans moved from Chicago to San Antonio, and share news about other relatives and landsmen that are known to bubbe Sarah.

Chasia indicated in her letter to bubbe Sarah that Tzvi and Rachel have a mute daughter (keylen-shtil, throat silence, in Yiddish). This appears to be their younger daughter Feiga, although there is some inconsistency about ages, raising a question of whether someone else is missing from the family tree. Sema also mentions the deafness in her letter, curiously saying, "that she can not hear is not a concern, if she would only speak."

With a hint of aspiration, Chasia mentions how wonderful it would be if she could come to see bubbe Sarah. The Stillermans must wonder, said Chasia, why she and Szmuel have not immigrated to America, but goes no further with that thought. Sema asks bubbe Sarah if she has heard anything about Chasia and Szmuel's daughter Chana coming to America, noting that San Antonio may not be the right place for a young girl.

The letters in this book constitute a one-way look into the conversation of my grandparents and their families. There is evidence of other letters which were lost throughout the years, some fragments and envelopes shown on the next pages. Matching together letters was problematic. Some unmatched pages labelled "p. 5" were torn from larger pieces of European-sized paper. We surmise an additional 1/4 page might fall within postal weight limits and be added to an overseas letter. Other pages may simply have been separated from original letters. Rules and ink color also provide clues in matching pages.

LAST WORDS FROM MIZOCZ

By 1939, prior to the onset of the war, Polish Jews were threatened with conditions similar to those in Nazi Germany. Two letters were sent to my grandparents during the early months of 1939. They contained a plea for support from bubbe Sarah's sister Malka (the only letter from her in the cache) and a baring of the soul from zadie Zelig's sister, revealing the past tragedy of her life.

By the time of the German invasion in 1939, hostility towards Jews was a mainstay of the right-wing political forces in the post-Pilsudski regime. The Jews, according to right-wing ideology, had given birth to Bolshevism and were the reason for its success. This approach was adopted by many members of the Catholic Church, who supplemented and enriched right-wing anti-Jewish rhetoric with traditional elements taken from Church doctrine. Discrimination and violence against Jews had rendered the Polish Jewish population increasingly destitute. Despite the impending threat to the Polish Republic from Nazi Germany, there was little effort seen in the way of reconciliation with Poland's Jewish population. Escalating hostility towards Polish Jews and an official Polish government desire to remove Jews from Poland continued until the German invasion of Poland.

By 1938, anti-Semitic laws were being drafted similar to legislation in Germany. A substantial portion of Polish Jews lived in grinding poverty.



**“WE ARE STRUGGLING”
EXPLAINS BUBBE SARAH’S SISTER MALKA**

"1939 Jan 2, Mizocz

To my dear beloved sister and dear brother-in-law, may you be well. Thank God that we are hearing from you, dear sister. We have received the 5 dollars you sent us and I thank you very much for it and for not forgetting us, may God make you happy.

A few you years ago we had livelihood. But now as we are struggling you can not imagine how much your few dollars mean to us. The times are so bad, one can not earn anything. I have fallen quite low. I have not prepared anything [she probably speaks about clothing] we need so much because the children are big now, but times are so bad, we cannot make anything....

Would it be possible dear sister to send a parcel? I send you the address you need to send it to. We use this address because it doesn't cost us anything to receive there. I have nothing else special to write you about our family, thank God we are all well.

I have really a lot to write about but I don't want to bore you [?] dear sister. I ask you to please write me about your dear children. How many times do I have to ask you to write? Write me what your children are doing? Sarah write me. Have you received a letter from our aunt Basse Keila? And write me how you are and what you are feeling? I ask you to write me something and to write me about everything. Also when I receive a letter from you, my children are so happy that day. When I receive a letter it's such a joy.

I end my letter here. My best regards to you and your husband and children. I send my greetings to all. My children are also sending their regards to everyone. A special greeting from Hershel and Chayle and their children. Chasse and Shmuel also send their greetings to everyone.

May my letter reach you in the best of health. I ask you once more, please answer and write about everything.

From me your sister, Malka "

**ZADIE ZELIG'S SISTER ITTA SHARES HER HORRIBLE BURDENS
WITH HER SISTER-IN-LAW BUBBE SARAH**

[January?] 27, 1939

Dear sister-in-law and brother with your dear children,

We have well received your letter and the 15 dollars for which I thank you many times. Sarah, the 5 dollars you have sent for your mother I have given to Chasse who has sent them. Dear Sarah, I'm envious of the mitzva you did with the 10 dollars. I can't complain to anybody. In my entire life, until, this day, I have not had to come to [asking help of another], because there was always some room to maneuver but now things are really bad. My husband is unwell and there is no work to be had.

Sara, I have had such difficult life, I have suffered already so much.

I lived through two long years of war and had two [children] during the war, and became pregnant [again] in the 5th year. And then when I was 7 months pregnant, I carried a heavy burden as that child in me died. And had to be taken out in pieces from my belly. And I looked with my eyes what was done to me, as they couldn't put me to sleep. One was absolutely not prepared and will continue to suffer. Dear sister in law, forgive me for writing you such about my misery.

I can talk to you about it now, after having had my 2 children. Will they have to suffer as much as I did. Sara, if only you could see my children, my daughter Dinale is so beautiful. She is so beautiful that anyone who looks at her cannot tear their eyes away. Imagine how much I have already suffered and I can't do anything for my children? And they have to suffer with me, it's so hard and one is ashamed when one falls down.

I am so little. Will God help? I am not jealous of your good fortune that your children are learning well and that they are merchant. And I'm myself a poor seamstress. Oy times are so hard. How can one prevent oneself from falling? How many more times will I have to see my children go to sleep hungry?

Compared to my sister & your sister, I am very small. I don't begrudge them. They are rich students ... give their children [education?] and they are all merchants." And my sister Fruma knows nothing about it. I beg you dear sister in law, don't be cross with me for writing such a letter. I'm emptying my heart to you a little. It will surely make it more bearable.

Dear Sara, I ask you write me everything about you. If you knew how much joy your letter brings us. And the picture of your beautiful daughter! I swear to you that my Dinale has not let the picture out of her hand. Each (night) she gives it a kiss and she would so much want to write to your children, only she doesn't know how too [?] Could they all write something for her with your answer? We ask of you to please send us each your picture. And I'm thinking about your oldest daughter, how is she feeling? I ask you to write us about everything and do not forget us. Allow me to greet and kiss you all.

Itta

Genealogy and Family Notes:

The first of these final letters is from Malka, bubbe Sarah's sister, and is the only letter we have written by her. Malka thanks Sarah for \$5 that was sent for their mother. Malka emphasizes how difficult times have become and that the family can no longer make a living. She asks for a relief parcel to be sent and provides an address at which there will be no fees for the family to receive the parcel.

Malka's letter evokes a degree of desperation not seen in previous correspondence. Although many letters to my grandparents included a plea for assistance, Malka's tone is dire. She cannot provide for her family.

Malka refers in the letter to Basse Leah, presumably in America. We have not identified this person, but wonder if it might be the same individual bubbe's mother referred to in 1936 as Rachel Leah.

The final letter from zadie Zelig's sister Itta reinforces the desperation reflected in Malka's letter, saying there is no work for their family, her husband is sick and the children go to sleep hungry. The letter reveals a total of \$15 had been received by the family, a portion of which was the money Malka referred to previously, and expresses profound appreciation for the gift.

The most emotional content of all the letters to my grandparents is found in this letter from Itta, who shares with heart-rending sadness to bubbe Sarah that Itta had a stillborn child at or near the end of WWI and suffered through surgical removal of the fetus without anesthesia. (There's difficulty with translation regarding the timing of this event in relationship to the birth of her other children, who were born five years apart.) Itta laments the sadness of her life and wonders if the same fate awaits her children.

The economic condition of the my grandparents' siblings in Mizocz and Rovno is revealed in this letter. Sarah's sister -- presumably Chasia SpanoverWygrajzer -- and Itta's sister Frume Cotel Szerman are said to have done well. Their husbands are merchants and their children receive education.

The letter does inform us Itta and her husband have two children, one of whom was named Dina, the same name as my mother. (Following traditional Jewish naming conventions, there was probably a "Dina" in the family tree in earlier generation for whom they are both named.) Itta's Dina had a photograph of Sarah's daughter Dina that she carries with her and adores. The translation is difficult, but it appears Itta is saying Itta's Dina wishes to write Sarah's Dina, but either her ability to write or the language barrier prevents this. (My mother Dina understood Yiddish but only read and wrote in English.)

THE SHOAH

The letters written to my grandparents in January 1939 were the last communications received from their family. Germany invaded western Poland on September 1, 1939. From the east, the Soviet Union attacked on September 17. By early October, Poland had been divided, with Mizocz and Rovno annexed by the Soviets.

In Rovno, some in the Jewish community welcomed the Red Army arrival on September 17, 1939, either due to preference over the Nazis or based on their political leanings. A “Komsomol,” communist youth league, was formed. However, throughout the Soviet-occupied zone, many if not most Jews were opposed to the communists, who nationalized private business, bringing a devastating blow to economic life in the Jewish communities. Synagogues were not closed but heavily taxed. Zionism was prohibited as anti-Soviet.

Soviet annexation of eastern Poland brought widespread arrests and deportation of local Polish officials and suspected communist enemies to forced labor gulags in the Soviet interior. Such deportations included 100,000-300,000 Polish Jews. Although some Jews were appointed by the Soviets to fill vacant government positions, few obtained real power.

Dependent on Soviet media, Jewish refugees from western Poland were unaware of the happenings in the Nazi-occupied areas they had fled. Some wealthier Jews in Soviet-occupied Poland actually applied to be repatriated to the German zone, but were labeled as “class enemies” by the Soviets and deported to Siberia.

As Nazi Germany’s appetite for resources grew, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact disintegrated and Germany attacked the Soviets, bombing Rovno on June 22, 1941. By this time, refugees from western Poland had swollen the Jewish population of Rovno to 23,000 (about half the population of the city) and the Jewish population of Mizocz had almost doubled to 2,000. About 300 members of the Mizocz Jewish community escaped ahead of the Nazi invasion, heading eastward, either as Red Army recruits or as evacuees and fugitives. A week later, Nazi forces occupied the area.

When the Nazis captured Rovno from the Soviets, they carried out several executions of its Jewish population in order to inflict terror and fear for the sake of coercion. In Mizocz, Ukrainian collaborators carried out a week-long pogrom. Anti-Jewish riots flared up, encouraged by Nazi propaganda. In Rovno, 3,000-4,000 Jews were killed in July and August as 'Bolshevik agents' and 'Jewish functionaries,' and German units conducted the first mass shootings of Jews in the surroundings of Mizocz.

The first concerted *aktion* to annihilate the Jews of Rovno occurred on November 5, 1941. The Germans decided to clear out space in Rovno for its occupiers. 18,000 adult Jews from Rovno who did not have work permits and those who would not leave their families were rounded up and told they were being taken to work assignments. Many stood the whole day shivering in the cold and snow. They were marched off and were shot by the SS police and troops with the assistance of the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police in the Sosenki forest near Rovno. 6,000 children were also executed at a killing site close to the adult one.

Many of our grandparents' relatives lived in Rovno at the time. From postmarks on their letters, we know *zadie* Zelig's sisters Itta Lerner and Frume Szerman were living in Rovno, as were *bubbe* Sarah's sister Chasia Wgyrajzer and her brother Tzvi Spanover -- and their families.

The first ghetto in Volhynia province was established in Rovno in December 1941. The ghetto was created in the Wola neighborhood on the edge of Rovno and 5,200 Jews initially lived there. (See map on page 71.) Some Jews were under the illusion that when the military regime was over, their situation would improve. The Jews living in the ghetto had to pay levies to the German authorities. The two men who were appointed to head the *Judenrat* (local Jewish administrative authority) both committed suicide at the end of 1941, because they did not want to follow the Nazis' demand to turn over a group of Jews.

During the same period, a *Judenrat* was established in Mizocz, as was a Ukrainian Auxiliary Police force. Jews were under curfew and ordered to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David. In the summer and fall of 1941, the Jewish police helped collect money, valuables and other items demanded by the Germans as "contributions." From the very beginning of the occupation, Jews had to perform forced labor, such as washing wounded soldiers' laundry, snow removal, farm work and construction work.

In March 1942, all Jews in Mizocz and the surrounding villages were ordered to move into a ghetto located in the old part of town. This was an open ghetto, not surrounded by a wall or other physical barrier and it was not closely guarded. Despite the public hanging of Zeyde Gelman (presumably a shochet, or butcher of kosher meat) for illegal slaughtering and several other arrests, the German administration of Mizocz was relatively benign, according to a description on the Yad Vashem website. An estimated 1,700 Jewish children, women and men lived in the Mizocz ghetto.

If *bubbe* Sarah's mother, Leah White, was still alive, she would have been living in the Mizocz ghetto along with *bubbe*'s sister Malka Kaczka and her family. Yeshayahu Kotel would also be in Mizocz, but it is not certain where each of his children and their families were precisely located at the time, but most remained there until the end.

On the night of July 13, 1942, the liquidation of the Rovno ghetto was carried out. SS and Ukrainian police units surrounded the ghetto, positioned spotlights around it and turned them on. Brigade SS and Ukrainian police were divided into small groups, broke into houses and pushed the people out, herded them into a freight train which took them to Kostopol where

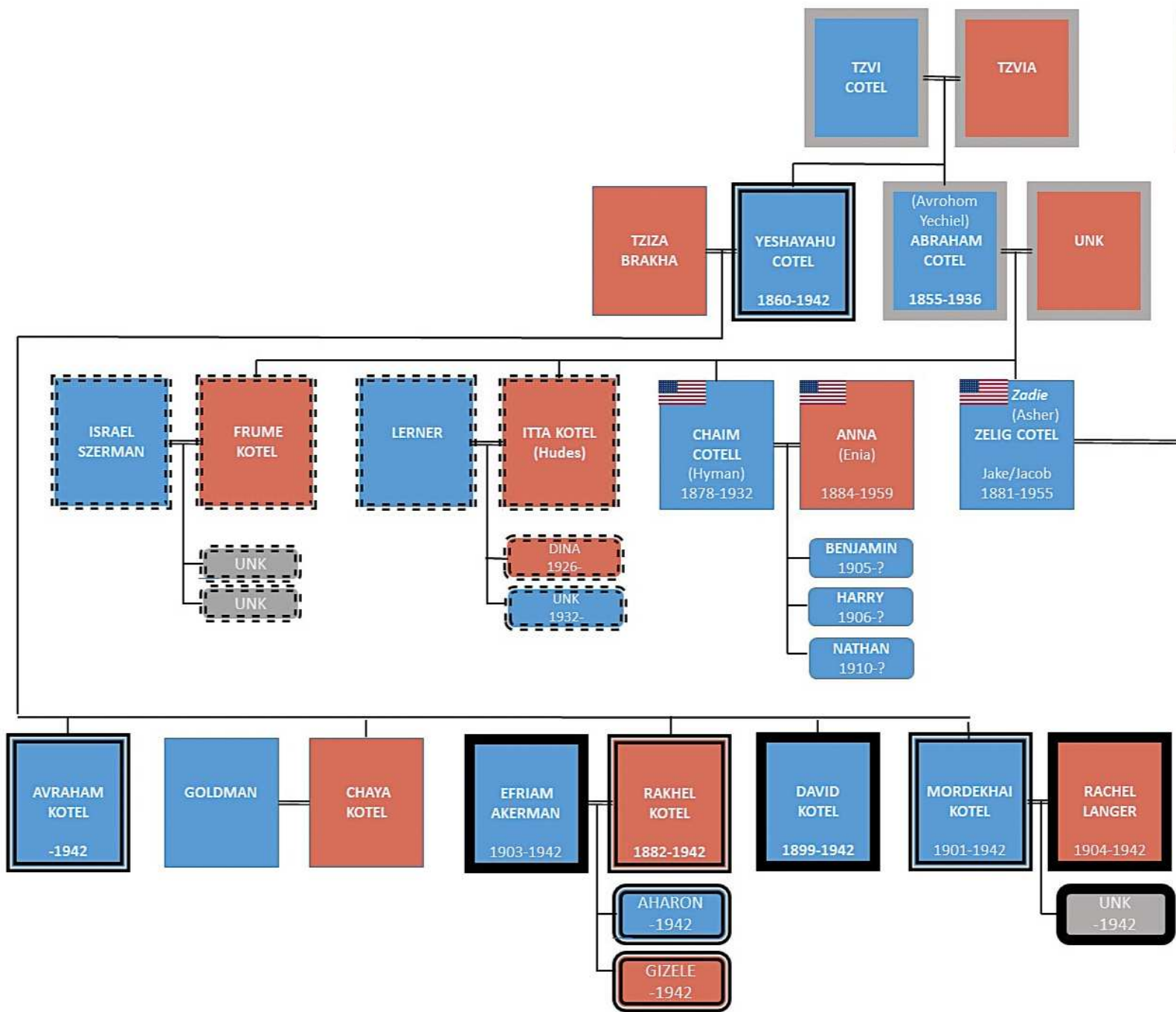
they were shot to death in small *aktionen*. 5,000 Jews were killed in this manner. Several additional *aktionen* took place in the neighborhood afterwards.

On October 12, 1942, the Mizocz ghetto with 1,700 Jews was surrounded by Ukrainian Auxiliary Police and German policemen in preparation for a liquidation *aktion*. The organizers of a resistance movement and others set many houses on fire and attacked the Germans and Ukrainian auxiliary police in a short-lived uprising. The fires helped a large number of people escape, although about 200 people died in the flames.

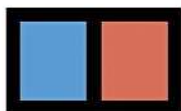
The next day, a firing squad of German police and security troops arrived in Mizocz. The remaining Jews in Mizocz -- mostly women, children and the elderly -- were taken to a ravine south of Rovno near the sugar factory and shot to death by an SD unit. They dragged the Jews to the ravine and murdered them by a shot in the back of the head. Within two days, the unit had murdered up to 1,500 Jewish children, women and men. The murder operation continued until October 15, with troops going door to door in the ghetto, pulling Jews from hiding places. The few survivors took to the forests and went into hiding, some becoming partisans, until the Red Army liberated the region on February 6, 1944.



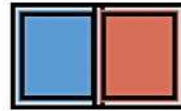
Five photographs of the Mizocz massacre were taken by a German police official and seized after the war by the Czechoslovak government and made public.



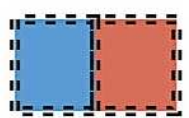
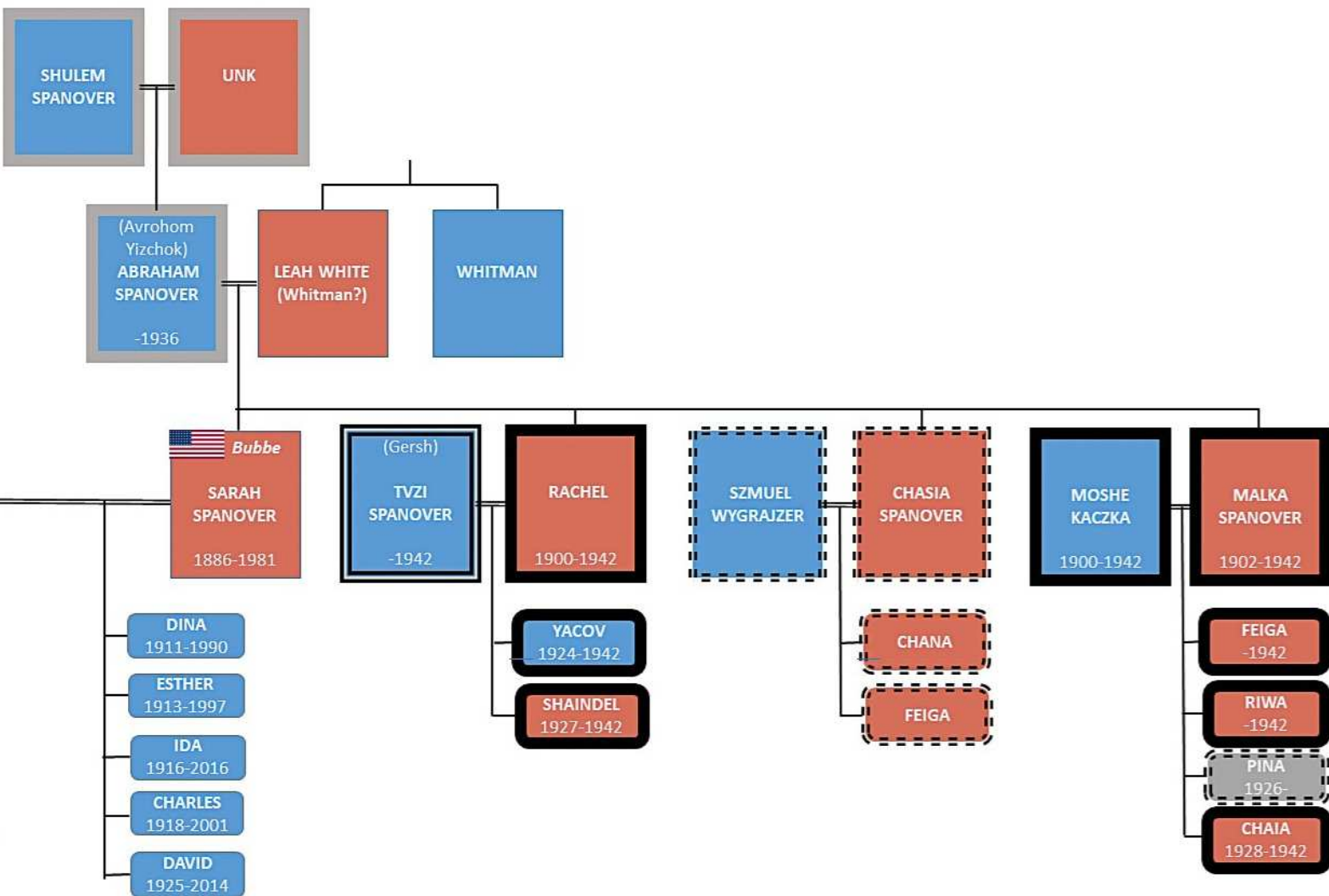
Known or assumed dead before the Shoah



Murdered in Mizocz October 13, 1942



Murdered in the Shoah Details unknown



Presumed Murdered in Shoah
No documentation found.

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Genealogy and Family Notes

The family tree shown on the previous page summarizes all we know about the fate of our relatives in Mizocz and Rovno. Yad Vashem records verify the fate of those known to have died in the Shoah (black double-lined boxes) and those known to have died specifically on the day of the Mizocz massacre (black solid-lined boxes.)

From what we can determine, most of my grandparents' forebearers died before the Shoah, except zadie Zelig's uncle Yeshayahu:

- Yeshayaho Kotel was murdered in the Mizocz massacre on October 13, 1942.*
- The last correspondence regarding bubbe Sarah's mother, Leah White Spanover, came in 1937 when Chasia said her mother was living with Malka in Mizocz. Leah White Spanover is not listed as a Holocaust victim. In the absence of such records, we assume she passed away in those poverty-stricken years prior to the Mizocz massacre.*
- Neither zadie Zelig's mother nor Yeshayahu's wife Tziza was never mentioned in letters, so we assume they preceded their husbands in death long before the Shoah.*
- No information of any kind has been found to further indentify or determine the fate of the Whitman family (pictured on page 17.)*

All of bubbe Sarah's siblings are either confirmed or assumed to have perished in the Shoah:

- Sarah's sister Malka, her husband Moshe and their children Feiga, Riwa and Chaia perished in the Mizocz massacre on October 13, 1942. There is no record for one child, Pina.*
- Sarah's brother Tzvi perished in the Holocaust, but there are no details regarding his death. His wife Rachel, son Yakov and daughter Shaindel perished in the Mizocz massacre on October 13, 1942.*
- Sarah's sister Chasia, of whom we read many letters in the book, her husband Szmuel Wygrajzer and their daughters Chana and Feiga were never heard from again. We presume they were murdered in the Holocaust, but we can located no records regarding their fate*

The children of zadie Zelig and bubbe Sarah, all born in Chicago and married, led full and productive lives, but this book does not tell the story of their American descendents. Although our family lost touch with the family of Zelig's brother, Chaim Cotell, we know his wife and sons also emigrated from Mizocz to Chicago. His son Harry married and practiced medicine in Chicago. Zadie Zelig's other siblings, who remained in Europe, are presumed lost in the Holocaust:

- Zelig's sister Itta and her husband Lerner (we never knew his first name), their daughter Dina and their son presumably perished in the Shoah, but no record can be found regarding their fate.*

— Zelig's sister Frume, her husband Israel Szerman and their two children presumably perished in the Shoah, but no record can be found regarding their fate.

With only one exception, the family of Yeshayahu Kotel died along with him in the Shoah:

— Yeshayahu's son Avraham Kotel perished in the Holocaust, but no further details are available.

— Yeshayahu's son David is known to have been murdered during the Mizocz massacre on October 13, 1942.

— Yeshayahu's son Efraim was murdered during the Mizocz massacre on October 13, 1942. Efraim's wife Rachel, their son Aharon and daughter Gizele all perished in the Holocaust, but there are no details about their deaths.

— Yeshayahu's son Mordekhai perished in the Shoah; no other details are available. Records show that his wife Rachel and their child were murdered during the Mizocz massacre on October 13, 1942.

— Information on Yeshayahu's family in the Mizocz Yizkor Book was provided by his daughter, Chaya Kotel Goldman. We would be pleased to learn something of her life. Because it is likely she would have connected with the Cotels in Chicago had she come to America, in the absence of any other information, we assume she emigrated to Israel where the Mizocz Yizkor Book was published.

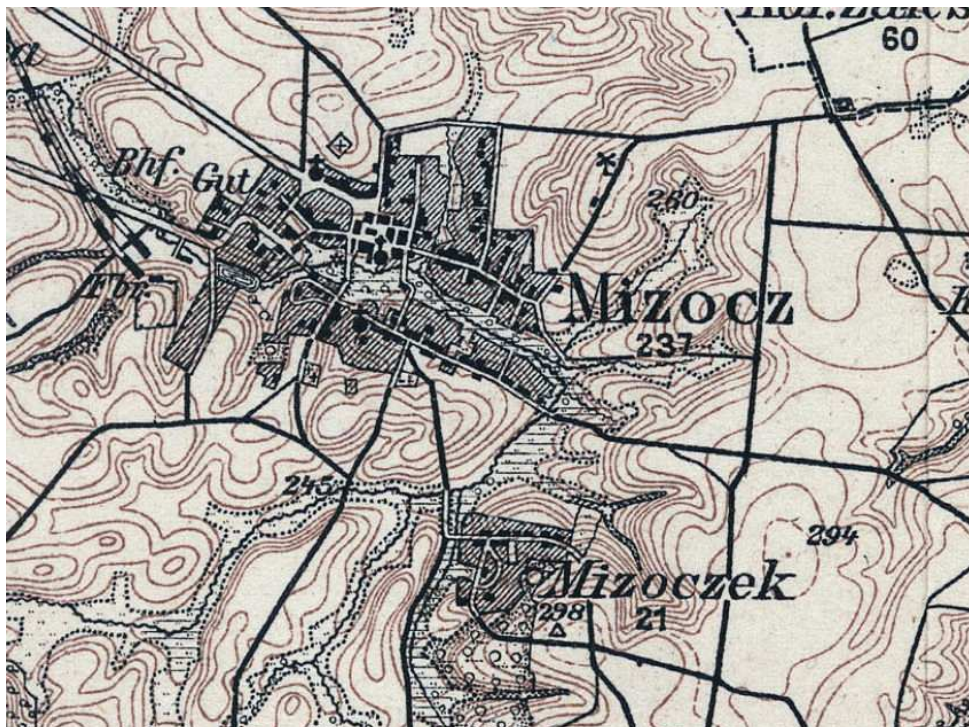
In addition to learning about Chaya Kotel Goldman, other unfinished business from this book includes the following:

— Locating the American descendents of Borys Trachtenberg, the "landsman" from Mizocz, who emigrated to America in 1947 and sought out my grandparents to reveal the painful fate of their families. In genealogy records, we discovered he had a son, Michael, who also emigrated and served in the U.S. Army.

— Locating the long-lost aunts mentioned in several letters. Sarah's aunt, presumably the husband of J. Rich or Morris Rich from Dorchester, Massachusetts, who was referenced in the first letter in this book (page 20). A letter in 1936 (page 45) mentions Rochel Leah, whose grandchildren -- presumably in America -- send money to Europe. In 1939, Malka mentions another aunt, Basse Keila (page 59). We have not identified whether these mentions refer to the same or different persons or whether there may be descendants.

— In 1950, an advertisement was published in the Jewish-American paper from Chasya Leah'ke Kotel. She wrote that she was from Ostroh in Volyn and was seeking others originally from Ostroh: Netzia Applebaum in the USA, Leah'k Komnat and her cousin Baruch Hershak Kownat. Her return address was in B'nai Brak, Israel.

Topographic map of Mizocz, 1915. A map with street names cannot be found. An envelope from Tzvi Spanover in 1935 identified an address on Zedolbonof (?), probably the road leading northeast from the city to Rovno. Zdolbuniv is a small town midway between Mizocz and Rivne.



Map of the market area of Rovno, submitted to the JewishGen website. The listings along the left edge identifies Jewish families in this area. Barely legible, family names of persons mentioned in this book include Kacska, Lerner and Goldman.



EPILOGUE

There are two facets to the dedication of this book. One is personal, to my grandparents and their lost families, who have become known to me 78 years after the Holocaust. I *kvell* at the vision and stamina of my grandparents and extend unending gratitude to them for the difficult journey they made to America, leaving behind all they knew. I mourn for their families, whose lives were fraught with difficulty and sadness and ended in unfathomable horror.

Researching the story of my family brings the bitter reality of their life into stark focus. For so many, life is hard enough -- simply finding food, protecting loved ones and fighting the ravages of disease -- let alone fending off those who would humiliate them and steal what little they had.

My relatives in Europe did enjoy moments of happiness and I am buoyed by the letters about their children and Uncle Yeshayahu dancing on the table. The research into their families has made them more human to me, and for that, it is even sadder to know any measure of joy in their lives was trodden by unending poverty and any glimmer of liberty extinguished by greed, discrimination, xenophobia and hatred.

In the preface, I mentioned my puzzlement at how thousands could march to their deaths without resisting. I now understand how downtrodden they were, cold and homeless, and in the end naked, strength depleted, lying down to return to the warmth of the earth. They had no alternative but to surrender, and for that, the imperative to the rest of us is all the more urgent.

The other part of the dedication is broader and includes all those who suffered along with my family in 1942 and all those who resisted. A few brave souls had the fortitude to resist the genocide in Mizocz and we must honor them. Some hid Jewish children or provided papers for refugees. Others, particularly youth, joined partisan groups in the forests. Because of them, we know the story of what happened in Mizocz.

But it is not adequate to say, “what a shame, what a *shonda*” about Mizocz. We, in our own time and according to individual abilities, must stand up against hatred. We must commit ourselves to speak out against the viral evil of racial and ethnic hatred whenever we encounter it. We must guard against the temptation to visit the sins perpetrated against our families to succeeding generations, but instead, stand up against hatred in our own time.

Whatever our color or origin or beliefs, we share this earth together. The bedraggled woman and her children trekking from Latin America, the Syrian refugee clamboring into a leaking boat, the persecuted refugee in Southeast Asia or Africa, we must come to see them all as Chasia and Malka and Tzvi and Itta and Frume and Uncle Yeshayahu. We must see their children as Chana and Feiga and Yakov and Shaindel and Dina and Aharon and Gizele. And we must think -- if I only could -- what would I not have done to save them?

