

Helen Lederer

United States

IN PAIN FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

[*Mlynov-Muravica Memorial Book* pp. 147-148]

Translated from Yiddish by Hannah Berliner Fischthal

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Helen Lederer was born Chultzie Goldberg in Mlynov, Russia in 1903. She was the oldest daughter of Moishe (Morris) and Gitel (Weitzer) Goldberg. Helen's father, Moishe, had migrated to the US in 1911 but WWI had intervened, and the rest of the family could not join him until 1921. During WWI, the Eastern Front moved back and forth very close to Mlynov and the residents had to be evacuated. In one of the only firsthand accounts of this evacuation, Helen here recalls this experience as a young girl of about twelve or thirteen. After migrating to the US with her mother and siblings in 1921, she married and became Helen Dishowitz and later Helen Lederer.

It was during the time of the first World War. A cold winter day, a burning frost, a deep snow. The Germans are getting closer to our town Mlyniv. All of us are taken out

of our homes. The soldiers intrude into the synagogue sanctuary and pack us inside, like sardines. We are lying in great anxiety—not knowing what to expect. 2:00 a.m. An angry wind howls, like devils dancing. A banging is heard. Soldiers are standing with guns. They order everybody to go out into the street.

The soldiers have brought wagons, which are standing there: “Pack what you can on the wagons, and you—walk.” The horses can barely drag themselves in the deep snow. Women and children shlep after the wagons on the way to Varkevetsh.¹ Everybody’s hands are busy grabbing provisions for the children to eat. My mother, Gitl-Pesye Khoyle’s,² has four small, crying children shlepping along with her. Also my Aunt Soreke-Pesye Khoyle’s is going, carrying something in both hands, with her little girl Dvoyrele. After having walked a few versts,³ Soreke looked around – the child is not there!... She screamed; there was a commotion; Soreke ran back. The soldiers with their rifles drove on and said that the Austrians use searchlights on us; they will see her walking, and they will shoot. Soreke crept back and found Dvoyrele in the snow, passed out!

It is day. We get to Varkevetsh. We come to our relative Nakhman Leyb. There is not even room for a pin. There is my grandfather, Leybush Gershon’s;⁴ both his daughters Chana-Gitl and Chaye; and other refugees—there is no place for us. And there is no place to go to. Frozen, tired. . . at last we see a cover over the cellar-- the only empty spot. We put a feather bed on it, and we lay down, exhausted.

¹ Varkovychi, Ukraine, according to jewishgen.org Gazeteer--HBF

² *Khoyle* is someone sick; perhaps the mother of Gitel and Soreke was ill. Yiddish names are often in the format of first name, then a possessive. Here Gitl-Pesye is probably the daughter of a sick woman—HBF. Pesye is likely the name of Gitl and Soreke’s mother—HS

³ A verst is about .66 miles--HBF

⁴ Leybush, Gershon’s son--HBF

The next day we were on the way to Oziran.⁵ Until we managed to get there is another chapter. In Oziran we learned that we had to walk from there to Rovne.⁶ With great effort and suffering, a few people with us made it to Rovne. However, not a single house in Rovne had room for more people; all the houses were filled up with unlucky refugees.

So we stood, my mother with the children—Soreke, her little girl, and Basye-Chaye Malke's,⁷ a pregnant woman during her time who was pitifully shivering from the cold.

It is said: a gentile makes the exile longer . . . Imagine that near us stands a coachman and speaks Yiddish the same as we do. A lover of Jews. He even gives money to the rabbi, to help the poor. . . And this angel in a human image takes all of us under his protection. Namely, he took us to his home through an underground door—so that his antisemitic wife would not see us. Over there we stretched out our tired bones.

Coming out into the street, we learned about the Joint Help Committee from America; they gave out packages of food to every refugee.⁸ So my mother stood in line and, thank God, we now had what to eat.

Basye-Chaye Malke's suffered labor pains, and after much anguish she gave birth to a child in the cellar. The coachman kept us four months and provided for us. His name will always be on my lips.

⁵ Ozeryany, Ukraine, according to Jewishgen.org Gazeteer--HBF

⁶ Rivne, Ukraine. According to Google Maps, the walk from Mlyniv to Varkovychi to Ozeryany to Rivne was a distance of about 65 km or 40.4 miles. -- HBF

⁷ Basye-Chaye, Malke's daughter--HBF

⁸ American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee--HBF

In the summer the Austrians left, and most of us from Mlynov returned home. I remained with a cousin, Gitl Sotiver; I studied from the same teacher as her children. When my mother wanted to have me near her in Mlynov, I returned home.

We went through much fright and suffering until we made it to America. Thank God that this all happened in my young years, and I was able to overcome it. May the future generations know of better times with peace spread over the entire world. Amen.

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