

EXERTS FROM A SHORT STORY OF THE LIFE OF MY PARENTS

BY HELENA JACOBS

MY MOTHER

My mother, Genia ('Genendl') Kac, was born in Bielsk-Podlaski, a small town not far from Bialystok, Poland, in 1906. Her family was very Orthodox. Her father was an excellent scholar, a Talmid haham (a learned scholar), highly respected in his town. He was also the town shohat (a ritual slaughterer) and mohel (ritual circumciser).

There is sometimes a fine line in my mind between my own memories and memories of what my mother told me. I was lucky that I had spent so much time with her, first in the long cold and dark winter nights in a Russian village during the war and later in the last years of her life, when she seemed to have a great need to recount to me our family stories, knowing that she was the last of her generation to remember them.

MY MOTHER'S FAMILY

One particular story I want to share with you. My great-grandfather Abraham Izaac came to Bielsk-Podlaski from Prozini in 1866 as the shohat and cantor (I found these details in the Bielsk-Podlaski Yizkor [memorial] Book). He had two sons and two daughters. His sons were not religious and did not want to study Torah as he would have wished. The younger son migrated to America. The older one was, in those days, regarded as an agnostic. He only observed the laws of kashrut (dietary laws) out of respect for his father. Abraham Izaac's dearest wish was to find suitable husbands for his daughters. He found them among the hard-studying Yeshiva (religious school for higher education) boys, talented and dedicated scholars. The older daughter's husband was supported for eight years after their marriage to enable him to study and become a rabbi in the small town of Surz, near Bielsk-Podlaski.

My grandfather, Samuel Kac, was not so lucky. After marrying Abraham's younger daughter Tsivia who became my grandmother, he did not get the promised eight years of support because his father-in-law was by then too old and too sick and had to give up his work. The town needed someone to replace him so my grandfather became the shohat of Bielsk-Podlaski.



For the rest of his life he spent every spare moment studying the Talmud and its commentaries. He used to write down his remarks and prepare them to be published in a book. The town's rabbi often asked for his advice in clarifying Jewish laws and rules. I remember a room in their house filled with beautifully bound sforim (holy books) which took up a whole wall. They were a treasure which my great-grandfather left to his son-in-law as compensation for not having had the promised years of support.

er.

My grandparents had two sons and a daughter. My grandmother's greatest worry was the fact that they joined different and opposed political parties: two were Bundists and one was a follower of Jabotinski, today's Likud party. The house was full of their endless arguments.



2 Tsivia Kac, Genia's mother, second from left, on summer vacation in 1938, with her younger son, daughter-in-law Gitl and only grandson Avremele.
All four perished in the Holocaust.

My mother was the youngest child. Her oldest brother followed Jabotinski, left home very young and went to Palestine. He returned a few years later disappointed and suffering from malaria. He and his wife also perished in the Holocaust.

3 Israel Kac, Genia's oldest brother.



My mother's second brother was the first one to leave his hometown for Vilna where he joined the Jewish Teachers' Seminary (Vilna Lerer Seminar). He excelled in all his subjects and became one of the leading teachers in the CYSHO school system (Central Yiddish School Organisation). He taught for a while in Bialystok. Some surviving students remember him with great love and respect to this day

4 Yosef Kac, Genia's second brother.



At University he studied languages and specialised in German. When the Germans came to Bielsk and wanted to form a Judenrat (a Jewish council appointed by the Germans to execute their orders), he was pointed out as a candidate. He refused and as a result was shot in front of his parents' home, in full view of his parents and all the Jewish neighbours. Of all the Jews of Bielsk-Podlaski only one survived, a friend of my mother called Hanan Tykocki, who found us after the war and told us this story.

NB. I have many photos from that era about which I have only a little information. The following are photos from my mother's school years in Bielsk-Podlaski.



5 Class photo, summer 1917. Lying in front on right, Genia Kac.



6 Same group as 5, summer 1917. With teacher in centre.



7 Same group playing a game, with the same teacher. One girl has her hand on Genia's head.



8 School girls in Bielsk-Podlaski, 21 February 1918. The Russian inscription reads: "Souvenir from S. Youngerman"



9 Genia on the left,
12 June 1918, with a
family member.
Note on back of photo
reads:
“To Genia, from niece
Anna”

10 A school play –
‘Among the flowers’-
performed by the
Yiddish school in
Bielsk, 1919. Standing
at the back, 4th from
left, Genia Kac, 13
years old.





11 A close-up of Genia in the play, 20 May 1919.

Genia was a good pupil and very popular both with her classmates and teachers. She was always surrounded by lots of friends, had a beautiful singing voice and usually played the lead role in any school performance.



12 Genia (seated on left) with a group of friends.



13 Genia (seated on right)
with a group of girlfriends, 1920.



14 “To Genendl, as a memento of our
friendship, I give you my photo”
Signature unknown.

Bielsk, 25 December 1922



31 Jewish workers' drama group,
Bielsk-Podlaski, founded in 1926.



32 "Summer vacation in Milejczic (in the forest near Bielsk), 1926".
Standing, centre left – Genia's mother Tsivia Kac;
next to her – her son Yosef Kac.
Seated, third from left, Genia Kac.

37 “A memento for my
dearest friend Genendl”
Signature illegible.
Bielsk 20 December 1927.



38 “Faces of three friends
from your youth in our
Bielsk: Velfke, Gitl,
Yoshke; to Genendl as a
memento” 25 April 1927.



Having finished the Jewish Teachers' Seminary, and qualified as a teacher, my mother got a job teaching kindergarten and primary school. This was her personal choice as she loved being with young children.



45 Peretz Kindergarten class in Bielsk-Podlaski,
Pesach 1928.

Seated in the centre: teacher Genia Kac.
On the portrait – Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz.



48 Bielsk, 9 July 1928. A group of Bundist teachers, from left to right (back): Yosef Kac, Mashke Kirpitsch, Shepsl Ayzenberg, Genia Kac; seated in front, Etl Ayzenberg, Libe Uzitski.



49 Group of friends, Pesach 1928. Second from left, Genia Kac.



54 "Don't forget! To Genendl, Sheve.
Bielsk, 22 August 1928"



105 Summer holidays near Bielsk-Podlaski, with Genia, her parents Samuel and Tsivia Kac, and Helena, 1935.



106 Same holiday, 1935, with a group of friends.
In front on right, Helena. On the stairs, left, grandmother Tsivia.
Holding onto the post, mother Genia.

Due to the terrible anti-Semitism of the late thirties in Poland, my father lost his excellent job in the Polish-owned printing firm in Kalisz where he had worked for many years. He found it difficult to establish himself in something different. My parents and I moved to Brest-Litovsk. Living close to my mother's family, we spent all our holidays with them.

I remember with love the preparations for Pesach, the seders, Hanukkah celebrations, the fun of Purim, the Holy days in shul where my grandmother could show off her only granddaughter, dressed up for the occasion, to the townsfolk. On summer vacations we went with them to nearby places, the most popular being the beautiful forest of Milejczic.



109 Summer holidays in
Milejczic, 1936.
On right, grandmother Tsivia
Kac and mother Genia.
In front, Helena.



110 Same holiday, 1936.
Second from right, mother Genia.
Third from right, Chanan Tykocki, the sole
survivor of Bielsk-Podlaski.
Helena in front on the left.



111 On a summer holiday near Bielsk-Podlaski; grandmother Tsivia Kac, mother Genia and Helena.



112 On the same holiday, Tsivia sitting next to Helena, Genia standing behind her and friends.



113 Walking in Bielsk- Podlaski – Tsivia, Genia and Helena.



114 In a Bielsk- Podlaski park, Genia (first on right), friends and Helena in front.



115 On holiday in Milejczic - with a large group of holiday makers, in 1937.



116 On the same holiday – grandparents Samuel and Tsivia Kac, Genia and Helena.



117 Genia with a friend.



118 From left, Tsivia, friend, Genia and Helena.



119 Friends, mother Genia (on right) and Helena.



120 Milejczic – two friends and Helena (on left), six years old.



121 Milejczic, summer 1937.
“A group of Bundists – (left to right) L. Tykocki, Genia Kac-Storch and Mr. and Mrs. Glat.



122 On a street in Bielsk-Podlaski – Genia Kac and Mr. Glat.



123 “13 January 1937,
a memento for the Storch
family, from Noach and Libe



124 “Winter 1937”, in Bielsk-Podlaski.
Helena, front left,
mother Genia standing behind her.



164 Genia (left) and Helena Storch, 1947, with the only survivor of Bielsk-Podlaski, Mr. Hanan Tykocki. They had just been fitted out by the Jewish Committee with second-hand clothes sent from America.