JACOB BALTZAN

OUR HOUSE IN LEOVA

Edmonton, Alberta (Canada)
1935
Manuscript

To Hinda

My life's companion,
My partner in life's struggle,
Mother of our children,
With everlasting love
and thankfulness.

Printed through the auspices of
the author's brother Shmuel's son
Dr. P. Baltzan
1965
Herzlia.

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My partner in life's struggle,
Mother of our children,
With everlasting love
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A Few Words

It is not that I consider myself an important personality that I write my memoirs, but because it is in a person's nature, when he reaches his golden years, to take stock, do some soul searching and take a look at the past.

I grew up in other times and circumstances than those in which my children and friends live today.

The struggle was great, but we must be thankful for the time.

Therefore I have written these pages, perhaps someone of my friends will be interested to read them.

J. Baltzan

[handwritten in the original]

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In Memoriam

February 10th, 1939.

Dear Friend:

A Memorial Meeting under the auspices of all the Jewish Organizations of Edmonton in memory of the late Mr. J. Baltzan will be held in the

TALMUD TORAH HALL

ON

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15th, AT 8:30 P.M.

Every member of our Community and District is asked to attend this meeting and pay tribute to the memory of the late Mr. J. Baltzan who made such lasting contributions to all our institutions and community life.

Respectfully,
JOINT COMMITTEE.

MEMORIAL

February 10th, 1939

Dear Friend,

A memorial meeting, under the auspices of all the Jewish organizations in Edmonton, dedicated to the memory of the late J. Baltzan, will be held in the hall of the

TALMUD TORAH

Wednesday the 15th, at 8.30 in the evening.

Every member of our community, as well as of the surrounding district, is asked to come to this memorial meeting to pay tribute to the late Jacob Baltzan, who did so much for all our institutions and for the general community life of Edmonton.

Respectfully,
Joint Committee.

JACOB BALTZAN



1872 - 1939

Jacob Baltzan
Edmonton, Alberta,
Canada
1935

OUR HOUSE IN LEOVA

Leova, a small town in the new Bessarabia, stands on the river Prut, which has also been the border between Russia and Romania since 1878. Before that it was Romanian.

The town is situated at a high spot, much higher than the river, and is surrounded by forests and vineyards. The town itself is comprised of several streets. Two of which are main streets where the shops and homes of the wealthy citizens, the town fathers and the influential folk are found. The poor lived on the side streets. There were about 500 Jewish families in the town, almost all of them related to one another by blood or by marriage.

It was a lively town. The chief business of the town dealt with grain, all types that grew in the vicinity in abundance and was exported to Romania, to Galatz-Braila, by boat on the Prut.

As far as "Gura Prutului" (the mouth of the Prut), where the river flows into the Danube, the ships float downstream with the current, helped by the sailors who push them along with long wooden poles. But, when the ships reach the Danube, there is a large steamboat there that pulls ten boats at a time into the ports of Galatz and Braila.

At the Prut river's edge, where the ships are loaded,

there is a lot of noise and excitement. There can often be from 80 - 100 ships there that are loaded with various grains. Those grains for export included summer and winter wheat, barley, corn and so on.

The ships' owners as well as the sailors are Greek, therefore every merchant had to know at least enough Greek to be able to converse with them.

The laborers who brought the grain to the ships were almost all Jewish, each had his own cart and his horse, and during loading time they made good money. Thankfully the cost of living was not expensive, so they lived not badly. They were organized in groups with a manager over them. During the winter, or when there was no work, they used to get advance payment from the merchants, so they were able to live quite nicely.

My father, olav hasholem, Chaim Yehuda (Alter) Baltzan, a well-to-do, fine citizen, held an important position and his word was regarded and respected. Although he himself was a quiet, gentle man who hated to become involved in communal leadership, but they used to somehow drag him in to involvement in everything.

As a Jew, a householder, he ran his home with a generous hand and he was always surrounded by various brokers offering different projects. Here there was a forest to buy; there a landowner needed to borrow a few rubles, buy off some grain from small merchants who needed the money and generally through deeds of charity to help the needy and so on. There always seemed to be some "nudniks" around and in addition, he had his own business affairs to attend to. Doing the accounts with the gentiles, paying out money, giving orders to the hired help, but all this was done sensibly and calmly, never angrily, always with a smile and a good word. If ever there was a loss or failure, he never became angry or dismayed, rather he said,

"It can happen to anyone."

During his free time he sat and studied a chapter of "Mishnayess" and "Chok LeYisrael", and always turned to his Midrashim and other such books.

By nature he was a good and gentle person, generous and sympathetic, always ready to listen to another's problems. He had many friends both Jewish and Christian. Their home was always open, and there were strangers and guests seated at every meal.

The house was already considered quite modern for the time. The table always had settings for each and everyone and according to the standards of the time it would even be considered a bit aristocratic. This came about due to the fact that he was associated with merchants from abroad and he felt that everything should be pretty and nice and in order.

My mother, Chana, loved to give away anything from the house that was left over, dairy products, sours, or to send food parcels to the needy, those who were ill, or to mothers of newborn babies still recuperating from childbirth. She loved fine things, but also liked to get everything as cheaply as possible.

During fruit harvest time the house was filled to overflowing because all the gentiles who dealt with my father used to always bring us fruit. My mother already had her "steadies" to whom she gave away all we could not use.

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The house in which we lived was passed down to us from my father's father, Reb Moishe Baltzan, olav hasholem. I remember that from time to time some of my aunts used to come to collect some inheritance, (my father was the only son). He used to, each year, buy out from them their share of the inheritance. My mother used to complain, "You've already paid them at least ten times their inheritance, why are you still giving them money?"

He used to smile and say, "They don't have it as good and I would help them out anyway, so isn't it nicer for them to feel that I'm paying them their inheritance than giving them charity?" "G-d will help"!

The house was passed down through several generations. Whether the earlier generations kept paying out inheritance to other family members, I don't know, I know only that the house always had to belong to a Baltzan!

A large, old-fashioned house, with a large shingled roof, which each resident tried to make more modern, according to his outlook; a lot of windows facing the street as well as the yard, into the garden. Two doors: one, as they used to say, for distinguished guests, which led into the hall (salon). The second door led into the dining room. The rooms were large but not terribly high, according to the architecture of the day, it was obviously built at least 150 years ago. The ceilings, made of smooth, nice looking boards painted with a white oil paint (a luxury in those days). The doors and windows were white on the inside and either brown or yellow on the side facing the street. In the front of the house there was a yellow picket fence and a row of eight large, spreading acacias planted in a straight line.

The furniture was old-fashioned, wooden beds, upholstered chairs in the living room and in the dining room a large, heavy oak table that could seat the entire family, with Viennese chairs and also a few wooden benches made by local carpenters.

On the side of the house there was a small door leading into the yard, with a path of thick boards leading to the garden and to the annex and the yard.

Next to the small door was a fine large gate with iron hinges, painted red. In the yard there was an annex, like another house, where the summer kitchen was. The servant's quarters were there as well as a suite where one of the married who preferred to live near their father could live, notwithstanding the fact that they already had their own houses. There in the annex was also a lovely brick-built Succah with all the conveniences, which my father loved very much. Between the two houses was a front garden enclosed by green fences with white tops, with an arbour overgrown with Morning Glories, and fruit trees.

In the centre of the garden stood a large table and benches where, all summer, except on Shabbes, we used to eat there day and evening "neath the shade of the large Acacia tree."

My father already had garden lamps which the wind could not extinguish and garden lights which were certainly brought at first from abroad and later from Kishinev. At the other end of the garden were two small tables between the trees, where we used to always sit and read, or play chess.

The yard was very large with another gate for driving in from another street. A row of large granaries where the various grains and other produce were stored, sheds for tools and a stable for the horse and buggy.

The yards was always full of ducks and geese which, during the summer, we used to buy cheaply and they used to feed on the kernels of wheat and other grains that were left in the milling, and also, large cages of hens.

The fields around the yard were planted with large Acacia trees. This was the tree my father loved best. They served also as a protection against fires, which very often occurred in our town of Leova. Once there was a fire that approached closely, but the thick branched Acacia's did not let the fire burn through.

Our town was famous for fires. When one occurred, a whole street would be consumed! The rich would rebuild and the poor would have to sell their land to the wealthy.

Once, during Succoth, (and it actually started in a succah), HALF A TOWN was destroyed by fire. One of the wealthy men in the town gave ten thousand rubles so that people could rebuild and recover from their loss. Those who suffered losses were given aid and assistance according to a plan worked out by a committee of ten leaders and my father was their Chairman. The above-mentioned benefactor was my father's uncle, Reb Eliezer Arieh Mitchnik. There are many fine stories I could tell you about him, but this is not the place. Thanks to him and the committee, that was the first time that the victims were ever assisted and able to stand on their feet again.

Talking about the geese and other house animals, I can't contain myself and must here tell a humorous incident. We started noticing that each week 2 or 3 of the fattest hens were missing from the cages, or 2 of the fattest geese. This went on for the longest time until in the fall when every householder put up kegs of wine in the yard until the first frost hits, then they sort the wine according to it's strength and then they remove the kegs to the cellar.

One Thursday evening two geese were again stolen and wine had been drawn from a keg.

The bore in the keg was closed, stopped with a corn cob. If the cob had been round it wouldn't have been bad, but as it happened, this one was somewhat flat and so the wine slowly spilled out all night long. The wine happened to be very red, and the night very frosty, and when they came out in the morning they saw a red scum over the entire yard. What a terrible waste! It was heartbreaking! If they wish to steal, then steal what you wish, but don't waste! Oh no! My father called out to me, "You're a lad of 15-16, perhaps you would like to undertake the job of finding the thief?" I liked the idea. I had long thought about doing it but my father used to say, "People don't steal for pleasure, they probably needed it, so let them enjoy it."

There was a gentile working in our yard and I made a deal with him that every Thursday evening he should guard the yard. When he sees that the thief has taken a hen or a goose, he should give us a signal on a whistle which I gave him.

I sat in the house with a few of my good friends and waited for the signal. We closed the shutters so that no light could be seen. Half a night passed, and then suddenly we heard a whistle. We run outside to the yard and see that our gentile is holding on to a man. We are angry and run over, but to our surprise we see that it is our neighbor, a Jew with a long, white beard, two curly "payot". I became ashamed and confused but the gang was happy and started leading him into the house. I also gathered my courage and helped lead the "culprit". We did a good job, and the gentile, the "goy" - carried in the two bound geese!

My father, upon hearing the noise, came out into the

dining room in his robe and yarmulkah, views the comic scene and realized what's happened here and says to us, "Children, you go to bed and do not dare tell anyone a word of what's happened here. And you, Reb ..., come in here." He leads him into his office, closes the door, speaks with him a while and when he left my father let him out the front door, gave him the two geese and said, "Enjoy, - and don't forget to send your son for wine to make kiddush." This bothered us children and when I asked my father why he did this he answered, "He has nothing for Shabbes, so I gave him the two geese!"

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It was the custom that the poor used to send their children with jugs to get wine for kiddush from the wealthy householders and so on Friday after shul, our house was like a marketplace! And even more so before the two seder nights of Passover when boys and girls with assorted sized jugs and bottles used to come to my father and say, "Reb Alter, my father asks for wine, enough for the 4 cups." The helper, Reb Leib, used to always bring up from the cellar a full wooden keg or a clay jug (because neither wood or clay spoiled the wine) and he would fill the bottles.

One such bottle was very large, we used to call it "the orphan" for the bottle had a large belly and could hold a huge pitcher of wine. The helper was furious and said to my father, who is busy studying the abridged Shulchan Aruch, studying the laws of Passover and especially how to arrange the Seder plate, "Reb Alter, take

a look at the orphan." My father raises his eyeglasses, considers the matter and says to his helper, "Fill it up, what does it matter to you? For the sedorim we have just opened, and began a new cask of wine, it will be enough for Passover!" The helper felt ashamed, and filled the bottle full. I, as a young boy, used to enjoy this very much. The larger the flask, the more I enjoyed, for I used to see that Reb Leib used to tremble each time he had to return to the cellar.

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My father's business dealt with grain which he bought from the farmers of several neighboring villages, this was considered his "territory". The gentiles used to pre-sell to him their wheat, barley, corn, oats, wine, honey, sheep wool, and take out loans to be repaid with percent. The farmer knew no other way. He used to come for money and always got it, and in a short time later he would repay and the managers of the warehouses used to weigh and measure and record the transactions and the gentile was given a note of the transaction to take to my father. It was a huge business of good merchandise.

The gentiles loved my father very much, and they each brought him gifts. During the fruit ripening season our house was filled to overflowing with fruit. They also brought fish and my mother was always busy dividing all this up and sharing it with many relatives and friends, of which she had many!

When the gentiles used to come to my father, with great respect they used to doff their winter caps. They used to borrow money from him to make their weddings or to buy horses or land. Once, a landowner who had come down in the world had four thousand desyatinas (10 dunam) of land to sell. Several

villagers came at that time to my father and asked him to buy the land for them, and he did. He bought it and held them all responsible, both the rich and poor villagers, for repayment. He himself did not have that much money, but his rich uncle, Reb Eliezer Arieh helped him out and loaned him some money at 10% interest. My father had a good year that year, with good earnings, and the gentiles were happy and grateful to him that he had made possible the purchase of the land. The government bank loaned one half of the money required and the second half they had to raise themselves.

They were very loyal, and truly loved, him. He was a peacemaker amongst them. If anything happened they came to him and even to ask him when their holidays and festivals fell that year. He used to put on his glasses, take out his calendar and figure it out exactly. They looked upon him almost as a G-d.

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I remember that once one of his villages was destroyed by fire, the village of Tamai. So he ordered 2 wagons filled with bread, and a sack of silver coins (gulden, worth 15 pennies) and they sent me to the village to distribute a bread and a coin to every soul there, even those who did not deal or trade with my father. We set up a table in the midst of the village and village officials and I sat around the table and distributed to everyone equally. I even announced that they may also come to see my father and he would give them a note so that they may go to the forest and receive lumber in order to rebuild their houses. Just a short time before he had actually bought ten plots of forest land from the government and now divided it freely, at no charge, to those who had been burned out.

Our attic was always full with sacks of nuts, cases of different beans and grapes. In the warehouses, amongst the grains, we would bury whole sacks of apples, and during the winter when we used to take them out they were still fresh and beautiful. My mother used to distribute whole blocks of cheese and butter during the winter, together with corn meal and other flour. This was her greatest pleasure. At Passover, when the season of slaughtering the young lambs for their skins began, we used to slaughter them in the hundreds, and my mother got busy distributing that meat to anyone who had the need and anyone who asked. Even the gentiles used to come for the hind quarters.

For the winter, whole sacks of sheep pastrami would be prepared. Our house was always stocked full of provisions and all neighbors also enjoyed from Alter Baltzan's house!

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It was in that same house that I was born on the 11th of Iyar 5632, the 19th day of May, 1872, according to my Romanian birth certificate, in the beautiful city of Leova, then Romania. I don't remember when I started "cheder" (school), but I do remember something that used to amaze my parents whenever I used to tell them about it. I remember all these details: I studied in "cheder" with my "melamed" (teacher) Reb Moishe Zaigermacher when the Russian military marched through the streets of our town (then Romania). I recall how the Rabbi, his assistant and all the children were standing and watching the soldiers going through the streets, marching to

music. According to my calculations, I probably was not more than 5 years old at the time. The Russian Army went through the town and crossed over the river, on a bridge made of barrels, on their way to Plevna, during the Russian-Turkish War of 1877. No one could believe a young child of 5 could remember such a thing in such detail.

I remember that an important man, either a colonel or a general stayed at our house and we set up a bed for him in the large living room. In front of our house, by the fence, they set down an iron strongbox, where a sentry always stood on guard. The regimental band came each day and played in front of our house, and I remembered various other details, which the grownups later confirmed.

During the time that the army marched through our town of Leova, and also through "Faltchu", we children did not go to the "cheders", but found ourselves under the supervision of our parents, according to an order decreed by the Rabbi of the town.

I remember when I first started learning "Chumesh" with the redheaded "melamed" (teacher). We started with "Vayikroh", and, as was the custom, there was a party, where a young boy asked me "What are you studying?"

When I started learning "Gemorrah", tractate Kiddushin, with Reb Michel the Shammes, I remembered it very well. The Rabbi used to explain and translate certain words with the same word I didn't understand, so I asked him again to tell me what it means. Instead of an answer he used to slap me and say, "You don't ask questions! The Rabbi teaches and that's all!" This put me in a situation, what does it mean,

you don't ask questions when you don't understand? Secondly, I resented being slapped, which to my mind was most insulting! I was not used to being slapped, I was the "muzinik", the youngest, and therefore even a bit spoiled!

In the evening, during dinner, when the whole family sat around the table, I told them that I had started studying "Gemorreh" and when I asked the Rabbi to explain something, he hit me. I really wanted to squeal on the Rabbi! "What word did you ask?", asked my father. I did not hesitate and told him the word. All became quiet, and my second brother Shmuel (now in Kishinev), then still a young boy, said ashamedly, "With such a child you start learning Kiddushin?" (the tractate dealing with marriage). The next day I was already learning Bava Metzia, and the Rabbi never hit me again.

I went from one teacher to another until I arrived at my studies with Yankele Litvak, an expert in "tanach" (the Bible), who was considered not to be so bright and they called him "tzelem kop". I didn't learn much Torah from him because by profession he was also a bookbinder. The children, his students, would rather help him paste the torn pages of the old books, preparing them for binding rather than study, until my parents found out. Then I began some bookbinding on my own and wrecked havoc on my father's books that I stuck up with paste made of flour and boiling water. My mother, may she rest in peace, had much to say about that! All the furniture, the chairs, everything was sticky from the paste.

They decided to take me away from him, and after a series of other teachers (far from good ones), they turned me over to Reb Moishe Halevy, the best Gemorreh teacher in the city, where one had to be very "frum" and "daven" a lot.

At Yankele Litvak's we weren't used to that. To study just "gemorreh" to him that was "treif". I also was not a great lover of "Gemorreh", but there were other compensations in his class. He had ambitions to become a rabbi and used to answer "shaiyless", questions concerning kashrut, and he always had a sharp knife to cut open the fowl. So, when he answered a question, which could take as long as half an hour, we were free from our learning. He also had a weakness, he loved to tell wondrous stories about good Jews, and about demons and imps, that often took hours. These stories filled me often with fear and when I used to pass a church I used to imagine that a devil stuck out a long tongue which when cut off would grow back even longer. One of his stories and other devilish tales influenced me so that for a time I was afraid to close my eyes or go out of the house at night.

There then came about a division in the town, as usual between the Rabbi and the ritual slaughterers. My father was on the Rabbi's side and my Reb Moishe Halevy became a judge for the other side of the dispute. My father and one other, Israel Buchman, became angry and took us away from Reb Halevy. Since he was considered the best "gemorreh" teacher it was not proper to send us to a lesser teacher, so for a time we did not study at all. Then my father wrote to my brother Shmuel Baltzan in Kishinev that he should send us a special teacher. My brother wrote that he was sending us a young man, from Lithuania, a "litvak" by the name of Stolitziff, a real student of the Tanach, very educated and enlightened. He thinks it's time we started studying in a more modern way.

The young man, the "Litvak", received 125 ruble a term for 3 students, that is 50 ruble for my friend, 50 ruble for me and 25 ruble for my sister. He was to eat for half the term at my friend's fathers' and the other half with us. We gave him a separate room in the annex in the garden.

The new Rabbi, or as we called him "lerer" (teacher) instituted a new method of learning. He divided the day into hours and each hour we studied something different. He made a special tablet showing days divided by the hours and subjects and hung it in the room. The studies were as follows: chumash, prophets, Hebrew, Hebrew grammar, Russian grammar and writing. We also had another teacher for one hour a day to learn Romanian grammar because in our town that was as important as Russian.

He started teaching us the writing of Mapu and the first book he taught us was "Ahavat Tzion" (Love of Zion). We studied Hebrew grammar from "Talmud Lashon Ivri", a book which I immediately bound and I have "till this day".

There was a ruckus in the town, Alter Baltzan and Israel Buchman have brought to town a teacher who is a "Litvak", enlightened and non-religious, he will surely lead the children off the righteous path. We were the first boys in town to wear short jackets instead of long frocks and our "payess" (sidelocks) were shortened. It would have perhaps led to a division in the town were our parents, especially my father, not so beloved. They were also the prominent city leaders to whom so many of them were beholden for favours and good deeds. Not willingly they had to get used to and accept this and for the second term, two others asked that their children also be accepted to study with us. The non-religious "Litvak" got 50 ruble per child per term, except for my sister for whom he was paid only 25 ruble, because for girls you paid less. The truth be known, she learnt better than the boys because we boys had always other games that took our time away from our studies.

Today, having been connected with the Edmonton Talmud Torah for almost twenty years, and serving as chairman of the Board of Education, I see how the girls are always better students than the boys and I am reminded about those childhood years and my little sister.

From that time on, with the coming of that non-religious teacher the era of enlightenment dawned in our town. The young men, sons of the leaders and gentry of the community started befriending the teacher and amongst them my third brother Moishe Baltzan. The people got used to him and then started sending more of their children to study with him. Our parents however, were not happy or agreeable to this, because they were paying quite a bit for our lessons and did not want him to have too many students. Other similar teachers started coming to our town, but none as good as this "Litvak". I was 10 or 11 years old at the time and I had already started putting on my phylacteries (t'fillin) with my teacher. Even though I knew he never put on t'fillin, and didn't pray, I loved my t'fillin which were especially done by the scribe, Reb Dovid'l Soifer. He was a remnant and reminder of the Leover Rabbi, Reb Bereniu, of blessed memory. The scribe went often to the mikveh (ritual baths) and because of this he was very well paid for my t'fillin.

The teacher was like a friend to us and even though we were given a separate room for our classes, we spent most of the time out in the garden under the shady trees where we used to read books such as "Ayit Tzavua" and "Ashmat Shomron". He was very friendly and used to tell us so many things and we loved him very much. What we loved best of all was when he taught us about the prophets. I remember how he used to stand opposite

us, or walk around the room from one end to the other and recite the entire chapter of Isaiah.

He was a tall, lean young man and the Bessarabian food and the good air made him strong and healthy. He used to recite those chapters of the prophets with a tone of voice that so inspired us and at times I used to imagine that Isaiah the Prophet himself was standing before us and addressing the people. He noticed our enthusiasm and did all he could to instill in us a love for the "Tanach" and to our past history.

Out of envy of this teacher who was teaching the children of the best homes; was being paid 50 ruble a term per child plus board; and given such respect and honour, the older teachers tried to find something of which to accuse him, and discovered that he had run away from being mobilized into the army in Lithuania. With a bribe they got him released by the police chief, and that same night he crossed the river, the border into Romania and from there he went to America. After him, it was difficult to find another teacher. We changed teachers often and in the meantime we were getting older. We read every book we could find, also "HaTzefirah" and "HaMelitz", and we formed a youth group. We organized a small library and the enlightenment more and more enveloped our town. Keeping in mind that Leova was until not long before the residence of the Rabbi Reb Bereniu, the youngest child of the "Rezhiner" (great Rabbi). He was simply idolized by the people. Not wanting to remember the story, or the misfortune (?) that had happened to him, the majority of the residents still remained loyal to

the dynasty of the "Rezhiner" and they often visited the grave of Reb Bereniu, who lies in one tomb with his father, the "Rezhiner", and his devoted chassidim. Still, in our town, amongst the chassidim there shone through this beacon of enlightenment that slowly developed and strengthened, thanks to the teacher that the local gentry had brought and whom the people could not resist. Perhaps the tragedy that happened to the Rabbi helped, who knows?

The surroundings and circumstances of our learning were conducive and pleasant, a beautiful and mild climate and all the conveniences, according to those days. Because of rich parents, we were easily able to get what we wanted. At first the library was in our yard. In the room in the annex that had previously been given over to our studies and we, the four children of the leaders of the community became the leaders of the first enlightened youth.

We used to always meet in our garden where we read books and newspapers and I must remark here briefly that my mother, of blessed memory, played a great role in our meetings. She used to sit amongst us in the shade of the trees and used to tell us wonderful stories from the Midrash and Aggadah that she heard from her father Reb Shmuel Gitterman, of blessed memory. He was a great scholar and as was her brother Reb Dovid'l Gitterman from Hantshesty. My mother did not know how to read or write, but she had an unbelievable memory and she used to listen to and remember all that was told and read to her. She was very knowledgeable in politics. She listened to political conversations and discussions in the house after reading political journals and articles had been read by others. She used to remember and recall everything, including names of political and civic leaders.



Chana Bat Shmuel Baltzan (Giterman)

Em Kol HaBaltzanim — the mother of all the Baltzans

We children used to be amazed at how she could repeat all our lessons, even those we had learned earlier and had ourselves long forgotten, but she remembered it all. The concepts of Zionism she knew thoroughly. When Rebelsky came here (to Edmonton) a few years ago, he said to me at a large meeting at his hotel, "Reb Yaakov Baltzan, I have regards for you from your mother. I can tell you that she knows more about Zionism than all the Canadian Zionists," and then tells this story. During a Campaign for Keren Hayesod in Bessarabia, they wanted to visit in Leova. They knew that in order to raise money in Leova they needed my brother Shmuel Baltzan of Kishinev because he was well-known and from a large family. They asked him to go with the delegation to Leova, but because it was Erev Shavuoth he declined saying he never left his home during Yom Tov. The delegation wanted him badly though, so they approached his wife, my sister-in-law Rachel Leah Baltzan and she persuaded him to go. The campaign was very successful, they raised 3 million lei. My brothers-in-law and my brother Yitzchak Baltzan and all the children themselves gave 1 million lei.

After the campaign my brother said to Rebelsky: "Come, see my mother." He imagined she would be an old-fashioned "yiddeneh" (Jewish lady), however, after sitting a short time, having refreshments, nuts and wine and listening to her speak, he left very impressed and said to my brother, "Your mother is a wonderful woman. She must be very educated." My brother told him, "She cannot read or write, but has learnt everything by heart and from memory."

My mother, who always loved to hear discussions on the Torah, also loved to listen when we read our books of enlightenment. She used to serve us fruit

and say, "Eat in good health and grow to be honest children, no matter what you may study." Once I heard an elderly neighbor say to her, "Channah, how is it that you allow your children to study that (treif) enlightenment?" So my mother answered with the story about Rabbi Meyer who ate fruit but threw away the peel, "Let the children study all, as long as they grow to be honest and worthy people." Thus our little world continued with my mother's help. My father did not bother us and I even once found an "Ayit Tzavua" tucked in amongst his holy books; he used to snatch up our books and read them quietly.

Slowly, boys from chassidic families started coming to us, those who still wore long black coats. Our town was still steeped in the spirit of Chassidism, even though some were now not as deeply chassidic, since the happening with the Leova Rabbi. I have already written about this in the newspaper "Dos Yiddishe Vort." Trade with other countries also contributed a great deal to this, because it brought many merchants to visit our town. However, many still remained loyal to the "Rezhiner Family", and the Rabbi closest to us was the Buhusher Rabbi, Reb Itzchak.

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Speaking about the Buhusher Rabbi, I recall a story when the Rabbi was very helpful. It was during a year when the Russian government decided to have military manoeuvres in the entire Odessa and Warsaw regions and also in the neighborhood of Leova near the Romanian border.

Whether there was a political motive we do not know, but Romania was frightened to have the Russian military and so much of it, so close and they protested. I will yet speak about this. It was during the season when the fields were full of watermelons, other melons also, cucumbers and vegetables. The weary soldiers fell upon the crops and by the time they reached our town, there broke out amongst them an epidemic of cholera and they started dropping like flies. The populace complained vehemently and asked that the soldiers be removed.

The Romanian Government seeing so much military on their borders, asked also that the soldiers be removed because it was contrary to the Berlin Accord of 1878 which forbade Russia from keeping it's military near the Romanian border of the new Bessarabia, except for border patrol. The soldiers were recalled, their maneuvers cut short, but they left behind a "present", the dreaded cholera which started spreading through the poor inhabitants.

The government and the town adopted strict measures to quell the epidemic. A number of doctors and healers were brought in. The Jews and the Christians together organized a strict sanitation committee with the government's help. The homes of the poor were cleaned, the basements and attics too as well as the homes of Christians and Jews. Good, nutritious food was freely distributed. Two barracks were set up where they distributed, also for free, strong old wines and cognac for all to drink, and with these remedies the disease was quelled in two weeks time.

But it wasn't so easy to keep everything so clean by some of

the Jews. We quietly and discreetly approached the Buhusher Rabbi, who lived in Romania and he sent out a decree to all the Jews which was posted in the synagogues and this helped a great deal. The decree included a list of instructions and directions on: how to keep the houses clean, about proper food, a lot of sleep, and drinking of alcoholic beverages. Also how to whitewash the houses and around the walls making a line with black coal, this was a sign that the illness should not enter. The Christians, seeing all that the Jews were instructed, did the same and when you went down through the poor district you saw all the whitewashed houses with black coal mark lines around. According to the decree, a "chuppah" was also erected at the cemetery.

During that time, all the gentry used to take out the old, strong wines from their cellars and they used to get together and drink. There was no business then. The whole town was locked up. No one came and no one left. Here I am reminded of a funny happening.

My father had, amongst his barrels of wine, one barrel called "Mevushal". To explain that wine, it is made at first very sweet, later, when it ferments, it becomes ordinary wine. When it is still fresh and sweet they pour it into large copper kettles of 50 or 60 buckets each, and boil it down by half, and then it remains sweet. They remembered this wine and decided it would not be a bad idea to taste it, and who should have the honour to put the spout into the keg? Probably me and, at the time there was a very good friend of mine there from Skuleny, Aaron-Yosef Bondar, who was caught in the quarantine in Leova and could not return home. The two of us, two boys from Bessarabia, 12 and 16 year olds, got the necessary equipment together and went down to the cellar. We placed the spout in the keg and slowly started tasting. The strength and the aroma of the wine affected us and although

we were used to strong wines, we both fell asleep near the barrel.

In the house, they started to wonder why we were taking so long, so they came down to the cellar and found us sleeping like dead, leaning on the barrel. For quite a while I was very embarrassed when they used to remind me of this.

Of course, when a well-to-do gentleman in Leova is known to have such a wine, he has no fear of cholera. This wine was used for curing an illness, for stomach aches, for all other illnesses, I remember how children of our friends and acquaintances used to come to our house and ask for wine as a remedy.

During the epidemic, it was forbidden to eat fruit and vegetables. In our attic we used to have whole bunches of grapes spread out and left to dry over the winter. They used to lie there until late in the winter and during normal times we used to always eat them, when fresh were not available and they were delicious to eat. But, when fresh fruit is not allowed to be eaten, how does a Bessarabian boy control himself and not grab a "nosh" of these dried grapes from the attic, even though it was forbidden both by our parents and doctors?

Every day, when my father took a nap, I would sneak up to the attic to eat a few bunches of dried grapes, even unwashed as they were. Who has time to wash them? I noticed, however, that I was not the only one eating of the forbidden fruit and I decided to find out who it was. I hid in the attic and waited.

At my brother Yitzchak's home lived his wife's young brother, an orphan, a boy of 16. His name was Shaikeh Fruchtman and he was a friend of mine. All of a sudden I see him attacking the grapes, as if in "cold blood" he's eating.

When I yelled, "Shaikeh", he was so frightened, he nearly fainted, because there was a legend that said that the illness cholera used to disguise itself in different forms to trap its victims. And when I suddenly called out his name in that large attic where he imagined no one else but he was there, he was terrified. After that day, we both met and went up to the attic together to eat the forbidden fruit.

One day, climbing the ladder in the space between the two houses, I heard someone knocking on the window. I paused and thought someone had discovered my folly. But, when I looked, I saw that my sister Ita was calling to me and saying, "Where is it written that only the two of you may eat the dried grapes? What about me, don't I deserve any?" She was right, but she was not allowed to climb up to the attic, because she would certainly be caught and seen. So, each day we brought her down a few bunches of grapes.

One day, during lunch, when the epidemic had subsided, the servant was sent to the attic to bring down some grapes. When he returned he said that something awful had happened up there and there were almost none left. My father didn't think long and looked over at me and said, "Nu, my little wise guy, what do you know about this?" My sister and I started to laugh and told him how each day we had gone to the attic and stolen and eaten grapes, even though it was forbidden then to eat fruit, just to prove that it was not harmful, obviously so, as nothing had happened to us. I also told them about the time I caught Shaikeh at it and frightened him so and they really laughed. My mother, though, was upset and said, "How does a youngster do such a thing that is forbidden? He could have died."

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In the meantime, the younger generation was growing up and a new teacher was brought for them, Yehuda Steinberg, a small, thin little Jew with a short, clipped beard, who came highly recommended. A good teacher, a scholar, enlightened, but very non-religious. Again there were several of the wealthy gentry in the town, amongst them my older brother-in-law Leib Shaffer (owner of the local branch of the Bank of Moldavia) who undertook to care for him, and he received 400 ruble a term for teaching 5 children.

In the beginning, before he brought his family to join him, he used to eat at my brother-in-law's and my older sister Golda used to make certain that he had everything he needed. She was very goodhearted and even more ready to help people than our mother. There, in my sister and brother-in-law's home, I got to know him and we became fast friends.

Being from Bessarabia, he also loved the fields and the garden. Even more, he loved the river where we used to go often three times a day to swim (even Shabbes). He visited our library and promised to do something for us if it wouldn't interfere. I promised him full support, even from my mother. He was older than me. He was from Old Bessarabia. We were considered the New Bessarabia, which changed over to Russia after the Russian-Turkish War. According to the Berlin Agreement of 1898 all of New Bessarabia went over to Russia.

Yehuda Steinberg was from Yedinetz and married a woman from Britchan. Because he was so enlightened, he had to leave both these towns, often literally running away and thus he often had

suffered hunger. When he came to us and now lived in good, wealthy circumstances and was widely respected, it could be said with certainty that this new situation greatly contributed to the development of his beautiful and poetic soul. He became the well-known writer and author, Yehuda Steinberg.

He became our leader. He organized a youth group called "Bnai Tzion" (Sons of Zion). Although our parents were all members of the Odessa Committee of "Chovevei Tzion" (Lovers of Zion), they really knew little about Zionism.

Actually, there already was such a group which has been founded by the modern speaker of the times, Mr. Masliansky, when he came to visit our town, sent by the Odessa Committee of the "Chovevei Tzion". He spoke in the large synagogue, standing on the steps near the Holy Ark. He had a lot of hair, and a small, shorn beard. He was a modern speaker. I recall even that he spoke on the theme "Dry Bones". It was something new for us. We were used to the oldtime speakers who always seemed to scold their audiences. I was still young. With his fiery speeches he excited and inspired his audiences and attracted many to join the Odessa "Chovevei Tzion" Committee and we, the young boys, were organized into a "B'nai Tzion" group and we paid 3 ruble a year in dues.

When Steinberg came, he organized the library in his way, the books were all moved into a large room, donated by Mordechai Shpinodel. The library became the centre and meeting place of the youth. Yehuda Steinberg was our source of enlightenment and we all flocked around him. He organized literary evenings and readings. This was his weakness. He loved to read and explain and there really was much to hear and learn.



YEHUDA STEINBERG

I recall that on Tisha B'Av we gathered in the library where he was explaining "Tziyon Halo Tishali". The room slowly filled up with adults, parents who wanted to hear what this heretic would tell the children. They were very impressed. One was heard to remark, "If they say he knows, we must believe, but what will he do to our children?"

Thus our library grew. There was no problem of money, for we were all children of well-to-do families where, according to their circumstances, a ruble meant nothing.

When his family came, his wife Fradl, his older son Nahum (about whom I once wrote in "Dos Yiddishe Vort" under the title "The Living Dead"), his daughter Ziona and a small son, then we became very close friends.

Because our town was near the Romanian border, our police were the gendarmes. The gendarmes were always going around sniffing and snooping, looking for contraband and watching for political activists who used to go throughout town to cross the border. The more gendarmes they sent to our town it seemed, the more political criminals used to steal across and took with them more contraband. Contraband business was very widespread amongst the gentiles in the villages on either side of the river and many of these had Jewish partners in the villages too.

The gendarmes started checking on our library, coming in and inspecting the books to see if they could be approved by the censor. Once they found the Warsaw Yiddish Weekly newspaper "Der Yid", which was printed in Kracow and it did not have a stamp from the censor on it. Each week they came in to confiscate the paper that arrived by mail,

until they wrote from Warsaw that the Warsaw Censor Board does allow this publication. We could not get a permit for our library because we were near the border and to employ a special Censor there did not pay for the government. The gendarmes used to keep dropping in to see what was happening, who was coming in and kept a watchful eye on everything and everyone. So, we moved the library to the Steinberg's and there we used to get together and enjoy. You could say that Steinberg was the one who rejuvenated the Leova youth and brought to us much enlightenment.

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Our town was considered to be quite free, even heretic. The story of what happened with the Rabbi, the times, the trade that we did that connected us with the outside world, the good economic conditions, all this helped to take us "further". We became freer in our ways than other towns around who remained somewhat backward and fanatic. There they still wore the traditional shoes and stockings, long underwear, long black coats, long "payess" (side locks) and were also, in the main, very poor.

There was to be a wedding in our family by the in-laws the Shaffers. The girls learnt to dance the quadrille, the polka, the shere bulgar, hora and so on. At that wedding I was the only Leova boy that danced, of course, only with girls from our own family. There was one other boy who danced and he was related to the in-laws, he was a son of Skuleny.

The town was going wild. They asked

my father how he could have allowed such a thing. He answered that he saw no harm in it, especially since I danced with the Rabbi's daughter, (also an in-law), and she was pretty at that. Thus, people slowly got used to this and within a year I was allowed to dance with girls, daughters of other gentry and our parents enjoyed this.

Although the folk of Leova were considered to be freer than others, we were still treated with great respect, because others drew their livelihood from our town, which did a great deal of export business.

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As I had previously mentioned, my father did not like to get involved in community affairs, but nevertheless, nothing was done until it was first discussed with him and he gave his approval, because we were like a large and many-branched family. My older brother Yitzchak once came home and told him that he had leased the tax on kosher meat (under the Romanian system the meat tax was leased out). When my father heard that he was furious and said, "I hate those who collect that tax." When my brother explained that he did this on behalf of some of the poor relatives whom he could give jobs and some of the income, my father felt a little better about it, because we had to support them anyway. During those two years when my brother was in charge of those taxes they gave the income to the relatives and he also added several hundred ruble to them.

Once at night, while I was asleep, I heard an "alarm", a great commotion, someone was banging on the door. We were very

frightened, because there were often fires. My father and a few of the gentry in the town were the first to insure their property against fire, and they urged everyone to insure. When the insurance plate was first nailed onto our house, everyone came to look.

We opened the door and a whole group of Jews pushed their way in, all excited and out of breath, carrying with them the Chevra Kadisha record books, wrapped up in a tablecloth. Reb Alter took the books and all screamed that they had taken the books away from the Chevra Kadisha "gabbai", the custodian, because since he had the books, too many people were dying. "We brought them to you and hope that while they are in your hands perhaps G-d will have mercy and things will quiet down!" they said.

I will never forget that moment. My father wanted to calm them down, so he asked them to leave him alone and take the books back. But, it didn't help. They only settled down when he agreed to keep them. The guardians of the Chevra Kadisha kept changing, but the books remained with my father and he guarded them like something holy and kept them locked in his desk. Whenever I could, I used to sneak in and read the books. Perhaps it is since that time that I developed such strong feelings about the vast importance of keeping records and books for our own organization right here in Edmonton.

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Meanwhile, the time for my being called up into the military was drawing nearer and nothing helped. I was strong and they took me into the army as a soldier. They were asked to try to give me an assignment not with the commoners. They planned to send me

to Kishinev to serve, where my brother Shmuel Baltzan lived and we could have a bit of influence and "protektzia".

In the draft in our town, which was in September of 1893, I drew a small number and was taken as a soldier. They gave us a month free before we had to report in October of the same year. The people could not believe that I was actually taken into the army, they said it was only for appearance sake. But, when the time came, I left for Izmail with my older brother Yitzchak to find a way to be sent to Kishinev.

In that year they sent the Bessarabian recruits to the Caucasus, but with bribes I was kept in Kishinev and not sent away, using the excuse that I was not well. After the transports left, they sent me to Bender, just a few hours travel from Kishinev, I was almost home.

When I was sent out of Izmail, they gave me a few days off, from Thursday to Monday. Shabbes I stopped in Bolgrad with relatives and Sunday I took a carriage to the station at Troyanov Val and arrived at night in Bender. Next to the assembly point there was a small shop owned by a Jew. There, all the Jewish soldiers gathered. I was taken there, it was a spot where groups ate, got together and enjoyed and often even stayed overnight. For this we had to pay the junior officer. Very early they used to wake to make a minyan and say prayers and I did that along with them.

While we were standing and putting on our t'fillin, my brother Shmuel and another Jew from Kishinev came in. I understood how pleased my brother was to see

me praying. He introduced me to the Jew with him, Shabtai Berman was his name, a chassid of the Berdichev Rabbi. He invited me to visit him often and he told me that they had already assigned me to the Larga-Kagulsky Reserve Battalion in the Bender fortress, in the first company, and that all was arranged. The company commander received monthly payments from my father; he was a good man, but he liked his men to be good soldiers and to "daven". I didn't understand what davening had to do with being a soldier, but I didn't pursue it.

By day I found myself in the fortress, in the first company of the aforementioned battalion. The history of this battalion had, so to speak, a family tie with my home. The river Larga is only 30 versts from my town of Leova. Years ago the battalion distinguished itself by this river when Bessarabia belonged to Russia in the days of Nickolai the First and later went over to Turkey and now, I, a son of Leova, here was I only 20 versts from that lucky river Larga, serving in that same battalion. This speech was given by the Unit Commander upon my reception at my new quarters. He asked me if I prayed every day, because only the faithful can also be dedicated soldiers of the fatherland and, to the Czar. Those who do not pray are enemies of the Czar and of Holy Russia.

He was a good looking, tall, pleasant man, obviously did not hate Jews and also did not object to the few rubles he was promised monthly. He immediately asked me if I would eat from the kettle. "Of course", I answered. "That's the kind of soldier I like, It's a pleasure to look at them", and then he ordered that Rosenberg, Gomberg and Tumarkin be brought there. I took a look and they brought three very thin Jews with beards, obviously Polish. "See, these three Jews will not eat from the kettle, they eat only onions and bread and therefore they are good for nothing, they're poor soldiers", he said. Then he pointed to one and said, "This one I tried to forcefully feed,

stuffing kasha in his mouth until he nearly choked. I made him stand at attention under his rifle as punishment, but it didn't help. I'll just have to suffer through with them. If you will be a good soldier, you will be free and be allowed every Shabbes to go to Berman and eat his Jewish kugel." I listened very seriously to his lecture and told him I would try my best to be a good soldier.

That day I received my military garb and became a complete soldier. When Mr. Berman and my brother came to see me they didn't recognize me, I was like a lord. A nice black uniform with a red collar, a hat without a peak, a red ribbon around with a yellow stripe in the seam with the number 232. Red epaulettes also with the yellow number 232.

My brother and Mr. Berman told me of all the arrangements made with the commander and that if I will be a good soldier, I will be allowed to go home for Passover. But, when I'm in the city, I must go to the Berman's. My brother Shmuel promised that he would come to visit me every second week.

Soon it was nightfall. I see they are seating the new recruits, who have already been studying theory for two months and I among them. I sit amongst them and begin to yawn and even from time to time start dozing a bit. The commander comes in and sees me yawn, so he asks the junior commander not to take me to the theory sessions, but to give me a book and I should study on my own. I read the book once or twice and learned everything by heart. A few days later an officer came in and saw me sitting at the side, reading the book. He asked if I had already learnt something and I told him yes. He begun questioning me and examining me and I passed the exam. With great joy he went to inform the unit commander.

The next day they questioned me again and my answers obviously satisfied and pleased them

for they asked me to coach the recruits and teach them to write the numbers of their rifles. At first I liked the idea, but I soon felt I would be spitting blood among those swine. But I persisted and they soon grew to like me very much and they benefitted.

I was in the second platoon and my Junior officer was a real villain and he always looked for ways to pick on me. One day at lunch time, he called me out of the mess hall and told me to sweep out the platoon's quarters. I was very insulted and told him I wouldn't. Therefore he said, "You won't get to go into the city on Shabbes."

Shabbes at ten in the morning I used to always go to the commander for a permit to go into the city, which he gave until Sunday evening. This Shabbes I didn't go to him. He expected me and when I didn't come, he sent an aide to find me and see why I wasn't going into town. Berman had also already telephoned to him to ask. I explained what had happened and the commander himself came, (he lived not far away) and when he heard he was furious with the officer and said to him, "Don't you know that he has special privileges?" And right away I left for the city.

To write about my soldiering life in the army would take a lot of space, perhaps I'll leave it for another time and occasion. At first I enjoyed it, but when summer came and the time came for manoeuvres, I wrote home and asked, "How is it that my tour of duty is longer than my brothers?" The next week my father and my brother Shmuel came and started "working on it". Exactly eight months after I entered the army I was released from

Reserves. When I was released from duty they said it was for reasons of fatigue and weakness. I weighted however 66 kilo, so you can imagine how much this excuse must have cost my father. I must here also mention Shabbtai Berman who's involvement with all the officers and doctors was very helpful to us, he was a very fine Jew.

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I went into my father's business as a young man of the gentry should. They started to find me a "shiddach" (a match, a life partner) and I latched on to one from a small town, Hantshesht, not far from Leova. It was a very fanatic and chassidic little town, but the father-in-law was a wealthy man, very influential. His business and trade was in lumber, wine, sheep and he handled the postoffice between Hantshesht to Kishinev.

Actually, I had known the girl for quite some time. I had met her in Kishinev where I used to spend the winter months. All we needed was to make arrangements through a matchmaker. She became my wife and now it is already 34 years since our marriage.

In that small town when a young man from Leova ever came, they used to look upon him as a heretic. But, thanks to my father's good name and the fact that he was one of the gentry, rich gentry and a leader, the synagogue leaders knew him well. They used to often come to us for donations.

When I went with my father-in-law to the synagogue, I made a donation to the Keren Hakayemet, which was then considered "traif" (not kosher). But because I had also donated to the Talmud Torah and to the Synagogue, they forgave me for everything.

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My father died before my wedding. We put off the wedding until Shabbes Nachamu. I took over my father's business and conducted the household exactly as in his day. The same guests for Shabbes and Holidays, the same traditions, everything as it had been. My mother paid more attention and care and helped me because the gentiles respected and revered her greatly. The house remained a Baltzan house as always. The other children all had enough on their own and thus, it went for many years.

Until the Russian-Japanese War of 1902-1904, when there was an upheaval in our lives and we were plucked from the nest and came to Canada.

My brothers looked after my business and used to send me sums of money. The house remains until today under the name of Baltzan and it will pass on thusly to the grandchildren. *)

The continuation of my life story is contained in detail in memoirs of my life as a farmer in Canada, published in the Yiddish newspaper, "Dos Yiddishe Vort".

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*) In the year 1941 the house was destroyed together with the entire Jewish population of the town. P.B.

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The Family of Uncle Zaidl Kazak Urbuch

1918

The Last Inhabitants of the House.



Legend

From right to left:

1. Pereleh – perished together with her husband Grisha and her child Loni in the Kishinev Ghetto, 1941.
2. Eliezer – Dr. Eliezer Kazak-Urbuch, murdered in Yassi, 29.6.41.
3. Aunt Ita – perished in the Ghetto.
4. David – Engineer David Ur, the only one of the entire family who lives with us here in Israel.
5. Uncle Zaidl – died of a heart attack in 1918.
6. Mordechai – perished together with his wife Rosa, somewhere in a camp, 1941.