

HISTORY
of the
STIEFEL FAMILY

by
MICHAEL STIEFEL

CHAPTER I: THE STORY OF MY LIFE

I was born on March 1, 1871 in the town of Poketilov, in the Ukraine, in the province of Griev. But, small and insignificant as this town was, still, it is most deeply imbedded in my heart and soul. Even now, at age 68, despite 52 years here in America, still, during all these 52 years, not one night has ever passed without my dreaming or thinking of my home town, Poketilov. My fondest wish is to live to again see this tiny village which I cherish so highly.

This town may have been small but to me it was beautiful. There were about 500 Jewish families in Poketilov in a general population of 1,000 families. The Jews lived within the town and the non-Jews on its outskirts. But, during all these years, both Jews and non-Jews lived together peaceably and on very friendly terms. In fact, during the '80's when pogroms were raging throughout all of Russia, we were left unharmed.

The entire town was dependent upon its non-Jewish population. In the surrounding hamlets, many of them were merchants, some were artisans. In the center of the market-place stood two rows of stores. Every Tuesday would be a market-day when thousands of the non-Jews would come together from their farms, bringing their produce for sale, and then doing their shopping for the needs of their farms with the proceeds of their sales.

The Jews and their Gentile neighbors were quite contented with one another and lived together very peacefully. Therefore, the many tales told of Jews cheating Gentiles are nothing but wild fabrications of certain anti-Semites. Life flowed along quietly and calmly in our town. All the Jews got along, some better, some worse, but no one ever died of starvation. They would marry off their children, giving them dowry and support. Children didn't have to work to support their parents. Life then was so much more peaceful and much smoother and healthier than here in America.

There was one large synagogue ("Beth Ha-midrash") where most everyone would worship. For the wealthier elite and for the more learned Jews there was a "Kloiz" (a synagogue) and for the youth there was also a Kloiz called the "New Kloiz."

According to a well-known American adage, "You can take the farmer out of the farm but you can't take the farm out of the farmer." This was also quite true of me. I was taken out of my town but you couldn't take my town out of me! Nor is this a bit surprising. Here was a town, encircled by vast fields where hundreds of people were raising wheat, rye, oats, etc., but where the air was filled with such a perfume-like aroma. My greatest pleasure would often be to slip out of the house among the sprawling fields where the farmers, with their wives and children would carry away their grain from those fields. Oh, for the silence of the enchanting summer nights when you could hear only the ripple of the lake and the beating of the windmills, and

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also, quite often, the singing of the birds from the farms! Oh, my, how I yearn for that tiny and quiet town! Whenever I hear the familiar song "Mein Shtetele Belz" ("My Little Town Belz") my what bloody tears stream down from my eyes!

As I have already mentioned I was born on March 1, 1871, but I must have been born old because I never had any period of youth, according to modern standards. From the first day of my birth I was met with hatred and enmity. My parents despised me almost immediately. The reason — because my mother had had five sons and the sixth child they were hoping for a girl. But mother was still carrying her seventh child they were terribly disappointed and therefore hated me even from my very first day.

They immediately gave me over to a wet nurse, a baker woman, who lived somewhere in a dingy basement. There I wallowed around in lice, insects, and filth for about three years, during which time neither my father nor mother ever saw me. But, during those three years that I had spent with this bakery woman my mother bore three more children, all girls. The girls would be carried aloft but I was despised even more.

After three years I was sent home to my parents, in their huge, luxurious home. But, even then would I still find myself often making my way to the baker-woman's home (in the basement), and, as a result, I was nick-named "Mendel Baker." However, despite my upbringing among such sordid conditions of cold, filth, etc., I nevertheless grew up to be very nice, handsome, and healthy — even nicer than the children who were loved.

When I was three years old I was sent to the "Cheder" (elementary Hebrew school) of a teacher (a "melamed") named David Isaac Somchas. He was a good, honest Jew (also a Kohen), but very quick-tempered. From him I received more than my share of swats and blows. In fact, I received even more than did the other children, since he lived but a short distance from the baker-woman, and, because I would often play truant, he would beat me, not as he would a child of three, but of ten years of age.

To report such punishment at home was forbidden, because, it was understood, that if the teacher had punished, no doubt it had been earned. As a matter of fact, many of these beatings were very-well deserved! Whatever damage had been done was usually my doing. Who had removed the ladder while the teacher had climbed up to the attic? Mendel! Who stuck a pin in the teacher's seat? Mendel! Who broke a dish? Mendel! Whenever a prank was played they would always look for me.

At home we were forbidden to report that the teacher had punished anyone (as I have already mentioned). Aside from that, there wasn't even anyone at home to whom anything could be told, because, both my father and my mother had been fully occupied most of their days.

My father had had several businesses. He bought and sold oxen and also operated a distillery. During the summer months they would pasture the oxen on the steppes and during winter they would keep them near the distillery. During the sultry hot weather these oxen would be sent from the steppes to the markets of the larger cities where they would be sold. Then, during Spring, the winter oxen would be shipped to market. In addition to these, my father also held the concession leased out by the lord manor of the province of Poketilov.

In such ways did my father keep himself fully occupied all his days. He

was therefore seldom home. In fact, I believe that if he were ever to meet me in the street he would never even recognize me!

In like manner was my mother also fully occupied. She was nick-named "Breindele the Kozak." She too conducted several kinds of business undertakings. She was in charge of the rental concessions of all the saloons belonging to the feudal lord of Poketilov. In addition she owned a wine-cellar. All these, and other occupations, kept her quite busy.

She was quite friendly with all government officials, in addition to having been a very wise and attractive-looking woman. She even had access to the Czar and would therefore often have to travel to Ovezd of the province in order to intercede for any Jew who might have gotten into any trouble. Now, since it would have been below her dignity for any of her sons to serve the Czar she was always prepared for that and the children were therefore left to serve as servants and attendants at home.

Therefore, the older ones would vent their spite upon the younger ones, and because of my having been the youngest of six brothers I would get blows and swats from each brother. Thus, since there was no one to complain to I was getting my full share both in school and at home. But, as if in spite of all this I did grow up to become as healthy as an ox and also quite handsome, at that.

Our home was the largest and the most beautiful one in town, occupying a number of blocks. The trees surrounding the house practically reached the clouds. The acacias, broom-trees, conifers, flowers and roses grew everywhere. On one side was an orchard. Then, behind the house was a large field of cucumbers. In the courtyard stood a number of buildings. The fence around the house and the railing in front were most striking. Every passerby would stand and admire the beauty of our home.

Many a government official would often whistle at my father and mother with the most intimate familiarity. But, to devote time to their children — for that they could never find time. It seems to me that no child in the world had ever received as many fist blows as I had gotten, both from my teacher in school and from my brothers at home.

The little I ever did enjoy was on Friday afternoon, when our teacher would dismiss us from school. Friday night and the Sabbath day is something I shall never forget.

Until six o'clock Friday it was busy as usual in town. The women were bringing their "cholent" to roast, the men were hurrying to their ritual bath — everyone was preparing to welcome the Sabbath Queen. But after six o'clock the town clothed itself in its Sabbath garb, for Queen Sabbath had arrived — from the heavens and from earth, from the East, from the West, from the North, and from the South. A "super-soul" had descended from Heaven and had entered every Jewish heart. Even the ruffian and the thief — they and everyone else assumed a Jewish appearance as the Sabbath arrived.

On Friday night and throughout the entire Sabbath day the Divine Presence found its proper rest in our home. However, for us children even this Sabbath rest was disturbed, because for a few hours we would have to go to Cheder after the Sabbath meal. Thus, the whole town would be resting comfortably following its Sabbath feast, but we children had to return to Cheder.

In the summer I would often slip away on a Sabbath afternoon into the fields among the gardens or among the wilds of nature. But, for having failed

to attend the Cheder session I would pay very dearly that Saturday night. First, at home, because my teacher would send a boy to our home to inquire about my absence that afternoon. Needless to say, for my truancy I had no lack of punishment — at home from my brothers and the next day at school, from my teacher.

Nevertheless, the next Sabbath I would again do the same thing, because my soul would yearn for the serenity of the woodland — for the vast fields of the Ukraine, where the peasants would bring back their grain from the fields; for the singing of the men and women at work. In this way would I miss school every Sabbath, especially during the summer, and pay for it on Sunday. But during the winter I had to go to Cheder, even though very reluctantly.

My childhood years were very sorrowful ones. Let me now recall one winter morning. About the time I had to start out for Cheder it was still dark outside and Winter's cold blasts held sway. The teacher lived in a small two-room house with a kitchen. One room was rented out to a tenant and in the second room lived the teacher, his wife and four small children. In that one room all of them would sleep, and eat. In the same room stood a long table around which sat 12 lads studying, with the teacher at the head. The small windows which were practically overdrawn were frozen. The teacher, his wife, and four small children all slept in that same room. Then, at night, they would even bring the goats into that same room! The stench from the teacher's room on an early winter morning is another thing I will never forget. The windows wouldn't open, neither in summer nor in winter.

The teacher's wife and children were still sleeping. He was scurrying around about the house, excitedly. You could immediately sense that his expression was most ruthless. Little wonder, then, that he was forever so terribly embittered.

Quite often, upon entering he would pinch my cheeks, obviously as a friendly gesture. But the end result was already obvious for the rest of the day. "This," he would say, "is only the beginning for today. The rest of it will come throughout the day."

In such ways did I move on, from the elementary teacher to the reading teacher, from the reading teacher to the Chumosh ("Bible") teacher, then, from the Chumosh teacher to the Gemorrah ("Talmud") teacher. One was worse than the other. But, every single one of them was nothing but a "murderer." They all simply derived great pleasure from torturing their pupils.

In addition to this, each one of them had his own special technique of punishment. One would enjoy striking your calves. Another one would slap you, not with the under side, but with the outer side of his hand. Still another would take pleasure in striking your forehead until a swelling would erupt. Another would take your hat off and strike your head with a club.

But the most gruesome "murderer" of all was the Gemorrah teacher, whose name was Benish. As they say, "Every blemish is an evil." His blemish consisted of a cracked lip, through which grew a long tooth. Such an ugly appearance was enough to instill a terrifying fear into the hearts of the children, who dreaded him.

However, he was one of the most excellent Gemorrah teachers, and the parents felt fortune in having Benish as their children's teacher. But the pupils cursed the time they would have to spend with him. Even though he

was short and thin, he had the strength of ten peasants. Whenever he would strike a blow your fingers would be touching your stomach all day long. But it so happened that I had the ability to imitate his manner of speaking. Of course, this would make him quite angry and for me there was no end of trouble. Benish was one person whom I will never forget as long as I live. Even now, I still often wake up at night in sheer dread as I dream of having been in Benish's class.

In this way was I tossed about from school to school, suffering cold, filth, misery, etc., until the age of 12. In school I would feel most miserable and at home I would have even less pleasure, because we were twelve children. Now, since both my father and my mother were constantly occupied with their outside work and the girls were the privileged characters, no one could ever say a word to them. Then, on top of all that, my brothers were always domineering me.

My best years were spent between the ages of 12 and 16. When I was 12 years old my father, together with another few parents, engaged for their children a tutor, not a "rebbe." He didn't even want us to call him "rabbi," but rather "Herr Meier Lifschitz."

He was certainly quite an intellectual person, having spoken several languages, as well as having been a proficient Talmudist. He taught us Hebrew grammar, and he would never raise a hand to strike a child. The pupils were most fond of him and it now became so enjoyable to attend school. He taught us the entire "Tanach" ("Bible") and also had us memorize it. We also studied Talmud, as well as Russian grammar. At the close of the term he would examine us and give us grades.

We would sit around a table and study from our Bibles. There were but a few of us, yet, each one of us would have gone through fire and water for the sake of our beloved teacher.

These were the happiest four years of my childhood, the last two having been the happiest. This was because, during these last two years the main subject of conversation had centered around the fact that my brothers Jacob and Abraham and I would be sailing for America. The reason for the three of us having been selected for going to America was that there was talk of my brother Jacob not holding a legal passport as well as the fact that Abraham had now reached the age of 20. I was thrown into the bargain because my parents realized that some day I too would be drafted, since I was in sound health and otherwise excellent soldier material. Because it was below the dignity of my parents to have any of their sons serve in the army did they worry about me, not out of any personal concern for me alone.

They therefore began discussing the advisability of their three sons going to America. They continued discussing this matter for a period of two years and I was burning with the desire to go there.

However, it wasn't the same America that I actually encountered later that I was picturing to myself. Because, instead, at home they were constantly talking about being farmers and working the soil. I imagined to myself that, upon my arrival in America I would become like the peasant farmers who were ploughing, seeding, and harvesting the wheat and corn of their fields.

I further fancied myself leading the life something like our familiar peasants. I would have a barn with horses and oxen. I too would seed the soil and on my farm would stand haystacks of straw and of hay. In addition there would be a huge garden with a variety of fruits and another plot for

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the vegetables. I would be leading a full life of a peasant-farmer, just as in the familiar Ukraine. This was my ideal and for a life such as this did my soul yearn — for the freedom of the soil and to be as free as the wind.

During the entire two years while all this endless talk was going on I also had some apprehensions. But I wasn't allowed to interfere. I couldn't believe that I would ever reach that point in the discussions. Now they would talk and then they would forget about it. In this way did two years pass, until G-d helped, and my brother Abraham was to be drafted as a soldier. Brother Jacob hid himself. It was then definitely decided that the three of us leave for America.

As long as I live will I never forget the final days prior to my departure. This occurred a few days just before (the festival of) Shevuoth. The whole town was embedded in green shrubbery, and especially our house, which was so overgrown with such a multitude of shrubbery that it could hardly be seen beneath it all. We were nearly intoxicated with such a rich abundance of trees and roses.

During that last night I didn't sleep, but ran around to bid farewell to the mill, to the stream, to the lovely far-flung fields. It was a night filled with charm and enchantment — one of the loveliest in all the Ukraine. Its silence spoke a thousand languages. All you could hear was the murmuring of the stream, the rattling of the water-mill, and the barking of the village dogs, in addition to the lovely Ukrainian songs which the women were singing. That night has been standing before my eyes during my entire 52 years here in America.

We departed on the following day. My grandfather, Nissan Stiefel, who was the wealthiest man throughout our entire area, gave us one thousand rubles for expenses — just to get rid of us.

My journey to America was in no way outstanding, except that I was terribly excited. Until my departure I had never before seen a train, ship, nor any other town beside our tiny hamlet. In this way did we plod along for 17 days — traveling steerage, and overcome with sea-sickness. The food, too, was unbearable.

We finally arrived in New York on Saturday, June 28, and left for Philadelphia by train that very same day. Arriving there that night we came to 9th and Green Sts. My head soon became dizzy from the intolerable heat.

From there we were taken to some of our friends and relatives who lived at 3rd and Reed, a place called "Castle Garden." This place consisted of a long alley with 15 houses on either side. Each house had three rooms on three floors with wire stairways. There were four toilets at one end and four at the other. The stench coming from the water was unbearable. These houses had neither water, gas, nor electricity. Little wonder that it was most filthy with insects.

Each house held from 10 to 15 occupants and it was located amid the dreadful stench, as well as the clatter of horse-drawn cars and express trains. Also, adjacent to these houses were several tanneries, which gave off an even more foul stench.

All these things made a dreadful impression upon me and I immediately regretted having come here. My longing for my quaint little home town couldn't prevent me from shedding oceans of tears. I had already overlooked the raging heat which, as though for spite, wouldn't let up. One day was simply hotter than the day before.