

## **A Miracle from the Stavisht Web Page**

By Karen Isabel Sanders © 2015

When I was a young child, I remember that at Passover while the Hagaddah was being read, I wondered, "If God did so many miracles back then, why doesn't he do one right now." As I grew older, I realized that miracles were happening every day. In March of 2013 a really big miracle happened for my family and me.

I had just finished a course on website creation & design, in preparation for doing a website for the little village of Boyarka, Ukraine. I had already worked on the website for Stavishche, but this time I wanted to do the web work as well. I sent a link for the Boyarka site to a friend, to see what he thought of it so far. He didn't get a chance to look at it because he was in the middle of preparing and giving mid-term exams to his college students. When I asked him what he thought of my site, a week later, he said he would look at it right away. After our phone conversation, he did a "search email" for Karen-website, and "accidentally" found the email where I announced the site for Stavishche years earlier. He thought that it was okay (not being Jewish himself), but thought that his ex-wife, Vicula, might find it interesting because she is a Jew who was born and raised in Kiev. He sent her the link and he immediately got a response from her. Vicula asked my friend to tell me that her roots were in Stavishche! She gave her grandmother's maiden name as "Levit."

When I got the forwarded email, I was shocked. Some of my family from Stavishche had the surname Levit, and there was only one other person that had that surname in the town of 3000 Jews. What would be the odds of this woman being my relative? I did know that there was a brother of my paternal grandmother, Beila, who stayed in the Ukraine, and was later killed by the Germans in 1941. I knew that this great uncle of mine had two daughters, and that his name was something like Isik. (My middle name is Isabel, and I was named for him.) I also knew that one of his daughters had come to the US at some point and that her name was Rifka.

I got several more emails from Vicula. She told me her great grandfather's name was Isak, and that he was killed by the Germans in 1941. She told me that her grandmother, Shifra, had a sister that had come to live in America in the 1980's. She also told me that an aunt of her grandmother, my great Aunt Shiva,

used to write to them, in Yiddish, and had done everything she could to help them out. She also sent me a picture of her grandmother. This, with other corroborated facts, made us realize that we are indeed cousins. I never thought that I would find this "missing branch" of our family tree.

What is surprising is that I met Vicula about 6 years prior, and the subject of exactly where my family came from had never come up. So to find out that we were cousins was amazing. What are the chances that my Ukrainian/Russian cousin had been married to my old college friend that I have known for over 40 years! It's nice to have the last branch of my grandmother's family completed. And it's nice to know that miracles still do happen every day.

Vicula was so excited to find her family as well. She told me that we had other relatives living in the US, but that she had lost touch with them. We thought this would be a perfect time to have a family reunion. So in May of 2013 we had a family reunion in Queens, New York. Family arrived from New York, Boston, California, New Jersey, and even Poland! There were eight newly discovered family members for me to meet, along with several cousins I had not seen in over 50 years. What a treat for everyone. No one wanted the day to end, and we vowed to keep in touch.

Vicula went through her papers and computer files to see what she could fill in for me. What she found was amazing. Isak had two daughters and four sons. His son, Shulem (born in Stavisht) was a history professor in Kiev, and before he died, he wrote a book about our Levit family from Stavisht as a gift to future generations. He wrote the book, in Russian, when he was in his late eighties. Some of the information about the part of the family that immigrated to the US is not very accurate, as he was just a young child when the family was disbursed. I have inserted comments into the story where additional information was available. Also, our great grandfather, Nissan Leib, is called Lev in the story.

The following is an excerpt from Shulim Levit's book on The Levit Family. The translation came from a compilation made from several people that responded to my Viewmate posting.

## THE VILAGE BLACKSMITH

By Shulim Levit

My father, Isaac L'vovich (son of Lev) Levit was born in a family of Lev Iosifovich (son of Iosif or Joseph) - a village blacksmith in the village of Stavische in Kiev Gubernia, on December 21, 1879. Note that this is precisely in the same month and year that Stalin was born. My father spoke about this coincidence once at some meeting. It came to me that I should advise my father to "forget" his birthday, for in those times such a thing could end tragically for him. The "Leader of the People" couldn't be born on the same day as a simple man. To identify oneself with "the leader", even just by being born on the same date, would be unacceptable.

The name Isaac is from the civil documents, in Yiddish he was called Itzhak. Ukrainians called him Itzko. With respect to the last name of the blacksmith, it used to surprise Jews because Levits were at the top of the power ladder in old times and played an important part in creating the Jewish state.

The village blacksmith, Lev Iosifovich, was respected not only by Jews, but by Ukrainians as well. Everyone loved him - adults, children, and even animals. Everyone in the village needed the blacksmith, but people were also rather afraid of him as he possessed unusual strength. There was a legend in the village about a distraught bull who once killed a dog, wounded a horse, and broke a wagon. The blacksmith came to the bull, scratched him behind the ear, grabbed him by the nose ring, and walked him to the stall. With respect to the horses, any restive horse, any stallion brought to him for putting on shoes, in his powerful hands behaved themselves relatively peacefully.

Lev Iosifovich didn't want to teach his only son the blacksmith trade (Itzhak already knew how to do many different things through helping his father from childhood), but decided instead to give him a more prestigious profession of a mechanic. But destiny made things different.

The forge (blacksmith shop) and the house were located beyond the Pale of the Settlement, in a Ukrainian village. In the beginning of the year 1900 the forge was destroyed, and the family was moved to a shtetl (Stavisht.) The blacksmith, who lost everything, soon died. His wife Keyla, daughters Beila, Shiva (an amazingly beautiful girl), and Feiga, moved to the shtetl.<sup>(1)</sup>

Aspects of the tsar's regime such as pogroms, bans on government work and military officers' ranks, marriages to foreigners, and many other restrictions for Jews, in fact, limited their civil rights.

All attempts by father and his sisters to somehow better their lives came to nothing. They didn't have any professional skills. The anti-Semitic policies of the tsar's regime forced the sisters to emigrate to the USA.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, my father couldn't go to America for two reasons. Firstly, by that time he was already married, had a big family, small children, and was in a difficult financial situation. Secondly, he didn't know how, and didn't want to be involved in commerce. My father grew up in a blacksmith shop (but didn't inherit it). From childhood he loved horses and knew how to look after them. It is not difficult to understand why he decided to become a waggoner ( i.e. a cabby with a horse and wagon). To have his own horses, be a cabby and a porter - this what remained for him probably the only opportunity in the circumstances, to support the family.<sup>(3)</sup>

Karen Sanders Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup>*It is unclear whether or not the forge was on the edge of Stavisht or in another village. Immigration manifests of the sisters listed 'Sovka' as place of birth, other documents list Stavisht as birthplace.*

<sup>(2)</sup>*In fact, the sisters, and Beile's two sons escaped Stavisht and awaited their visas in Bucarest, Romania before coming to the US. The sisters fled Stavisht after a big pogrom where their mother was injured and then died shortly thereafter.*

<sup>(3)</sup>*Isak relocated his family to an area near Krasnodar, near the Black Sea. In 1941, the Germans came and he was killed.*