

Book Two:

The Letters of Yankev Alperowitz

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Introduction

It was during a telephone interview in the early stages of my research that Pauline Cohen mentioned an old book stored in her attic that she thought might be helpful to me. A couple of months later I traveled to Bangor for the second of four research trips there, and I set aside an evening to visit Pauline. After talking for a while she led me up a dark, narrow attic staircase to look through the boxes that had accumulated over the years. Fifteen minutes later we found the book that her grandfather, Nathan Cohen, had brought from Sosenka to Bangor, the book in which he had inscribed the name, birth date and birth place of each of his children. This proved to be an important discovery.

A year later Pauline mentioned that she had saved some old letters written to her mother that might also be of interest to me. These, she believed, were written by her other grandfather, Nathan Cohen's brother; but as they were in a foreign language, she couldn't be certain of their origin. Shortly after this conversation, in the fall of 1989, I entered the attic of the small white frame house on Mt. Hope Avenue for the second time. Despite its tidy appearance Pauline's attic held all kinds of treasures, hence our search for the letters was interrupted by numerous distractions. A stock of old photographs in nearly perfect condition turned up, including the large framed portrait of Nathan that had hung in her father's store, and photos of Hyman Epstein and Jake and Samuel N. Cohen in their respective stores - all sturdy Yankee merchants. Pauline's collection, assembled by her parents, also included one image from the Alpert side of the family: the wedding photograph of my grandparents.

After searching through every box and trunk we had come up empty-handed. We began to re-examine the furniture. Finally, in the back of an old drawer we found a bundle of yellowing papers covered with neat rows of crisp handwriting. The letters.

Finding a translator for the letters was a challenge. Samples were mailed to a variety of promising contacts, but no one had the time to translate twenty-five letters from a Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish to English, including several professionals referred by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. It finally occurred to me to consult the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco, where I had researched much of the background material for *The Alperets and Cohens*. The librarian's referral led me to Daniel Marlin, a Berkeley, California poet whose wonderful translations are rendered here.

Yankev Alperowitz's letters, mailed from Lithuania to his children and brother in Bangor, cover a period of more than twenty years. No envelopes remain to indicate when they were written or exactly where they had come from, but Yankev included return addresses, written in Russian, at the bottom of many of the letters - a factor that led to another mystery surrounding the use of names. Each letter was signed in Yiddish with his full name, Yankev Alperowitz, however, the names and addresses he included in Russian were "Mr. Yankel Abramovich, Remesolsko Street #44, City of Panevezys, Kovno Gubernia" and "c/o Arron Dvorkin for Yankev Abramovich, City of Polock,

Vitebsk Gubernia." The use of Yankel, a familiar form of Yankev, is common; but explanations for the use of Abramovich are less easy to come by. There is evidence that the addresses he provided were just mail drops - a device that Yankev felt offered some protection against the theft of packages and money that arrived regularly from America. Perhaps he adopted a pseudonym as well.

Yankev's children, who had become Cohens in America, reverted to their original personal names in these letters. Thus Alice returned to Shprintze, Samuel H. to Simcha, Julia to Yehudeske, Annie to Hannah, Sophie to Shayne and Robert to Reuven. Their father sometimes wrote to them at their own addresses and at other times in care of each other; he often asked them to pass the letters along to each other, which they did even without his suggestion. Certainly, the arrival of a letter from Lithuania must have been an event that called for a family gathering. The latest letter was brought, read, and it seems often retained by Shprintze. Consequently, the letters in Pauline's attic were addressed not just to her mother, but to her aunts, uncles and even to her great uncle, Samuel M. Cohen.

Because only one letter was inscribed with the year in which it was written, it is through the events described by Yankev that an approximate date has been fixed. But estimating is often difficult, as the twelfth letter reproduced illustrates. In this, written from the village of Komai, Yankev's salutation included Simcha, Shprintze and their children as well as "my dear daughter Hannah, her husband Zalman Kostrel and their little son... my dear daughter Yehudeske and my little grandson Reuven." It was originally surmised that this letter was written after 1926 because of the inclusion of Julia Saltzman's son, Reuven (Robert b.1926), in the salutation. Since Yankev did not include the six other Saltzman and Costrell grandchildren in his greeting, it is almost certain that the letter was written around 1918, when there was only one grandchild from each of these families. He apparently believed that the first Saltzman grandchild was named Reuven rather than William.

Other examples are more perplexing. Why, for instance, does a letter that by most indications was written after 1920 include the comment "You have to have the Tsar's permission just to make a little bit of a living," when the tsar was deposed in 1917? Perhaps Yankev was using a figure of speech, inserting an old habitual remark... The letters are arranged in their assumed chronological order, although numerous guides within them point to conflicting dates.

Following Yankev's movements is also no easy task. Many letters have no dateline and when a locale is mentioned, the problem of matching the Yiddish spellings with cities on modern maps is almost insurmountable. Dvinsk, where he mentioned his stepson lived and is now known as Daugavpils, is easier to identify because it is a larger city and the previous name is retained on many maps. On the other hand, the villages of Komai and Fashtef, where Yankev lived for some time with his second wife, who he referred to as "Auntie," are more difficult to trace. There are two Komais spelled identically - one located forty miles west of Dvinsk, the other about fifty miles northeast of Vilna. There is no trace of Fashtef, but it was from Panevezys, about a hundred miles north of Vilna, that Yankev wrote most of the post-war letters.

Far more important than when or from where these letters were written is, of course, their content, for they document the social, economic and personal

disintegration of the author's world with devastating impact. The environment in Lithuania was one of unrelenting crisis even before the outbreak of the First World War. Food shortages, hyper-inflation, massive unemployment and intense discrimination drove nearly two million Russian-Jewish immigrants to America between 1882 and 1914. The war, revolution and constant changes in government left the area so unstable that as Yankev observed, "Really, the whole world is topsy turvy here, the sky has fallen beneath our feet. To this very day the hunger in Russia is horrible - a thousand or more for a loaf of bread, people are falling like flies, Jewish blood runs like water in pogroms." As for his own and Auntie's circumstances: they were elderly, impoverished and isolated. All of his children, save one, had left for America.

In a letter written in 1923, when conditions had improved somewhat, Yankev reflected on what he and Auntie have been through. "Lets look at how the Almighty conducts the world with His compassion. He's given us many years, He's sent our children to America so that they'll be able to support us for however many years more we're fated to live, so that they'll be able to rear their children." But the 1918 post-war letter, Yankev's first to Shprintze in five years, was very direct in terms of the severity of their situation: "If my dear children really want to take care of their old father, they'll do as others do and send letters and money often." He instructed Shprintze to "go like others to the currency exchange office, buy German marks and send them to us." Apparently to allay her fears that the money might be stolen in the mail he advised her, "you take a risk and put a few dollars in an envelope. There are people across the courtyard from us...who receive letters from friends every day, and within the letters or photos are German marks." To ensure that his children wouldn't think that he was exaggerating their plight, he added that the rabbi "also wanted to write you, but I told him it wasn't necessary, that my children, with the Almighty's help, won't abandon me to suffering."

Yankev was very conscientious about acknowledging the receipt of money and packages, and while always reminding his children of how bad things were, he was genuinely grateful for their support and didn't press them for more. He understood their financial circumstances and acknowledged that they were making sacrifices for him and their stepmother. It was important that he and Auntie were spared the humiliation of accepting public charity; Yankev stressed to each of his children that they were able to live "just as other people do, through the support of our own children, not of strangers." His requests were modest - "dear children, if you can send me some shirts, and Auntie a dress or two, some kind of a shawl. She stays in the house even when she'd like to step out a little..." - and were always followed by an explanation of the terrible conditions in which they lived.

That it was Yankev's vision of a personal and ultimately benevolent God that psychically and spiritually sustained him through the years of crisis is reflected in each letter. When he wrote that "we have to place our hope in the Living One..." he was expressing not just a religious philosophy, but a fundamental belief in God the Provider that is at the core of everything. Yankev's frequent references to the Almighty's compassion and intervention in human affairs were balanced with the sense that God was also inscrutable, and that

things both good and bad happened according to a divine plan. In one letter he observed, "I never imagined I would see such terrible times - but what can you do, it's all God's will;" whereas in the moving reunification letter to Shprintze, written after five years of isolation during the First World War, he proclaimed, "but now, receiving a letter in your own hand, I have a new lease on life. It's God's plan you know." He also found parallels to their situation in Biblical legends when he wrote, "Just as the Creator sent Joseph into Egypt to feed his father Jacob and his brothers, to save them from hunger, so it is with my children in America."

While the religious invocations and allusions that permeate these letters may strike the modern reader as formulistic-sounding and, perhaps, as simply typical of the writer's time, Yankev's sentiments were not drawn exclusively from the vocabulary of fundamentalism. In a letter written from Fashtef after the war he reminded his children that despite all that has befallen the Jewish community, "the Almighty cares for us as He has in the past and will in the future. He rules the world well, but we don't know how to thank Him for sparing us from the tragedies around us, in every household." In one of the letters' most dramatic passages, Yankev followed this observation with impassioned prayer: "Creator of the world, I thank you and thank you every minute for your mercy until now, for sheltering us in winter, for sparing Jews from sorrow."

Like hundreds of thousands of other parents who remained in Europe, the separation from his children was both emotionally painful, and, as he aged and could no longer earn a living, distressing on a practical level. Who would look after him? The departure of his youngest son Reuven (who, as a student at the yeshivah at Dolhinow, was probably anticipated to attain his father's most cherished expectations: becoming a rabbi) was the last in a series of familial disruptions that began in 1889 when his eldest son, Simcha, joined Nathan and Rosa in America. Four years later Itka died, and within another five years twin sons were lost in an epidemic. The void created by the early death of their natural mother was assumed first by Shprintze and then, after she had left in 1903, by Yankev rather than by his second wife or eldest daughter, Shayne, who had married in 1899. After Hannah emigrated in 1905, Yehudeske, the youngest daughter, was left without sisters. But in a letter to his brother, Yankev mentioned that Yehudeske "has no desire to travel to America." Later, when she had changed her mind, he wrote "my heart weeps, for who is to remain with me?" Nevertheless, he didn't hold her back.

Yankev continued to watch over his children despite the great distance that separated them and he seems to have been responsible for writing all of the letters; indeed, Auntie had her own brood of children to worry over. As it happens, Auntie - we never learn her given name - appears to be less of a background fixture than many stepmothers in similar situations. Yankev dutifully reported on her health and the activities of her children and included her when giving thanks for the generosity of his children: "(Auntie) blesses you and your children and grandchildren. 'May they wear diamonds and jewels to their weddings', she says, 'for each cent it cost to send us this package.'" He was even fond of quoting her. Only once did he bemoan the expense of her enduring and mysterious illness, and in that instance he blamed her son Men-

achem, who "managed to spend quite a few of my rubles taking her to the finest doctors and professors."

Having only Yankev's letters is akin to listening to a one-sided conversation - yet a great deal may be learned from his half of the correspondence. Certainly, the distance between Lithuania and America did not prevent him from continuing in his patriarchal role. When Hannah apparently expressed reservations about a marriage proposal, her father didn't hesitate to offer advice - which she ignored: "Everyone knows that it would be the worst thing you could do to turn it down, now when you are young and pretty, for you know that nothing pleases the world like a young woman, but it has no use for a hard old maid. Look my daughter, do not delay. When the Living One presents you with your chosen mate, you must take the opportunity." Once she was engaged (several years later), her father wrote, "My dear daughter, you've delighted me - its known here that I've wept with great joy, wept that I can't see it all with my own eyes." He then launched an appeal to each of his children to help bring off the wedding. To Shprintze and Simcha, he wrote: "I want to wish you all good fortune in seeing through my daughter Hannah's engagement. May the Living One have compassion and provide you all you need to help her out. Your sister Hannah, poor thing, is an orphan and has no one to look after her. If not you, there would be no one to take an interest. May the Living One give you a hundred dollars for every dollar you spend - He is the Father of orphans - He will provide you with much more."

Yankev expected his children to communicate regularly, and when they failed to do so he could become rather testy. He wrote to Yehudeske, "Your letters, my darling, come more often than anyone's. You continue to keep us in mind..." and then wondered, "Why I have no mail from my daughter Hannah I don't understand - just the money in an envelope. She used to write me often, but now it's over five months since I've heard from her. I don't know what to make of it." He became upset with each of them as they fell behind in writing, and urged that his concern be conveyed to the lax correspondent of the moment. To his brother he wrote of his son Simcha, "I'm ashamed to say that I haven't had a letter now for two years already. But you see, my dear brother, this is also probably God's will." Once this matter was cleared up, he turned his attention to Shprintze: "I wonder at how you, more than anyone, forgets to write us here, since after your mother's death you were the one who really took charge of things, kept me and the orphans going as best you could..." The balance of this letter is, in fact, profoundly moving and suggests that he was not angry, but instead deeply hurt by these lapses. Letters were a measure not only of his children's respect for him but also of their love. Yankev and his children seemed to know that they would never see each other again, which undoubtedly heightened his expectations of their fidelity.

Sometimes Yankev dipped his pen in venom and it was the failure of his children to write and keep him informed of their activities that created the most bitterness. Shayne was the subject of his greatest wrath when he exploded, "I've not seen one drop of ink from my daughter Shayne's pen. That's the nature of a murderess - not to know what's become of her parents throughout a war; a character like that is rare, one in a world!" As if realizing that he may have gone too far with this outburst, he tempered it in the fol-

lowing sentence by adding, "I'm very anxious because I haven't received any mail from my children for such a long time." He seems to have maintained a troubled relationship with Shayne, apparently because of her husband, who he blamed for her difficulties. In a letter to Shprintze, Hannah and Yehudeske he reported of their eldest sister's family, "they're all in the best of health, though her life is a hard one with that wretch of a husband." Because we do not have any record of Shayne's correspondence (she lived in Chicago) we don't know how this conflict finally sorted itself out.

Yankev often considered his own future, and the possibility of traveling to America with Auntie. As early as 1907 he wrote, "if I wasn't responsible for my son Eliohe, I wouldn't, believe me, remain in Russia a single day more." Eliohe had some kind of physical disability, but this did not prevent him from marrying and having a family. Auntie, on the other hand, suffered from some illness that rarely seemed to let up. Later he summarized their situation this way: "As for your suggestion that I come to America - how can one travel with a sick person? Or leave her here when we don't even know what's become of some of her children, where they may be? To uproot her into strange surroundings - only a real wretch would do that. I *would* like to at least have a look with my own eyes, to see how my children live in America, but what can I do? The Living One probably won't allow me to travel, but if I could, believe me, I wouldn't hesitate to accept your invitation. I'd be there on wings to see the whole of your existence." Ultimately, it was neither Eliohe nor Auntie that was holding him back from America, but a convergence of circumstances.

Yankev's life and hopes were distilled in the last letter found in Pauline's attic: "I stay at home, I don't go into town any more to daven or to shop. The time I have, I study and pray to the Living One, for all of you, your husbands and children, for your health and livelihoods, and that you'll be able to fulfill the commandment of sustaining your old parents. There is no better thing one can do than this, and it will be *honored in this world* and even more in the next world. From me, your father who wishes you all the best."