

The Varaess Chronicles

by Tobey (Kaplan) Katz



Tobey (Kaplan) Katz , April 8, 1918 — August 14, 2004

Edited by Cary Sneider

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How it happened that a junkman's daughter
was able to go to Europe, just like the rich kids!

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by Tobey (Kaplan) Katz

Edited by Cary Sneider

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Jacob and Brina Kaplan, Chicago, about 1955

This book is dedicated to Ma and Pa

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Prologue: About the Author

“My bosom is in the way!” said my 84 year-old mother with a laugh, as she jiggled and jostled the keyboard on her chest, while reclining in her electrically-powered chair. She fiddled with pillows and afghans and tried out six pairs of glasses until she found the right ones—the trifocals with wire rims seemed to work best. Though she was barely able to walk to the bathroom as a result of crippling arthritis, within an hour she was typing away on a Macintosh computer.

My mother had always been a terrific storyteller. And her favorite stories—well, I suppose *my* favorite stories—were about her trip to Lithuania in 1926, when she was just eight years old. She remembered the town and the people vividly. In fact, there were so many people in her stories that I would frequently become confused, and could never remember how they were related to us. The explanations of family relationships were made even more complicated since my grandmother married her uncle, so that my great-grandfather was also my great-great grandfather. Then there were the two brothers who married the two sisters, and my mother married her second cousin, and so on.

I was 54 and my mother was 83 when she went into the hospital with a very severe case of diverticulitis. My sister and I were worried that we might lose her. Sharon flew down to Florida for the first visit, and I went on the second visit. By that time my mother had recovered enough to be in a rehab center, and was off the medication they had given her. She was lucid, and ready for more storytelling. I decided that the time had finally come to sit down with the lists of family members she made and draw out the family tree.

It was more than a year until I had the time to finish the tree, and send it to all of the relatives that we knew who might be interested. They gave it to other family members who passed it on to others, and I started receiving letters and email messages from family members I never knew I had. I found out that I was related to a physicist who worked at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York. He introduced me to a distant cousin who had lived for many years in Africa, and was now living in London. They sent me additions and corrections to the family tree, and I collected these letters in a file to sort

out when I visited my mother, so that we could discuss each one and she could pronounce on which were correct and which were likely to be erroneous.

In September 2002, I brought the computer. We had recorded many of Mom's stories on a tape recorder, and I never found the time to transcribe them. We had a Mac Classic in the basement that we no longer used, so I thought—why not? She'd probably enjoy writing as a break in reading and watching television. She always enjoyed writing poetry, and even had a poem about a rummage sale published. So, giving her a computer to write the family chronicles seemed like a good idea. Once she figured out how to arrange her bosom, she began to recover her typing skills. We stayed up past 3 AM that first night, as I answered email messages from work, stopping to remind her (less and less often) how to correct mistakes and break between paragraphs. I eventually got her a Macintosh notebook computer, which was easier for her to handle.

It's now more than two years since we started this project. For the past several months Mom's health has been failing. She was too weak to type the last few chapters, so I took dictation on my monthly trips to visit her. Luckily, her mind stayed as sharp as ever right up to the end, and she refused to leave this Earth until her story was told.

Tobey Olive Katz passed away Saturday morning, August 14, at 4:50 AM, at the Florida Hospital in Altamonte Springs. I can't believe it was simply a coincidence that she took her final breaths as Hurricane Charley roared through the neighborhood, ripping off roofs with 145 mile per hour winds. Like Charley, Mom was a force of nature, with her resonant voice, strong opinions, and vivacious personality. Quite unlike Charley, however, she was a community builder, active in Hadassah, Cub Scouts, and craft clubs and classes of all sorts. She made friends wherever she went, and never tired of making the world a more beautiful place with her gardening, ceramics, painting, knitting, crocheting, bead-making, bread-making, chair-caning and basket weaving. But most of all, I remember her story-telling, and I hope you enjoy listening to her stories as much as I have for the past 57 years.

— Cary Snider



Zalman Kaplan (1836-1926) was both my grandfather and my great grandfather.

Chapter 1 The Kaplan Connection

This is the story I have stored in my memory for seventy-six years. I feel it is about time I get it all out before I become completely senile. This is how it happened that a junkman's daughter was able to go to Europe, just like the rich kids!

My parents came to the U.S. from Lithuania, my mother from Telz and my father from Karklon. When they came over before the First World War, almost anyone was allowed into the country, as long as they had no serious diseases and were able to come up with the passage money. My father arrived in 1899 when he was 17 years old, and my mother arrived in 1912 at the age of 22. The reason they came to Chicago was because Pa's brother Barney was there first and in this way the entire family followed. But Pa and Ma met long before, while they still lived in Lithuania. Here's the story that led to the story I'm about to tell you.

Friday night was the one leisurely meal in the week. Pa didn't need to get up for work the next day, and we didn't need to get up for school. On Saturday nights we often went visiting with other relatives, and on Sundays Pa was the fixit man for all the *lantzleit*, as he was mechanically inclined. So Friday nights became our story nights.

The stories started right after dinner. It was just too noisy to talk during dinner. But after dinner Ma got up to wash the dishes, and the three of us—my sister Helen, who was two years older than me, and Harriett, who was six years younger, listened with great interest to Pa's stories. (My younger sisters Zeldie and Goldie came along later.)

In truth, there wasn't much else to do on Friday nights in the winter. During the summer it was still light enough to go play outside, but in winter it was dark out, and the kitchen was the warmest room in the house. So we sat around the scarred oak table with the ball and claw feet while Ma cleaned up and Pa told stories.

I especially liked hearing Pa tell us about growing up in Karklon. He was one of just four children. In those days, the 1880s, four children was a small family. Here's how Pa explained why that was so.

“There should have been six of us, but my mother, Henna, accidentally suffocated her two first-born children. In those days it was customary for a mother to take a newborn baby into her bed to nurse. My mother fell asleep while nursing and accidentally rolled over and suffocated her first child. This happened again with her second baby.

“Wouldn't you think my mother had sense enough not to do the same thing again? But after giving birth for the third time, she still did not learn her lesson. She gave birth to a little girl, whom she named Shayna-Faygeh (translated as beautiful bird). After taking the baby into bed with her, she dreamt that her foster father came to her in a dream and admonished her, “Get up, you're smothering the child again.” But while in her sleep she said to herself “Oh, I know it's only a dream,” and kept on sleeping.

“Her foster father came to her in the dream a second time, with no results. He appeared a third time, shaking his finger very violently at her. In her dream she could see the sleeve of his shroud moving with the shaking of his hand. This time she took it seriously and awoke to find the baby had already turned blue. She and her husband gave the baby mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and, thank G-d, Shayna-Faygeh was saved.”

The reader should know that Ma, who was washing dishes during this story, was Shayna-Faygeh's daughter. And if Henna had awakened just a few seconds later, neither Ma nor any of us kids would be there, listening to the story! Later, I'll get to the story of how Pa met Ma, but now let's get back to Pa's story of his childhood.

“As time went by, my parents had three more children: Berah (Barney in English), Kaufka (Carl), and me, Yankel-Motte. As a child in Karklon, they mostly called

me 'Mottke.' As an adult in Europe I was known as Yankel. When I came to the United States, at Ellis Island I was registered as Yankel Kaplan. But Yankel is not a common American name, so I adopted the name Jacob. Most people call me Jake. You can call me Pa.

“The house where I grew up did not belong to my parents, nor did the land on which it stood. Zalman and Henna were what we would today call “sharecroppers.” That is, they gave a portion of whatever they raised to the *Poyer* (Landlord) as rent, and usually they did not raise much. Their house was only one room. And one corner of the room was draped off for a poor widow, who was even poorer than they were.

“My parents were desperately poor, and your Zaidy Zalman had no head for business. To bring in a few coins, he went out of town to dig peat, which had to be cut into squares and dried before it could be sold as fuel. He did this only at night because it was considered shameful for a Jew to be doing hard labor.

“Your Bubby, Henna, was very tiny. Some considered her to be the brains of the family. Henna’s manner was abrupt and people were afraid of her tongue, though they came to her for advice. She had a vegetable garden, so she could trade with the neighbors, but they led a hand-to-mouth existence. We were too poor to have a cow or horse, but we did have a goat.

“One of my most enjoyable memories was of getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning to go and pick mushrooms in the woods. Sometimes we only had goat’s milk and mushrooms to eat for weeks at a time.

“When I complained that we didn’t have enough to eat, my parents told me that things were even worse during the great potato famine, which occurred when Shayna-Faygeh was a baby. A potato blight swept Europe and caused widespread famine. Millions died because they couldn’t find anything to eat.

“One day during the potato famine, the *Poyer*’s wife, the *Princessn*, who could not have children of her own, came and promised my parents that they would have all they wanted if they would just give up their baby. In the time in which they lived, the *Poyer* actually had the power to do anything he pleased with his tenants; but when Henna refused to give up the child, the *Princessn* did not press the case. Henna and the *Princessn* continued to be friendly for the rest of their lives.

“One of the things I enjoyed most as a boy was to look through the *Poyer*’s trash heap. I frequently found little treasures, as any kid my age would. The best treasures were used tin cans. In those days canned food was a luxury so used cans were not easy to find. I had carved ice skates for myself out of wood, but they squeaked and stuck on the ice. With the tin from the cans covering the ice skate runners I could just sail smoothly over the ice.”

One of Pa’s Friday night stories was about why he came to America when he was 17, and how he first met Ma. When Pa was a child, Lithuania was a part of Russia. The Russian Army was desperate for recruits. So for a time, their policy was to kidnap little boys, only two years old, planning to raise them in camps until they were old enough to fight. In order to avoid having their children kidnapped, parents dressed their boys as girls, shaved their heads, and gave them an earring to wear in one ear. These children became very adept at evading the soldiers, but many hundreds of thousands were captured and died in the army camps. An old Jewish expression, “He’s with an earring,” meant that the person was clever enough to evade the kidnapers. Pa remembers wearing a dress and an earring until he was 5 or 6 years old. He was one of the lucky ones.

The one who finally stopped the policy—at least for the Jews—was the Head Rabbi of all Russia. This man was widely respected, and he came to see Tzar Nicholai to make him a proposition. He said to Tzar Nicholai, “You know how Jewish people are renowned for taking care of their children. No mother would want her child to be killed in the camps. If you instruct your armies to stop kidnapping little boys, I promise—and each Rabbi will keep this promise—that when it’s time for his 21st birthday, each young man will give himself up to be recruited into the army.” Nicholai said, “What if a family doesn’t keep

its promise?" The Rabbi responded "If that happens, you can take whatever you want from the family." Tzar Nicholai asked, "but what do they have to give?" The Rabbi responded, "Whatever they have." The Tzar trusted the Head Rabbi, so he agreed, and instructed the armies to stop kidnapping children.

When Pa was 17, he had a serious discussion with his parents about his impending recruitment into the army. They knew that service in the Army could sometimes be as long as 25 years, so his parents thought it would be best for him to volunteer for the army now, at age 17, rather than waiting until his 21st birthday, so that he would still be a fairly young man when he got out of the army. He was big for his age, so they thought that he'd be accepted. However, when Pa went to the army recruiter, they said to him, "No, if you want to go in now at age 17 you have to pay us for the privilege." Pa and his parents agreed that this was ridiculous, so they said, "instead of waiting to go into the army four years from now, run away. Leave for America now." That's when Pa left home and came to live in Chicago, in 1899.

You should know that the family had thought about Pa going to America for some time. By then his older brothers had already left Lithuania. Bereh (Barney) had emigrated to Chicago, and Kofeh (Carl) had moved to Manchester, England. Recognizing that her "baby" would be leaving too someday, Henna did the best she could to prepare him. She said, "Who knows what the women in America are like? Maybe they can't even sew buttons." So she taught little Yankel how to sew buttons and many other things that boys typically don't have a chance to learn.

Before Pa boarded ship he stopped off in Telz to say goodbye to his one and only sister, Shayna-Fageh. When he reached the edge of town he saw a group of little girls, about five to nine years old, playing a game. They pretended to be boys, trying to pish on the wall. So he asked them, "Where do Elia and Shayna-Faygeh Varess live?" One little girl said "I'll show you," and she led Yankel to his sister's house. That little girl was Brina, whom Yankel would marry many years later in America.

The day after he arrived in Telz, a circus was going through town. In those days, when the circus arrived, they would parade through town so people would see it and come when they had their shows. The next day everyone was lined up on the sides of the street waiting for the circus performers. Brina was too small to see, so Pa picked her up and put her on his shoulders so she could see the parade. She always remembered that.

You may wonder what happened to Zalman and Henna when Pa's 21st birthday arrived. Government agents came to induct Yankel into the army, but found only his parents. As punishment, they confiscated everything that they had—the one cabin with a little furniture. But the story ended well. The richest Jew in town bought the whole thing at auction for 6 rubles, and when the government agents left, he returned everything to Zalman and Henna.

When Yankel arrived in America he went to live with his brother in Chicago. At the time, Yankel was 17 and Barney was about 29. Barney's wife was named Chana. They had three daughters: Minnie, Molly, and Rosie. (Later they had another girl Katie, and a boy, Jakie).

It didn't take long for the two brothers to have their first argument. Every night at dinnertime Barney would send one of his kids out with a pail to buy beer. Even the children drank beer. At every single meal there was always a hubbub and crying among the kids. Pa noticed that much of the crying was from the youngest child, Rosie, who insisted on drinking beer from the full pail. As she was always crying, her nose was running, and it ran right into the pail that everyone drank from. Everyone thought it was cute, but it disgusted Pa. He wanted to start his own business so he could move out as soon as possible.

Pa probably got his start in the junk business from watching Barney, who made his living by picking up used bottles and selling them. Pa's business started when he asked Barney if he could borrow \$7. With that money he rented a horse and wagon and concluded his first business transaction. He bought and sold a stove. That was the way Kaplan Salvage started. Soon he discovered that tailor shops disposed of their woolen scraps. He picked

up the cloth and sold the rags to the mills, where they were re-milled into new woolen cloth. At one point, Pa stopped selling rags and paper and started selling only scrap metal. One of his biggest customers was the Schwinn bicycle company. He purchased the scrap steel and sold it to the steel mills. Eventually he was able to purchase a truck, which he drove himself for several years. At its height, Kaplan Salvage had six trucks and more than a dozen employees.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I should tell you about Pa's second business transaction, which was a little more exciting. He saw a young lady walking up the stairs dragging a heavy trunk after her. In sign language he asked if she needed help. She indicated yes, she did indeed want his help. So he dragged her heavy trunk up three flights of stairs. When they got upstairs he held out his hand for the money. Instead of giving him money she pointed to the bed. He was embarrassed, since he had never had a woman before. When he told me this story, he said "If only I knew then what I know now...."

It didn't take long before Pa was able to move out of Barney's house and had clean beer to drink. And soon he discovered that when you get married you can have sex whenever you want to. So he met a woman named Minnie and he married her. I never knew her last name. He had three children with Minnie: The first was named Hyman. We called him Hymie. The second was named Lily, and the third was a baby girl who died at the age of two.

Pa and Minnie were divorced in 1906, and in 1916 he married his niece, Brina, who had recently come to America. Pa and Ma had five children: my sister Helen was the eldest. I came next, and then my sister Harriet, who is the "baby" in the story that follows. When we returned from Europe the other two came along, Zeldie (Jeannette) and Goldie (Gloria).

I'd like to tell you more about Pa's family, but this is the story of how Ma, Harriet, Helen and I spent a year in Europe in 1926-27 with my Ma's parents, Elia and Shayna-Faygeh Varaess, and their extended family. So here we go!



This photo, taken in Telz, Lithuania, in 1926, shows five of the main characters in this story. From left to right, are: Isaac, Harriet, Brina (“Ma”), Helen, and me (Tobey). Ma is wearing a dress that was made for her in Telz.

Chapter 2 The Opportunity of a Lifetime

After the First World War, the U.S. immigration gates became tightly closed and it was necessary to have a visa to come in. The visa system was set up so that countries with larger populations had a larger quota. This was very bad for the people of Lithuania as the population was fewer than a million. Because of this problem, many Lithuanians came in illegally with false visas and blended into the population without any trouble and became productive citizens.

My mother, Brina Varaess, had eight living brothers and sisters, all of whom were married except Isaac, Pera, and Pesa. Isaac was 19 years old in 1926 and still living at home with his parents, Elia and Shayna-Faygeh Varaess. Brina and her brothers, Bennie and Carl, were the only ones who were living in America by 1926.

Isaac was desperate because there was no opportunity for a young man to make a decent living in Telz. So Bennie, Carl, and Jacob (my father) decided to bring him over to America. Arrangements were made for a false visa and the money for the passage was entrusted to the Krulevitch Company who had always dealt fairly with the Telzer immigrants. As luck would have it, the forgery was detected and the deal was off. The Krulevitch Company was willing to return all of the money except for \$100, which they felt was due them for their time and expenses.

So the three men, Bennie, Carl and Jacob talked it over and decided to make use of that money. Brina was always crying because she was homesick for her family in Telz and they felt this was a good way of using up the \$100 credit. Actually they did not have to add much more money because only my mother and my sister Helen needed a full ticket on the trains as well as the ship. Helen was 10 years old at that time. Since I was only 8, I only needed a half ticket and the baby, Harriet, had free passage.

Now things really started to speed up because we planned to be back in Chiicago by Labor Day when school would start. My mother took us shopping on Roosevelt Road to the best children's shop and the excitement mounted every day. What was really fun was when my father brought home a huge red trunk. The three of us climbed in and my father pretended to lock us up. This trunk was not the type with drawers or trays but simply a big box. But we were not the only ones who were all excited about this trip. The Telzer *lantzleit* kept calling us with good wishes and instructions what to tell their relatives. Some even sent along gifts so it was a good thing that our trunk was so big.

Helen and I kept talking about all the good things we were going to miss. This was only in our imagination, as we really did not know what we re getting into.

While my folks were busy with all the arrangements, the house was always full of relatives and *lantzleit* reminiscing about how different it was from the time when they came to "the golden land." In fact it was actually easier to come to America than it was to steal across the border of what was then the Russian Empire. This was during the reign of one of the Czars. I believe it was Czar Nicolai. At that time the countries, which are now Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, were part of Russia.

The men, especially, were anxious to avoid going into the army because conditions were so horrendous that many of them died from disease and starvation before even engaging in combat. Although the soldiers were supposed to serve 4 years, Jews often served as much as 25 years. Many were so desparate to escape that they maimed themselves just to avoid going into the service.

A day was selected to go downtown in Chicago to obtain the passport and take the photo for it. Because we were minors we appeared together on the same photo. This would have been a wonderful souvenir to keep of this really great adventure in my life, but unfortunately my sister Harriet threw it out of the place were it had been for all these years. My mother had kept it in the safety deposit-box of her bank. At first I was upset about this, but after thinking it over realized that the whole experience did not mean anything to Harriet as she was only 2 years old in 1926, and did not remember any of it.

Now the day of departure was here and the house we lived in at 1509 South Hamlin Avenue was crowded and noisy. At least 4 or 5 relatives took me aside in a quieter room and spoke to me very seriously. "Taibale, I want you to always remember this trip because you will never have this chance again." I actually took this advice seriously and as you can see that may be why I still remember it all today. I do not think that they necessarily gave this advice to Helen because she was older and it was assumed she would retain this wonderful experience. And, of course, Harriet was a baby and too young to remember. In later years she often expressed regret that she could not remember any of it.

Up until this time I was hardly aware of the name of Varaess, only hearing or seeing it when my parents sent packages or received mail from Mascio Gatve, Telz, Lithuania. This was a small village on the shores of the Mascio River. I was only aware that I was going to visit my grandparents. So this was my opportunity to find out all about these people I had only heard of before.

Now that I think of it I imagine my father and mother must have discussed how to send us money for the couple of months we would be gone. After all, it costs a bit more to feed 4 extra people in a poor household.

So it was in a day in June or July in the year of 1926 that our family, along with all the people that were in the house all went down to the train depot to see us off on our great adventure.



This postcard shows what Chicago looked like in the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter 3 The Trip Begins

As we were saying good-bye to our *lantzleit*, my mother suddenly said to my father, "Yankel, you must give me your little knife to take along as I know I will need it sometime, especially when traveling with a baby." Pa said, "No, you will probably lose it and I will never see it again." From that remark you would naturally think that the little knife was at least made of some valuable material. In fact it was nothing more than a cheap little penknife that probably cost less than a dollar. But Pa had always acted that way about his knife, constantly sharpening and guarding it from anyone wanting to borrow it. After a little more discussion he relented. Turning to me he said, "Taibale, I leave it to you to take care of it for me and be sure to bring it back!" I took this very seriously and gave him my solemn promise that he would get it back. All during the trip I kept an eye on it and believe it or not, I was able to keep that promise until 1927, and less than 100 miles from Chicago, but more of that later.

A Telzer by the name of Sol Shlutz was trying to be helpful and said to Ma, "Brina, let me screw up the cap of your thermos bottle, so it will not spill and you'll have it for the baby in case the dining room food will not suit her." Well, he did such a good job of it that it remained closed for the entire year and when we brought it back, it was finally thrown out.

One other thing remains in my mind of that day before we had even boarded the train. Helen and I had constantly worried that we would not be able to have our favorite nosh, which was a certain kind of cookie. Naturally, we did not appreciate our mother's homemade baking which was much better and more nutritious. Our favorite cookie consisted of a vanilla wafer base topped with marshmallow and then covered with chocolate. On top of that was a half pecan. Well, someone must have been listening because Katie Kaplan presented me with a large paper bag with at least a couple of pounds of that cookie. Of course as you would imagine, I immediately sat on it!

I should explain who Katie Kaplan was. Her father, Barney, was my Father's older brother and the only sibling he had living in the U.S. Someone asked my mother where

she got the courage to go without my father with three small children—wasn't she afraid of a ship wreck? She asked what was meant by a shipwreck? Upon hearing the explanation, she said, "If it is *bashert* every thing will be okay."

Finally, we were off after a few tears and that is when I discovered chocolate from the cookies all over my dress. Since it was the middle of a hot Chicago summer the windows in the train were wide open. We soon became sick from the smell of the smoke from the engine and that was the first time I saw my mother worried. She thought if we were already sick from the train how would we be able to stand a sea voyage?

The train trip took about 24 hours and after the initial nausea wore off Helen and I started to enjoy the trip, wandering all up and down the aisles. We really loved it when the porter came and made up the beds out of the seats we had sat on all day. Naturally we tried to peek into the curtains where other passengers were trying to rest. You can imagine how popular that made us. Finally we arrived in the city of New York and took a short ferryboat ride to Hoboken, New Jersey, where we boarded our ship.



This is a group photo of the passengers from the kosher dining room on board the Columbus. It was taken near the end of the voyage. Ma, Harriet, and Tobey are in front, left of center. Helen, who didn't want to be seen with the rest of us, is in the far back. She has a close-fitting hat, and she's standing in front of a man who is waving. Charlie is on the right, towards the back, with white shirt and pants, and a sailor cap. The young boy with knickers is on the far right, in front.

Chapter 4 Starting the Sea Voyage

We boarded the ship called the "Columbus," supposedly one of the largest of its time. It was part of a fleet that was famous at that time and even today known as the North German Lloyd. As soon as we boarded a handsome young steward directed us to the kosher dining room. How did he know we wanted kosher? Could it be because he saw our faces when we smelled pork?

We were surprised to find the kosher dining room to be so large. It must have easily have seated two or three hundred people. This meal was just a snack before dinner, which was to be served a couple of hours later. I should mention that it was a Friday and that evening we had the usual Friday night supper (which we called the evening meal in those days). Before we were served, a man introduced himself as the *mashgeach* and assured us that he was to be trusted so that we would not be afraid that we would be given *trafeh* food. He said that he will be present in the kitchen at all times, except on *shabbos*, but that would be fine as he would leave properly inspected food from the day before. At the end of the meal we all had a good laugh because ice cream was served for dessert! Having dairy and meat dishes at the same meal was forbidden. That was one of the most important rules to follow in the keeping of the correct kosher diet. Of course the *mashgiach* apologized and promised it would not happen again. From then on meat and dairy foods were not served together.

After the meal we were shown to our cabin. Helen and I just loved it, although Ma complained that it was much too small. We especially thought that the sink was cute because it folded into the wall.

It seemed that we had barely set sail when Helen and Ma became very sea sick and were in fact that way much of the time, or so it seemed to me. Strangely enough, Harriet and I were not sea sick at all. When Ma and Harriet were that way, I had to watch the baby, but that was no trouble at all, as she was always a good baby and did not cry too much.

Did I mention that we were traveling in what was called “Tourist” class? We thought nothing could be finer as the service and the food were just wonderful. I know there was a first class, but am not sure if there was a second and third class. Of course the classes were not supposed to mix, but one time it happened by accident. Helen and I opened a door and walked up a staircase and found ourselves facing a woman who looked as if she had just stepped out of a movie scene. She had her legs crossed and was wearing silk stockings that were rolled just below the knees. She also wore a headband with a feather sticking out of it and was smoking a cigarette stuck into a very long cigarette holder. This was certainly not the way that the women we knew dressed, but she was really in the height of fashion for a “flapper,” as they were called in the nineteen twenties. A steward came around and made us go down to where we belonged.

This was the time of Prohibition in the States, so we were not used to seeing people drinking except when my father drank a little wine to make *kiddish* to usher in the Sabbath. Well, we certainly saw plenty of that on the ship, although all the drinkers were good-natured. It seemed to us that everyone walked around with a beer stein, especially the men.

One strange thing happened that I could not figure out until I was grown up and my mother could explain it to me. It seems that the German men just adored fat women and my mother fit the bill perfectly. One of the staff members—I don’t know what his title or job was—took a real liking for my mother. Every day he appeared in our cabin with gifts for my mother, usually very large baskets of fresh fruit. My mother declined the gift and insisted he should take it back. This went on throughout the voyage, and though she put the basket out in the corridor, untouched, he never gave up. What we could not understand was the funny way he stood there begging my mother, while having his hands folded in front of him in a very unnatural pose. Forgetting that German is almost exactly like Yiddish, she would say to us that we should not leave her alone with him.

The voyage was pretty uneventful except for one day when we were not allowed on deck because it was very stormy. I was standing alone on the outer deck while watching the extremely high waves when a strange, very large man grabbed me and practically threw

me through a door, after which he gave me a tongue lashing in a very loud voice. Although I did not understand the language, I knew he was telling me what danger he had rescued me from. When I returned to our cabin, Ma told me that we had been warned not to go out of our cabin until further notice.

A few days before we were scheduled to dock, everyone was asked to assemble on deck and a group picture was taken. I still have that picture today, with my mother, Harriet and I in the foreground, while Helen, who was not associating with us that day, for some unexplained reason, can barely be seen in the back of the crowd. In this same photo I can see at the right lower section a boy in knickers who looks about fourteen. I think he was the only other child in our Tourist Class. At the upper right hand side of the photo the figure of the passenger named "Charlie" can be seen in his sailor clothes of white pants, shirt, and sailor cap. This was really ridiculous with his beer belly. At that time in America there was a saying, which cropped for every thing and for no reason at all. The popular saying was "Goodbye, Charlie!" Since this passenger was always drunk, every time anyone approached him, he was greeted that way, which caused everyone to laugh uproariously, including Charlie.

At one time during the crossing, the ship stopped somewhere near an Irish island, and people came aboard to sell linens. I did not see anyone actually buy anything. We had discovered that there were shops on board. Ma bought a beautiful big rubber ball with painted scenery on it, which she gave to Harriet who immediately dropped it on the rolling deck; and that was the end of our shopping on board.

One evening a "Costume Ball" was held and Ma let us stay up late so we could see the fun. Of course Ma did not attend.

A few days before the end of the voyage the *masgiach* announced that inasmuch as we were docking on a Saturday, he would like us to give him his tip on the day before because he did not handle money on the Sabbath, according to the Jewish law. No one believed him but he kept his word. One man jokingly said "Why don't we test him and

hold back the tip until Saturday and see if he refuses it.” Another man spoke up and reminded him that it is a greater sin to tempt someone than it is to succumb to temptation.

And so, on the eighth day, we disembarked in Bremen, where we would continue our journey to Lithuania.



My Uncle Shea and Aunt Henna Varaess, about the time we visited them in Telz.

Chapter 5 Crossing Europe

We landed in Bremen on Saturday. I do not know how much time we spent there but I know we walked around the city quite a bit and noticed how very clean it was. Everywhere we saw women on their hands and knees scrubbing sidewalks and staircases.

Then we took a train to Shavel, where we would have to transfer to another train for Telz, our destination. We arrived in Shavel on Thursday. We were met by Aunt Pesa, Ma's younger sister, who was in her early twenties. I was very impressed by her. She looked like a fashion model, dressed all in pink, including her dress, shoes, purse and hat, which was a turban. She was very attractive, with her olive complexion. When I mentioned this to her about 40 or 50 years later, she denied that she could have had such fashionable clothes.

The next thing I remember was waking up in a strange bed in the old hotel we had checked into the night before. Without opening my eyes, I began to listen to the conversation going on and was puzzled because I could hear Uncle Carl speaking, even though we had left him back in Chicago. When I looked around, I saw a much taller and skinnier version of Uncle Carl. This was my Uncle Shea.

While I was sleeping, Uncle Shea had put in a request for a long distant phone call to Telz. (A long distance call was not available immediately, as it always was in America). When the call came through the hotel clerk came up and asked to speak to "Herr Varaess." This was actually the first time I had heard that name spoken. As Shea talked to our relatives in Telz, we all crowded around him. A very important decision had to be made. It was Friday and a train for Telz was leaving later that day. If we took that train we could be there the same day, but if the train were delayed we would end up traveling on the Sabbath. A safer course was to wait until Sunday. Everyone on the other end of the wire urged to us to come today—except for Bubby. Well, the majority won, and we decided to leave for Telz that day.

By the way, you won't find this town on the map because Telz is the Yiddish word for it. The Lithuanian spelling is "Telshia " and is pronounced as "Telshee".

Since there were a few hours to kill before the train would leave, Shea took Helen and me for a walk, while Ma stayed behind because the baby was sleeping. It happened to be a market day and we were very amused to see people selling things while sitting on the ground instead of behind a counter. Uncle Shea bought us candy, which was in little tubes of chocolate filled with real brandy.

Finally we got on the train, which turned out to be the train from Hell! When I saw the movie, "Dr. Zhivago" about 50 or 60 years later, I was reminded of it in great detail. This train was nothing but a boxcar that we usually use for freight. It had a few bunks in two or three rows, one above the other. Some of the men who occupied the upper bunks constantly harassed us and even spit on us ! Ma finally got very angry and went into another car and came back with the conductor who told off these ruffians in a language I did not understand but was able to guess because he mentioned just one word: "Americanski"! There was no more trouble after that.

There was no food or water available on the train. We only ate when the train stopped so that we could buy food and water from vendors. There was a bathroom on the train, but I really don't remember what it was like.



Telz, viewed from across the Mascio River, about the time we were there. This image is from a photograph that I had pasted into a school report about Lithuania that I write when I was in seventh grade.

Chapter 6 Telz At Last!

As you would guess, we finally arrived in Telz four hours late. It was eleven o'clock at night and the Sabbath had already started. When the big door opened and we looked out, it seemed that the entire town had turned out to greet us (which was actually true). Everyone was there except Bubby who was angry because no one had listened to her.

Getting off the train was not easy, as there was no train station, and no platform. The train had merely stopped in the middle of the field. When the big door of the train opened a man snatched me off of the train and started to carry me off through the dense crowd. As he was carrying me, I looked back and saw Ma. She was standing silhouetted against the light in back of her, in the middle of the door, which spanned nearly the whole width of the railroad car, just like real freight trains. I heard her shouting in a mixture of English and Yiddish, "Voo is my baby? Voo is my blanket? Voo is my bottle?" Of course they did not understand her, and she was probably unaware that she was not speaking Yiddish! Afterwards I wondered how Ma did get down from the train because there was no step and it was quite a distance from the ground.

Though I can't be sure, I imagine the man who snatched me from the train was one of my uncles. It was a very dark night with no moon shining, and of course no street lighting, so the house looked like a jewel as we approached it.

The house seemed to be quite crowded and the first thing I noticed was the table, which was absolutely covered with cakes. I guessed that they must have been honey cakes or sponge cakes because they looked just like Ma's cakes. I found out later that these cakes had been brought in by friends and neighbors to welcome us.

Bubby Shayna-Faygeh handed Helen and me each a glass of milk before she even greeted us or kissed us. Of course we drank it down quickly and threw it up even quicker, because the taste was completely different from what we were used to. The cow had just been milked, and of course the milk was not pasteurized.

The next thing I noticed was that all of the people who were not able to squeeze into the house were standing at the windows and leaning in, crowding each other and shouting. (They were French windows and opened outwards.) Bubby walked over and calmly shut the shutters in their faces.

Then someone announced that the cat had just given birth to two kittens, but both were born dead. At this moment my uncle Isaac took my arm, introduced himself and led me into a bedroom. He pointed to something screwed onto a bureau top and explained that he knew it was meant for grinding something, but for what? I explained it was a pencil sharpener, but I did not know the Yiddish word for "pencil." I tried to explain by using my right forefinger and pretending to write on my left palm. He ran and brought me a pencil, and when I demonstrated its use, he slapped his hand on his forehead, while exclaiming "Ah, America Goniff." This was meant as a compliment, even though translated literally, it meant "American thief." I was to see and hear this many times, because they were actually admiring us for our inventiveness and ingenuity.

The house seemed to get more and more crowded every minute with more and more noise. I was amazed that people could hear each other. The baby was taken into a bedroom and put to sleep for the night. Helen and I just wandered around and watched the grown ups and wondered where the kids were. Of course we soon realized that it was much too late for kids to be up. From time to time an adult would approach either Helen or me and ask us questions, which we could barely hear or chuck us under the chin, which I always hated.

Several of the aunts and uncles introduced themselves, but it actually took a couple of days until I sorted out which spouses belonged to each other and which kids belonged to which family.

It must have been about two or three hours (well into the morning) before someone thought of telling Ma to put Helen and me to sleep. With all of the milling around in the house and excitement of all of the new relatives no one had thought of putting us to bed,

which of course we did not want to do. Eventually we could not keep our eyes open and had to give in.

Ma led us into a bedroom where I saw Harriet fast asleep in the big double bed.

That was not so surprising, but what was surprising was where Ma expected me to sleep—in an over-sized crib! I was really insulted, that the baby was in a grown-up bed and I, the big sister, in a crib. However, I soon learned that it was long enough for me. Also, I thought to myself that this must be a European custom.

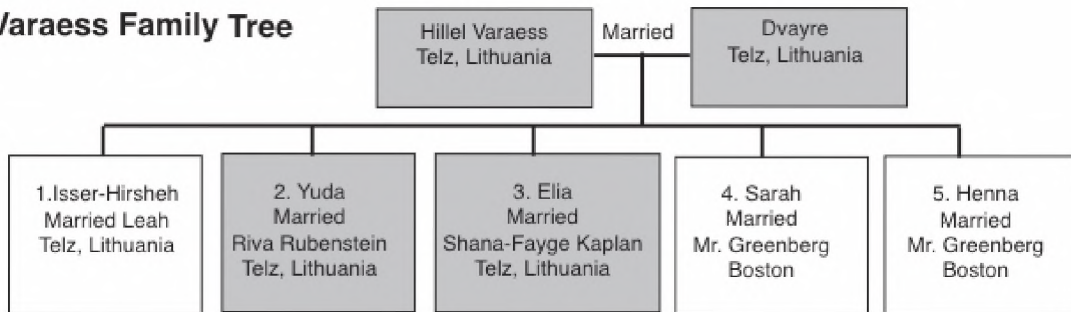
As I was falling asleep I thought that I smelled fresh mown grass, which was certainly odd since it was dark outdoors. When I asked Ma about it she laughed and said she would tell me about it tomorrow. Then I heard her muttering to herself, “Of course, no closets.” That kind of worried me because we were constantly reminded by Ma not to get our coats dirty because there was no dry cleaning in Telz.

I was absolutely in love with my coat and hoped it would not land on the floor and get dirty. For the trip we all wore our newest and best clothes. Ma wore a black satin dress with chiffon sleeves, and with a beautiful embroidered pattern over one side. Over that she wore a black silk brocaded coat with a small grey fur collar. She had grey T-strap shoes and a really marvelous hat. The hat was of a fine straw, also in grey, and it had a large brim made of horsehair, which was highly popular because it not only was translucent, it would never wilt in the rain. Ma’s outfit was certainly beautiful, but hardly practical for an overseas voyage and with three kids often clinging to her and almost always having to carry the baby.

I really cannot remember what Helen or Harriet wore, but I remember my outfit very well, because I loved it so. My dress was pale pink crepe de chine, with little ruffles along the hem. My coat was a summer-weight wool, with a detachable cape that buttoned under the collar. The cape was elbow length. I know Helen and I both wore black patent leather shoes knee length stockings, which were held up by garters under the cuffs.

I suddenly thought of Pa’s knife and thought I would Ask Ma about it tomorrow.

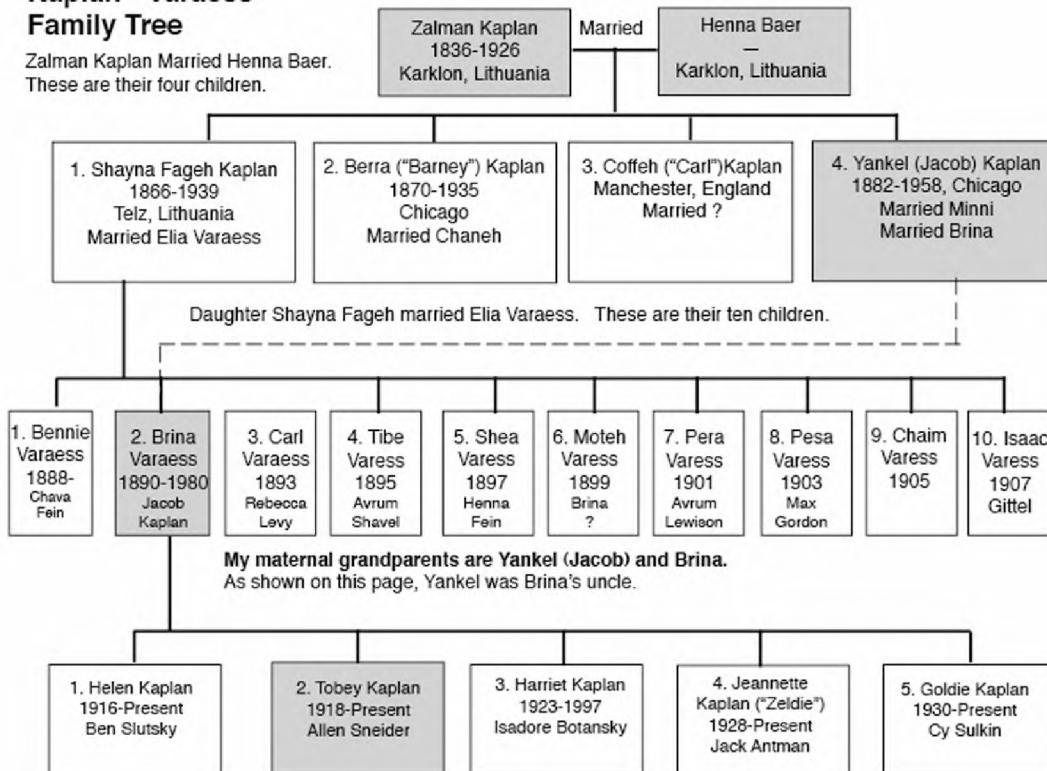
Varaess Family Tree



Zaidy Elia's parents were Hillel and Dvayre Varaess. Both had died before I came to Telz in 1926. Elia's brothers, Yuda and Isser-Hirsheh and their wives lived next door to us, so I got to know them quite well. Sarah and Henna had already left for America by the time I arrived.

Kaplan - Varaess Family Tree

Zalman Kaplan Married Henna Baer.
These are their four children.



Bubby Shayna-Faygeh's parents were Zalman and Henna Kaplan. Zalman died the year I was in Telz. As you can see in the diagram, Brina was the daughter of Yankel's sister, Shayna-Faygeh. In other words, my father married his niece. At the time of our trip, my sisters Jeannette and Goldie were not yet born.

Chapter 7 The Family

My son, who has been reading this story as I've been writing it, thinks that by now you must be thoroughly confused about who all these people are. So I thought I would pause in my story to briefly describe who's who.

This is primarily about my Mother (Brina Varaess) and her family, in Chicago and Lithuania, in the small town of Telz. At one time, when I was grown and spoke to Aunt Pera about the size of the town, she said that in 1926, the population was about 13,000, with more than half of the city dwellers Jewish.

The non-Jews were mostly farmers, but were much more friendly with the Jews, at least in business, if not in a social way. This was a great deal better than the way the Russian peasants or military treated the Jews, with constant pogroms.

Ma's parents were Elia Varaess and his wife, Shayna-Faygeh. Zadie Elia's two older brothers lived nearby: Yuda and Isser-Hirshe. All three of them had beards, since the Jewish tradition permitted trimming, but never shaving the beard. They didn't look at all like each other. Even their beards were different. Elia was the youngest. His beard was shaped in a modified Van Dyke, slightly rounded at the end, to suit his long face. Yuda, whose physique and face were broad, wore a beard cut straight across, to match the shape of his square face. Isser-Hirshe, the eldest, had a long, sprawling beard. It looked as though he never trimmed it. All three brothers were very lean, not a paunch among them. Yuda was very hairy, a trait that he passed on to later generations. I remember seeing Yuda outside his house in the summertime with a pan of water in front of him, shaving his chest.

Yuda's wife was Riva. Isser-Hirshe's wife was Leah. Riva, Leah, and Shayna-Faygeh all had long dark hair that they wore in a loose knot. In fact, all the women wore their hair this way, except for Ma, Pera, and Pesa, who wore their hair in a short bob, as was the fashion at the time in America. All the men wore crew cuts, except for the unmarried men, like Isaac, who wore a pompadour. (Most of the men in Telz shaved their heads to discourage lice, but not the men in our family.)

Elia's wife, Shayna-Faygeh Kaplan, was from Karklon, a town not too far away. Elia and Shayna-Faygeh were married about the year 1887 and eventually had ten children.

The years of their births were as follows: Benyumen (Bennie), 1888; Brina Stera (Bertha Stella), 1890; Coffeh (Carl), 1893; Tibeh, 1895; Shea, 1897; Moteh, 1899; Pera 1901; Pesa 1903; Chaim, 1905; and Isaac, 1907. You will notice that all of the children were born two years apart, except for Carl being three years after Brina.

Ma always told me that Carl was Bubby's pet, because she said that he was responsible for starting the baby factory again! Bubby was told by the doctor that she would never have any more than the two children because Brina's birth was so difficult. She said that having only two children was a tragedy she could not bear, and along came Carl and proved the doctor wrong, even if one year late! No one was allowed to strike back at Carl as a boy, and when he proved to be a hero and rescued the baby during the Great Fire, well, that clinched it.

All the children grew up, except Chaim, who died at the age of 15. There are two versions for the reason of his death. Ma told me that during the first World War the Germans occupied the town and did not bother the civilians, as long as they minded everything the Germans told them to do. At one time, they told the people not to eat the fish from the river, because the water (and the fish) were poisoned and would cause death, for sure. Well, the fish was poisoned and Chaim died. Aunt Pera said that he simply died as a result of dysentery, a common illness during war times.

Whatever the cause, Bubby blamed herself for his death, because she was not at home at the time and figured that she should have been the one to try out the fish. From that day on, she determined to punish herself by depriving herself of the thing she enjoyed most, which was to bathe in a full tub of hot water. Sure enough, she never went to the public bathhouse, but simply stood up in a large wooden tub and just washed herself that way.

Another person lived with us that I have not yet mentioned—Zaidy Zalmen Kaplan, who was Bubby Shaneh-Fageh's father. Of course, he was also Pa's father, so that on Pa's side, Zalmen was my grandfather, but on Ma's side, he was my great-grandfather!

When we spoke of the grandfathers in our house in Telz, we never mentioned their names, just called them "old Zaidy" or "young Zaidy." By this time, Zaidy Zalmen must have been at the very least in his nineties. He was so very wrinkled that his wrinkles had wrinkles! He was also bent at a 90-degree angle, so that when he walked, he was only able to look at the ground. Yet, he managed to go to shule three times a day for prayers. Luckily, the shule was just in back of the house, separated only by an empty lot. He had a full head of hair that was not even all white! I remember that he spoke very little, and seemed to prefer sitting in the kitchen on the straight-backed chair.

He died the year we were in Telz. One morning, on the way to shule, he fell down and was brought into the house, but never regained consciousness. He lingered for a couple of hours, with a group of men standing around the bed, each man holding a lit candle. They said a prayer each time he drew a breath. A few hours later they took him to the cemetery in a coffin on the back of a wagon. When he was buried they removed the body from the coffin in a shroud, and placed him in the ground. That was the orthodox method of burial.

I visited all of our relatives, but spent most of my time at the home of Shea and his wife, Henna, mainly because their daughter, Rochel, was my best friend. Shea was the tallest of the family, at least six feet or more. He was quite good looking and paid a lot of attention to me, always greeting me when we met in the street. One day, he pinched my cheek, like adults do to children, in a friendly way, and was shocked to see me faint away! What he did not know was that I had an infected tooth, and the pain must have been too much. It was a good thing it did happen, as that alerted Ma to take me to the dentist.

Aunt Henna was a very tall woman, with simply beautiful posture, just like her sister, Aunt Chavie in Chicago. She also had very high color in her cheeks, and I know it was

natural, as none of the women used cosmetics. The year we were there, she gave birth to her third child, a girl they named, Esther. I got a kick out of the way she dressed up the house for the Sabbath. She cut out paper in a lacy pattern, with a long part to fit over the handle on each pot and pan, and with the copper shining through, it was very nice, hanging on the wall.

As I write this I realize that the reader may get confused about all the Hennas (as well as the similar Hennias and Hannahs). In fact there have been eight women with this name in our family. The eldest was Zalman Kaplan's wife, Henna Baer, who became Henna Kaplan after she married Zalman. The second was Shea's wife, Henna Fine, whom I described above. She became Henna Varaess after she married Shea. The third was Henna Shavel, the daughter of Tibe and Avrum Varaess Shavel. The fourth was the daughter of Hillel and Dvayre Varaess, who married the widower of her elder sister Sarah. When she married she became Henna Greenberg. The fifth was Henna-Rochel Varaess, daughter of Benny and Chava Varaess, who was called Helen Weiss in the United States. She married William Kaplan (not related to the other Kaplans in my family) and became our second Helen Kaplan. The sixth was Henia, daughter of Golda Varaess and Chaim Jaffe. She married, but I don't know her last name. The seventh is Hannah Antman, my sister Jeannette's granddaughter, and the eighth is my sister Helen, whose Jewish name is Henna. She eventually married Sam Hiller, and so became Helen Hiller. To avoid any possibility of confusion, I call her "Helen" in this story.

Mote was rather a quiet man, also good looking, with a small moustache. He was also in the butcher business, as was Zaidy and Shea. In fact, all the men were either in the butcher business, or were cattle dealers.

Mote was married to a woman named "Brina," who not only shared Ma's name, but was very like her, in being jolly and stout. I remember Brina as having beautiful red hair and always being elbow deep in flour, as she was constantly baking wonderful pastry. At this time, she had two children, one being a little blond girl, the same age as Harriet. She is the one we know that lives in Israel, whose name is Yocheved.

Aunt Tibe was married to Avrom Shavel, a tall well-built man, except for one thing, or so I thought. His head was completely shaven. Ma told me it was because he had grey hair, and Russians thought that a shaven head was more attractive. Avrom walked around all day, seeming to be rich, as he was never seen to be doing any work. The truth was that he had no business ability at all, and with Telz being a town with no industries, he did not have much choice. The truth, however, was a secret known only to the family. At night, after dark, he worked down at the place where the trains stopped, shoveling coal for the steam engines. Because it was manual labor, he was ashamed of it, as Jews did not ordinarily do this kind of work, and made sure to be back in town before sun-up.

During the day he could be seen strolling through the town, with the older children. Before they set out, Tibe, being a true Jewish mother, sent along a lunch, although the entire town could be walked through in one half an hour. When they returned from their walk, Tibe demanded to see if there was any leftover food, not because of the wasting of the food, but so that she could be sure of how much they had eaten. The family thought this was very funny, because her children had huge appetites.

Tibe, seemed to be very nervous in many ways. I heard the family talking about this, and there were many different opinions about the reason for this. One thing was odd, is that she could hardly bring herself to do any housework in her own home, but would come to Bubby and go into a regular cleaning frenzy!

Everyone could see that Tibe and Avrom were very much in love with each other. Sometimes Tibe would pretend that she was angry at Avrom and pinch him, but she was really pinching his sleeve which caused much laughter. They had only been married six or seven years, but had four children, ranging in age from five years old down to a few months.

Pera and Pesa were only in their twenties, but were already considered to be old maids, which naturally concerned everyone in the family. They came to Telz very often, whenever there was a holiday or recess from the schools in which they were teaching. They were very close, to each other, more so than to any other members of the family,

and remained so for the rest of their lives. At this time of my writing, Aunt Pesa is still alive, being 100 years old (*Kanen-Hora*).

The two sisters were as different as day to night. Pera always arrived with a chip on her shoulder, ready to do battle with everyone, even with me! She especially delighted in teasing Helen and me by eating little luxuries, that we would not have even cared about in America, but here it was a thing we missed, just because we could not have it. One time she arrived with a bag of grapes, and refused to give us a taste, smacking her lips loudly while eating them. Of course, if we had the sense we have today, we would have ignored this. Ma even offered to pay her if she would give us some, but she refused. Finally, she relented, and gave us each one single grape! Pesa, on the other hand, arrived like a ray of sunshine, usually with a gift of some sort or a toy for the baby.



This image of Telz is also from a postcard used in my seventh grade report on Lithuania. It shows the upper end of Main Street. Notice the unpaved road that was very muddy when it rained. The side streets were even worse. The area at the far left is the only grassy area in town. It is an entrance to a park called the “Garden.” The brick building on the right is a jail, with soldiers posted in front.

Chapter 8 Life in Telz

After a good night's sleep we were awakened by all the noise that was still going on. Ma hustled us out of bed by telling us that we had guests waiting especially for Helen and me. The guests waited outside while we had breakfast.

While we were eating, Ma explained the mystery of the lawn mowing. It seems that in lieu of a mattress, I was sleeping on a large burlap bag filled with fresh hay! This was to be changed weekly. I actually liked it except for one little problem. Sometimes the hay would work itself out and prick my skin.

When we went out we found about six or seven little girls, all dressed up in their best clothes as it was *Shabbos*. They greeted us as if we had known each other for years, with no shyness at all. I guess our command of Yiddish must have been okay, as I don't remember hesitating and looking for the correct words.

The first thing they told me was that I was committing a sin by carrying my handkerchief, and with those words they simply took the used hanky and tied it around my wrist. They explained that it was a sin to carry things on the Sabbath, but okay to wear it.

As we walked along, we could hear voices in back of us and found four or five adults listening to our conversation, which was astonishing to us as it usually worked the other way, that is, children following adults. But soon the novelty wore off and they left us. The girls explained that the larger building in the yard across from our Bubby and Zaidy was a duplex that was occupied by Zaidy's two older brothers, Yuda and Isser-Hershe, and their families.

In the same yard there was also a barn and an outhouse. Between the house and the barn there was a well, which was not considered pure enough for humans, but was used only for animals. Our water was brought from the center of the town, where I saw the only pump in Telz. Everyone seemed very proud of the pump. When we got to the main street we were surprised to find it to be very wide, perhaps as much as six or eight lanes.

We were even more surprised to find the street paved with stones, all of the stones being of different sizes and different heights, so that it was hard to walk. Down the very center of this wide street was a large brick building, which contained all of the kosher butcher shops. Most of the buildings on Main Street were of red brick, as in sharp contrast to the homes on the side streets, which were all unpainted wood.

The girls also pointed out the local jail, which had a sentry or policeman walking back and forth, with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Telzer Main Street was a long sloping hill. At the top of the hill was a small park, which was called “Der Gorten,” The Garden. This was the only place I remember ever seeing an actual lawn in town. All yards and empty lots were just bare earth, which turned to mud in the rainy season, and became almost impassible.

There were quite a few shops that I could see, among the red brick buildings, but we decided it was time to head for home. We found quite an elaborate meal awaiting us as this was *Shabbos* and the big meal was served at noon.

After the Sabbath meal we returned to roaming around town and discovered another interesting place at the foot of the hill on the Main Street. (It was also the end of Main Street). There was a large property enclosed by a fence, although the gate stood open. We went in and found ourselves in an apple orchard, which the kids told us was owned by a convent which was on the back end of the yard, but all children were allowed to play there. They told me that the gates were closed at sundown. I found that the great attraction of the place for children was that the ground was covered with wild flowers that we were allowed to pick. Nothing was said about the fruit and I never saw anyone try to steal any.

During this first walk around town, my mind was also on other things and I had kept this in my mind throughout the entire trip—where should I hide Pa’s knife?

I started to really look over the house in a quiet way because if I asked questions,

someone was sure to ask me things I did not want to talk about. I soon found the perfect place, so little used that there was dust all over it. It soon became the favorite place to find me indoors. I was not afraid of Helen finding it because by this time she had been practically adopted by Uncle Isaac. Naturally, she had to act grown up as he took her with him everywhere. What really hurt my feelings was that they went everywhere on horseback!

It is hard to explain about the hiding place. The house, which consisted of just four rooms, was built around the oven. The oven was made of four walls reaching from the floor to the ceiling. These walls seemed to be part of the house walls, or at least some section of them. The very center of the oven was enclosed so that it was almost impossible to touch the flames. In the section on the kitchen side, there was an opening perhaps a foot square, through which Bubby would insert the fuel which was only wood, and then put in the pot on a very long handled large type of spatula, which was shaved thin on the edge so it could be inserted under the pot and moved around at will. There was also a very long iron poker with a hook on the end, which also helped to distribute the burning coals, according to how much heat was needed.

Now the back of the oven, which had a wall in the small bedroom, started to get smaller by gradually stepping up to the ceiling with smaller and smaller steps. By the time it reached the ceiling it was just the size of a regular chimney. These steps were about two feet in height and about three feet in width. It was on these steps that I hid the knife and any other treasures I had during that year in Telz.

Ma told me that the peasants actually slept there on cold winter nights, but of course Jews would not do this. I found that Jews prided themselves on many such things, as if it were beneath their dignity. One of the other things that Jews would not do was actual manual labor, unless it was in their own business (more of this later).

This smaller bedroom had three single beds where both grandfathers and Bubby slept while we were there.

The kitchen had an old grimy looking sofa, a small table, one straight-backed chair, a cupboard, and a bureau with about three or four drawers. Against one wall, near the door, was what we call here a “lavabo”. This was simply a large tin container with a small button at the bottom, which you pressed for a little water, and I do mean little. Under this was a large pan, which was used for any wastewater as well as any garbage from the kitchen. You never saw any waste paper, as there did not seem to be any paper around.

We spent most of our time in the largest room in the house, so I think of it as “the family room.” It was used for dining as well. It had a long table about like a picnic table and several chairs, most of them what we would call stools, being without backs. This room also had a large grimy looking sofa, and that was all, but there always seemed to be enough room for everyone. This room also had the only ornament in the entire house, even though it did not work. This was a large Grandfather clock, but without a case around it. Zaidy said that no one ever remembered it working. There were a few family portraits, most of them oval in shape.

The larger bedroom was where we slept. There was a double bed for Ma and Harriet, a single bed for Helen, and an actual crib for me! But it was long enough so I could not object. There were no clothes closets but there was a small armoire in the larger bedroom. Of course we did not have enough room for all of our clothing, but we managed with hooks on the wall. Luckily we had taken only summer clothes as we expected to be home by fall in time for school.

If you saw the movie, “Fiddler on the Roof,” you can imagine what our grandparent’s home looked like when I tell you that Fiddler lived in a palace, compared to my grandparents’ house in Telz.

The walls of the inside were all white, as well as the parts that were the oven. The floor was painted a dark yellow—that is the parts around the holes! It seemed that the house was built directly on the ground, with no crawl space, or foundation, so naturally the floor was always rotting. Also, the mice were constantly gnawing through the floor, which was why every house kept a cat.

The house had only one entrance. First, there was a long hall, off of which was a door on the right, which led to a small storage room. This room had a staircase, which led to the attic. When you continued down the hallway, you came upon the barrel of water, which was replenished as often as necessary, usually not more than once a week. The barrel had straight sides and was able to be opened only half way; I suppose to minimize bugs or dirt getting in. This water container was of galvanized metal and was filled up by a local non-Jewish woman. She brought the water from the center of town, from the pump. She carried two buckets at once on a yoke over her shoulders.

The back of the house had a small barn attached to it, which was used only for hay and vegetables, as well as certain foodstuff that was not perishable and for which there was no room indoors. This little barn became another of my favorite places to play with the cousins, above on the loft.

I believe this should give you a pretty good picture of our grandparent's house in Telz.

After we had been in Telz for only a few days we were suddenly afflicted with a terrible skin problem. We broke out in big angry-looking sores, which were a problem that no one—not even the doctor—had seen before. I don't remember if it itched or not, but the sores became scabs which were quickly replaced with more of the same. Many people, even complete strangers, came with all kinds of home remedies, which Ma was not afraid to try, as long as it was not to be taken by mouth. Most of the remedies were to be put into the bath water. One in particular, I remember because it consisted of a complete anthill, which was in a burlap sack! Many of the people were friends or acquaintances that Zaidy knew through his cattle business.

Lucky for us, Helen's and my sores disappeared within two weeks, but poor Harriet had it the entire year, with low grade fever. She also had a very poor appetite. Ma went to great lengths to get some nutrition into her, even tempting her with chocolate. Harriet even refused the chocolate, while Helen and I were just drooling and thinking what a waste it was since we did not get even a taste.

We soon settled into a routine, which I remember with great enjoyment. I think part of it was that people paid more attention to me, than was the case at home. Of course, here we were still a novelty.

Isaac—whom you may recall was 19 when we visited—was entirely preoccupied with Helen and Harriet. He enjoyed taking Helen with him everywhere on horseback. When he wasn't doing that, he was trying everything that he could imagine to get the baby to eat. One day he was running home to feed Harriet, and accidentally crashed right through the window of a neighbor's house! That was not so strange as it might seem since the houses had French windows and were very close to the ground. Of course, crashing through the window of a neighbor's house still made him the laughing stock of Telz.

I am amazed to remember that not once did we hear either Bubby or Zaidy complain about our making too much noise, which must have been quite a change in that house, since their youngest child was already grown up. I am sure Helen and I made plenty of noise when we got into fights.



When we were in Telz we stayed with my mother's parents, whom I called Bubby and Zaidy. This picture of Elia and Shayna-Faygeh with their granddaughter, Rochel, was taken a few years before we came. Rochel and I became fast friends. At the time I thought she was my age, but later I found that she was two years younger than me. Rochel married and moved to Israel after the Holocaust. We have stayed in touch by letters and phone calls over all these years.

Chapter 9 Happenings

It so happens that Zaidy Elia and I developed a rapport from the very beginning. Very often, in the evening, after supper, he pulled me down on his lap and told me stories; but what was more important, he answered all my questions about the history of the family.

Now that I think of it, I am surprised that I was not insulted to be put on his lap as I was certainly too old for that. I guess I liked being babied for a change, as Harriet was usually getting all the attention because she was sickly as well as being the baby.

The first thing I asked him was to tell me how he lost his eye. Naturally, I could not miss such an obvious thing as he wore a black patch on one eye. Everyone immediately shushed me, but he said that was a good question and deserved an answer.

When he was three years old, a neighbor came to visit and kept on saying that she had never seen such beautiful blue eyes, and no one remembered to say “kanen hora.” As soon as she left his eyes started to tear. They went to a doctor next day who declared that it just needed a little drop of eye medication.

He remembers that the doctor appeared drunk, and as soon as the drops were put in his eye, the white of the eye pulled over the pupil and he immediately became blind in that eye. As the years went on, other doctors told him that it was just a simple operation and his sight could be restored. The only problem was that this operation could be performed in Riga, Latvia, the nearest medical center. Of course this would cost more than they could afford but the hope was always there. Even after he was married they usually had a small nest egg for that purpose but more important things happened, either a sickness in the family, or even such a minor thing as the newly slaughtered cow turned out to be *traife*.

When he was still a young man, married with several children, it so happened that he had to go out in the countryside to visit a farmer who owed him money for a cow (or parts of

a cow). Naturally, with his bad luck, this farmer was also drunk, and instead called him a bad name and picked up a very heavy iron weight and threw it at him and struck him in his bad eye. This punctured the eyeball and the fluid ran out which of course ruined all hope of restoring the sight. When I heard this, I exclaimed in horror. But Zaidy said, “No, it was a good thing because it did not strike the good eye.” He said that it happened so many years ago that he was quite comfortable with it and did not notice his nose, which I asked him about, after closing one eye and trying it myself.

The next question I asked him was how did he and Bubby meet, since I already knew that Bubby came from another town, Karklon. He told me that their parents decided that they should meet and perhaps, if both children were agreeable, a *shiddach* would happen. They arranged a rendezvous in the forest, exactly midway between both towns, where was a “*shadchen* bench”, especially for that purpose. Both were left alone for a couple of hours to become acquainted and decide if they would be suited to each other. This was not a “must” as it was done in earlier years, but was considered quite modern, as they were allowed to make a choice. They both decided that they liked each other, after a courtship of two hours! Zaidy added that these courtships were always arranged at twilight, as then “all cats are grey,” meaning that the soft light was romantic, as well as covering up any imperfections.

Bubby was usually much too busy to sit and just talk to me, but she did much of her meal preparations while sitting on the old sofa, with a pan in her lap in lieu of a sink. So that is the time I was able to talk with her, while sometimes I helped her with small chores. Every time we sat together, she told me the same story, of how she saved her thumb from amputation, going against doctors’ orders. It seems that she had a bad infection on her thumb that refused to heal, and the doctor said that the poison would spread and she would be in danger of losing her arm, or even her life. But she cured it herself and she proudly showed me that there was not even a scar to show for it.

I admired how easily she went about her housework, despite what I considered rather primitive conditions. Near the oven, she had three baskets on the floor and a bucket of water. One basket had hay in it, the second one had sand in it and the third basket had

small pieces of birch bark. The latter was used to start the fire, in lieu of paper, as I never seemed to see any paper lying around. To wash a pot, she grabbed a handful of hay, dunked it in the water and then dunked the wet hay in the sand, to which it clung. Without any soap, she used this as we would use kitchen cleanser and it did a good job of cleaning.

I noticed that Ma did not do any of this type of work, As she was by then an American housewife and was accustomed to more modern methods of kitchen Work.

Bubby told me many other things, which I found interesting because before this I had only heard parts of these true-life stories.

Once I asked her to tell me more about the great fire of 1907, which had almost destroyed the entire town. About that time the Bolsheviks were already very active, trying to overthrow the Czarist government. At that time, no one used the word "Communist." It was against the law to have any armaments or explosives within the town, but someone did have it in his hayloft, and it exploded. Because most of the homes had roofs that were straw thatched, the fire spread so quickly that it soon engulfed everything. Bubby said that they went outside and she told them to dip their quilts in the well and try to throw it up on the roof, but of course, it then became so heavy that it was an impossible task. So they each grabbed whatever they could and raced out of town, in their wagon. Some of the people were trapped between the river and the fire, and in desperation, floated their featherbeds on the water with their smallest children floating on it. (I was amazed to find that a featherbed could float).

As soon as they were out of reach of the flames and looked around, Bubby immediately saw that the youngest child was missing. Carl then wrapped a rag around the horse's head so it would not see the flames and actually rode right through a wall of fire. When he arrived at the place where their home had been, he saw what he later described as a miracle. All around him, the trees were actually exploding, embers were flying

everywhere, and right in the middle was a small clearing, free of fire, and in the middle of that clearing was the baby sitting quietly, sucking on a piece of sugar!

They had taken refuge in the local *abbatoir*, which was all concrete, and far enough from the fire to be safe for the time being. All around them, people started to awaken next morning and take stock of their predicament. The first thing that Zaidy did was to catch a cow running loose, find the *shochet*, and started butchering the cow on a tree stump, in lieu of a block, so at least people would have something to eat. Someone in authority sent a telegram to the capitol of Russia to tell them of this tragedy, and received a reply that was pretty good, considering the bad reputation of the Czar, and the fact that most of the people within the town were Jewish, while the non-Jews lived on outlying farms.

The reply was addressed to the Rabbi. The Czar would send out, free of charge, all the necessary materials for rebuilding their homes, but they had to supply their own labor. The order to the Rabbi was that he should see to it that no one would claim these free materials who had not had their own home before. Furthermore, he directed that the former homeowners did not have to rebuild on the same lot as before, but could build close to other members of their families. That is why The three brothers, Elia, Yuda, and Isser-Hirsheh, lived within the same lot.

After this great fire, when they took stock, they discovered only two people were killed, in both cases, needlessly, as they were both motivated by greed or foolishly putting their lives at risk for money. One man had been the janitor at the Inn and decided that now would be a good time to go down into the cellar and drink all the wine he wanted, while everyone was busy fighting the fire, and of course, the house fell down on him. The other person who died was a servant girl who ran back into the house to get her little purse of money, after she had been safely outside.

Of course, it was not that easy or quick to rebuild a house, and it became necessary to send out their children to various relatives, to live, until they had at least a place to sleep. I know that some of them went to Shavel, where there were more Varaesses living

Years later, when I was a teenager, Ma told me another part of this tragedy, that Bubby herself never knew about until the day she died. Like most girls of her time, she knew nothing about sex or how babies were made. When they awoke the next morning, after the fire, she was horrified to find that she was surrounded very closely, with men as well as women and children. She did, however, know that a baby was started by sleeping with a man, and she really meant “sleeping.” Being afraid to ask her mother about sex, she kept the secret to herself, while thinking she was actually pregnant! Being so nervous, she kept looking if her stomach was getting bigger. When nothing happened after nine months, she breathed a sigh of relief and went on with her life, as before. During those nine months she had lost her appetite and could not sleep for worrying.

Her family never knew what caused that strange illness in their daughter, or what caused the miraculous recovery!!



Horses and wagons were the major mode of transport when we visited Telz in 1926, as shown in this image of the lower Main Street. The building in front left is where Shea and Brina lived with their children, on the second floor. In 1926 there were no additional buildings at this end of Main Street. Following the street to the left leads out into the countryside. This photo was also taken from my seventh grade report.

Chapter 10 Summertime

One thing happened when we had only been in Telz a short time that frightened the whole family. Uncle Shea was butchering a cow when he became violently ill with a dangerous infection. This type of illness comes from the inside of the animal. (I have read about this many times in stories of pioneering days when people did their own hunting). The doctor said that the remedy for this could only be obtained from Riga, Latvia, and that it would never arrive in time to save his life, if we waited for train delivery.

Someone got the bright idea to have it flown in which may have been only a few hours away. The reason I remember it so well is that I can still see Ma turning her purse upside down and seeing a shower of things falling out, including coins and paper money, as well as a box of face powder, which was soon covering everything. Also, there were toys, hankies, and all sorts of things, which women carry in their purses. The money may have been either American, or German or Polish or Lithuanian, as those were the countries we had traveled through. It looked as if Ma had not yet cleaned out her purse since we arrived, which leads me to think we had only been in Telz a short time.

Thankfully, the serum arrived on time and Uncle Shea had a complete recovery. He was soon going about his business, as if nothing had happened. I imagine the entire family pitched in their share to make up the necessary funds.

I have neglected to mention about the lighting in the house. The kitchen and the family rooms each had a large oil lamp hanging from the ceiling, with a white milk glass, unadorned, shade over it. The bedrooms had only small hand-held oil lamps, which seemed to always need cleaning as they naturally collected soot.

Some time before we arrived, Telz was finally electrified. In Zaidy's house, we had electric light in the kitchen and the family room. This was just a large, bare bulb suspended on a cord, hanging from the ceiling. The only problem was that no one was able to turn it on or off at will. The power plant turned it on at dusk and shortly before ten in the evening, blinked it several times, to warn people to get their oil lamps lit.

One time, the baby fell asleep on the couch, and Ma did not want the light to shine in her eyes and awaken her, so she casually reached up and loosened the bulb a little bit. Everyone shouted for her not to do it again as she would certainly be electrocuted!

Of course, since there were no switches or outlets, this was the only electrical thing in the house. Despite the electricity in town, the streets remained dark, and I wonder how many years it took before there was street lighting.

When people went out at night, they carried kerosene lanterns, much the same as we had in America.

Of course, as with any new item, people had to invent a new name. So they looked at the shape of the bulb and called it the same word they called a pear—a *barneh*.

The weather was not much different from Chicago in the summertime, but we suffered very much because of the flies. Ma told us it was worse, not only because of the lack of screens, but because the barn was so close to the house, and flies were attracted to the manure pile right next to it. Right next to the barn, and running in back of our house, down to the river, was a ditch in which all waste was thrown, from the house, as well as the barn.

In addition to the horse and cow, Bubby also kept chickens, which ran around loose, without being penned up. When I saw Bubby throwing out their feed, I wanted to do it, but she said they might peck at my feet, in their eagerness to get at the food. She called them with a funny clucking noise when it was feeding time.

Our food seemed to be just what I liked, because we seemed to eat a lot of herring, at dairy meals, and herring was always a favorite of mine and still is to this day.

Bubby had a unique way of pairing herring with home baked bread. She made black bread about every five or six weeks. She made a big lot of it and when baked, the loaves of bread were put into a large white cloth bag, which hung on the kitchen wall and yet never tasted stale or became moldy. I still cannot explain that. Of course, the crust was very hard, but the inside was soft and delicious.

The dough for this kind of bread was not like the dough for challah, but was more like clay and could be formed into any shape. Whenever she made this bread, she formed three birds out of them, which were first stuffed with herring! This artwork was pretty good, and she put in split peas for the eyes,

Bubby took a rest just once in a while, and even then, she was doing work, but she considered this fun. What she did was knit, but only stockings, nothing else. These sox or stockings were knit out of what appeared to be grey string, and very rough if you were to touch it. They were only for the men to wear, as the children, and perhaps even the women, could not tolerate the roughness and would surely wind up with blisters on their feet. Very often, I would see her knitting only the heels, as that part wore out quicker, and I was told by Bubby that was more difficult to do than to knit the whole sock. She used very four thin double-pointed needles. The string was really linen.

One of the greatest joys of the summer was when Zaidy would return from the country. Of course he had gone for a business purpose, but all of us grandchildren benefited from this, I guess I can call it a by-product. His wagon was very low to the ground, and when he returned, usually with a cow tied and following, we hardly could wait for him to stop in the yard, before we jumped in and started eating like a bunch of animals. You see, the wagon was loaded about three or four times as high as his seat, and what he had loaded it with was entire vines of sweet peas! Never was anything so sweet, and we just gorged ourselves on them. The left over pods and vines were then fed to the animals.

I soon found another time to spend with Zaidy, when we could talk without his wasting time. Whenever I saw him sitting in front of the little hay barn, I would join him. I was fascinated to watch him cutting up huge amounts of vegetables for the cow. They

consisted mostly of beets, turnips, and different types of squash. I was surprised, as I had thought that cows only ate grass or hay. While we were talking I would steal pieces of turnip and eat them with great enjoyment, whereas if Ma had told me to eat it I would have refused. It took me a while to notice that he peeled only the turnip, so that it would be clean for me, whereas the other vegetables were served to the cow, dirt and all.

One fine day, Ma decided that we should visit the town of Trishik, where Aunt Eva (Chava or Chavie) and Aunt Henna came from. When we arrived, we were also welcomed by another family, who were related to us on Pa's side. Their name was Baer. The family of Chavie and Henna included three brothers, named Hillel, Yael, and Arne, as well as a sister named Reva. The men were all handsome, with Arne looking just like a movie star. I really do not remember the older generation in the family. They were in the business of making boots, and had a small factory for knitting stockings,

During the year we were in Telz, Arne came to visit quite often, and he was so handsome, that even I felt a thrill, especially when he wore a belted coat with a fur collar, and a fur hat tilted on the side. He always carried a walking stick and twirled it as he walked along.

I soon understood that he was courting Pesa, but she was not interested because she considered him below her, socially. The people then had a strange system of class in society, with the lowest being the *foorman* or the wagon driver, because he had to be out in all kinds of weather, and smelled of horses and manure.

The next above him was the *shuster*, because his hands were always black from handling dye and leather, and so on up the scale. The butcher and tailor were pretty far down on the scale. At the top were teachers, doctors, and other educated people. Everyone in the family was classed together with the breadwinner, unless there were circumstances in which some of the family rose above it by becoming more educated. So Pera and Pesa considered themselves higher than the rest of the Varaess family members, by having gone to college. So, because of this, Pesa did not encourage Arne's courtship.

When it was time to return to Telz, the same driver appeared with the horse and buggy that had taken us there. Helen and I were just thrilled with that buggy, as it looked just like the ones we had seen in the movies of olden times. It had a convertible top that folded back for sunny weather. On the return trip, Helen and I told Ma we had to “answer natures call,” so she told us to simply do it in the field nearby. When we returned we told her that the field was just so beautiful, being covered with all red flowers. Ma told us that these flowers were where poppy seeds came from. Helen and I exclaimed that now the *homentashen* for next Purim would be ruined. Ma just laughed and told us that all the rainstorms before harvesting would erase the “strange” flavor. We were greatly relieved to hear that.

When we arrived home, we were greeted with Bubby and Zaidy telling Ma that the head Rabbi had summoned her to appear at his home for a very serious matter. They really looked scared and we understood it was like being sent down to the principal’s office, to our way of thinking. Ma said that there was no hurry, as we were tired from our trip, and next day, we had planned to go to the bathhouse, since it was “ladies day.” Then she added, “What can he do to me, after all, I am an American citizen.” So we took our time, going to the bathhouse next day, a weekly thing for us, but not for the Telzers.

The public bathhouse was a plain looking building on the outside, but was a strange mixture inside. The building was divided into cubicles for each bath, by a very thin wall, with warped boards, which allowed plenty of peeking if you were so inclined. However, the bathtubs were really luxurious, being about the size of modern day Jakuzzis. Instead of being made of porcelain, they were made up of tiny colorful tiles. Also, the tub was a “sunken” tub and I was afraid to go down into it myself. So the year we were in Telz, Ma and I bathed together. Of course, Helen bathed alone, and the baby was simply bathed at home in a small pan.

Now that Ma had shown that she was not afraid of Rabbi Bloch, she went to see him next day. While she was gone, Helen and I were very nervous, as I am sure were Bubby and Zaidy, since no one knew what her “crime” was. In order to distract us, Isaac took us

outside to show off one of his tricks we liked to see. He took up a pail of water from the well, and holding onto the handle, twirled it around his head from top to bottom very rapidly, without spilling a single drop.

The first time we had seen this, Helen and I tried it, and, of course spilled it all over ourselves. Ma tried to explain the trick, but we were a little older before we understood it was centrifugal force.

When Ma returned from the Rabbi's house, she had a good laugh over her so-called crime and Bubby and Zaidy agreed with her. The Rabbi said that he had complaints from all of the Telzer housewives, that Ma was enticing their husbands and even interfering with their business! The truth was that the house usually had at least four or five men visiting, and simply asking Ma all about America. Since their visits all took place in the kitchen or family room, with other people all around, how could this be considered wrong? As a matter of fact, Ma usually did not even sit down with them, but continued her housework, while talking to them. And furthermore, why didn't their wives come along? The only way in which Ma was friendly was to offer them a glass of tea, and certainly not any liquor, as our family did not seem to go in for that.

In the time we were in Telz, the Rabbi summoned Ma twice more to appear before him, and one time, it actually involved me! But more of this later.



The synagogue was very important in the Jewish section of Telz. About 1929, my father Yankel, and his nephew, Benny, visited Telz to see family and make a donation to the synagogue. Yankel is standing on the right, and Benny is standing next to him.

Chapter 11 Family Matters

One time during that first summer, Helen became very ill with high fever.

When the doctor arrived, he said that she had an abscess on her right breast, which was not too unusual for girls who have started puberty, and are beginning to sprout small breasts. The doctor said he had had experience in this problem and he was pretty sure he could cure it without having to lance it.

The remedy was to apply hot compresses, hot enough to draw out the pus, but not too hot to burn the skin. Helen was very ill for an entire week, with all the family working to help. It required lots of work, keeping the oven going, in order to have a constant supply of hot water. The compresses were little cloth bags filled with flax seed. Thank G-d it worked, and Helen recuperated and was soon riding around on horse back with Isaac as before.

This particular illness reminded Ma of something that occurred in her life, when she was also about the same age. She reminded Bubby that when she had started to grow breasts, Bubby wanted Zaidy to see it (for some reason she could not figure out) and they both approached her while she was asleep, standing over her with an oil lamp. Unfortunately, they dropped the lamp on her chest, causing serious burns, which took a long time to heal.

Another bone of contention was why they did not allow her to go to school, while all of the other nine children went to regular school and graduated at the usual amount of schooling, for that time. They did, however, allow her to go to a tutor, at ten o'clock at night, when she was so tired, that she could hardly keep her head up. This was not surprising, since she awoke at 3:00 A.M. in order to bake and cook for the family of twelve people. Her mother, meanwhile, helped Zaidy in the butcher shop. Ma complained that even though more girls were born a few years later, no one took her place. She told me, years later, that she often apologized to the tutor for not understanding everything so quickly, but the man told her that her enthusiasm to learn made up for it.

Surprisingly enough, the tutor taught her Latin, as well as Yiddish and Hebrew. When she told him that she wanted to learn arithmetic, he replied to her, “Why bother, since you won’t need it as you will get married and have no use for that!”

Another complaint, which hurt Ma more than anything, was the fact that they hired her out as a maid to work for a Rabbi with a family of eight children, who lived in Riga, Latvia. This Rabbi and his wife were mean to her, begrudging her a little food and never allowing her to rest. Worse than all, Ma developed infections on all her fingertips, which were terribly painful, oozing pus. The Rabbi refused to let her to go to a doctor. This went on for several months, until a Telzer just happened to be visiting in Riga, and stopped in to see Ma, who was about fourteen years old at that time. In fact, Zaidy Elia’s family was considered well off, since they all dressed decently and certainly had enough to eat. It was more humiliating than anything else that really hurt, the fact that they hired her out as a maid, when in fact they really did not need the money.

And one more thing she had to complain about which really happened to her brothers as well as to herself. She talked about the time when Bennie and Carl and Pa all decided to bring the entire family to America. The family really scrimped to save that money. When the money arrived, Bubby refused to allow them to go to America, saying that America was full of “goyim” and that they would soon forget their faith. Of course, they all obeyed her and squandered the money by hiring a car and driver and just driving around until the money ran out.

All of this time, which went on and off throughout the week, Bubby did not answer or try to explain herself, or defend herself. Meanwhile, Zaidy went in and out of the house, as if it had nothing to do with him.

One more thing, Ma said it was a shame that her sick child, Helen, had to sleep on such a filthy couch, which certainly could not be good for anyone.

When Ma said this, only Pesa had an answer, at least about the couch. She said that as soon as Helen would be completely recovered, she would do something about the couch.

No one took much notice of that remark, because Bubby finally answered Ma about all of the complaints. She said that all grown up children have complaints about the treatment they received as children and Ma's children would also complain. Ma replied, "Oh, no, I will be a perfect mother and my children will have no complaints."

Aunt Pesa was as good as her word. In a few days she brought into the house, some very colorful cloth and started to pull down the old dirty cover. When she ripped it off, every one started to laugh. Even I saw the humor in it, as the couch had been stuffed with paper money! But it was even funnier when it was explained to us children that the money was obsolete, since it was Russian rubles for a government that did not exist anymore. At last peace seemed to descend on the house, and it was certainly a lot more cheerful with the new couch cover.

Well, the list of complaints was not over yet. Ma remembered that when she was about sixteen years old, Zaidy slapped her face and by accident scratched her cheek. As his fingernails were dirty and encrusted with dried animal blood, she soon became very ill with blood poisoning and her face swelled up into horrible lumps and with great pain. But the worst trauma to her at the time was that all of her hair fell out. Ma could not remember what she had done or said to cause him to slap her. Actually, this physical punishment happened very rarely in their family.

Yuda beat his boys severely. One time, his eldest son, Isser, (who changed his name to Harry White when he came to America) was supposed to be working behind the counter of a dry goods store, where he had recently gotten his first job. A man passing by saw that he was playing a game (similar to marbles) in back of the store and reported this to Yuda. When Isser came home, Yuda punched him and threw him into a wardrobe, so that he could not escape, and continued the beating until he broke his nose. It affected his breathing for the rest of his life, and when I met him as an old man, he still breathed very noisily and made odd sniffing noises. Ma told this story to Helen and me to show us that her father was not as bad as Yuda. She remembered seeing her father cry when he saw what his slap had done to her.

Chapter 12 Town Characters

Like any other town, I suppose, Telz had its quota of characters. I think they were mostly aware of their nicknames, but simply disregarded them, unless they were insulting. The worst case was if you were a redhead. They attributed all kinds of negative personalities to these, most of them being very hot tempered

One man was known as “Itze Der Rater” (Itze the Red). He was actually a very nice man, who had a reputation as a practical joker. One story they were fond of telling, years after it happened, was this: his wife was down in the market place selling her merchandise, when she remembered it was time to nurse her baby. So she told Itze to bring the baby to her, but to wrap her up, as it was a little chilly. He did exactly as instructed, except that he wrapped up the baby in a sheet of dough! She had left a large circle of dough, spread out on a clean cloth, planning to cut it into noodles when it would dry.

Whenever I saw Itze Der Rater in the street, he laughed at me. The reason for this was that one day he came into our house. I had heard the story about him long before. Then I said something that was just terrible. I recited out loud, in front of him, the verse some smart alec had made up, which in fact, was a complete fabrication. Someone had made up this verse: “*Itze der rater hut gecrochen auf a later, gezen a madel, gevoren a tater.*” (“Up the ladder went Itze the Red, he saw a girl and fell down dead”). After I said this the family were embarrassed, but he just laughed and patted me on the head.

One of the town characters had the *mishigass* that he had to speak to the president of the United States. So Isaac brought out an enema and told him to put the nozzle in his mouth and the other part to his ear! Bubby and Zaidy frowned on this but Isaac thought this was perfectly okay.

One of the strangest customs they had in Telz was they did not use any surnames, unless it was for a stranger. People were called by mentioning several generations back. For instance, If Ma asked me where I was going, I told her “I’m going to Brinke, Gitke, Esther, Ryness” This meant that she called herself by mentioning three generations back.

Also, people were identified by their husband, such as Brina, Yankle's, but never Yankle, Brina's.

People were also called by any defect of their person or by their occupation.

Zaidy was called "Elia der *Blinder*". His brother, Yuda was called "Yuda der *hinkadinker*" because he limped very badly. The most unpopular character was called Elke de *sheske*, which means Elke the skunk. She had a bad habit of confronting a person with complaints and recriminations, and running away without giving the other person a chance to explain or defend themselves. In other words, leaving a stink behind.

Two of the town characters were beggars. Beside Avrom der Longer, the other professional beggar was named Mashe Pitah. There too, Isaac convinced the poor man that he had to dance for his supper. So he would shuffle his feet a little before he was given a meal and a few *leet*. The latter was worth the equivalent of ten cents. I believe the two beggars had some kind of schedule, so as not to appear at the same house at the same time. Once they made a mistake in their schedule and they almost came to blows over it, but Bubby put them at the table together, which was a first as they considered each other rivals in their business.

I asked Ma how Yuda was so badly crippled on one leg. She told us the story, out of hearing of Bubby and Zaidy. She explained to us that the kosher butchers had several strikes against them to start with when they proceeded to have a cow or sheep slaughtered. First of all, the *shochet* had to be paid for killing the animal. Then they had to pay the *mashgeach* for inspecting the carcass for signs of any disease or abnormality. If the animal passed inspection they could sell the forequarter, but the hindquarter had to be sold at whatever they could get as the non-Jews knew that the Jews were not allowed to eat the rear end, except for the tail. If the animal did not pass inspection and was declared *trafe*, the only money they could get was the sale of the hide. However, the town of Telz demanded the hide as their tax. In that case the poor butcher was out of pocket for the complete price of the cow plus the expenses of bringing it from the farm.

So the butchers decided to go on strike and offer to pay the town some other price for the fee of the annual butcher's license. All of the kosher butchers agreed except for Yudah and perhaps a few others that were not mentioned. The other butchers decided on very drastic measures to make him agree. The strikers set upon Yudah one night and beat him so severely that his leg was broken and never set well. When we asked Ma if Zaidy Elia was a part of the ones who did the beating, she did not answer, so we assumed that she did not know or did not want to know. Thereafter, Yudah was known as "Yudah the Lame One."

His wife, Reva, was also considered a "character" by our branch of the family. The year we were there, Reva must have been in her sixties or early seventies and seemed to have a mental problem. She would suddenly appear in the yard, which was between both of our houses, spread her legs apart and urinate, instead of using the outhouse, which was only a few feet away. She thought no one knew what she was doing, because of her floor length skirt! She did this even in the midst of a howling blizzard! Of course, Helen and I thought this was hilarious, but Bubby made us stop looking and explained that it was a very great sin to make fun of a person who was not all there. While Reva was occupied with this strange behavior, someone mentioned that it was especially strange for her to do this, considering that she was a very vain woman. All the older women covered their hair even at home with a "babushka," which was almost always a colored cloth, and only wore a pure white babushka for the Sabbath. Reva not only wore the white cloth on weekdays; she was constantly adjusting the knot and fussing with her hair, which did not show anyway.

Years ago, when Reva was quite young, she was found to be diabetic, and she determined to cure herself of the disease by making annual pilgrimages to the famous spa in Carlsbad, Austria. No one really knows if that was her own idea or the medical opinion of the times. Being a normal type of woman, she had to bring back something to make the other women jealous of her, because she and the *rebbitzen* were about the only women to travel outside of the country. One time, she stopped off at a large city (probably Paris) and brought back a new style garment, which was the envy of every other woman in

town. Of course, every woman who sewed, as well as each professional dressmaker, immediately followed by making her own version of this new garment.

One of the stories that Ma told me about when she was a child is that she used to play with Reva's daughter, Chai Pera. Once Chai Pera invited her into their house and showed her a container and said that if she wanted to taste something sweet she could lick the cover of the container; but that if she ate what was inside she would die. It turned out that the container held saccharine, which Reva used as a sweetener as a result of her diabetes.

To understand the next story about Reva you need to know that women in Telz (and probably throughout Europe as far as I know) rarely used a coat. If poor they used just a shawl, which was supposed to keep the upper portions of the body warm. The lower portions of the body were warmed by numerous petticoats, which women wore every day. They did not, however, wear underpants. If they were in better economic conditions, the women wore a little waist length jacket, which was also more stylish. But at this time, the new style garment was actually a floor length cape. On top of the petticoats, the cape spread out like a tent, and it was called a "rotunda!" When Ma told this to me, many years later, I got a big kick out of the word as it brought to mind the room of the same name in the Capitol building in Washington, DC.

The first time Reva saw Bubby wearing her new rotunda, she demanded to know by what right did she have the nerve to wear such a stylish and expensive garment, especially considering the fact that Bubby had ten children! Of course Bubby retaliated by demanding what did the size of her family have to do with it? Reva replied that she was probably taking more than her rightful share of the business income because it took twice as much to feed ten, rather than five children that she and Yudah had.

There is one more important chapter to the Reva story. It seems that Zaidy Elia and his brother Yuda had been partners in the butcher business. The agreement was that aside from the regular sales of the business, the wives of each partner—Reva and Shayna-Faygeh—were to have the proceeds of the sale of the smaller parts of the animal, such as

the lungs, liver, etc. They were to take turns at this on a weekly rotating plan. However, as things will happen, each wife decided that she was being cheated somehow and they almost came to blows over it. This was the last straw and they never spoke to each other again. At some time before 1926, the two brothers broke up the partnership and rarely even spoke to each other, because of the falling out of the wives.

There were a few other characters in Telz, many of them so labeled through no fault of their own, or because of certain circumstances. One of these people I remember because she was called “Pera de *Shmultz*,” meaning “Greasy Pera.” She was simply a poor widow who earned her living by keeping the bathhouse clean and orderly. She, herself, was not dirty or greasy at all! She could not have made much money, because most of the Jewish people only went to the public bath at holiday time because they were expected to give her a “tip” beside the regular fee. Ma and we children went to the bath every week, which was considered extravagant. Ma pointed out to Helen and me that it was sinful to attach bad names to people who did not deserve it, and that Isaac was really doing the wrong thing to make fun of people who could not defend themselves, either because of mental or financial or any other problems. In doing so he was acting too childish for a young man who was already almost out of his teen years.

Oh, yes, there was another character in our own family., which happened before we arrived, but was alluded to very often. After we were in Telz about a week, Bubby started to set the table for supper, when she made a sound of disgust, and threw the dish of food in to the garbage barrel. Of course, Helen and I rushed forward to see what was so awful, and when we saw it, we agreed with Bubby that it should have been discarded as it was moldy. As Ma saw our expressions, she hastened to explain to us, not only the reason for it being left so long in its inedible state, and why the rest of the family were not so surprised, considering that it went back a good many years to the time when Zaidy Hillel lived close by.

By the way I should mention that Hillel was very tall. We were told that he had five brothers who were all over six feet tall. I don't know how many sisters he had. As we learned from Beverly Oldsberg, a woman from England who is related to us through one

of Hillel's brothers or sisters, there are a great many Varaesses in Europe, and a great many different spellings of the name.

After his wife, Dvayre, died, Hillel tried cooking for himself, but the results were not good, although he continued living in his own house, within the family compound. So the family took turns bringing in fresh food on daily and sometimes hourly shifts. This was, of course, necessary because there was not even any ice available. The family soon noticed that he refused to eat the fresh foods they were delivering, and started to eat food that had been delivered one or more days before. This old food very often was actually green with mold and needed a haircut! When they protested, he always replied, "What goes down in the black box, no one sees!" It did not seem to bother him any, as he lived to a ripe old age!

Another *mishigoss* of Zaidy Hillel was that he loved the wooden shoes that the peasants wore, but would not allow anyone outside of the family to see him in them, because it was considered too low class for a Jew to be seen wearing them. He especially treasured them to be used as "comfortable house slippers," stating that they were unbelievable soft. When any one approached his door, they had to announce themselves, as he was ashamed to be seen wearing them by any of the townspeople and ruining his reputation.

By the time we were there a few months, I imagine *we* were known as "characters" by the Telzers, since we were so different from them. First of all, we were from America. Second, we dressed a little differently, and we ate food that they considered fit only for animals, such as lettuce and tomatoes. Also, we showed that we were not afraid of the Rabbi. But most of all, we actually took a bath every single week; whereas the Telzers bathed only before the High Holidays.



The seated man and woman in this photo are the parents of Eva (Chave) and Henna Fein. Chave married my uncle Benny Varees, and Henna married my uncle Shea Varees. Chave's mother (seated) was Golda Baer Fein. Her mother was Tzipa Baer, a first cousin to Hanna Baer Kaplan, (my great grandfather Zalman Kaplan's wife). The two women in the background are their daughters Henia (on the left) who will marry Shea Varees, and Rivka. Chave is not in this photo. The three men are their sons Yale, Arn, and Hillel. They are in World War I uniforms. One of the men was injured by poison gas in World War I. The photo was taken in Trishik, where the Fines lived. No one in this photo survived the Holocaust.

Chapter 13 Small Incidents

In 1926 a fire occurred in Telz. The rule was that whenever a fire occurred every able-bodied man was required to go and fight it. The signal was a hand-held bell. One day we heard the bell ring. Isaac was in the house at the time, while I was in the yard. The horse was tied facing the barn. At the sound of the bell, Isaac ran out of the house, and leaped over the rump of the horse and galloped off, just like you see in cowboy movies. I was so thrilled by this feat of horsemanship, I felt goose pimples all over me.

As Isaac galloped away, I went out into the street to see what was happening. I saw men rolling out a huge wheel, maybe eight or ten feet across, unrolling hoses for fighting the fire. Just then Isaac spied me, and he grabbed me and took me back to the house because it was too dangerous for me to be there.

Many small isolated things happened while we were in Telz that I find almost unbelievable. When we arrived, Shea's wife, Henna gave birth to a little girl, they named, Esther. Of course there is nothing so thrilling as such an event, so we visited there quite a lot. What we found when we first visited horrified us. The poor baby was always screaming, and Ma thought she knew exactly why. Henna wrapped the baby up very tightly so she looked just like a small mummy. Her arms and legs were completely straightened out and bound tightly to her little body. Her face was just about the color of a beet as she tried to release her little limbs in the natural fetal position that babies always assume. When Ma asked Henna why she bound her so tightly, Henna replied that if she were allowed to be unbound, she was sure to grow up with a crooked back. Henna considered this to be the normal way to take care of the new baby, since she already had two older children, Rochel, about six, and Chaim, about four. Ma said, "Do you see crooked backs among my children?" I really do not know if she took Ma's advice. For all we know, Esther grew up normally. She remained in Lithuania, married, had children and survived the Holocaust.

At that time there was another infant in the family. He was the grandson of Yuda and Reva and lived with his parents in the duplex. His mother was the only child of Yuda's to

live with them, as the other children had already emigrated—Harry and Mollie moved to New York, and Moness and Elka went to South Africa. The mother, Chai-Pera, was married to a good-looking man, but who was unfortunately considered “half-baked.” The first time we saw the baby, we knew there was something wrong, as he showed no signs of any animation at all. Ma told Chai-Pera that she should take the baby out-of-doors, even in the winter weather, as the sunshine was necessary for development. Of course the poor parents did not really believe us at all, so Ma took Pera with the baby to the doctor, who said there was no use hoping because of their low IQ. Things did not improve while we were there, and another baby was born to the family with the same disastrous results.

One time, I was hanging around the Main Street, which was quiet as usual, but all of a sudden, people were milling about and shouting and waving signs and speaking only in the Lithuanian language. Before I could even collect my wits enough to realize that something out of the ordinary was happening, Isaac appeared and stuck me under his arm and carried me back to the house. This happened in the month of December in 1926, right after a presidential election, when a man named “Smetana” became the new president. The reason for the rioting was that the losing side simply wanted to overthrow him. The reason I remember it so well is that the family kept on making jokes about his name until it was explained to me why it was so funny. It seems that in the Lithuanian language, the accent was on the second syllable, but when it was pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, it was the Yiddish word for sour cream! I guess we did not have too many things to amuse us as a single amusing incident could last for weeks.

One fine day, the Rabbi summoned Ma to come to see him, as he had done once before. By this time, the family did not seem so frightened as before, as it had already been shown that lightning did not strike just because Ma did not accede to the Rabbi’s wishes. This time he had two complaints: One, that she wore too much make-up, when in fact she wore only a little powder, no rouge or lipstick at all. The second complaint was more serious. It seemed that the boys who were attending the Yeshiva, and whose yard adjoined our schoolyard were actually seeing my panties! In vain, Ma tried to explain that there was nothing sexual intended not only because I was only eight years old but because the panties reached all the way to the knees and were of matching material, and

therefore could not be considered underwear. In fact, I actually wore underpants under the matching pants. This was the latest style in little girls' clothing. Of course, this did nothing to convince the Rabbi, but Ma ignored the whole thing.

We did a lot of visiting among the relatives, and as I said before, the homes were neat and clean, but very bare with no decorations, except the cutout doilies over the copper pots and pans. The only other decorations were large family portraits. These were almost all in oval frames, with convex glass over them. But one thing puzzled Ma was that each frame rested on an old large nail, besides being secured by the usual wire that was hung from the wall, just underneath the ceiling. When she asked the reason for this, they pointed out that if the nail were not there the portrait would hang flat and could not be seen as well. So, with their permission, she lifted the large picture down, turned it over, removed the wire, and secured it a few inches down from the top of the frame. This, naturally, caused it to tilt forward with the same result. Immediately, everyone exclaimed “Ah! America *goniff!*”

Another time we were walking along when Ma decided to go in to Zaidy's “rez,” The Butcher Shop. After observing him at work for a while, she offered to show him a little American style butchering.

Picking up the proper tools, she showed him how to cut chops, steaks, roasts, etc. and therefore, would be able to get better prices for the different cuts of meat, even though it would be from the same animal. He just scoffed at this ridiculous idea, not only because he claimed none of the housewives would take to this new-fangled idea, but, she thought he did not take it seriously because what did a woman know about butchering? Before this, he, as well as all the other butchers sold meat just by weight. After discussing it with Benny and Carl, on her return to America, they decided it would not have worked anyhow, because no one had a regular stove, or any stove at all, and it would have meant a lot of adjustment in their method of cooking.

Chapter 14 Wintertime

Now that the weather started to get much cooler, the question arose as to whether we should start for home or winter over in Telz. Everyone agreed that a winter ocean trip would be very hazardous because of the expected storms, and of course, it would be even worse with a sickly child. So it was agreed that we would stay, and the first thing Ma did was to write to Pa to send us winter clothing and extra money to hire dressmakers to buy cloth and start sewing.

Pa took care of that very quickly, and before we knew it, bundles started arriving. The bundles at that time were not packed into boxes, as we would do today, but were merely wrapped around in any form, and covered with white, heavy cloth. Then the seams were sewn with sturdy thread, and the seams, in turn, were then secured by having sealing wax dripped over them. The address was printed in English with purple waterproof ink. Needless to say, we awaited these bundles very eagerly, as it depended upon how much clothing we would need to have sewn locally. I am sure that Aunt Chavie helped Pa pick out the clothing for size, fashion, and so forth.

As everyone else did in Telz, we became busy with fittings. Ma even had to have her bras made to order as those could not be bought ready-made. Helen and I were sometimes allowed to choose the color of the cloth, but never the style, as they seemed to be cut from the same pattern. The only difference would be a little colored trimming.

Our dresses were made of lightweight wool or printed corduroy. We were delighted to find that the corduroy was printed in a paisley pattern, rather than solid color as it was in America. Our shoes were ankle high, laced and always black. We put away our Mary Janes for warmer weather. The most important things we bought for really bad weather were called "Vawlikess". These were merely boot-shaped and made of heavy wool felt, without any soles or heels. The felt boots were put into rubbers, which also made them waterproof. Another option we had was for galoshes just like American, except there were no zippers, only buckles. The women also had galoshes, but the men all wore the same heavy boots.

At this time I suddenly became aware of our laundry problem. I was amazed when Ma told us that all linens for bed or bath were accumulated in large bundles in the attic and were not washed until the spring, because it was impossible to do a thorough process such as boiling the clothes over an open fire in the wintertime. After the heavy winter weather passed, the village laundress would come with her huge wagon and haul it down to the river. There she used small wooden paddles to beat the linens on rocks and spread them outdoors to dry. Personal clothing was washed during the winter by the same woman, who brought the wet clothing back from the river and hung it to dry on lines in our attic.

Another thing that surprised us was when Aunt Henna told us that the coat that Rochel was wearing had actually been hers. When we expressed amazement because of the great difference in size, she told us the secret. The garment was carefully picked apart by removing all of the stitching and then re-sewn in the exact style (but at a smaller size) on the previously wrong side, so that it now looked new because the nap was still intact, whereas the original side looked scruffy and worn because the nap on that side was completely gone.

Surprisingly enough, none of us seemed to suffer from the cold that winter, considering the fact that we had previously lived in a steam heated home in America. If we felt a little chill, all we had to do was back up to the white oven wall that was in every room in the house. Another use for the warm walls was to use them as blotters for our homework, by just touching the ink to the wall.

Our house was situated between two streets. The yard between our house and the duplex next door was plain dirt. In wintertime the ground was frozen or covered with snow. But when there was a thaw, the yard became muddy. The side streets were all hard-packed sand so you could still walk on them, but the yard was simply impassable. One day when I was coming home from school I was almost home, and my boot became stuck in the mud. When I tried to take a step I found that I couldn't lift my shoe. I just couldn't

move, so I started screaming for help. Isaac heard me. He came out and lifted me right out of my shoes! Isaac was always rescuing me.

I remember another crisis walking home from school—a turkey was chasing me! When I got home Ma said it was because I was wearing red. Apparently turkeys are attracted to red.

The house had a rather unique way of making sure that no one would or could be asphyxiated by fireplace fumes. The windows were what are called French windows. They were made of small panes put into frames that were at least six feet tall. These windows opened outward, so that if a person walked too close to a house, he could easily bump into it, since all of the houses were built close to the ground. At least one window in each room had a little device that consisted of a round metal insert. This insert was about six inches in diameter and was divided into many small overlapping sections. In the center of this device was a small wooden knob, which was used to open or close as many of the sections as desired, to let in fresh air.

I don't remember actually playing outside in the snow. I think that is because by the time we returned from school, we were ready to warm up and stay indoors. I do remember one fun day when Zaidy borrowed or rented a sleigh. It was just as we read about it in stories, with the jingling of the bells and being wrapped up in heavy blankets.

Zadie Elia had a slight speech impediment because of poorly fitted dentures. We children laughed when he came in with icicles hanging from his beard. Sometimes the laugh was on me. During this cold weather, at one time, Zaidy went into the country to buy a cow. When he returned, I exclaimed in disappointment because he had not brought back the usually loaded wagon full of sweet peas. When everyone started to laugh, I realized that naturally peas did not grow in winter.

I also asked Zaidy Elia to explain something to me, which I did not understand. When going to the countryside to buy a cow or sheep, he rode on the wagon, but when returning home, he walked beside the horse, with the cow or sheep being tied behind and

following. I wanted to know why he didn't ride on the wagon on the way home. He explained that he was following the Jewish law of being kind to animals because a horse was not happy to walk slowly and a cow was not happy to run, besides which the cow would run off too much weight. So, in this way, he walked beside the horse's head and spoke to it to keep it happy!

An episode occurred that winter that I can never forget and feel ashamed of what I did, or rather, what I did not do. The town of Telz held a market on Tuesdays and Fridays. Those days were pretty busy with the side streets being very noisy and crowded with farm wagons and teams of horses. For that reason I was forbidden to go out of our yard, as many an accident happened on those days. Some of it was due to the farmers doing more than their usual share of drinking.

I was hanging around in the yard when I noticed Isaac coming out with Harriet on one arm and in the other hand, holding a bowl with some kind of food. He walked close to the street so she would be distracted by the wagons, and as one approached slowly, he hopped on the back of it with Harriet. I saw the wagon going towards the river, which I knew was frozen solid, and I thought no more of it. The wagon picked up speed as it was headed toward the river because it was going downhill. I wasn't surprised at seeing the two of them, since Harriet had a very poor appetite. Isaac, and just about everyone in town at one time or another, tried various ways to get her to eat.

A short time passed, when people started to say, "Where's Isaac?" "Where's Harriet?" Even though I heard them ask, for some reason, I did not speak up to tell them what I had seen. Finally, somebody asked me directly. By this time it was almost dark. "Tobey, have you seen Isaac and the baby?" I told them exactly what had happened. It was already too dark to cross the frozen river, so they couldn't do anything that evening. Next morning the owner of the wagon brought Isaac and the baby back intact. Believe it or not, nobody scolded me for this, but to this day I feel ashamed.



Although the leather strap and hinge deteriorated, the wooden base of the lunchbox I used in Telz when I was eight years old has survived all these years.

Chapter 15 School Days

Ma enrolled us in school. Because Lithuania was a new country, it tried to be modern in all ways, like taking care of its citizens. So they sent down, at government expense, a doctor to check on our health. That never would have happened under Czar Nicholas.

The boys and girls were separated, of course. He lined up all the girls of my age stark naked and did the usual examination with a stethoscope. After that he put his hand on each child's head and rolled it around to see that there was no stiffness of the neck. When it was my turn he put his finger in back of my ear and nodded to himself, as if he recognized a mastoid scar. But when his hand touched the top of my head, which had like a small hole, he asked me how it happened. I explained that I had fallen off of a chair and struck my head on a piece of rusted iron. Although it bled immediately I wouldn't let Ma put iodine on it, so she compromised by putting Vaseline on it, which is the worst thing she could have done. It was not sterile, and it sealed out the air so the germs had a chance to breathe underneath. A week later my head suddenly swelled up about three times its size. They rushed me to the hospital where it was discovered that I had blood poisoning of the scalp. For the next six months I was in and out of the hospital, in all having five operations. As you can see, I survived.

I was supposed to be going into third grade. In America I would have been learning long division, but in Lithuania I was already expected to know fractions and decimals. Because I was an American, the teacher didn't dare insult me. But she said "Ach, du American Frauline!" which she said frequently through the entire winter. Her name was Mrs. Gollub. Her husband taught the boys at the other side of the building, which consisted of only three rooms. The larger room, between the two classrooms was usually used for recess or meetings.

The family provided us each with a pencil box, pencils, a small slate, and a very cute lunchbox, which I have to this day. It was in the shape of a cylinder, and was made of steamed wood. The ends were wooden discs. It had a little cover on the side, which was painted with fruit. The cover, which was also curved to conform to the shape of the box,

was attached with hinges made of leather. To each end of the lunchbox was attached a long strip of leather, which we wore across our chest.

Bubby packed our lunch every day. The kids in school couldn't wait for us to bring our lunch, because the food was wrapped in American comic strips. These were not the comic strips you see today. They were published only on Sundays, and instead of a complete figure of a cartoon, the characters were just outlined in blue, with no details. All we had to do was put a Q-tip in water, and spread the water on the cartoon, and all the colors leaped out at you, so you could see the cartoon in full color! I've never seen anything like it since.

We used the slate for homework, but we did not have chalk. We wrote with something that was greenish in color, about half the thickness of a pencil. We erased it the same way you would erase chalk. We used the slate for our homework, to practice, but we didn't use it in class. In class, everything had to be done in ink—no pencils. If you got even one inkblot on the paper, you had to start again. It had to be perfect. So, first of all we did our work on a scratch pad. When it was perfect we copied it in ink onto graph paper, with each character being in one little square, so the entire paper looked very neat.

There were all Jewish children in this school. Of the subjects, I only remember arithmetic and Yiddish. I don't remember if we studied anything else. I found arithmetic very difficult, but I caught on to writing Yiddish very quickly. I retained the cursive Yiddish for many years afterward, but I have forgotten the printed Hebrew letters. The reason for this was that when we came back to America, Ma would often ask me to write a letter to Bubby, but she never suggested I read the *Forward* newspaper, which is Yiddish printed with the Hebrew letters.

Several days during the winter we did not attend school because there was too much snow or it was too cold. On those days we hung around the house. One day Isaac invited me to go up to the attic with him. When we went up the ladder I was surprised to find laundry drying there. This was personal laundry—not bed linens which were only washed in the spring and summer.

The reason we went up to the attic in the first place is that I wanted to know how *dar-fleish* was made. Isaac boosted me up to the side of the chimney where there was a little metal door. I reached inside and found hooks all around the inside of the chimney. On the hooks were suspended geese, or ducks, or cuts of meat. That's where they were dried, so they lasted practically forever. In other words, that was the "deli" of Telz! The *dar-fleish* was chewy and salty and absolutely delicious, but you had to have good teeth to eat it. I had a special cut of meat that I loved, and when Ma told me what it was, it did not deter me from eating more. It was the udder of the cow, which had a completely different texture from the rest of the meat. When we returned to Chicago, Ma tried to persuade Benny and Carl to make it and sell it in their butcher shop, but they abandoned the project after several months as it turned out to be too expensive.

Chapter 16 Food & Fun

I soon developed a special liking for foods that I never had in Chicago. In the previous chapter I mentioned *dar-fleish*. Another favorite was Bubie's black bread. I also loved some things that Zadie brought back from the "Mark," which is what they called the market. Every week or so he brought home a huge wheel of cheese. It looks to me almost as big as a bicycle tire. It was called *volix kez*. Another favorite was strings of tiny salted fish strung on a string, right through their eyes. We would eat these little fish as a snack—we'd walk around chewing them, bones and all. Another favorite were miniature bagels on a string. And then there was fresh herring, baked inside of black bread.

While we were there we "discovered" a food that our family didn't even know was there. Helen and I found chestnuts on Main Street. We brought them home, and Bubby said not to eat them—they're poisonous. But Ma realized they were edible, so she roasted them. Although Bubby screamed "No, no they're poison!" we ate them anyway, and they were really good.

Foods we never saw in Telz were: celery, lettuce, sweet potatoes, asparagus, broccoli, melons of any kind, Jell-o, canned foods, soda pop, strawberries, cranberries, fresh beans (such as string beans), sweet corn, egg plant, and dry cereal. Some of these foods were not popular in America at that time, but I know they existed because I had seen them in the stores. We only got tomatoes when the head priest gave them to Zadie to give to us. Isaac took a huge bite and promptly threw up. He thought it would be sweet like a fruit. At home in Chicago neither Helen nor I liked tomatoes, but because it was such a special thing in Telz it tasted wonderful.

There didn't seem to be much entertainment, but everyone seemed to be happy anyway. One thing we did have was a movie called "keano." They changed the movie every week. One movie in particular I remember. It was called "The Leathernecks" with William Boyd. (Could this be the William Boyd we saw years later as Hop-a-long Cassidy?) Of course it was a silent movie. The captioning was in English letters, but the German

language; so we had no trouble understanding it. What I didn't like about movies in Telz is that they stopped it at the end and turned on the lights. In American theaters, the movie ran over and over again, so people would stay until the part where they came in. When the lights came on—if it was a dramatic movie—everyone could look around and see who was crying. We once got Zadie Elia to go in to look at it. He came out saying “*Feh!* Nothing but shadows!” Bubby wouldn't even go in to look at it.

One entertainment for children in the summertime was to run behind the wagons, perilously, and snatch handfuls of straw to use as bubble pipes. Bubby scolded us for wasting soap. Other than that there was very little entertainment for kids—we talked and giggled a lot.

The women never seemed to get together for entertainment. But the men got together at least once a week, always in Shea's house. All they did was talk and smoke cigarettes and drink gallons and gallons of steaming hot tea. (The women never smoked.) After the glass was empty the steam would still arise; yet their fingers never seemed to burn from holding the hot glass. This tea was always strained through a cube of sugar that they held in their teeth. One time only I saw them playing cards, but Bubby and Zadie disapproved of it. Only once did they have liquor on their table. Shea got a little *fashosket*. Even though he was in good humor, everybody was disturbed about this. So talk turned to how to sober him up. The one remedy they all agreed on was sour pickles.

Another pastime for the young men was soccer. They had a soccer club which they called The Macabees. The games were held on the one lawn in town, called The Garden, at the upper end of Main Street. I'm still mad that they took Helen to the game, but not me. They said I was too young.

The highlight of the winter were three of four balls, which they pronounced “baal.” These were dances with live music. Both old and young attended. As each adult entered the room, he or she was given a bunch of notes, each about 3” square. One side was gummed all around. The tradition was, if a boy wanted to ask a girl to dance (or a girl wanted to ask a boy), he wrote his sentiment on the gummed side, signed and sealed it,

and folded it into a triangular shape, with the recipient's name on the outside. The notes would also be used to pay compliments, in which case they may or may not be signed. The notes were then given to a child to deliver to the recipient. Each child was thrilled when considered old enough to deliver these notes. When I was asked to deliver these notes I felt that not only was I old enough, but I was also considered a "Telzer."

After we had settled in to life in Telz, we found ourselves missing little things, and we started writing to Pa and he obliged with many of the things we wanted. I am sure that Aunt Chavie helped him out especially with clothing. He sent a letter every week, in which he always remembered to put in a couple of sticks of gum. Isaac was the only one besides the kids who liked the gum, sometimes chewing the same piece for weeks, sticking it on some place over night. Then Pa started to send us bundles about every six weeks. One time he included two pairs of roller skates.

Of course, Helen and I decided to try them out at once. Since the only street that had sidewalks of cement was on Main Street, we naturally had the whole town of kids and adults watching, who happened to be there. Like a couple of dummies, we started at the top of the hill, on one end of the sidewalk, and we soon found that we could not stop, as there were no fences or buildings close enough to grab onto! By the time we landed in a heap at the bottom of the hill, people had already alerted Ma as to our potential accident. The only thing that happened to us was a couple of skinned knees.

Other things he sent were better—so good, in fact, that all of the little girls wanted the same things, and as they were not available in the stores, we soon improvised. Pa sent us two sets of individual jump ropes, with wooden handles. We then asked Isaac to get us much longer ropes and we taught them how to play with two girls holding the ends of the rope, and a third girl jumping in. One thing they were not so good at was jumping "double Dutch" or "double Irish." Of course, the little nonsense verses that were part of the jump rope games were also difficult for them, since neither Helen nor I could translate them into Yiddish.

Another game Pa sent us proved very popular, what we called "Jacks and Balls."

But this time, the Telzer kids showed us their version of it and naturally, we wanted the same game as the Telzer version. So bubby made us each a set of Telzer Jacks, but it was played without a ball. She took several bones from the knees of sheep and boiled them until all the meat fell off, which left these little bones smooth and polished looking. They were just a little smaller than my thumb and she finished them off by dividing them in half. One half she cooked in beet juice and the other half in onion skins. I don't remember just how it was played, but Helen and I found it more challenging as there was no moment to catch them without a ball. Of course, when we went home, we left our games to the Telzer kids and took back with us the one Bubby made for us. The Telzer Jacks were called *tzachen*.

Here are some toys I never saw in Telz. Of course, I can't be sure they didn't exist, but I never saw them: balloons, kites, hopscotch, marbles, jump ropes, wind-up toys, roller skates (except the ones we brought), bicycles, tricycles, sleds, and hoops that kids rolled with a stick.

Other things that I never saw included: ladies' handbags (skirts had pockets built in) zippers, straw brooms (In Telz they used twigs wrapped around a bigger stick), refrigerators, stoves, sinks, sunglasses, fountain pens, umbrellas, curtains, shades, swimsuits, elastic of any kind (drawstrings were used instead), baby carriages, black people, oriental people, silver-plated cutlery (only wood or sterling silver), indoor plumbing, radios, household ornaments, fedoras (only the Russian caps with the stiff brim), oil cloth, linoleum, newspapers, mops, cameras, cigars, and carpets.



Returning home on the München. From left to right are Tobey (yours truly), 9 years old, Helen, 11, Brina ("Ma") and Harriet, now 3 years old.

Chapter 17 The Trip Home

One spring day, Ma took us on a trip to Kovna by train to consult a doctor about Harriet's condition. He said he did not know what caused the skin problem or the high fever. But, if she wanted to keep the baby alive, she should take her home as soon as possible.

Walking back towards our hotel room, we were delighted to discover signs of America. Bubby pointed out to us a sign that said "Singer Sewing Machine Company." Another sign said "Chicago Tribune." (In those days there was no Associated Press so each newspaper had its own offices all over the world.)

Upon our return to Telz, Ma wrote to Pa and he sent us tickets for the return trip. As soon as the weather turned warm we packed up and got on the same miserable train that we took on the way there. Isaac went with us part way to say good-bye. We were all hanging out of the window, crying our eyes out. Isaac ran alongside the train as far as he could, until he got to the barrier. That was the last time we saw him alive.

On this train you had to get off to buy food and water. Bubby explained to us how trains switched tracks. She said that if we accidentally switched onto a track that went into Russia, they would detain us, and we wouldn't be allowed to go home. This was the beginning of communism. However, the train went mainly in Poland so we were okay.

At one stop we waited on the caboose while Bubby got off the train to get some food. As Bubby started back towards the train, it started to move. We started screaming. She dropped her bundles and started running with her arms outstretched. As we cried a group of men standing next to us started laughing uproariously, slapping their thighs. Just as it seemed she would never make it, one man alone reached down with his right arm and swung her up—all 235 pounds of her! We continued to cry from relief and they continued to laugh.

When we got to Bremen (they called it Bremerhaven) we had to wait a few days for the Columbus to arrive. While waiting we took many walks because it was such a pleasant

city to look at. Very clean and full of parks. Ma got mosquito bitten on her shinbone, and contracted an infectious disease called erasyphillis. Within a few days she developed a very high fever and became delirious. The hotel people called an ambulance for her, with no explanation to us children. Of course, we understood, but the three of us were left by ourselves. At the time, Helen was 11, I was 9, and the baby was 3 and had to be carried because of the sores on the bottoms of her feet.

We realized that we needed to get some food. Helen gave me the baby and went into a grocery store, and came out with—of all things—a fresh herring wrapped in a newspaper. This was not pickled herring with vinegar and onions. It was fresh herring preserved in brine that could be eaten without cooking. She took Harriet and handed me the package to carry. The package was not well-wrapped, so immediately I spilled smelly fish brine all over my pink coat. We immediately realized that we could not eat it since the herring needed to be gutted, skinned, and soaked before eating. So we threw it away.

Next we decided to buy a doll so Harriet would stop crying. We saw a doll in a toyshop that intrigued us. Although it was a celluloid doll, it had a wig. In contrast, celluloid dolls in America at that time did not have wigs, just molded heads. (You can see what interested us as kids!) So we entered the shop, and the lady asked “*Vas villen sie?*” We pointed to the doll, and said “*Meer villen zie pupyen.*” She immediately started screaming and ran into the back of the shop. By the time the man came out, we were crying and shaking with fear. Again we answered the same way. He replied, “*Ah, zie poopyen!*” Later, when we got older, Ma told us that *pupyen* meant vagina in German. In Yiddish the words are exactly opposite, which just shows that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. I don’t even remember if we bought the doll or not.

We wandered around a little more, got hungry and followed our noses. We came to a huge building surrounded with people lined up, not singly, but in groups, to enter. We smelled familiar food. So without even consulting with each other we got in line. It was all Jewish foods. Chicken, meat, soups, koogel, chicken soup, kreplach, blintzes, challah, you name it we got it! As we lined up to get our tray, no one asked us who we belonged

to, they just fed us. For several days, maybe longer than a week, we did this three times a day and returned to the hotel room at night.

Meanwhile, when Bubby came to her senses, she asked, “Where are my children?” She sent out people to look for us. She arranged for a room to be set aside in the Children’s wing, with a private nurse to take care of us. They brought us to the hospital, which was a catholic hospital, run by nuns. After some time, we were allowed to see Bubby, but through the window, since she was still in quarantine. She was sitting up in bed, rolling bandages, and waved to us.

When we first got into the hospital the nuns bathed us. We had not had a bath in several weeks. In those days hotel rooms did not have running water. You had to go down to a common bathroom and pay for the hot water. When the nuns undressed us they found, on my shoulder, a mark—which I can see to this day—of ringworm, which comes from dirt.

Many of these nurses, including the Mother Superior, who was in a wheelchair, wanted to learn English. They frequently asked us to correct their pronunciation. This was great for my self esteem, after being considered a dummy in the Telzer school. They were very good to us. One thing that we had trouble teaching them was the English sound “oo” as in “books.” They pronounced it as though it were spelled “baux.” Upon leaving for America, the Mother Superior gave us hand-crocheted egg warmers, to put on top of soft boiled eggs, to keep it warm.

To pass the time, we played in the yard at the hospital with a young farm girl. She was recuperating from having lost an eye from being kicked by a horse. When we exclaimed in horror, she said, “Oh, that’s nothing! I can still see more than a blind man can see.” She was much older than we were.

One day Helen rushed up to me and said “Do you want to see what a boy looks like?” I said “oh, yea!” There were four beds in our room, and one was occupied by a boy. So, we rushed over to peek at this great phenomenon—a penis! At the same time we realized

that he had the measles. (We had already had the measles, so we were not afraid that we'd get it.)

When Ma was discharged from the hospital she went to the building where we ate every day to pay the bill for our food. That's when she found out that this was a HIAS organization (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and they refused to take the money. They said that all these people, Jews from all over Europe, had been waiting—sometimes for years—to get visas to come to America. Ma was told that if she wanted to, she could contribute to HIAS when she got home to America.

Of course it never occurred to us to tell her about the boy with the measles.

By now the Columbus had sailed, so we had to wait for the next ship, which was the München. Although it was much smaller than the Columbus, the accommodations were just as nice. Maybe because of the smaller size, or because of the storms, Ma and Helen became seasick. The baby had become much sicker, with high fever. The entire 8 days on board ship the doctor made daily visits. We landed finally in New York, almost three weeks after we left Telz.

Ma had arranged to meet Telzer lantzleit in New York to get regards from their families. They were long gone since we came on a later ship. We immediately got on the train. As soon as the train left, and the porter opened up the berth, Ma undressed the baby and found she was riddled with measles. Strangly enough, in all this time, no one had noticed that she lost her sores—only now she had measles.

Remember the knife that Pa lent Ma before she left. I made sure that Ma had it with her when we left for America. Well, here's the end of that story. On the train to Chicago, it was very hot. Everyone was hanging out of the windows to get some fresh air. Harriet, was fussy as usual. Ma rummaged through her purse to find something to entertain her with. She pulled out the closed pen-knife and gave it to Harriet, who immediately put it in her mouth. Ma said "*Feh*, throw it away, it's dirty!" Usually three year-olds don't obey their parents, but this time she did. And, this important item, that I so carefully

guarded for an entire year, was thrown onto the railroad tracks—probably somewhere in Indiana, less than 100 miles east of Chicago.

It was a 24-hour trip from New York to Chicago. When we arrived home the house was again filled with *lantzleit*. Pa must have let them all know that we were coming.

As soon as we entered the house, Harriet fell into convulsions. Among the excitement, three different doctors were called. Zadie was embarrassed and paid them all off. The doctors recommended cool baths. Thankfully she survived, and died at the age of 73.

We arrived before the start of school. Going into William Penn grammar school, Helen and I were interviewed separately by the Principal, Mr. Cassell. After listening to my story (in much less detail than this book), he said that I learned as much by traveling as I would have learned in school, so he only kept me back half a year. So I graduated in June of 1936 instead of in January. Helen lost a full year.

The End.

Epilogue — What Happened to Everybody



The wedding of Gittel and Isaac Varaess, pictured above, took place in Telz about 1938, twelve years after my unforgettable trip, and roughly five years before the Holocaust swept Lithuania. Here's what I know about what happened to the people in the picture.



Isaac liked to dress like an American. He had tortoise-shell glasses (while others had wire-rims) and wore his hair in a pompadour. He also wore an American-style tweed roadster cap. His marriage to **Gittel** was arranged with a girl slightly older and wealthier than he was. They had two children. The entire family died in the Holocaust.



Elia and Shayna-Faygeh, were my Bubby and Zaidy with whom we lived in Telz. They first met on a match-maker's bench in the forest. They had ten children. Bubbie died in her 70s, soon after this picture was taken. Zaidie lived into his 90s, developed Parkinson's disease, and died in the Holocaust.



Shea and Henna had three girls and a boy when I met them in 1926. They may have had more children later. Shea and the boy were killed immediately in the Holocaust. Henna and the girls hid in an underground cave, where friendly non-Jewish farmers left food for them. The day before Liberation Henna went out to get the food, and was hit by a sniper's bullet. Even though it was just a flesh wound, she fell face-down in a puddle and drowned. The three girls, Rochel (my best friend), Esther, and Golda survived the Holocaust. Rochel and Golda later emigrated to Israel. Esther died in Lithuania many years later.



Rochel married **Moshe Bromberg**. They are both shown in the wedding picture, though I'm not sure if they had married when the photo was taken. They survived the Holocaust and came to Israel 15 years later—when Russia finally approved their visas. Rochel and Moshe had two children: Shea and Sonya. Sonya married Moshe, and they had two girls. Shea (Joshua) married Assia, and they also had two girls, Iris and Yael, and a boy, Reuben. All live in Israel except for Shea and his family who now live in America.



Mote was Ma's brother. He and his wife, **Brina** had a daughter, Yocheved, and several boys. His wife, Brina was fat and jolly and always baking fancy pastries, much like my mother who shared the same first name. The entire family perished in the Holocaust, except for their daughter, Yocheved.



Yocheved survived the Holocaust because friendly farmers pretended she was theirs. She was quite blond and could pass for a gentile. She was among the earliest of the Youth Aliyah group who were rescued and sent to various other countries after the Liberation. At one point, when she was in

a large room with many other youths her eyes met those of Salek, who was slated to go to Paris. Although her group was scheduled to emigrate to Israel (then Palestine), she told the authorities that there was some mistake, and she was really supposed to go to Paris. Salek and Yocheved married and eventually settled in Israel where they live today. They have two children: Motti and Amatai. Moti married Tova and had three children: Roy, Ido, and Hagar. Amatai married Shoshana. They also have three children: Uri, Mika, and Oded.



Avrum Shavel was passing through Telz from another town, when he saw **Tibe**, my mother's sister, dipping candles. He fell in love with her. They married and had four children: Mayer, Henne, Label, and Benche. They all died in the Concentration Camps, except for Label who now lives in Israel.

That's all the people that I know in the picture of Isaac and Gittel's wedding. Following is some more information about what happened to other characters in my story.

Henna and Sarah Varaess, sisters of Elia, Yuda, and Isser-Hirseh, were not in Telz in 1926, because both had already emigrated to America. Sarah was engaged to a man named Rosenberg when she was in Telz. It was almost time for Rosenberg to be called to the draft in the Russian army. Not having enough money to escape to America, he accepted an offer from a man to marry his old-maid daughter. With her dowry, he had enough money to emigrate. After being jilted, Sarah also went to America and settled in Boston where she married a man named Greenberg, who was in the vinegar business. They had one child named Izzy, who was born lame. He didn't walk until he was almost 15 years old. Upon becoming pregnant with her second child, Sarah wrote to her younger sister, Henna, to come and stay with her during the birth process. Henna came to Boston at the age of sixteen, fully expecting to go back to Telz. Sarah had a little girl, and due to complications of the birth, she died, but the baby survived. On her deathbed she made Henna promise that she would marry her widower and raise the children. Henna did not want to do this, but she felt that she had to keep the promise to her dying sister.

It was customary in those days to use the flat rooftops in Boston for drying clothes and other purposes. One day Henna was on the rooftop with the new baby girl in a basket, with Izzy playing nearby. A neighbor, on the rooftop of the building next door, asked if she could see the baby. In passing the baby to her neighbor, somehow the baby was dropped and killed. An inquest was held, and Henna was absolved of any crime. Meanwhile, she had other children with Greenberg: Allen, who never married, Esther who married Joe Finks, a Lawyer, Bertha who married Jerry Schneider, and Thelma, who married Nat Goldberg. They all had children except for Izzy and Allen. This story was told to me personally by Henna in 1938, when I was in Boston. She lived to a ripe old age.

But the story is not over yet. In about 1933 we moved to California, where we visited with a man named Rosenberg who was very good to us. He was very handsome. I didn't realize who he was at the time, but later I asked Ma explained why he was so good to everybody but mean to his wife. She said that he was the man who had been engaged to

Sarah. He had a guilty conscience because he jilted Sarah. And in addition, he didn't love his wife, whom he had married for her dowry. That's the story of Sarah and Henna.

Isser-Hirseh and his wife, **Leah**, had four children: Itza, Gdalia, Chatza, and Chai-Henna. Gdalia emigrated to Cape Town, South Africa in 1926. Itza escaped to Israel. Chatza and Chai-Henna stayed in Lithuania, where they perished in the Holocaust along with Isser-Hirseh and Leah.

Yuda, Elia's brother who lived near us in Telz, and his wife **Riva**, had five children: Mones, Elka, Isser, Mollie, and Chai Pera. Yuda and Riva perished in the Holocaust, along with their married daughter, Chai Pera, with her husband and two children.

Yuda's and Riva's son **Mones** and daughter **Elka**, emigrated to South Africa, just about the time we arrived in Telz. (I remember meeting Mones, but not Elka, who left about a week before we arrived.) Mones married but had no children. Elka married Abram Kropman and they moved to Klerksdorp. They had three children: Janey, Michael, and Robert.

The other two of Yuda's and Riva's children, **Isser** and **Mollie**, emigrated to New York. Isser Varaess changed his name to Harry White. He continued living in New York, where he eventually owned a wholesale sugar company. He married Bea, and they had three children: Lucille, Morty, and Herbert. Lucille married someone named Green and they had one daughter named Risa.

Yuda's and Riva's daughter Mollie moved from New York to Boston, where she met and married Joseph Sneider. They moved to Biddeford Maine. Mollie died at age 81. She had four children: Carl, Allen, Phillip and Ida. I married Allen in 1940, and we had two children: Sharon and Cary. Sharon married Steve Canner, and they had two children, Marty and Elise. They settled in Reston, Virginia. Cary is married to Elizabeth Carter. Cary and Liz live in Beverly, Massachusetts, just outside Boston, where they now live with their son, Gabriel, and visit their daughter, Rachel, and their grandchildren, Seneca

and Maia, who live in Portland, Oregon. Cary is my not only my son—he's also my Editor.



Ma and Pa. This is the way I mostly remember my parents, Yankel (Jacob) Kaplan, and Brina Varaess Kaplan. Here they are on their way to Maxwell Street in Chicago, where they loved to buy antiques. Pa died of a heart attack in 1958, at the age of 76. Ma died in 1980, close to her 91st birthday.

Uncle Benny Varees and Auth Chavie Varaess (Weiss) are not in the wedding photo, but they were very important in our lives as we were growing up. We often visited Benny, Chavie, and their children, and they visited us frequently. So if you don't mind, I'll tell you their story too.



Benny in his early 20s, in Lithuania



Aunt Chavie as a teenager

Benny was my father's nephew, but Pa thought of him as his brother. Benny was the type who was absolutely un-mechanical. Pa, who was very good at mechanical things himself, had little patience for people who didn't. But when Benny would do something dumb, Pa would always forgive him.

For example, Pa told me that once Benny called him up from Calumet City at 2 AM, at least a 50 mile ride from Chicago. Pa got out of bed and went out there to help him, and guess what? Benny was out of gas. Anyone else would never hear the end of it, but because it was Benny Pa forgave him. Another example when Benny learned to drive, there were no teachers. You just watch and see what others are doing. But no one would ride with Benny. One day Pa and Brina went for a ride with him in the country. Benny tried to park near a farmhouse, but instead he drove right into the porch and knocked off all four pillars! So the entire porch collapsed and Benny drove off.

I later learned from Pa why he always had a special place in his heart for his nephew Benny. When Pa was a little boy, about ten, his mother, Henna, decided to visit her grown-up daughter, Shayna-Faygeh. (Pa was the youngest and Shayna-Faygeh was the eldest of his four siblings. Some years before Shayna-Faygeh had married Elia and they lived in Telz, which was also in Lithuania, but some distance away.)

When Henna arrived in Telz she could see that her daughter was having a difficult time. You should know that Henna was known for being very outspoken. She never said "Poo, poo! God should forgive me for what I have said." So she said to her daughter, "Shayna Faygeh, you're already pregnant with your second child. Taking care of a new baby and a two-year-old who is 'not all there' won't be easy. Let me take Benny home with me. I'll take care of him until your second child is older." So Shayna Faygeh agreed to let Henna take Bennie home with her to Karklon.

When Henna came home with the baby, Yankel could see that he had problems. Benny was close to two years old, but he hadn't started talking or walking, and he didn't even crawl. What was worse, he had no teeth and couldn't eat. He just didn't thrive like a baby of his age should.

Even though Yankel was only ten years old, it was his job to start his newpew Benny on the road to good health. Henna told Yankel how to feed the baby. She told him to take a piece of black bread (Black bread was for every day—white bread just for holidays) and chew it up. Then he should take the chewed bread out of his mouth and dip it in goats' milk, then in sugar, and feed it to the baby. Benny was able to eat that, even with lack of teeth. In fact, that's mainly what they raised him on, since they had nothing else.

Two years later, when Shayna-Faygeh was pregnant with her third child, she and Elia came to Karklon on a horse and wagon to reclaim their baby. Henna and Zalman tried to tell Yankel that Benny was not his brother, but really his nephew. But he had grown very attached to Benny, so that when they took him away, Yankel ran after the wagon, shouting "You're taking away my baby brother!"

If Benny really was my father's brother, then he'd be my uncle. And in fact, Benny *was* my uncle, since he was my mother's actual brother. Shayna-Faygeh had ten children in all. Benny was the oldest, and Brina was the second oldest. Shayna-Faygeh was pregnant with Brina the day Henna took Benny home with her to Karklon. Benny was my mother's brother, so to us he was "Uncle Benny." In other words, on my mother's side Benny is my uncle and on my father's side of the family he's my cousin. This confusing situation is really Pa's fault, since he married his niece. I hope that makes it all clear.

Benny lived in Telz until he was in his twenties, and then came to America. He became a butcher, and later went into business with his younger brother, Carl. They remained partners for more than 40 years.

Chavie was born in Trishik, Lithuania. They both moved to Chicago, where they met and got married in 1914. Everyone could see that Chavie loved Benny, as she forgave him for all of his "unforgiveables." As you can see from their photographs, they were a handsome young couple.

Sometime after they were married, Benny and Chavie changed their name from Varaess

to Weiss. All of their children, Helen, Victor, Hy, and Lakie, lived in Chicago for most of their lives. Helen and Lakie moved to Los Angeles later in their lives.

Finally I should mention one more Kaplan connection. Helen Weiss, Benny's and Chavie's eldest daughter (and one of my best friends since we were children) married William Kaplan. So far as I know he was not related to the Kaplans on Pa's side of the family. Their children, Philip and David, played with our children, Sharon and Cary, on those rare occasions when we were able to visit each other as adults.

Appendix: Family Tree

On the next few pages the reader will find the latest, somewhat corrected version of the Varaess-Kaplan Family Tree. It is almost entirely the result of Tobey's recollections, mostly from her year in Telz, but also from a lifetime of contacts with relatives.

In May, 2002, I sent a first draft to all the family members who I thought would be interested, and was gratified to receive many letters and email messages with new information, corrections, and names of more family members. I want to give special thanks to those who contributed information, and apologize in advance for any of their corrections that I botched, misspelled, or left out altogether. My files aren't nearly as good as Tobey's.

So, a special "Thank you!" to:

Howard Weiss

Helen (Weiss, Kaplan) Levin

Helen Hiller

Beverly Olsberg

Murray Slutsky

Burt Holzman

Elaine (Weiss) Holzman

Esther Samuel

David Phillips

Philip Kaplan

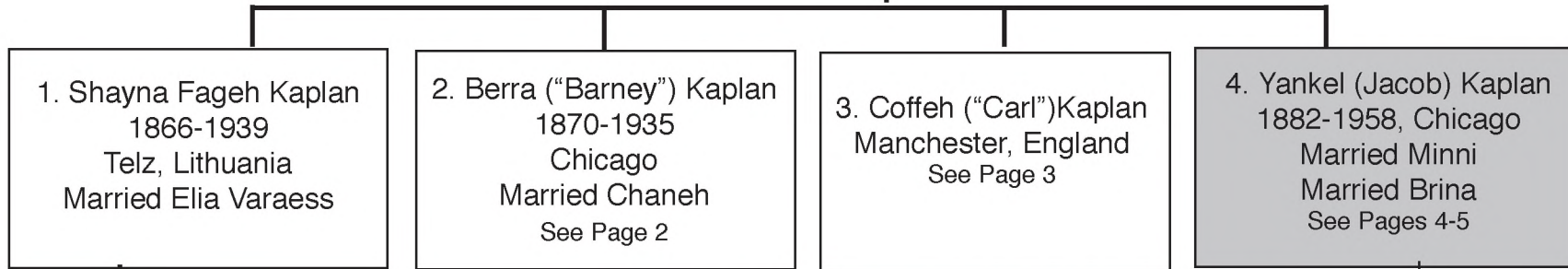
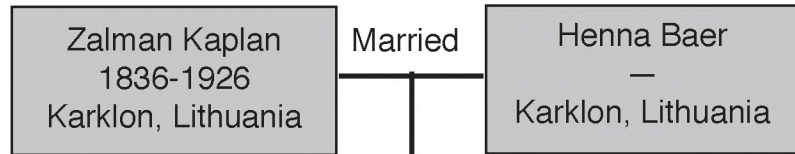
Helen (Kaplan) Hiller

Motti Holler

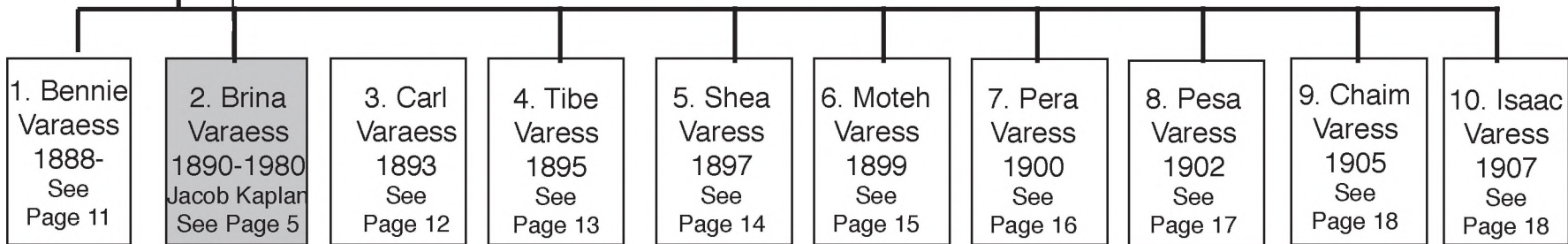
— Cary Sneider, October, 2004

Kaplan Family Tree

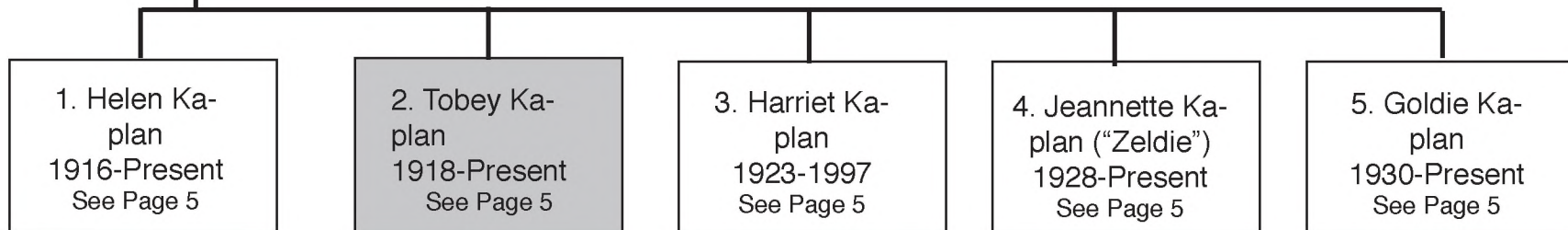
Zalman Kaplan Married Henna Baer.
These are their four children.



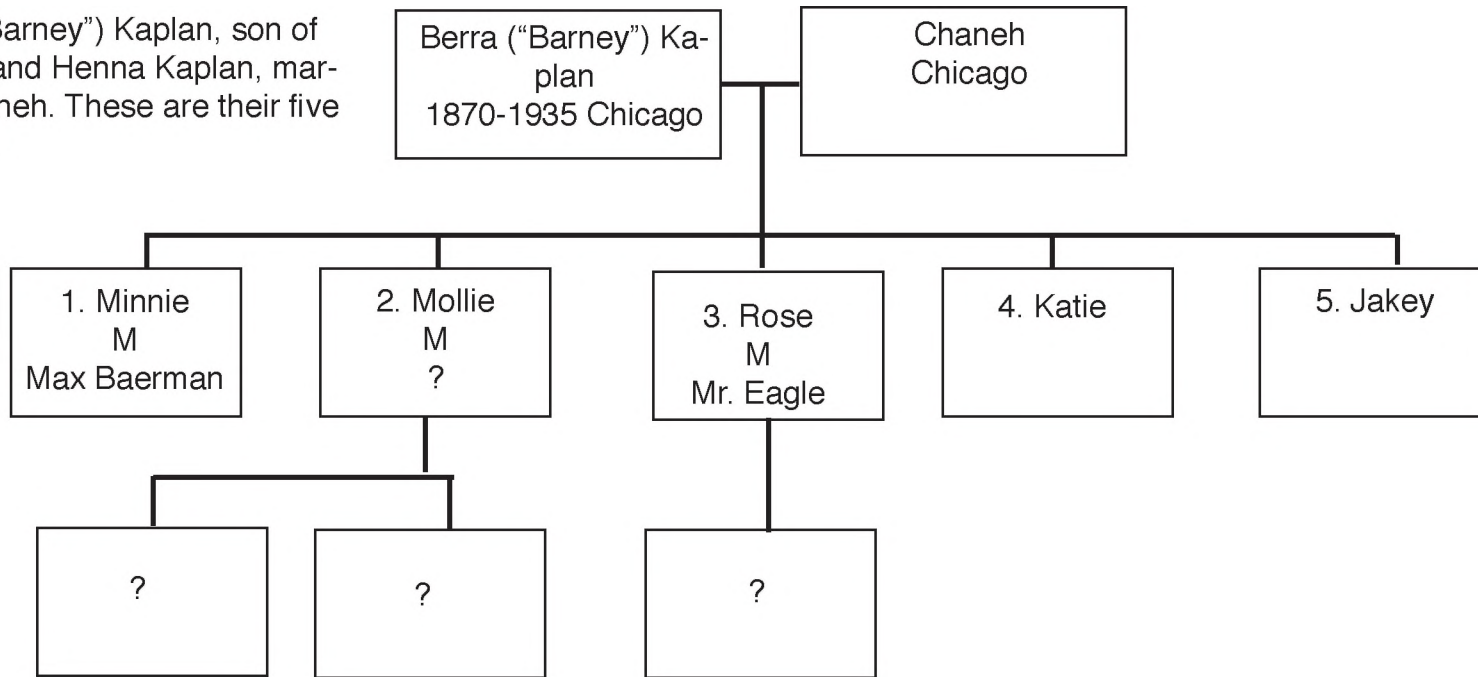
Daughter Shayna Fageh married Elia Varaess. These are their ten children.



My maternal grandparents are Yankel (Jacob) and Brina.
As shown on this page, Yankel was Brina's uncle.



Berra ("Barney") Kaplan, son of Zalman and Henna Kaplan, married Chaneh. These are their five children.



Barney and Chaneh had five children. Chaneh had severe depression and went into a mental hospital for the rest of her life. When she died Barney married Dora Glazer. They had no children.

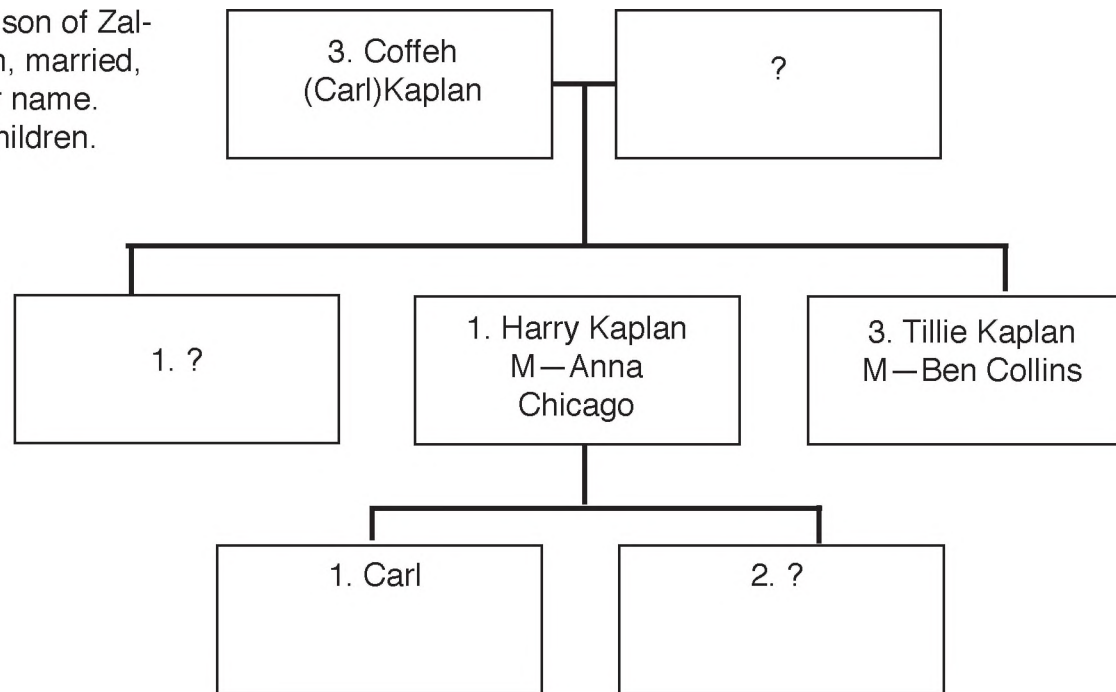
Minnie married her cousin, Max Baerman. They had no children.

Mollie had two children, but we do not know whom she married.

Rose married a Mr. Eagle. They had one child whose name we do not know.

Katie and Jakey did not marry.

Coffeh (“Carl”) Kaplan, son of Zalman and Henna Kaplan, married, but we do not know her name. These are their three children.



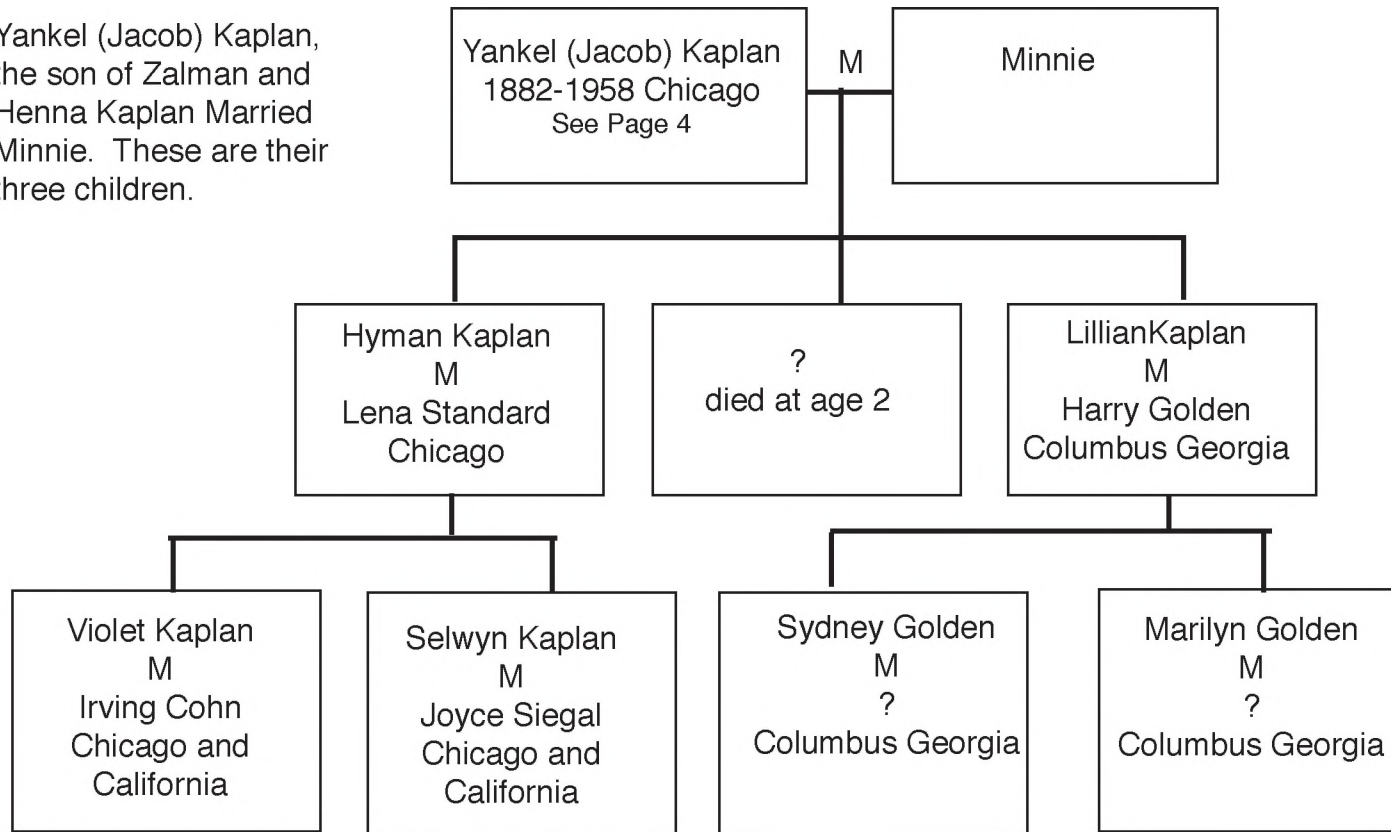
Coffeh (“Carl”) Kaplan was born in Karklon, Lithuania and married at about 18 years of age. They then moved to Manchester England. When Coffe died his widow married a man named Gayness, and that family lived in Mannchester and went into the fur business. Sharon Canner visited that family in the 1960s. She recognized one of the people as looking just like Jacob Kaplan, so he was certainly the son of Carl.

They had two sons. The first son, whose name we do not know, continued to live in Manchester. The second son, Harry Kaplan, moved to Chicago, and married Anna.

Harry and Anna had two boys. The eldest was named Carl. After Anna’s death, Harry married Sophie Kaplan who was the widow of Hyman Kaplan.

Tillie moved to Chicago and married Ben. they had no children.

Yankel (Jacob) Kaplan, the son of Zalman and Henna Kaplan Married Minnie. These are their three children.



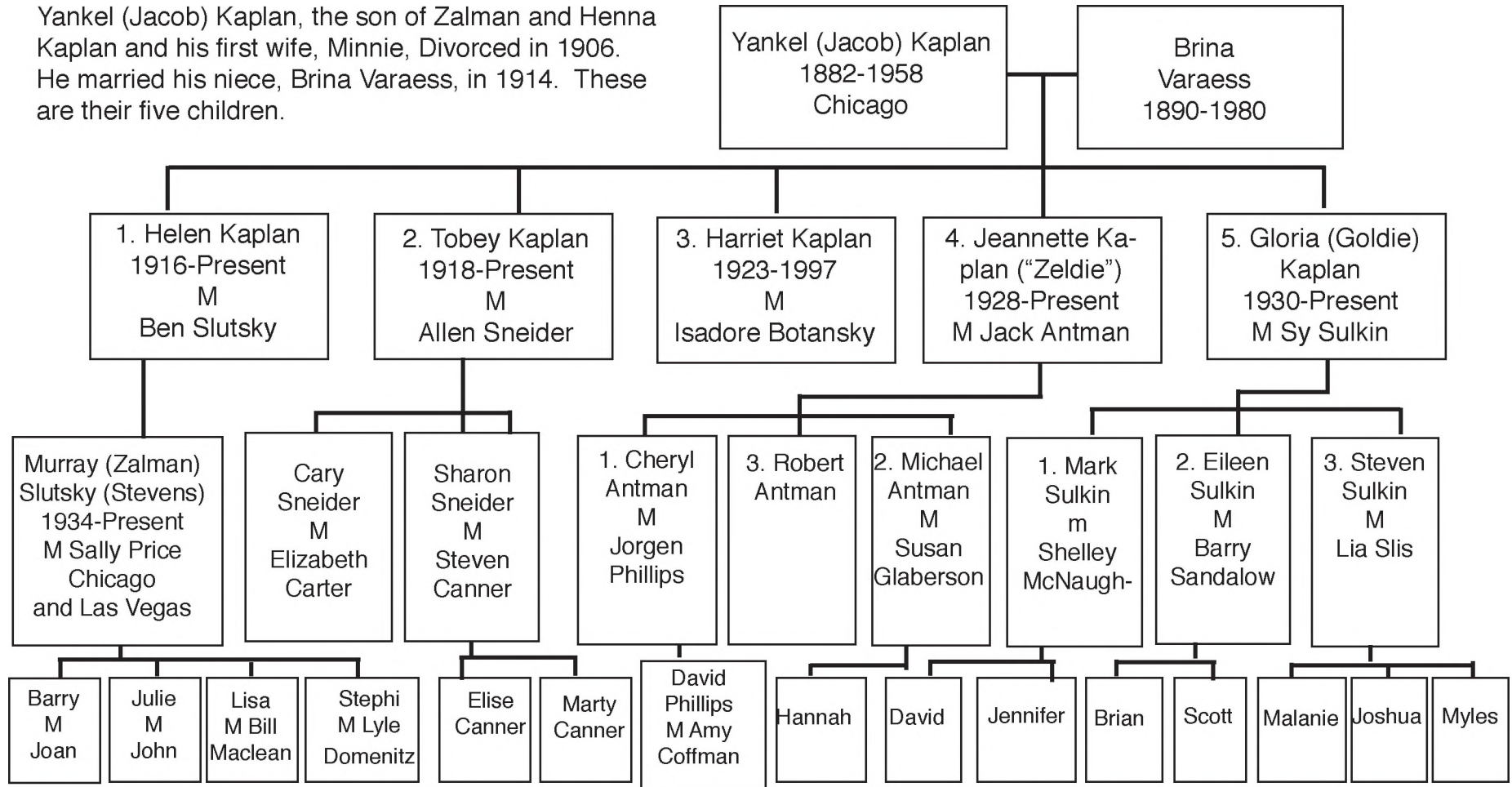
Yankel (Jacob) Kaplan was born October 6, 1882 in Karklon, Lithuania. He moved to Chicago in 1899, at the age of 17. He married Minnie and had three children.

Hyman Kaplan married Lena Standard. They lived in Chicago and had two children. Violet and Selwin married and had children, but we don't know their names. After Hyman Kaplan and Lena were divorced, he married Sophia and they had no children.

Lillian (Lillie) married Harry Golden. They also lived in Chicago, but then moved to Columbus, Georgia where they spent most of their lives, running the Golden Military Store. They had two children, Sydney and Marilyn, both of whom married and had children. Sydney died accidentally as a young adult. Violet Cohen and Selwyn Kaplan now live in California.

Violet and Irving Cohn had two children and six grandchildren. Selwyn and Joyce Kaplan had three children: Richard Kaplan who married M. Karman Lange, Wendy who married Richard Smith, and Craig Kaplan who married Gisella Capraro.

Yankel (Jacob) Kaplan, the son of Zalman and Henna Kaplan and his first wife, Minnie, Divorced in 1906. He married his niece, Brina Varaess, in 1914. These are their five children.



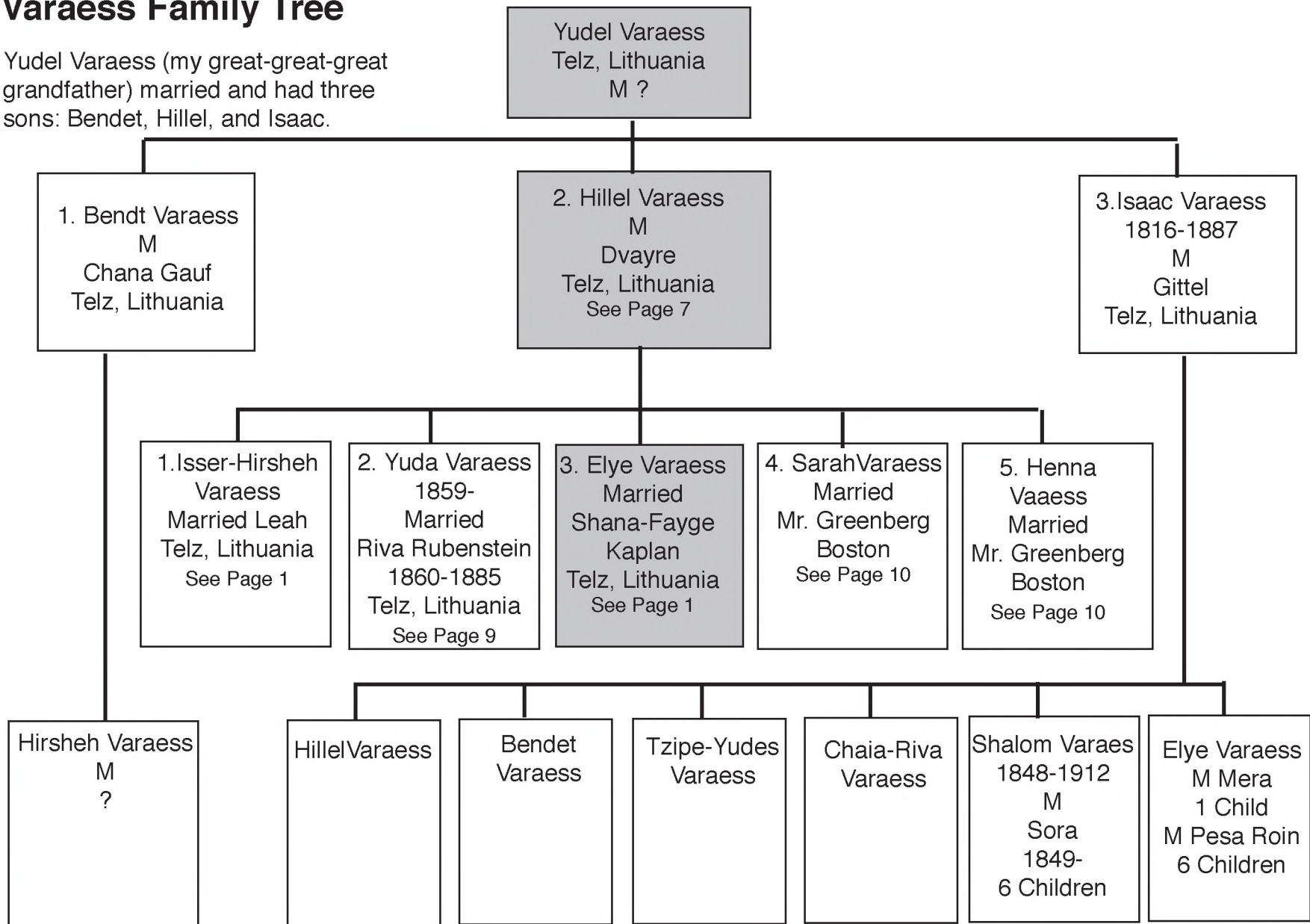
Helen married Ben Slutsky in California in 1933. They had one child, Zalman. Helen and Ben divorced and Helen moved to Chicago where she married Sam Hiller.

Tobey married her second cousin, Allen Sneider (See page xx), in 1940, and moved to Biddeford Maine where they had two children, Sharon and Cary. After Tobey and Allen divorced Tobey married Jack Katz of deltona, Florida, where they lived until Jack died in 1988. Then Tobey moved to Longwood, Florida.

Harriet lived in Chicago and married Isadore Botansky. They had no children. Jeannette (Zeldie) married Jack Antman. They lived in Chicago and had three children, Cheryl, Michael, and Rob. Gloria (Goldie) married Sy Sulkin. They lived in Chicago and had three children, Mark, Eileen, and Steven.

Varaess Family Tree

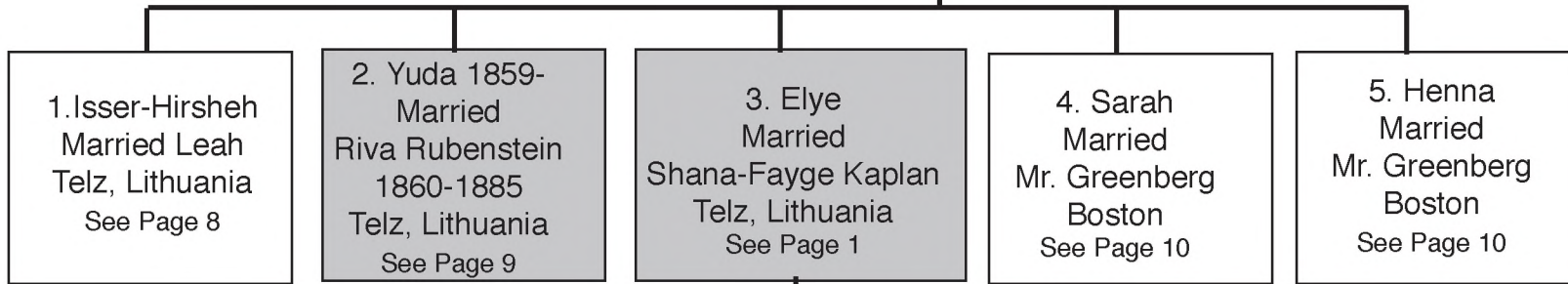
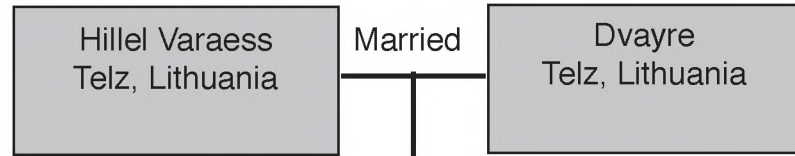
Yudel Varaess (my great-great-great grandfather) married and had three sons: Bendet, Hillel, and Isaac.



Information on this page is from Beverly Oldsberg whose great-grandparents were Shalom and Sora Varaess.

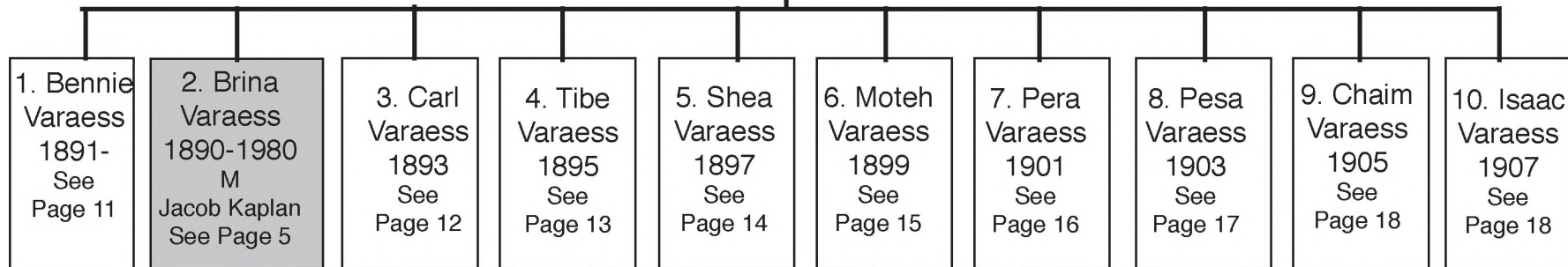
Varaess Family Tree

Hillel Varaess Married Dvayre. They had five children.

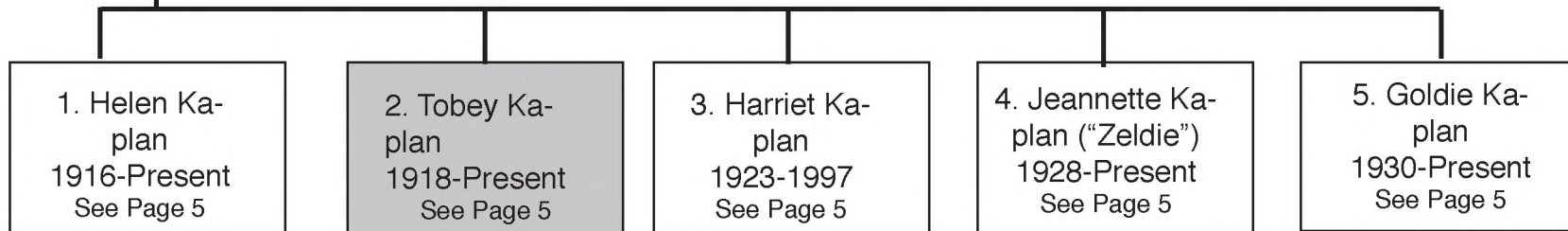


My paternal grandmother is Molly, one of Yuda's and Riva's five children, as shown on page 9.

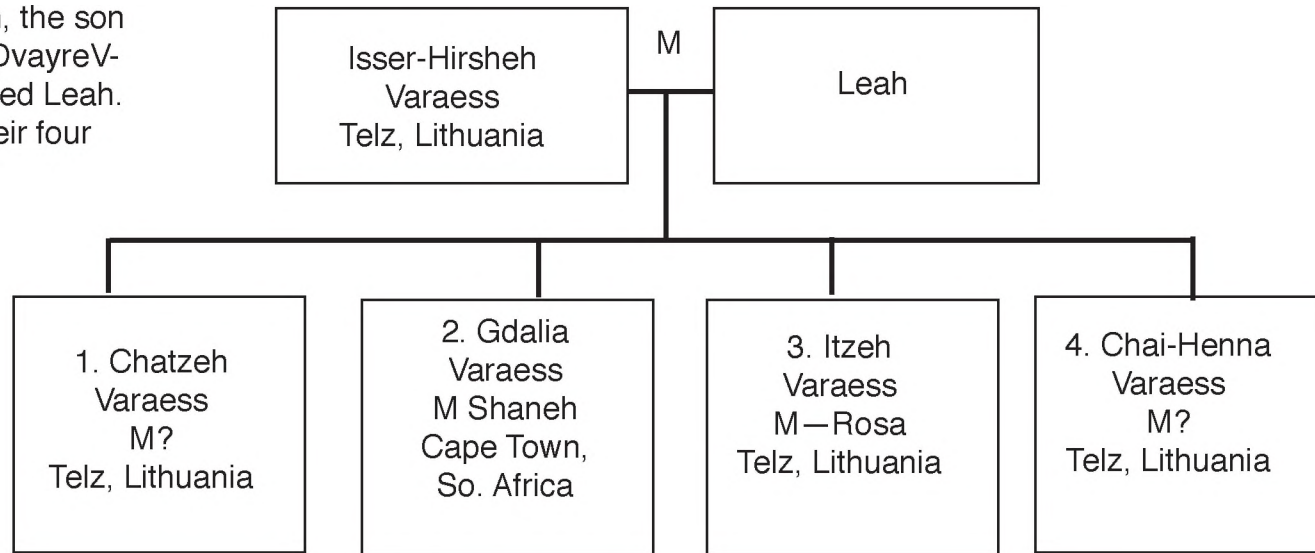
My maternal grandmother is Brina, one of Elye and Shana-Fayge's ten children, as shown on this page.



Brina Varaess married her uncle Jacob Kaplan in 1914. These are their five children.



Isser-Hirsheh, the son of Hillel and DvayreV-araess, married Leah. These are their four children.



Telz was a small village in Lithuania situated on a river or lake called Mascio Ezera. All three brothers, Elia, Yudah, and Isser-Hirsheh, lived on Mascio Gatve (street) that led right down to the river.

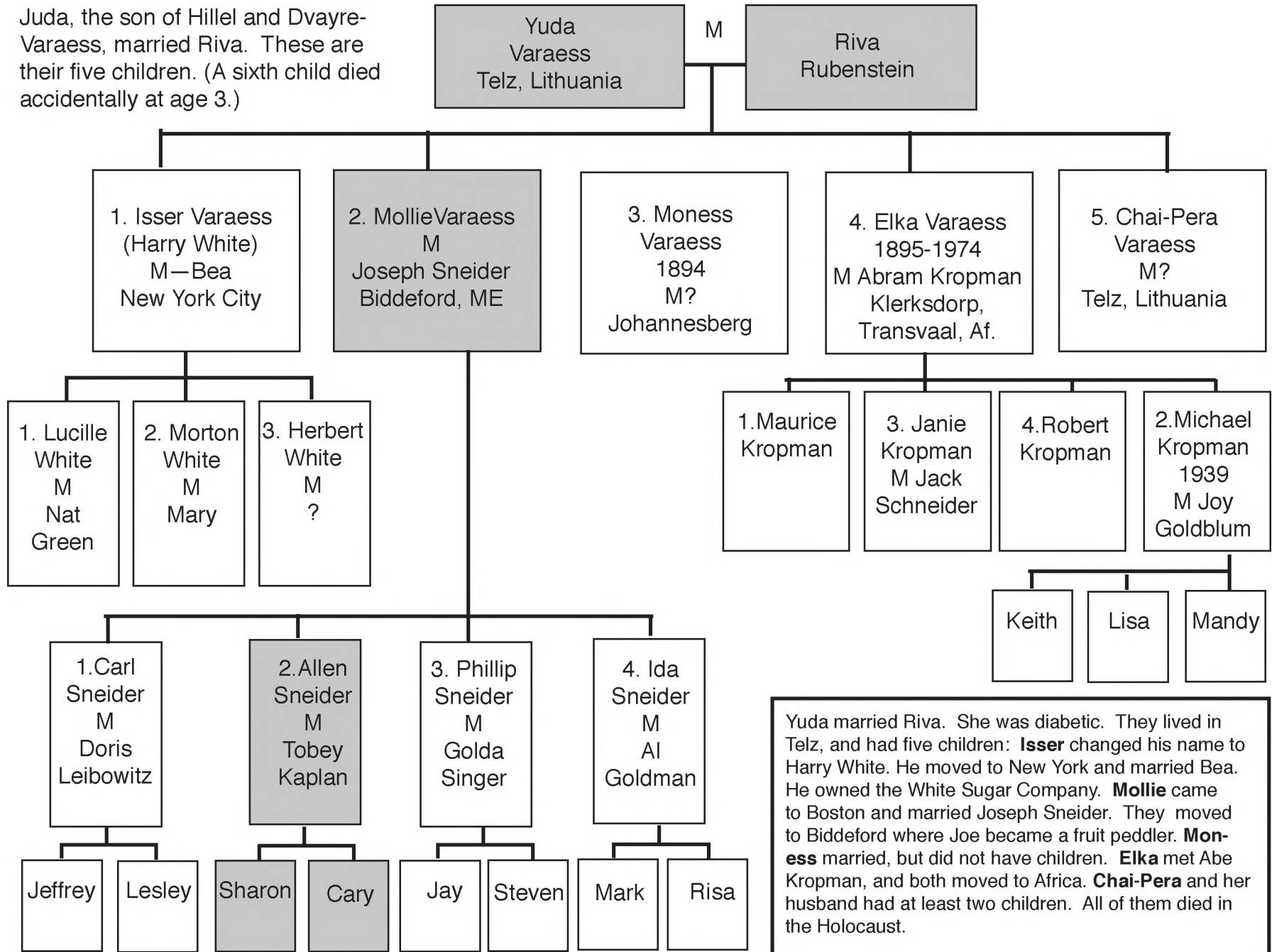
Chatzeh and his wife lived in Telz. They had at least two children, and all died in the Holocaust.

Gdalia and his wife also had two or three children. They moved to Cape Town, South Africa.

Itzeh and Rose also had at least two children. The daughter's name was Mereh and the son's name was Sholom. Itzeh and his son Sholom survived the Holocaust and moved to Israel.

Chai-Henna and her husband had children. They all perished in the Holocaust.

Juda, the son of Hillel and Dvayre-Varaess, married Riva. These are their five children. (A sixth child died accidentally at age 3.)

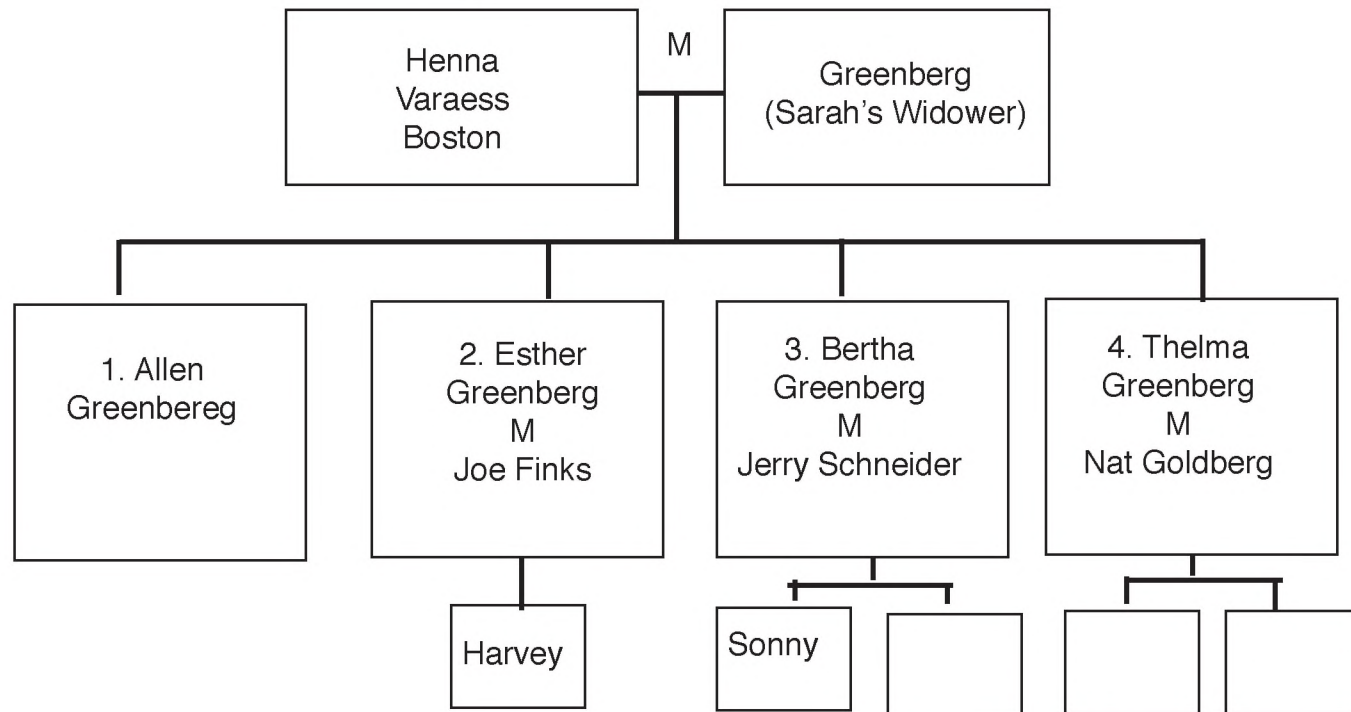
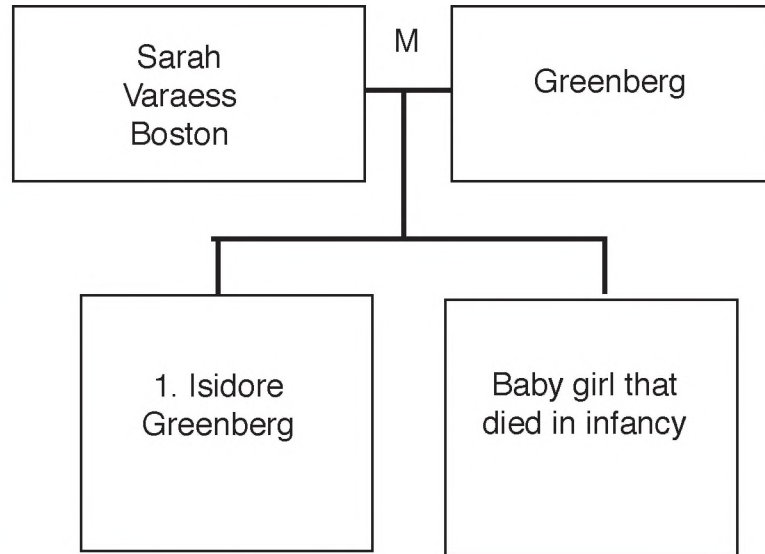


Yuda married Riva. She was diabetic. They lived in Telz, and had five children: **Isser** changed his name to Harry White. He moved to New York and married Bea. He owned the White Sugar Company. **Mollie** came to Boston and married Joseph Sneider. They moved to Biddeford where Joe became a fruit peddler. **Moness** married, but did not have children. **Elka** met Abe Kropman, and both moved to Africa. **Chai-Pera** and her husband had at least two children. All of them died in the Holocaust.

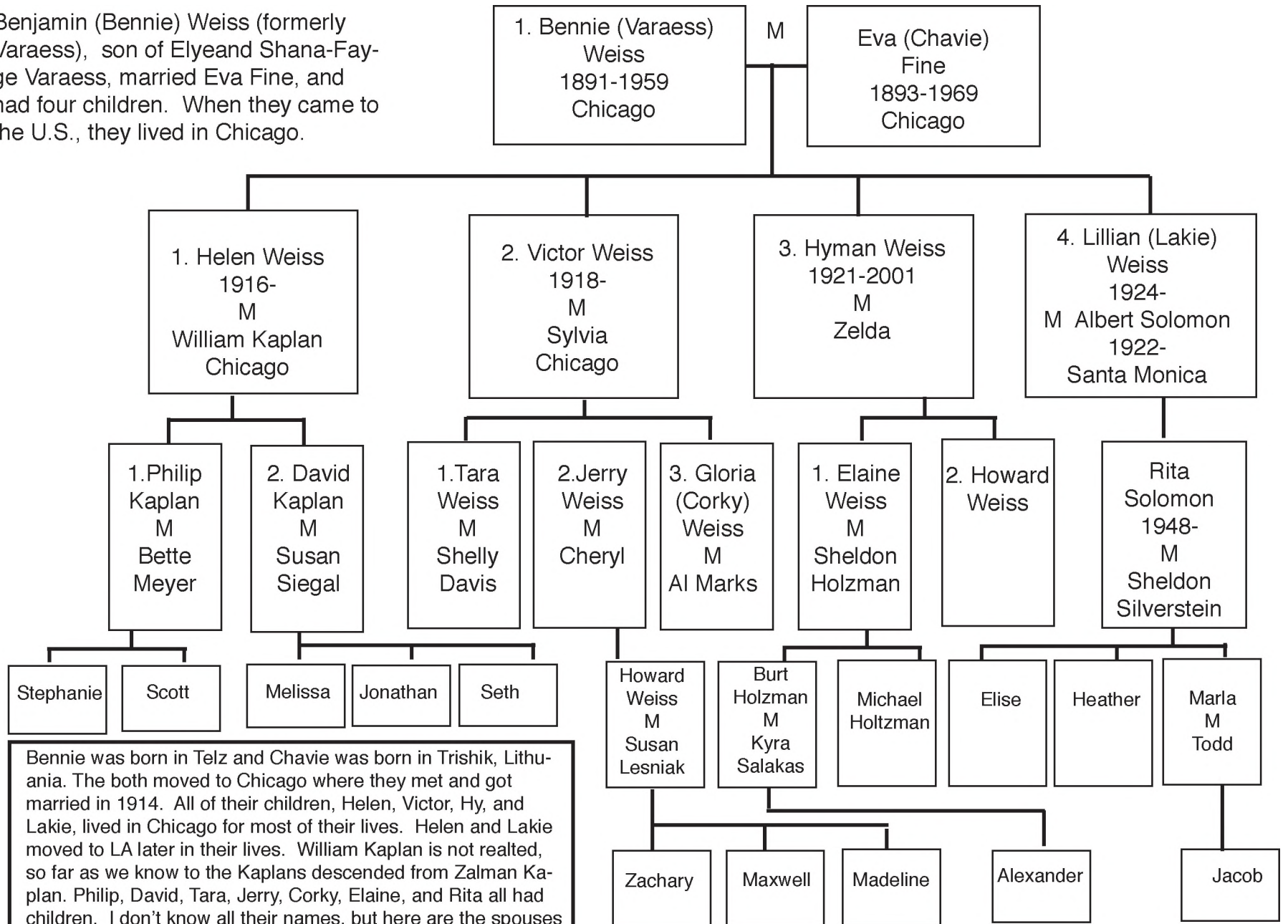
Sarah, daughter of Hillel and DvayreVaraess, married Mr. Greenberg. They had two children.

Sarah was born and raised in Lithuania, then came to Boston where she met and married Greenberg. They had a girl who died in an accident when she as an infant. They also had a son, Isidore, who never married.

Sarah died when giving birth to the little girl who later died in an accident. On her deathbed she asked her sister, Henna, to marry Greenberg and take care of her little boy. Henna was 16 at the time, and felt that she should fulfill her promise. So she married Greenberg and had four children: Allen, Esther, Bertha and Thelma.

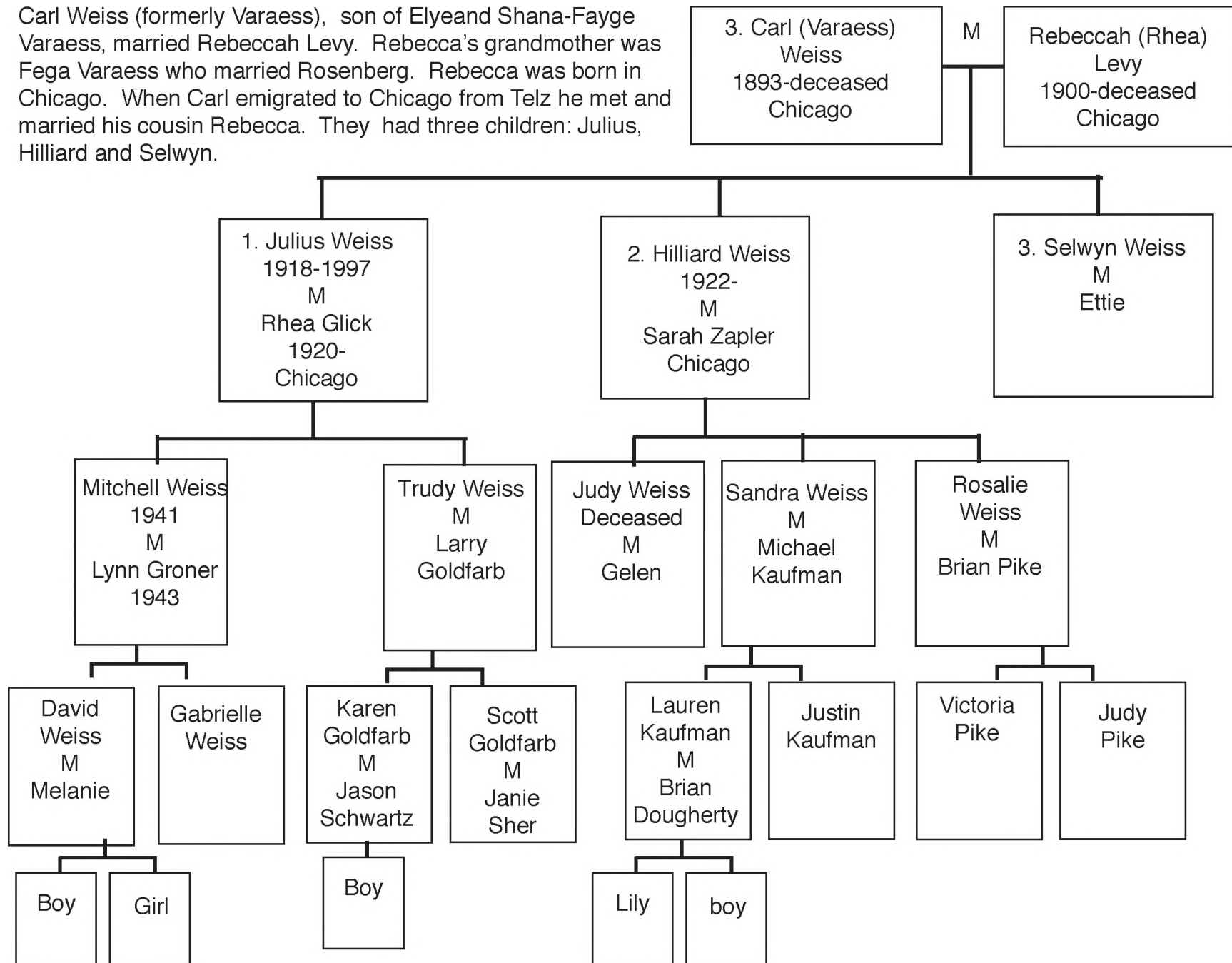


Benjamin (Bennie) Weiss (formerly Varaess), son of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Eva Fine, and had four children. When they came to the U.S., they lived in Chicago.

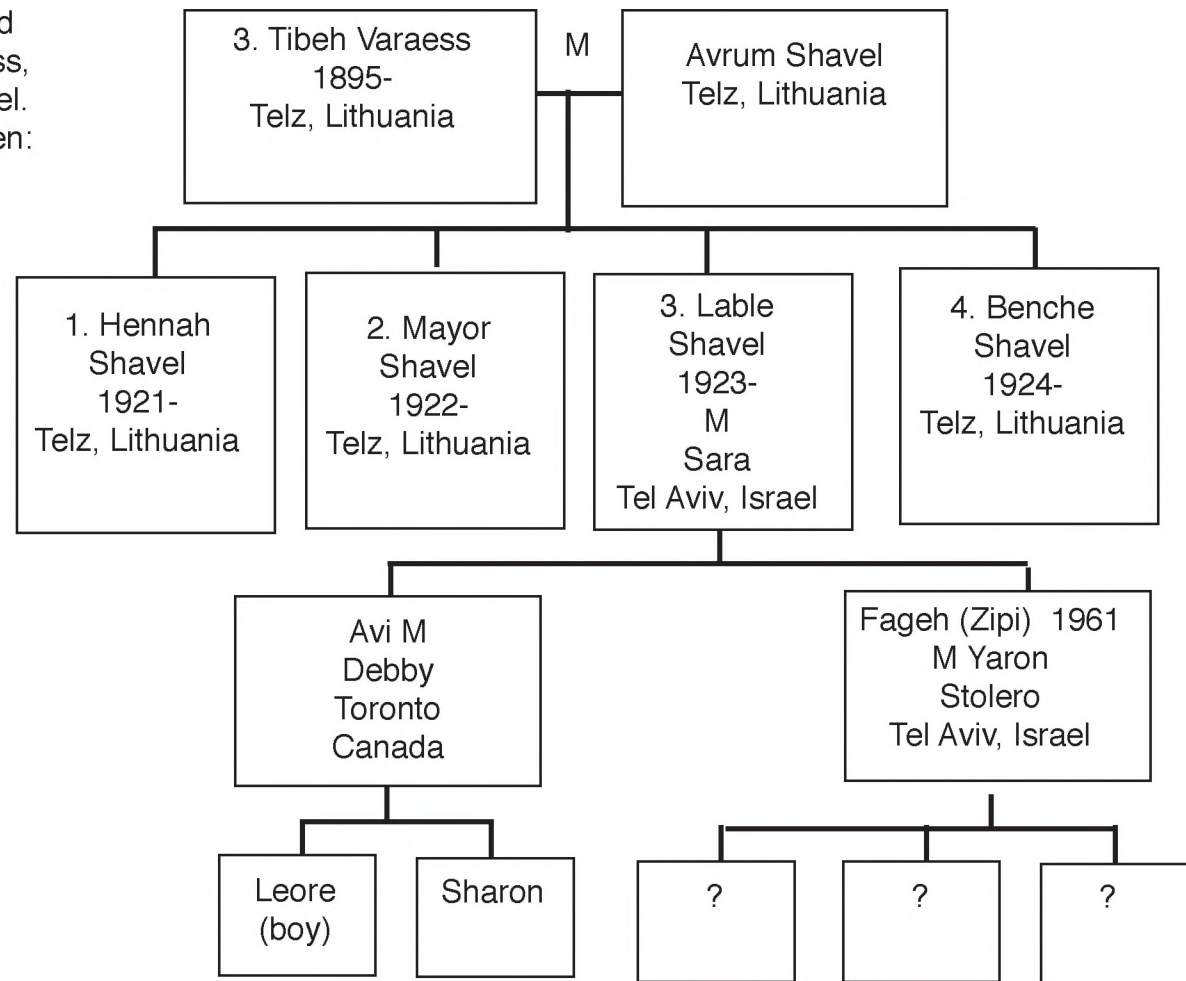


Bennie was born in Telz and Chavie was born in Trishik, Lithuania. The both moved to Chicago where they met and got married in 1914. All of their children, Helen, Victor, Hy, and Lakie, lived in Chicago for most of their lives. Helen and Lakie moved to LA later in their lives. William Kaplan is not related, so far as we know to the Kaplans descended from Zalman Kaplan. Philip, David, Tara, Jerry, Corky, Elaine, and Rita all had children. I don't know all their names, but here are the spouses and children I do know about.

Carl Weiss (formerly Varaess), son of Elye and Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Rebeccah Levy. Rebecca's grandmother was Fega Varaess who married Rosenberg. Rebecca was born in Chicago. When Carl emigrated to Chicago from Telz he met and married his cousin Rebecca. They had three children: Julius, Hilliard and Selwyn.



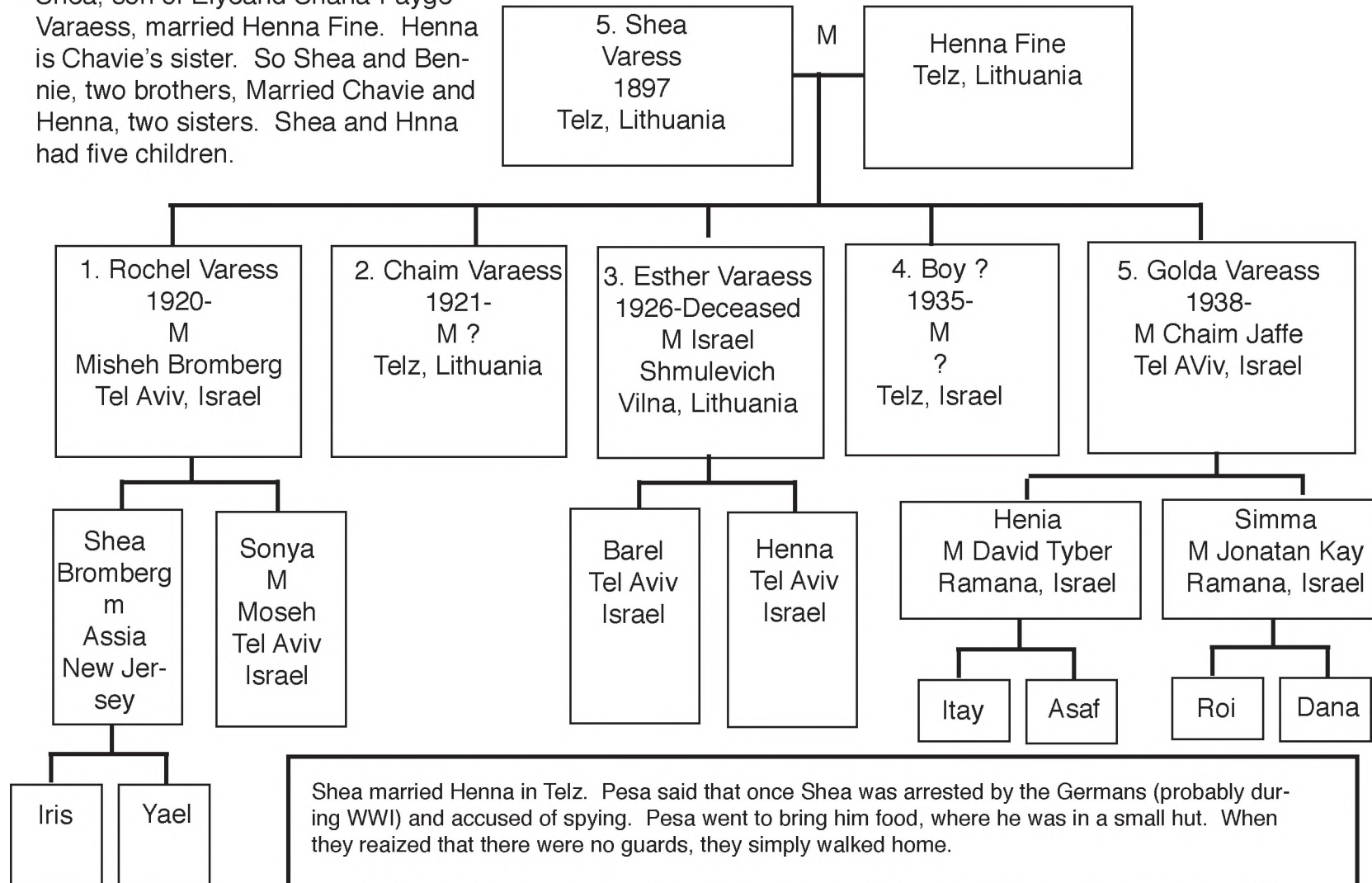
Tibeh, son of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Avrum Shavel. They had four children:



Tibeh married Avrum in Telz. He was visiting from somewhere, and looked in at her dipping candles and fell in love. They had four children, Hennah, Mayor, Benche, and Lable. Avrum died before the Holocaust. He had cancer, and had gone to Zurich for treatment.

The entire family stayed in Telz, and all died in the Holocaust except for Label. He was in a labor camp, in the same camp as Pera at the end of the war. Label had left his sweetheart in Telz, so right after the Americans took over the camp, he went back to Telz to see his sweetheart. When he got there he was interred in Russia for another 15-20 years. They both were released from the camps by the Russians, married and emigrated to Israel about 1979. They had two children, a son and a daughter. The son's name is Avi and he lives in Toronto where he's a Certified Public Accountant (CPA). The daughter lives in Israel but we don't know her name. Label, Sara, and their daughter live in Tel Aviv.

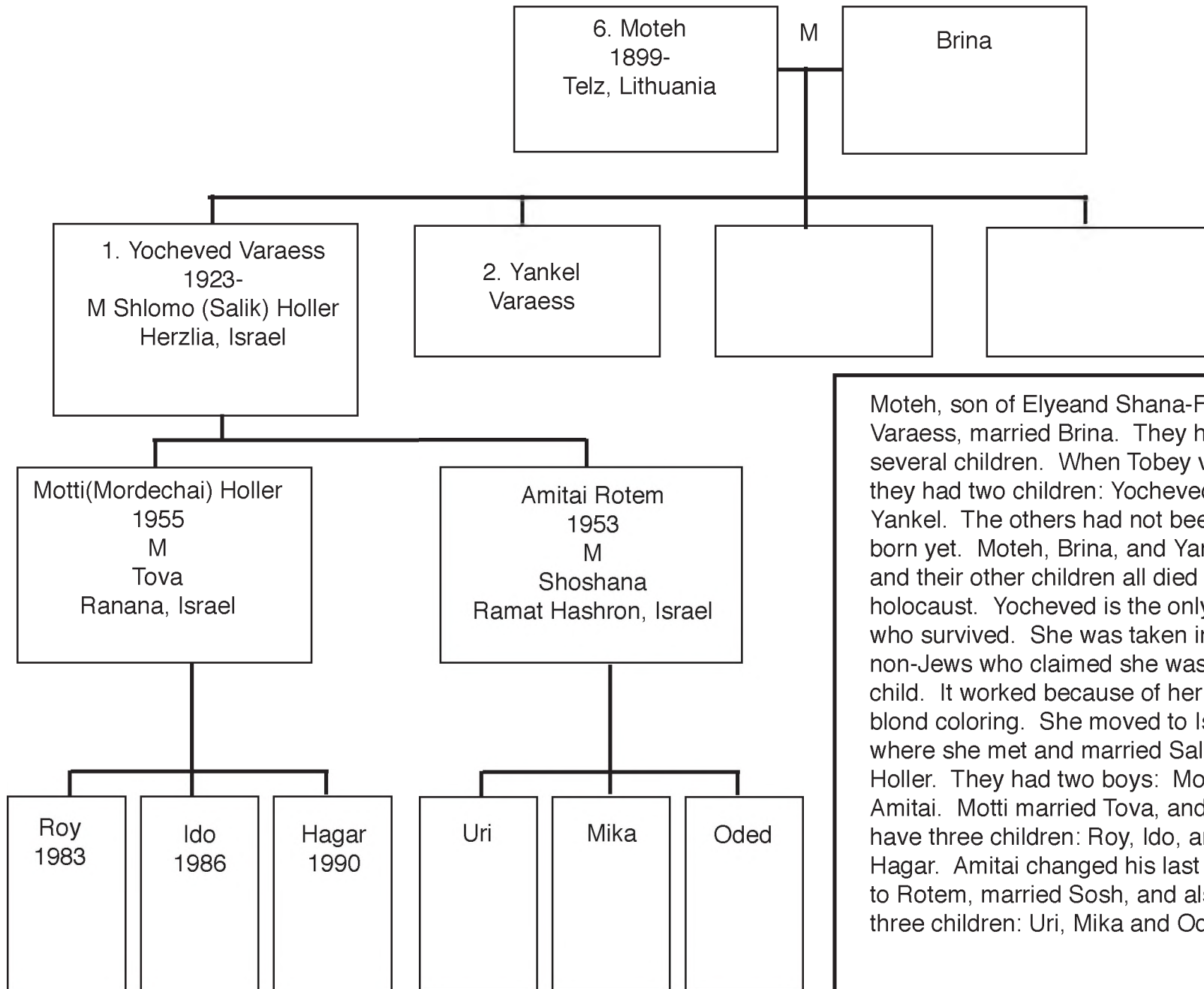
Shea, son of Elye and Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Henna Fine. Henna is Chavie's sister. So Shea and Bennie, two brothers, married Chavie and Henna, two sisters. Shea and Henna had five children.



Shea married Henna in Telz. Pesa said that once Shea was arrested by the Germans (probably during WWI) and accused of spying. Pesa went to bring him food, where he was in a small hut. When they realized that there were no guards, they simply walked home.

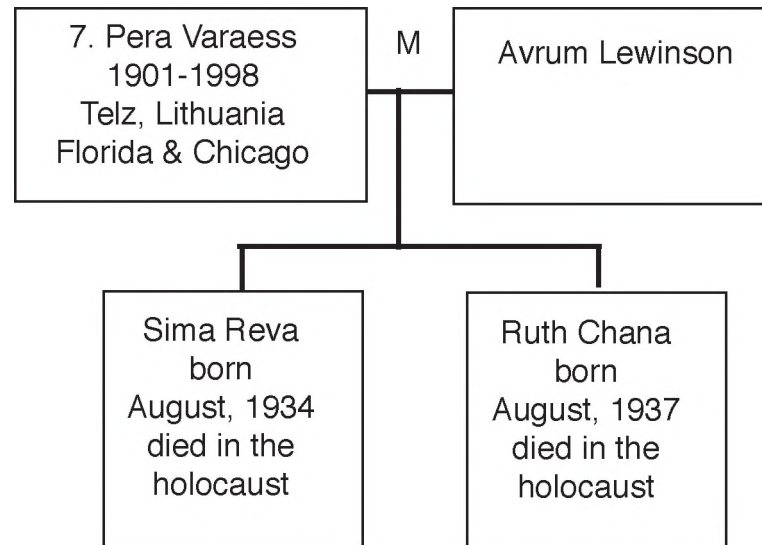
Henna, Shea and the boys were all killed in the Holocaust. Rochel, Golda, and Esther survived. They survived through the Holocaust by hiding with gentiles. They spent three years in a cave, helped by gentile farmers. The day before the liberation, Henna was killed by a sniper.

Rochel and Golda went to Israel long after the war. The family had to pay money to Russia to allow them to emigrate. Chaim Varess was killed in the Holocaust. Esther stayed in Lithuania. She had two children, both of whom eventually came to Israel.



Moteh, son of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Brina. They had several children. When Tobey visited they had two children: Yocheved and Yankel. The others had not been born yet. Moteh, Brina, and Yankel and their other children all died in the holocaust. Yocheved is the only one who survived. She was taken in by non-Jews who claimed she was their child. It worked because of her light blond coloring. She moved to Israel where she met and married Salik Holler. They had two boys: Motti and Amitai. Motti married Tova, and they have three children: Roy, Ido, and Hagar. Amitai changed his last name to Rotem, married Sosh, and also had three children: Uri, Mika and Oded.

Pera, daughter of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Avrum Lewinson. They had two daughters. Both died in the holocaust. Pera nd Avrum were in German concentration camps for many years until the camps were liberated and they came to live in Chicago.

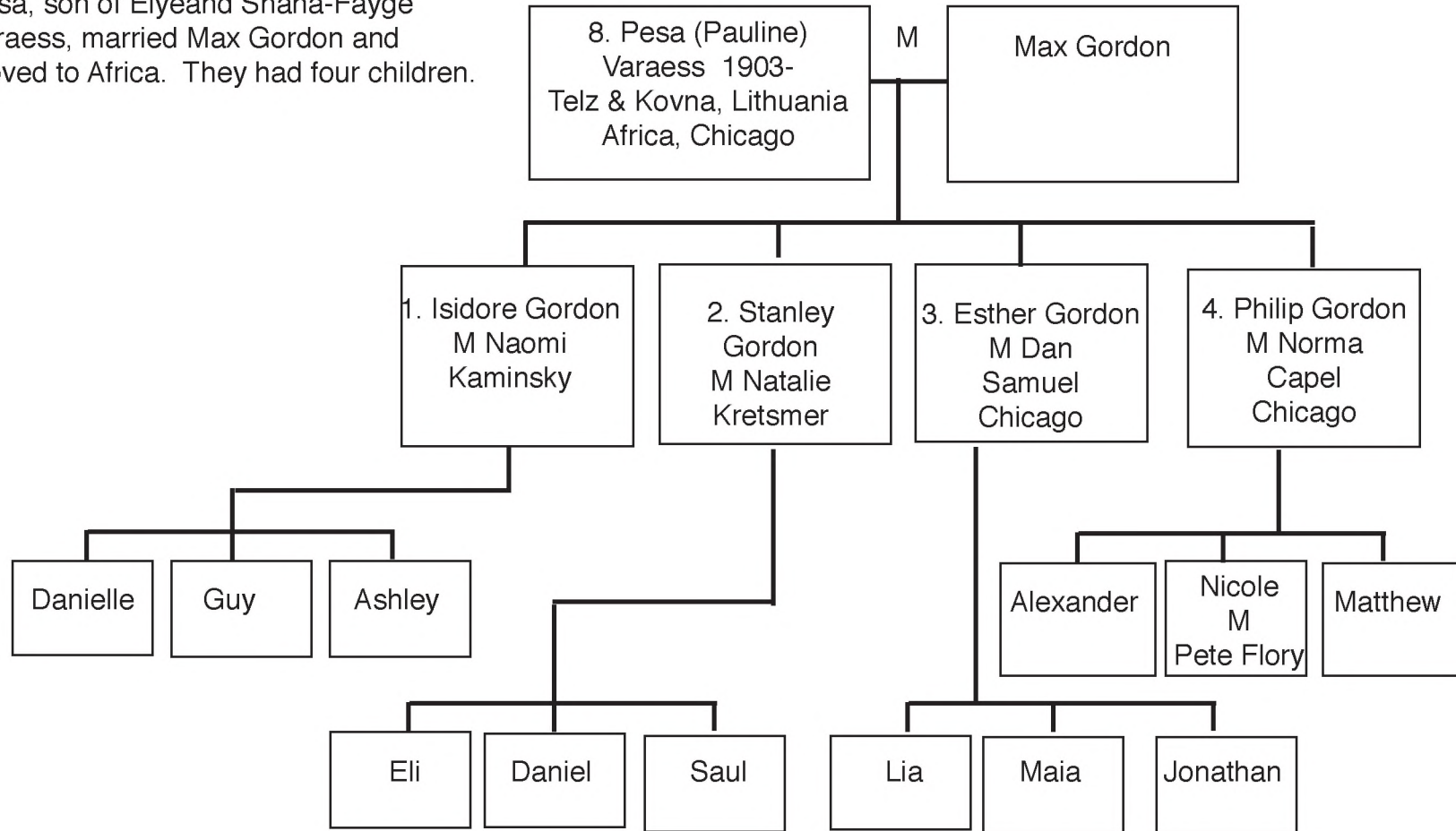


In Lithuania, Pera had studied to become a dentist. She graduated from college, but could not afford to finish dental school, so she became a Hebrew school teacher in Valkemer, Lithuania. All her life she taught school in various places. She spoke several languages fluently. In about 1928 or 1929 she married Avrum, who was grocer.

During the war, Avrum and Pera were in different concentration camps. In the camp, Avrum's job was to pick over the clothes of the people who were gassed. One day he recognized the clothing of his own children. He was never quite the same afterthat.

After the liberation Pera stayed in Germany, working for the U.S. government, teaching English to the people who were liberated from the camps. Even when they moved to Chicago, however, Avrum never worked. He would sit for hours and never talk to anybody, or pace the floor. Pera, on the other hand, always worked as a Hebrew School Teacher. She was nearly 100 when she died.

Pesa, son of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, married Max Gordon and moved to Africa. They had four children.



Pesa was a Hebrew teacher at a school in Malat, Lithuania, where she met her husband, Max Gordon, whom she married in 1929. He had returned from South Africa to help his father, who was in the timber business, pay off debts resulting from the crash. Max and Pesa borrowed money from Pera so they could get married. Pesa was pregnant when he went back to Africa.

When the baby was six months old Max sent for her. The trip to Africa took almost two months. When she arrived (in Transvaal, South Africa) Max owned a modest general store on a citrus plantation. Soon after Esther was born in 1935, they moved to a nearby town where he bought a maize mill. It was a town of about 3,000 people with 8 Jewish families.

She and Max had four more children. Since the state schools were pro-Nazi, the children went to a Catholic Convent school. Later they moved to Johannesburg where the children went to state high schools and then the University. Meanwhile Max commuted 400 miles between the farm and Johannesburg.

Chaim Varaess, son of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, died at age 15.

9. Chaim
Varaess
Telz, Lithuania

Isaac Varaess, son of Elyeand Shana-Fayge Varaess, married a woman named Gittel. We believe they had two children. The entire family died in the holocaust.

10. Isaac
Varaess
Telz, Lithuania

M

Gittel

According to Tobey, Chaim was 15 when he died of dysentary, during the First World War, possibly by eating fish from a poisoned river. The Germans warned the people not to eat the fish, but the family was starving, so he ate the fish first as a test. Bubbie Shana-Fayge blamed herself. Because of the guilt, she denied herself her greatest pleasure — taking a bath. Consequently, from then on she washed by standing in a tub, but would not go to the bath house with everyone else.

Pesa's daughter, Esther Samuel says that when Pesa was 12 or 13 years old, during WWI, Elia and Chaim caught diphtheria. Since the Germans occupied Lithuania at that time, they believed that if Chaim and Elia were sent to the hospital, they would be dispatched by injection to containe the epidemic. So, they were hidden in the hay loft. Elia recovered, but Chaim died while Pesa was watching over him, but fell asleep. Esther does not believe the story about Shana-Fayge and the bath is accurate.

Isaac desperately wanted to come to America, and he always dressed like an American. He wore an American-style roadster cap rather than a Russian cap. He loved chewing gum, and would keep the same piece of gum for a month. When he was 19, he was supposed to come to America. However, it was discovered that the man who provided his Visa was a forger. So Isaac was not permitted to emigrate. Jacob, Carl and Bennie had already paid for the passage through the Krulevitch travel agency in Chicago. When it was found that Isaac could not come, they money was re-funded except for \$100. Rather than waste the \$100, the men decided to send Brina on a trip to Lithuania, since she always cried that she missed her family. She had been in The United States 14 years at that time. With very little additional money, the \$100 paid for a full ticket for Brina, and half tickets for Helen and Tobey. No ticket was needed for Harriet, who was just two years old. (Zeldie and Goldie were not born yet.)

Sneider Family Tree

