

SAGA OF THE RISEN FROM THE ASHES

To Michael Okunieff, on the 90th anniversary of his birth¹

Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk...

Isaiah 2:5

So came the house of Jacob, lashed and bloodied, beaten to death and crucified, it rose and walked. A famished man, it broke out of the Warsaw ghetto; a little girl that was left for dead, it crawled out of the pile of bodies in Babi Yar; a gray-haired youth, it came out of Lithuanian and Belarusian woods.

So came the house of Jacob, and walked. It ripped off the bloody scabs, it shed the ashes of the crematory ovens, and walked to the highest point of the Earth, Jerusalem, to clearly and firmly assure the judeophobic mob of the world: "Never again! Never will I allow anybody to murder Jewish children!"

From "The Axis of World History" by Yuri Okunev



Prologue – *andante sostenuto*

I became interested in my ancestry and started feeling like a link of an endless chain that goes down into the bottomless well of the past, late in life, after I had emigrated.

Young people are seldom interested in their forebears. Their concern about the present, worry about the future, their school, job, career, women, family, children leave little time to take a thorough look at the past; and two-faced Januses able to look to the future and the past at the same time are quite rare.

The people of the former Soviet Union had additional reasons not to show any special interest in their ancestry, for such curiosity could lead to big trouble. The ancestors could turn out to be not of "proletarian origin", or, God forbid, clerics, or "enemies of the people". Hiding non-proletarian ancestry or their connections to clergy could lead to the expulsion from the communist party, and then you lost your job – as the best case scenario. That is why many of us first sat down at the computer as old men, after leaving Russia, to write down the story of our fathers, to find the roots of the family tree, to tell our children about their great-great-grandmothers and great-great-grandfathers that lived in the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian towns and villages.

I felt an overwhelming desire to find my family roots and tell my children and grandchildren about them after my mother passed away and the cold emptiness of eternity stood behind my back. My work was rushed by an unexpected illness, a kind of wake-up call that said:

¹ The author used original memories by Michael Okunieff as a basis of this essay in Russian. The essay was translated from Russian by Anna Tucker.

“Here’s your last chance to preserve the family history for your descendants and to free the images of your ancestors from the void. If not you, then who?”

As an additional motivation to dig deep in the past came a revelation. From the miraculously preserved obscure fragments of memories, from the faded writings on the faded photographs, there rose on the family horizon two truly outstanding, significant figures, those of my paternal great-grandfathers Movshe Okunev and David Yacobson. Movshe Okunev, the father of my grandfather Isaac Okunev, was a well-known shochet of the town of Velizh in the time after the infamous Velizh case that shook Russia, a blood libel of the Velizh Jews that allegedly ritually murdered a Christian boy. David Yacobson, the father of my grandmother Raisa Okuneva, served as rabbi in Lubavichi, the world-famous center of the Lubavichi branch of Hasidic Judaism where Chabad started. David received this high appointment in 1882 from the fourth Rebbe of Lubavichi, the great Tzadik Samuel Schneerson himself, known in the history of Chabad as Maharsh. I am going to omit my adventures that led to these discoveries, for they are not the topic of my story.

I would like to tell an incredible family saga, a story of a branch of the Okunev family that perished in the fire of Holocaust and yet rose from the ashes, like the fabulous Phoenix, and blossomed anew in Israel and America. The core of this story is a true miracle, the incredible discovery of a seemingly lost Okunev branch, the discovery that was made with the help of a certain book.

This story has two main characters. The first one is my second cousin Michael (Moshe) Okunev, who was lost with the rest of his family somewhere around the Polish-Lithuanian city of Vilna in the bloody breaking of the Second World War, and suddenly reappeared after 50 years in the American city of Chicago as the head of a new large family. The second main character of this story is... a book called “Letters to Relatives from XX Century”. This book magically brought to us our first hero, as if one of the ten lost tribes of Israel that seemed to have forever disappeared was found at the tip of the writer’s pen.

The part of yours truly, the author of this story, was to quite humbly put the two above mentioned characters together.

Lithuania, Rudniki Forest, spring of 1944

In the spring of 1944 the General Staff of the Red Army began to prepare an enormous military operation “Bagration” to destroy the German Army Group Center and free Belarus and Lithuania from the fascists. A significant part of this operation was played by the numerous partisan forces fighting far behind enemy lines. In May of that year the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo) among other news from the front lines reported the destruction of a German supply convoy by Lithuanian partisans near Vilnius.

Winter lingered that year and the warmth of the spring sun struggled to break the gloomy skies over the thick woods of Rudniki forest that grows between Vilnius and Lida. It was a chilly night, with drifting snow, and the guard, dressed in an old sheepskin coat, fed a few more thick dry twigs to the campfire. The fire swelled, pushing away the darkness, and outlined the silhouettes of the pines surrounding the clearing and the already melting snowdrifts that have been shoveled away from the entrance to the log cabin. The dark of the night would stay for a

while, but the breakfast of meat and potatoes was almost ready in the mess tins hanging over the campfire. The commander ordered to cook as much food as possible, all they could get in the nearby villages and homesteads. The soldiers missed bread, but the farmers had none and no place to bake it. Still, they had potatoes and sometimes – like that day – even meat.

Moshe awoke to his bunkmate David pushing him and chanting in a low voice: “Wake up... Wake up...” Young men and women huddled together to stay warm on two rows of wooden pallets that lined the cabin leaving a narrow passage in the middle. The pallets were covered with several layers of soft pine sprigs with old coats, sheepskins and quilted jackets on top. They used everything they had to sleep on and cover with. Three dozen people were waking in the pitch dark of the night. They got used to living deep in the wood; they knew it was their only chance of survival. They were getting off their pallets without complaint, feeling for their clothes in the dark, talking quietly in Yiddish and Russian, as if stressing the importance and even solemnity of the moment. They knew that they would soon have to go far in the forest, that there would be a fight.

Moshe ran outside and quickly rubbed his face, chest and sides with wet snow. Then he went back in, put on both his shirts and a coat made of old tattered military greatcoat, belted it, and shoved his trapper’s hat in the sleeve. The door to the cabin stood open and in the light of the campfire he soon located his bowl and his carved pine spoon.

Abba Kovner, the commander, was sitting on a felled tree trunk and patiently waiting for his people to finish their campfire meal. These people were his Jewish team finally recognized by the Red Army command as an operational partisan troop. The recognition had come several weeks before, when a Soviet airplane parachuted them some firearms and a radio. For over six months Abba had acted of his own accord. He would pick up Jewish refugees, exhausted by wandering in the forest, find food for them and put children, the sick and the weak in the care of remote homestead dwellers. He destroyed enemy lines of communication, attacked German patrols and local pro-Nazi police. Keeping the balance between the team’s effectiveness in combat and the safety of the old and the children was a very difficult job. But the hardest part was finding local people who would not betray the Jews to the Gestapo and the police. Abba learned how to do just that. Now his troop got orders from the command to regularly destroy German supply convoys on their way to the front lines. For the first operation Abba picked a forest road between Vilna and Lida. This road was used by the Germans to deliver troops and supplies. For two weeks his scouts tracked the movement of the convoys. They reported that a supply train takes the road twice a week at dawn, guarded by armored vehicles and half a company.

Moshe finished his meal, checked his rifle and joined the uneven line of partisans next to his friend David. Abba Kovner named the participants of the raid. His speech was short. “Our task is to destroy the German convoy that is guarding a supply caravan and seize the supplies. This raid will test our ability to fight the enemy and our readiness to support the advance of the Red Army that sent us arms and ammunition.” The commander stood in front of his soldiers bareheaded and his thick hair that turned gray before its time glimmered in the flickering light of the fire. Moshe thought Abba looked like Einstein, the Einstein that was mourning the failing harmony of the world. Suffering and hatred froze in Abba’s bright eyes. Everybody knew the reason for this suffering and hatred.

Abba Kovner was well known in Vilna as the leader of a youth Zionist organization Hashomer Hatzair. Later, when the Germans came, he started a secret resistance movement in the Vilnius ghetto. Abba did not want to be a slave. Abba was a poet and his brave words were

like the words of the ancient Hebrew warrior Eleazar that called to the defenders of the Masada fortress before the last Roman attack.

"We will not go like sheep to the slaughter.

Jewish youth, do not be misled. Of the 80 thousand Jews of Vilnius, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, there are only 20 thousand left. Our parents, our brothers and sisters have been taken away from us. Where are the hundreds of people that were sent into slavery by the Lithuanian "snatchers"? Where are the naked women and children that were taken on the scary "provocation night"? Where are the Jews that were taken on the Judgment Day? Where are our brothers from the Second Ghetto? None of them is coming back. All the Gestapo roads lead to Ponary, and Ponary means death!

If you still doubt, get rid of your illusions! Your children, your husbands and wives perished. Ponary is not a camp. They were all murdered there. Hitler intends to exterminate all Jews in Europe. The Jews of Lithuania are destined to be the first in his way.

Let us not be sheep that walk meekly to slaughter! It is true that we are weak and defenseless, but resistance must be the only answer to the enemy!

Brothers! Better die as free fighters than survive at the mercy of the murderers.

Resist to your last breath!"

In the fall of 1943 Abba Kovner organized a ghetto breakout and started a partisan team in the Rudniki forest. After the ghetto nobody ever saw Abba smile. He has witnessed too many deaths, too many of his relatives and friends had been brutally murdered. Everybody knew that. And Abba knew that there was not a single soldier in his troop that had not lost somebody close to them. There were no happy people there. The harmony of the world lay in ruins, as if God himself died in Ponary, in the bloody pits of the Ponary forest where Germans and Lithuanians murdered Jews.

Moshe squeezed his rifle. He had come to this forest with Abba Kovner and three hundred refugees from the Vilnius ghetto the fall before and went on his first military raid on October 7. He would remember that day for the rest of his life. His group of partisans destroyed a phone line along the road to Vilna. Moshe turned 21 the following February. He remembered celebrating his birthday with his parents and brothers in Vilna. Here nobody had birthday parties. It was a thing of the past, and the past was shadowed by the bloody ghost of the murdering gang that the whole world seemed to have turned into. Moshe slung the rifle on his back and walked by David's side. They had to walk several miles through the thick forest along the marked paths by dawn and set an ambush at a sharp bend in the road. "You know, Moshe," David mused, "The Fritzes are freezing in Russia, and we are going to take their food and warm clothes away."

The commander appointed Resel Sabin as the leader of the operation. Resel was obviously proud of his mission and looked like a dandy compared to his randomly dressed mates. He wore a warm striped quilted jacket and polished boots and carried an automatic rifle in his right hand and a handgun in his belt. "We received an order from the Soviet partisan staff to prevent delivery of supplies to the German troops from our area by any means," Resel explained. "Soon the Lithuanian partisans of Petritis' group will join us. Together we'll make almost half a company. We will destroy the enemy."

When daylight started to break through the dark thickness of the forest, they reached the place of operation. Resel Sabin and his assistant Isaac Czuzoy divided the united Jewish-Lithuanian team into three groups. The central group armed with hand grenades, automatic rifles and four machine guns lay in ambush by the bend in the road behind the fallen trees. They were

supposed to deliver the first fire strike to the convoy guard. The other two groups took their positions to the right and left of the central group a little further away from the road. They were to support the central group with gunfire in case of unexpected complications.

Day was dawning. The cobbled forest road with shallow ditches on both sides was getting more visible on the backdrop of the dark trees and dirty white splotches of melting snow. No birds broke the silence of the empty woods. The birds were stunned speechless by the humans showing up at such an early hour. Moshe and David were part of the left-side group. They lay low in a shallow dip and covered themselves with pine sprigs. It was chilly and wet. Time seemed to be standing still and minutes dragged forever. Eight o'clock, nine o'clock, and then it was full daylight. The trees were noisily dropping remaining snow off their branches on the soldiers here and there. The enemy was nowhere to be seen. The initial excitement changed to tiredness and worry. The operation must have failed. Or worse, the movements of the team had been spotted and they were going to be attacked.

Then they heard a distant sound, a mix of horse-driven carts on cobblestones and rumbling engines. In the resonant silence of the morning forest the sound grew fast, and soon the fascist-guarded convoy slithered around the bend in the road like a long snake. First came several dozen carts pulled by horses and loaded with two rows of sacks. They slowly passed the ambush. Everybody froze and held their breath. The commander ordered not to shoot the horses or the cart drivers under any circumstances. Then the rumble of engines joined the clanking of the horses' hooves and the rattling of the cartwheels on the cobblestones. The carts were followed by an armored personnel carrier with a squad of German soldiers and two machine guns on board, and right behind it came two pickup trucks full of local gendarmes. When the gendarme trucks came even with the ambush behind the trees, the commander said quietly: "To our victory!" and then yelled, "Fire, fire!"

The next moment the silent forest road turned into hell full of rattling machine guns and automatic rifles, exploding hand grenades, yelling people and scared neighing horses, fire and smoke of burning vehicles, people running randomly, blood covering the bodies of the dead and the wounded. The Germans tried to fire their machine guns from the armored carrier, but it was the first to be shot and burned in the shower of bullets and hand grenades. The burning vehicle blocked the road and all the firepower of the machine guns turned onto the gendarme pickups. Those who jumped off the trucks were shot with automatic rifle bursts with no mercy to the fleeing or wounded. Sanka Nisanilevich was methodically finishing the still breathing fascists pointblank from his rifle: "Here is for my family, for my dad, for my mom, for my brothers and sisters".

Moshe was overwhelmed with vindictive joy. Former helpless ghetto prisoners were beating celebrated Hitler's troops. He wanted to kill at least one German soldier or Lithuanian policeman with his own hands. The rage brewed inside him, as if his parents and brothers, tortured by the Nazis, called for vengeance. The surviving driver of one of the trucks suddenly jumped out of the cab and tried to run to the woods. Moshe aimed and shot at him. The driver fell. Later they found out that several partisans had shot at the fleeing driver and nobody knew for sure whose bullet had hit him.

The operation went brilliantly. The German convoy was destroyed; dozens of the fascists dead, no partisan casualties, lots of uniforms, firearms and ammunition, supplies, carts and horses were seized. The partisans let the cart drivers who did not escape go with a note of temporary removal of their carts and horses. It must be those coachmen that started in villages

and homesteads the legend of a “division of Lithuanian partisans” that destroyed “thousands of German soldiers and officers”.

They took a detour back to the camp, riding the confiscated horses and in carts, carrying the precious supply load. Moshe was sitting on top of the sacks with a Lithuanian partisan, and Sanka drove. Everybody was quiet for a long time reliving what had just happened. After the tiresome waiting for the enemy, after the shock of a swift fight, after the excitement of victory there came heavy exhaustion. Sanka talked first:

“War is cruel, but this fight is different. It was not cruelty, it was cleansing. I felt I could finally pay the Nazis back for my family’s murder.”

“I see,” interrupted the Lithuanian. “All you want to do is moan and groan like wild animals to cover your secret hatred. All of you Yids are murderers seeking revenge. The German driver was wounded and not dangerous. Why did you shoot him? My Christian faith is based on love for every creature that Jesus gave life to.”

“Lies!” Moshe cut him short. “Our Hebrew Bible teaches justice. The German soldier is our enemy. I don’t know how much blood was on his hands, but he was part of the system that is trying to exterminate my people and destroy the whole world.”

“Look, this is war.” Sanka tried to cool down the argument. “We have no choice. Either we kill the enemy or the enemy kills us.”

The Lithuanian snorted angrily, jumped off the cart and joined his team. Moshe and Sanka fell silent. Such an end to cooperation made them sad. Finally Sanka said:

“This guy really doesn’t care about the Jews or even who wins the war. He ran to the woods to dodge German draft.”

“He sensed that the Germans were losing,” Moshe added. “And he’s trying to be good for the Soviets that are coming back.”

Moshe and Sanka felt uncomfortable after the chat with their Lithuanian companion. They had met unfriendly Polish and Lithuanians even before the war, but mean words from a teammate alongside whom they had just fought the common enemy, the fascist, hurt deeper. Some things didn’t change, Moshe thought, like anti-Semitism. Germans were killing Jews, but Lithuanians chose to feel for the killers. Somehow it fit their faith better.

It got dark early in the forest and the sun never broke the clouds that day. In the dusk Moshe thought of sad things. The long-gone happy childhood in his parents’ home faded behind the terror of his miserable youth. What had he seen in his best young years? Humiliation, bloody pogroms and murder of his family, life in the ghetto worse than the life of cattle before slaughter. Orphaned youth with no place to call home, no relatives, living in filthy attics, dugouts and barracks, in this gloomy forest that sometimes showed him the faces of his mom, dad and brothers as he had last seen them.

Moshe did not know what was in store for him in the depths of the Rudniki forest. He did not know that only two months later Wehrmacht High Command would place tens of thousands troops and tanks along the road where the former Gestapo prisoners destroyed the German convoy; that two German armies of Group Center would set the last defense line against the Red Army marching to East Prussia here, on the way from Vilnius to Lida; that all hell would break loose when two gigantic armored armies clashed in battle.

Moshe Okuniew had little chance of survival, and yet he lived.

Warsaw suburb of Okuniew, XVI-XX centuries

To paint the full picture we should begin this story with the origin of the name Okuniew, or at least the Jewish variant of it.

On the outskirts of Warsaw about 16 miles from its center, where the rivers Długa and Zonza meet, up to this day stands a little village by the name of Okuniew. It has a small market, a beautiful St. Stanislaw church, the ruins of the Lubenski family mansion and the remnants of their park, an old abandoned Jewish cemetery, a famous stud farm and the Fellowship of Knight Okun building.

The village of Okuniew grew here in the first half of the XVI century and was named after the knight Stanislaw Okun, who received the ownership of the nearby lands on the trade route from Warsaw to Russia and the right to hold markets and fairs from King Sigismund I the Old of Poland himself. In 1634 Andrzej Swiecicki wrote in his work "Topography, or Description of Mazovia": "On the other side of the Wisla the Warsaw land spreads wider and envelopes the little towns of Okuniew and Stanislawow". This area is connected to many historic events. In 1656 a Polish national hero hetman Stefan Czarniecki defeated the Swedes by Okuniew, and in 1703 King Carl XII of Sweden resided in Okuniew. At the time of the November Uprising of 1830 the Polish rebels fought the Russian military between Okuniew and Old Miłosna, right before the battle of Olszynka Grochowska. Fired at by the Russian army, Okuniew burned down on February 18, 1831. The well-known Battle by Okuniew, in which one of the Polish national liberty movement leaders Piotr Wysocki fought, took place the same year.



The old town of Okuniew coat of arms and St. Stanislaw church

In the times of Commonwealth of Poland the Okuniew estate was owned by the Okuniews, the Powsinows, the Chyolkows, the Radziminskis, the Okenckis, the Grzybowskis, the Clickis and the Lubenskis. In 1795, after the Polish state fell as a result of the Third Division of Poland Okuniew became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a border town. During the Napoleon wars Russia annexed Warsaw and the surrounding area, including Okuniew. After the Warsaw-Brest railroad had been built and detoured the town, Okuniew started to decline, and in 1869 Emperor Alexander II stripped it of the status of town. In the early XX century Okuniew ran a horse-pulled tram to the railroad station in Miłosna. This tram operated until WWI, when the retreating Russian troops dismantled the two-mile track and got rid of the rails. The Russian

rule ended in 1915 and Okuniew found itself occupied by the Germans that lasted until the end of WWI. In 1920 during the Polish-Soviet war the front lines cut through Okuniew. In the following years, on the bumpy road through history of the XX century, the village of Okuniew suffered every misery and trouble that befell the distressful Polish land. Those events do not need further comment.

Jews came to Okuniew in XVIII century. The first synagogue was built here at the same time. According to historical evidence the village of Okuniew “belonged to the lands where Jews could reside with no oppression”. In the middle of XIX century the village had a population of 532, including 105 Jews; and according to the 1897 census 287 out of its 1119 residents were Jewish. At the time of 1921 census about 500 Jews lived in Okuniew and a lot of Jewish social, religious and cultural organizations operated here. After 1930 a large number of Jews emigrated and the Qahal was moved to Rembertowo. In September of 1939 Okuniew was occupied by German troops and in April of 1940 Germans deported the Okuniew Jews to Warsaw ghetto. Nearly all of them died. There are no Jews in Okuniew at present and the only reminder of them here is a small Jewish cemetery with a dozen tombstones. In 1988 the Nissenbaum Family Foundation renovated the cemetery and put a fence around it. But since then the cemetery has been slowly reclaimed by woods.

Let us go back to our story. In the early XIX century after the three divisions of Poland and the end of the Napoleon wars the Okuniew Jews learned that they now were the subjects of the Russian empire with the right to reside inside the Pale of Settlement in Lithuania, Poland Belarus and part of Ukraine. The break-up of the Commonwealth of Poland, the administrative chaos and the collapse of economy in the former Polish-Lithuanian lands pushed Jews to migrate east. That was then, in the first quarter of the XIX century, that my great-great-grandfather whose name I do not know left Okuniew for good and went searching for a better life far east in Belarus, in the Vitebsk Governorate, closer to the eastern border of the Pale of Settlement, closer to the border of Russia, and settled in the town of Velizh on the banks of the mighty Western Dvina.

Last names for Jews were introduced in Russia in the early XIX century. “The regulation of the Jewish Affairs” of 1804 under the reign of Alexander I stated that “every Jew must have or accept his known family name or nickname, which must be henceforth kept without change in every document and record with the addition of the first name given according to one’s faith or at birth.” Having settled in Velizh our distant ancestor faced the need of picking a name for himself and the rest of the family. His relatives and he still remembered their old homeland well and so without a doubt chose the name Okunev, after the village in Poland where they came from. The next generation of the Okunevs bore this last name officially and it was kept in every “document and record without change”.

Velizh–Vitebsk, XIX–XX century

To further move towards the opening of our story let me give a very short account of the history of the Okunev family that settled in Velizh in the first quarter of the XIX century.

A Velizh ritual butcher (shochet) Movshe Okunev, the son of the first bearer of this name from the Polish village of Okuniew and the founder of the whole modern Okunev clan, was born in the middle of the XIX century in Velizh and died there in 1914. Nowadays the town of Velizh that is situated about 56 miles northeast of Vitebsk on the bank of the Western Dvina is a part of

the Smolensk Governorate of Russia. At the time when Movshe Okunev's father, whose name we will never know, settled in Velizh, the town was the center of the Velizh uezd of the Vitebsk Governorate of the Russian Empire. About 300 Jews lived there, among them 10 merchants, and by the time of Movshe's birth there were over 3000 Jews in the area. According to the 1861 census 2105 Jews lived in Velizh making up 40% of the town's population.

I do not have much left to say about Movshe Okunev and his family, because I know little. He was a respected man in Velizh and around it. The trade of ritual butcher (shochet) was considered inherited and very honorable. The shochet had to study Talmud and Shulchan Aruch to know every detail of shechita and kashrut² and pass the test given by the strict rabbis in Lubavichi. Movshe had to practice a lot before he learned how to keep the slaughtered animals kosher. When he first picked up a shechita knife there were almost 3000 Jews in Velizh and all of them maintained the Law and kashrut, and all of them came to Movshe to be able to cook their food according to Torah and Talmud. The Jews of the villages Ilyino and Usvyat also came to him, so he never knew shortage of work and his family never knew poverty.



The Velizh shochet Movshe Okunev, the founding father of the Okunev family, and his wife Minna-Dvoira (Velizh, early XX century)

In the only remaining portrait of Movshe Okunev we see a wise old man reading Torah or Talmud. The picture was apparently taken in the early XX century in Velizh. We see a noble thin face framed by a large gray beard, lively and slightly sad dark eyes looking over the glasses that slid down his nose. He is dressed in a dark kaftan and wears a deep fur hat like those of the

² *Shechita is the ritual slaughter of mammals and birds for food according to Jewish dietary laws. Kashrut is the set of Jewish dietary laws or, in the wider sense, the set of religious rules for righteous life.*

Hasidim. Should I be asked to describe Movshe from what I know about him, I would describe something very close to this picture. I cannot imagine a better symbol for our family, so charmingly simple and at the same time so sublime.

Movshe's wife's name was Minna-Dvoira. There exists a picture of her taken in the Velizh studio of M.A.Tevelev in the early 1910s. On the back of the picture it comfortably says, "We keep the negatives". Oh sweet ignorance! In a few years the peaceful conservative Velizh and all the photographic negatives would fall into the abyss of an endless chain of catastrophic wars and revolutions. And yet this picture miraculously survived, and we can see what our ancestors looked like in the early XX century.

Movshe and Dvoira had three children – sons Hershen and Isaac and daughter Basia. Movshe's children were very prolific. Hershen had ten children with two wives, sons Pinchus, Simon, Joseph, Hirsh and Moses, and daughters Sonia, Rachel, Brayna, Fira and Minna. Isaac had three sons, Pinchus, Abram and Benzion, and three daughters, Ida, Rachel and Minna. Basia had a son named Boris and a daughter named Anna. So Movshe Okunev had a total of 18 grandchildren.

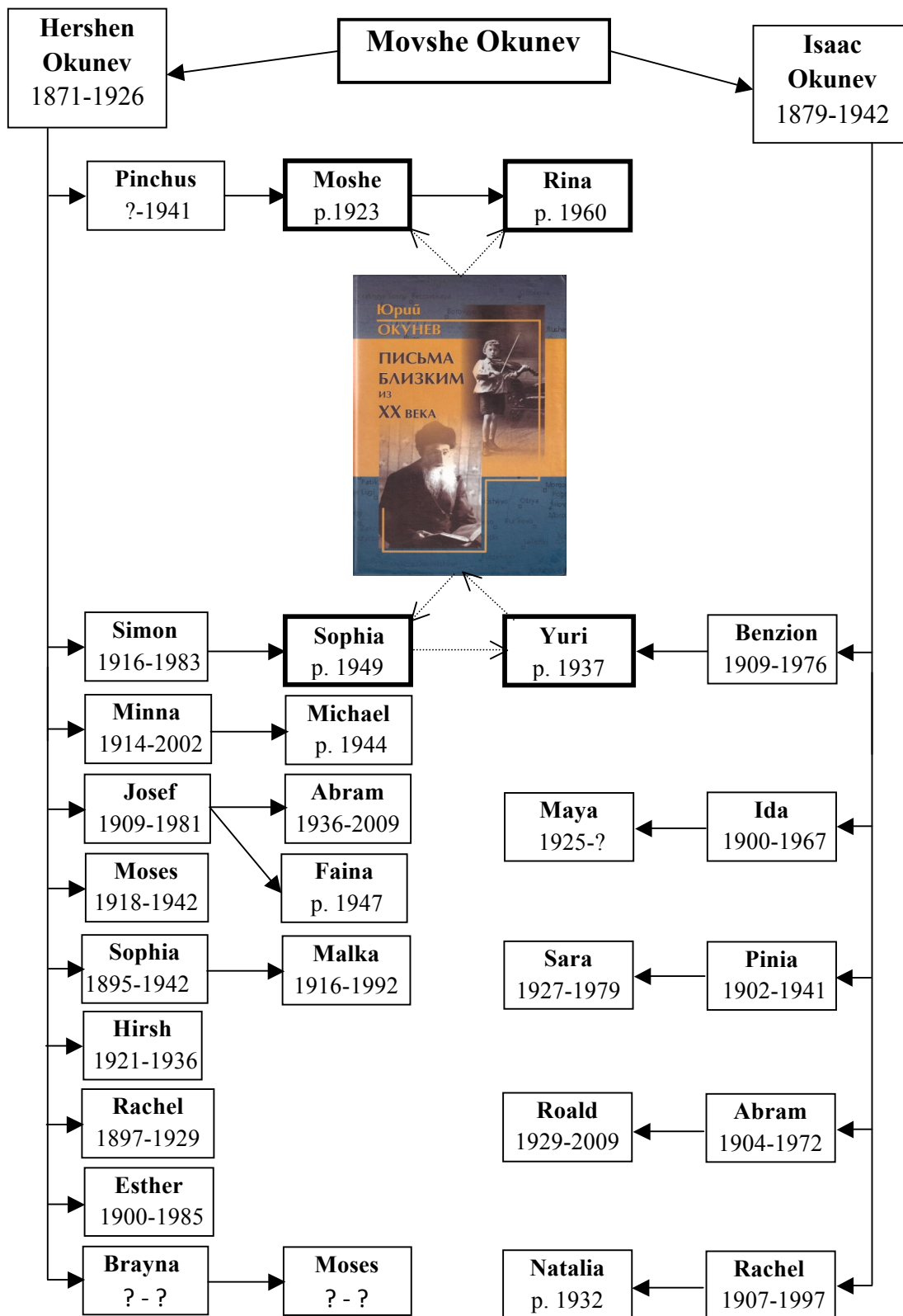
Movshe Okunev's sons Hershen and Isaac started the two branches of the Okunev tree of our family. The main character of this amazing story Michael (Moshe) Okunev belongs to the Hershen branch, and the author, Yuri Okunev – to the Isaac branch.

As visual aid I include here a plan of these two branches of the Okunev family tree, coming from the Velizh shochet Movshe Okunev. The plan includes children and grandchildren of Hershen and Isaac Okunev.

The four bold rectangles show the direct participants of the events in the following story, the main character Moshe Okunev, his daughter Rina, his first cousin Sophia and second cousin Yuri. The dotted lines show the interactions of the participants of the search based on the book "Letters to Relatives from XX Century". This search led to the discovery of a lost branch of the family tree. But let's be patient. We will learn the details further on.

To finally get to the life story of the main character we have to briefly go through the Hershen branch of the family tree. The father of this branch Hershen as the oldest son was supposed to inherit the family trade and the job of the Velizh shochet, but refused it and left to study pharmacy in Vitebsk. There exists a wonderful picture of Hershen Okunev's family dated around 1912. In it we see a Vitebsk pharmacist Hershen Okunev himself, his wife Fania and their five children, Brayna, Pinchus, Rachel, Esther and little Josef. Hershen's son Pinchus, the father of our hero, is on the far right in this picture.

In the winter of 1919/20 Pinchus Okunev left Soviet Russia, ran to Poland and settled in Vilna. This is how his son Michael tells the story he overheard as a child: "Father put on a White Army officer uniform and an expensive fur coat, pretended to be a former rich landowner and started moving to the West. He was detained multiple times, but managed to get free and reach Vilna saying that he had suffered from the Bolsheviks. In 1920 Pinchus got married. The marriage according to Michael was a happy one and his parents complemented each other very well. His father was a businessman with good intuition, but superficial education, and his mother, on the opposite, was very well educated. She graduated from a Russian school with high honors and devoted her free time to teaching her three sons, Boruch, Moshe (Michael) and Hershen.





**The family of the Vitebsk pharmacist Hershen Okunev (Vitebsk, around 1912),
On the far right his son Pinchus, father of Michael Okunev**

I look at the Hershen Okunev's family picture taken shortly before the greatest fall in the human history and see a happy family, good-looking parents and carefree children with a long and joyful life ahead. Alas, in a couple of years the world would fall into the 30-years-deep abyss of bloody madness, two devastating world wars and a cruel civil war, years of repressions and terror, poverty, occupation and evacuation, the siege of Leningrad and the Kolyma concentration camps, the ghettos and the Nazi genocide, the pits of Ponary and Babiy Yar, Auschwitz and Buchenwald... The life of these children fell on such horrible times as had not happened in many thousands of years of human history.

Vilna, 1935

"I was born February 23, 1923 in the capital of modern Lithuania, Vilnius, which at the time belonged to Poland, was called Vilna and was for the most part a Jewish city, the

Lithuanian Jerusalem. Vilna left Russia and joined Poland in 1920, the Polish language and education replaced the Russian, but the Vilna Jews continued to speak Yiddish.

I was 12 in 1935 and a student of a public Polish school. My older brother Boruch was getting ready to enter the Polytechnic Institute. Since he was a young child, he had been very good at math and showed a gift for engineering. My younger brother Gershon went to a Jewish school.

I remember my native Vilna very well. We lived at 5 Makova Street, across the street from a park where children played soccer. It was a group of five buildings with a common yard, where the neighbors got together to share local news and discuss world events. The only shared restroom with a flushable toilet was at the far end of the building. The heating was provided by wood-burning stoves and we rarely used coal, since it was expensive. The residents, of whom there were about 500, led a communal life. Everybody knew everything about everybody else, what you thought or what you were having for dinner or supper. On Fridays, when women were getting ready for Sabbath, the building buzzed like a huge beehive. Later in the night the Saturday candles flickered in the windows as if spreading the holiday mood all over the world. My mother lit the candles and my father prayed for peace and joy in our home. We always celebrated Saturday. My brothers, my friends and I would walk along the decorated Mickiewicz and Gediminas streets and pop into little cafes to grab an ice cream or a coffee. I can say that despite all the Jewish troubles my childhood in Vilna before the war was a happy one.

My parents were religious people and tried to instill it into their children. I remember a rabbi come to the house to teach my brothers and me Torah. The studies meant we had to memorize biblical text, often without any explanation of its meaning. The rabbi used to bring a belt with him as a motivation for diligent studies. My father had a small leather glove-and-coat making business and often traveled to remote corners of Poland to sell his products. When father was home, we usually saw him reading the Jewish papers "Vorwaerts" and "Der Tag". Mother, on the other hand, would spend a lot of her time with us. She was a well-educated homemaker and helped us with our homework every night.

Jewish life in Vilna was very diverse. In the famous Vilna yeshivas pale ageless students discussed the subtleties of Torah and Talmud. Poor bearded warehouse workers carried heavy sacks of goods on their shoulders. The city intelligentsia held heated arguments about how to reach a happy future. Political parties and movements ranged from religious Zionists to secular socialists and communists. Jabotinsky's Alliance of Revisionists-Zionists called to "immediate armed colonization of Palestine", the communists insisted that the Jews join "the Great International Brotherhood".

The disagreement and fighting over all these ideas and opinions prevented us from seeing the black cloud that was looming over the Jews of Europe. Meanwhile Hitler came to power in Germany, reinforced his position and began his steady advance on the rights of Jews. The Nazi propaganda fell on fertile soil in Poland, especially among the intelligentsia and at universities. Judeophobic groups of the national democrat party, the so-called "en-decs", boycotted Jewish-run stores and physically prosecuted Jews. My family soon experienced such display of anti-Semitic hatred as we had never known before.

Once I was going down the school stairs when a group of Polish students approached me and one of them suddenly punched me in the face with a knuckle-duster. I fell down bleeding. When my friends came to my aid, the hooligans were nowhere to be seen. Later we caught some of them and gave them a beating, but the scar on my face still reminds me how much Jews were hated in Vilna and the pre-war Poland.

In late June of 1935 my family moved to the country house that my father rented for the summer. One day I was walking in the woods and stumbled upon the secret spot where local Christians met. In the middle of a small clearing there stood a figure of Jesus Christ. A Catholic priest stood in front of it surrounded by his kneeling audience. In a loud voice the priest was telling them how Jews murdered Jesus and became a weapon of the devil. This undoubtedly educated man knowingly fed the fire of savage hatred for Jews in the Polish, the fire that would soon burn this land in the pyre of Holocaust. The hatred for Jews originated in the words of the Christian preachers and these words overpowered common sense and the Christian commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself.

The wind of this hatred grew stronger under the influence of Jewish pogroms in Germany. My father came to fear traveling to Polish towns. One day he returned from his trip to Poznan with bandages on his face and hands. Father did not like to complain, but finally he told us what happened. He was on a train to deliver an order to a customer when a gang of Polish hooligans dressed in brown Nazi uniform boarded the train and started beating up Jews and cutting off Hasidim's beards and payot with scissors. Father tried to defend the old Hasidim, but was beaten and cut.

Since then insecurity and fear settled in our home. Father tried to comfort us saying that Jews were used to prosecution, it happened everywhere, but with God's help they had always endured and in the end outlived their prosecutors. However, everybody sensed that father did not believe in a happy ending anymore. An eternal ruthless question arose: "What should we do?" Should we abandon our home, the land where we had been born, and walk into the unknown? And if yes, where should we go? America? But the roads to America were blocked by strict immigration quotas that left us no hope. And even if we had a chance, how would we survive in a foreign land with no language or job?

The biblical story of the flood, of the Ark, of the righteous man Noah and his sons, a true gem of ancient literature, is one of the most important parts of Torah that explain the relationship between God and His creation, man. This story has wise answers to eternal questions of existence, but it also poses difficult questions. Why didn't Noah, knowing about the coming flood, save the humanity from certain death? One of the answers that wise men of Talmud give is, "Noah did not quite believe in the flood himself". That's strange. Noah knew about the flood firsthand, he had received a warning, he was building a ship to escape the flood, and yet deep in his heart he did not believe in its inevitability. This plot goes through the Jewish history in many variations. The European Jews knew Hitler's opinion on the Jewish question. They had multiple warnings, both verbal and by action, that Holocaust was coming. And yet deep in their hearts they did not believe it. When Hitler was already forming special forces of professional murderers to exterminate Jews in Europe, Jews were still talking about whether "to go or not to go" and assessing their chances of leading a decent life in exile "without job or language". A tragic and yet sadly common Jewish story! Will we, though, throw a stone at someone who could not imagine the bloody slaughter of the Ponary pits and Babi Yar?

Vilna, June-September, 1941

On June 22, 1941 Germany started a war against the Soviet Union. The main strike of Vermacht was aimed at the western Belarus and the Baltic republics that had joined the USSR in

1939 and 1940. On the very first day of the war Vermacht's 3d armored army under command of Colonel-General Hermann Hoth destroyed the frontier Soviet troops and in a rapid attack seized the bridges across the Neman River near Alytus and Merkine. Having crossed the Neman, Hoth's motorized corps seized the capital city of Lithuania, Vilnius, on the third day of the war, June 24, 1941. That was the doomsday for the Vilnius Jews.

"The war came out of nowhere. Day and night motorized divisions, tanks, and artillery flowed steadily through the city. There seemed to be no limit to German power. Panic captured the city on the first day of the war. Thousands of people were packing and trying to escape with the Soviet troops. But the Germans seized the city so fast that nobody had time to run. It was a real blitzkrieg.

On the fourth day I left the house to assess the situation and try and get some food for the family. Lithuanian police had full control of the city. I saw the policemen pick Jews out of the lines of people waiting to buy bread and beat them with rubber cudgels. This was the first shock I experienced, and it was followed by more. In Novogrudskaya Street a group of Lithuanians in Nazi uniforms with swastikas on the sleeve were cudgeling a yeshiva student. Barely breathing, he was lying on the edge of a ditch, his clothes in rags and a grimace of pain on his face. I could hear him pray through the moans: "Shema Yisrael... Adonai Eloheinu... Adonai Ehad..." The beating continued until one of the torturers said, "He's dead, come on." I shuddered with horror.

I ran home and told my parents what I had seen and asked my father, "Papa, you say God is merciful. Why didn't he help the innocent boy that the Lithuanians beat to death?" Father replied, "You should not ask questions such as this. We cannot fathom God's ways, and He can get angry at you for such questions".

The next day I went to the house next door where my schoolmates lived. There was a body of a half-naked girl lying in a pool of blood in the front yard, bruised and cut. The girl's face was severely mutilated, but I recognized her. It was my school friend Lisa Morgenstern. She was 17 and she graduated right before the war. Lisa was very attractive, tall, and slender, with long black hair and large bright eyes on a beautiful face.

As I was told later, Lisa had been betrayed by her Lithuanian neighbor that went to serve the Germans right after the city had been occupied. This neighbor, in an attempt to gain favors from German officers, gave them Lisa's address and hinted that they could have a good time with a pretty Jew. The Germans came under pretense of confiscating Lisa's parents' apartment. They liked the girl a lot and demanded she provided them with sexual services. Lisa resisted, and that enraged the "Übermensch". They beat her severely and then gang-raped her. Excited by the bloody sexual orgy and angry at the girl's resistance, the Germans then dragged her outside and peppered her with bullets. Lisa's father was a humanities teacher at our school. When he saw his dead daughter he lost his mind and started muttering something about "new order" and "respect for humanitarian values". He did not have to suffer long.

It happened on the second day of the German invasion and was the beginning of terrible atrocities that helpless Jews suffered from the hands of Germans and Lithuanians. Lithuanian supporters of the new order were particularly cruel to the Jewish population of Vilna, which surprised even the professional killers from the SS Sonderkommando. They formed special police teams to catch, rob and murder Jews right in the city streets. The Lithuanian mob would set up "shows" in the streets that included torturing and murdering of Jews. Bloody terror took the city and people panicked. Finally German authorities found the actions of Lithuanian pogrom

makers unacceptable. The extermination of Jews should not be a chaotic bloody street orgy. It should be done in the German way, thoroughly and in an orderly manner. To facilitate “an orderly murdering of Jews” Germans came up with an impressive provocation. They accused the Vilna Jews of murdering a German soldier. As punishment, Germans together with Lithuanian police raided Jewish homes in downtown at night and took eight thousand Jews to a forest near the village of Ponary. There the Jews were shot and thrown into the oil pits that had been dug before the war. This act of German-Lithuanian monsters became part of the history of Holocaust as “the murder on the Provocation Night”. It was one of the first mass murders of Jews on the Soviet territory.

After the Great Provocation, in early September of 1941, the German administration started moving the Jewish population of Vilna to two ghettos known as Large Ghetto and Small Ghetto. Early in the morning Lithuanian policemen surrounded our house and gave us fifteen minutes to pack. We shoved some clothes and food and some family keepsakes into suitcases and sacks, put on two layers of clothing and stepped outside into the unknown. It was a warm day in early fall. The divine nature seemed to insist that it had nothing to do with the terrible ugliness of what was going on. We walked down Makova Street in a crowd of old people, women and children loaded with bags, rolls and suitcases. It was a march of the doomed. The people were directed to the ghetto. The streets on the way were littered with abandoned household items and pieces of clothing. On Licka Street, where the ghetto began, Lithuanian policemen used rifle butts to herd us into an empty Jewish house that must have been abandoned by its residents very recently. The food was still warm, there were clothes and pieces of broken furniture and kitchen items strewn on the floor, and fresh blood stains served as evidence that a real pogrom had happened here and the victims had been beaten violently. We were terrified to imagine living in this house that had seen torture and probably murder. While exploring our new home, my father and I went up to the top floor and discovered a passage that led from the attic to a house over in the next street. The whole family immediately moved there. And that saved our lives. The same night Lithuanian policemen deported all the Jews that had been moved to Licka Street on to Lukiszki prison and then to Ponary for execution. Germans put a fence up around the area where all of the Vilna Jews were rounded up and set guards along it, and so began our miserable life as ghetto prisoners.”

For two years professional killers from the SS Einsatzgruppe A and their Lithuanian lackeys methodically exterminated the Jewish population of Vilnius, for the most part in the execution pits of the Ponary village near Vilnius. A few survivors brought terrible news of the mass shootings of old people, women and children in the Ponary pits to the ghetto, but the ghetto residents did not believe them. By the fall of 1943 the Vilnius ghetto was completely liquidated.

Moshe Okunev had no chance of survival in that last circle of hell, but he lived.

Southbury, Connecticut, USA, 1999–2002

I did not know anything about Michael Okunev’s fate when in 1999 I started writing our family’s story in a small American town of Southbury, CT. My professional work brought me there – I got a job with General DataComm nearby. It was hard work, but every night I would still sit down at the computer, open my reference books and books on Jewish history and spend late hours in the past. From fragments of memories written down on aged paper, from names on

old photographs, from conversations with my relatives, from matching of their stories and historical facts, I was able to put together a vague picture of life and fate of my ancestors.

The most difficult was the branch of the family tree that came from Hershen Okunev, the oldest son of the family patriarch Movshe Okunev. Putting together the story of that branch, I wrote back then: “Hershen’s branch is a typical example of a tapered cone. Hershen had ten children, these ten children gave Hershen eight grandchildren, the eight grandchildren produced six great-grandchildren, and the six great-grandchildren produced five great-great-grandchildren.”

Of Hershen’s ten children only his daughter Minna was still living at the beginning of my research. She was 86 and a resident of Home for Leningrad Siege Veterans. Getting any reliable information about the family history from her would be difficult. Minna passed away in 2002, and I never got to see her.

Three of Hershen’s grandchildren lived in St. Petersburg at the time: Abram Okunev, the only surviving son of Josef Okunev, Michael Brio, the son of Minna Okuneva, and the only daughter of Josef, Faina. My only hope was pinned on Hershen’s grandchildren, because only they could shed some light on the fate of Hershen’s branch of our family tree. This hope was to some extent justified. Hershen Okunev’s grandchildren found and sent me some priceless pictures of our ancestors, and helped me outline the general plan of Hershen’s branch. Actually, all the information about Hershen Okunev’s branch of the family included in my first book of memoirs was based on the materials they had provided me with.

The book “Letters to Relatives from the XX Century” was published by “Art of Russia” in St. Petersburg in 2002. It had one sad line about the hero of this story Michael Okunev and his family: “Pinchus Okunev had a son named Michael. We have no information about him”. Michael Okunev’s Petersburg relatives, his cousins Abram, Michael and Faina, said that they had lost connection with Pinchus Okunev’s family in the early 1920s and that he had moved to Poland and most likely died with the rest of the family during German occupation. Michael Brio remembered his mother Minna mention Pinchus’s son Michael of whom they did not know anything either. All of these vague guesses led to the brief conclusion in my book, “no information available”.

As sad and vague were my deductions about other Hershen Okunev’s descendants. Of ten Hershen’s children only three had heirs, the rest had either been childless, or died before the war, or during the war along with their families. I concluded that only three of Hershen’s grandchildren lived into the third millennium, and none of the next generation – his great-grandchildren – bore the family name of Okunev or preserved any Jewish roots. As a result of these deductions based on the information I possessed at the time, my story about Hershen Okunev’s descendants ended on two very pessimistic notes:

- I tried to find a male line in the Hershen family tree that would have carried on the name Okunev. Alas, our last name seems to be lost in Hershen’s line forever.
- On this high and sorrowful note I complete my tale of a Vitebsk pharmacist Hershen Okunev. His descendants scattered and mixed with other nations. Less and less often they remember the vague image of their Jewish ancestor. The Hershen branch of our family tree is vanishing.

Both my deductions proved to be wrong!

Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev proved a hundred years ago that the survival of the Jewish people could not be explained based on historical experience of other peoples, that there was no materialistic explanation of such survival. He wrote that, “scholarly logic... is unable to offer any satisfactory explanation of their (the Jews) miraculous existence”. Many scholars before Berdyaev as well as after him failed to find logical explanation of the Jewish people’s story or come up with reasonable predictions of how it would unfold. The same happened to me. My deductions proved to be wrong and were soon refuted by unexpected and illogical events. It happened because of the one that had risen from the ashes, because of a miracle that could not – by any laws of cause and consequence – be possible, and yet was.

Isn’t this miracle a manifestation of the special destiny of the Jewish people, the people that mystically lives despite the whole world’s effort to destroy it? Isn’t this miracle that follows the Jewish people, the axis of world’s history?

Vilnius ghetto, 1941 to 1943

“I’m the only Vilnius ghetto survivor in our family of five. Life in the ghetto was horrible, but it kept you alive, because any Jew found beyond the ghetto boundaries was arrested and executed. The Germans paid the city residents a special bonus for every Jew caught. The Nazi propaganda mixed with traditional anti-Semitism turned the Vilna Christians into murderers’ accomplices. We did not realize right away how dangerous it was to be outside the ghetto, and that killed my parents and older brother. This is how it happened.

My father and brother decided to go to our house on Makova and pick up some things we had left behind. It was still possible to leave the ghetto and they did not sense any danger. However, some neighbor Christians saw them and reported them to Gestapo. Father and brother were immediately arrested and jailed. Someone suggested my mother bribe the Lithuanian guards and free Papa and brother. I remember the fear and pain in my mother’s eyes when she left home with all our money and her jewelry to go to the jail. I never saw her again. The guards readily accepted her offerings, then arrested her and put her in jail. Jews were outlawed and anyone was free to do whatever they wanted to them. Soon my father, mother and older brother were executed in Ponary. I do not know if they had a chance to see one another before they died, and I do not know what their last words were. They have no graves.

So my younger brother and I were alone in this world. I had no more mentors and had to learn to avoid mortal danger every hour of every day by myself. Eventually I created a plan of survival in the world where survival was impossible. At first hunger was my greatest enemy. It occupied my every thought and feeling, it took away my ability to think and fight. Faced with death from starvation, I learned how to find food and sneak it into the ghetto. I would scale a brick wall by a solitary monastery, buy food from Lithuanian profiteers and bring it back to the ghetto through a secret hole in the fence. The starving ghetto prisoners provided me with money and valuables that I traded for food from Lithuanians. It was a business of the doomed. I made several reasonably safe shelters for my brother and me to hide from police raids. One of those shelters was in an attic and in case of emergency we could go from there up on the roof. That’s how we survived. Eventually I managed to drop my brother Gershon off with my mother’s relatives. I thought he would be safe with them. Twice I tried to escape the ghetto and go to Lida or even Belarus. I spent nights in the forest and in abandoned sheds, but every time I came back.

It was impossible to survive on my own without any support. Runaway Jews were hunted everywhere and given away to the Germans.

Year 1943 came. The German military suffered defeat after defeat on every front, but the extermination of Jews continued. Out of tens of thousands of Vilna Jews only a few thousands were still alive.

The ghetto had small resistance groups led by Yitzhak Wittenberg, Josef Glazman and Abba Kovner. Their political views differed. Wittenberg was a communist, Glazman was the leader of a Revisionist Zionist organization Betar, and Kovner led the socialist youth union Hashomer Hatzair. These resistance groups were at first hostile to one another. However, later they created the United Partisan Organization under leadership of Abba Kovner. The Jewish administration of the ghetto, Judenrat, did not support the resistance. The Judenrat head Jacob Gens still harbored illusions that he could save at least some of the Jews. Before the war Jacob had been an officer in the Lithuanian military, and the Nazis appointed him head of the ghetto administration because of his ties to the former Lithuanian government and the prominent status of his Christian wife's family. Jacob Gens blindly obeyed every Nazi order in the hopes to prolong the agony of the victims. In the end he fell victim to his own ridiculous expectations.

I knew about the existence of secret resistance groups, but had no idea how to join them. Because of their isolation and the opposition of Judenrat these groups were unable to organize any significant action, and only made several attempts to resist at the time of the ghetto liquidation.

In early September of 1943 the ghetto was blocked off by several hundred of local Gestapo forces and Estonian police that had been brought here for this occasion. Gestapo announced through loudspeakers that the prisoners would be moved to Estonia to work at fortification construction. All the exits from the ghetto were closed and all connections to the outside world severed. The surviving Jews were overcome by terror. Having learned from bitter experience that everybody who got deported was executed, people started hiding in every nook and cranny they could find.

Harsh calls and orders of the Gestapo amplified by loudspeakers, terror and pain on the faces of running and hiding people showed me the horrible ghost of near and certain death in the Ponary pits, and I seemed to have no chance of survival this time. I saw some Estonian policemen round up a group of Jews and take them to the ghetto gates to be deported. I ran in short dashes to the two-story school storage building on 12 Sztraszuna to find Abba Kovner's team of about fifteen. They had a few rifles, some home-made hand grenades and several Molotov cocktails. I had no weapons and joined Ilya Scheinbaum who was sitting by a second floor window with a rifle and a hand grenade. When Germans and Estonians started coming, he threw the grenade, but it didn't go off. He had time to only fire his rifle once. I watched him die. Ilya Scheinbaum died a hero and I would never forget him. Gunfire rained on our shelter. I managed to hide under a desk before the Nazi surrounded the building. Those were the last moments of my life (or so I thought) and I could hear my killers' voices clearly. And then the roof of the building collapsed, burying me under the rubble. The fascists threw a few grenades at the building, but did not enter, thinking everybody had been killed. That must have been what saved me this time. I stayed under the rubble till dark and then dug myself up and crawled into the empty street, bleeding.

Those were the last hours of the Vilnius ghetto. The remaining Jews were sent to a concentration camp in Estonia or to Ponary for execution. My brother Gershon was deported to Estonia. I never saw my brother again. On the night of the ghetto liquidation, a mere few hours

before the “purge”, I escaped through my secret hole in the fence and hid in one of my shelters in the attic of an empty house. On the third day hunger drove me out and I wandered the streets of Vilna around the former ghetto pretending to be a beggar, until I bumped into a group of runaways who escaped through the sewer system. They were Abba Kovner’s team. I was accepted, and we went to the Rudniki forest. That is how I became a partisan.”

September of 1943 ended the two-year-long German-Lithuanian extermination of 80 thousand Jewish population of Vilnius. Only a few survived. One of them was Moshe Okunev.

Lithuania, Rudniki Forest, 1943–1944

For the first time in many years I was happy. It seemed that a new life was ahead of me. Black clouds of fear for my life dispersed and the sun was shining again. The beautiful nature of the forest became my shield from the enemy. I changed physically and spiritually. A Jewish kid that had lived under the threat of starvation and violent death turned into a man and a fighter.

Life in the forest, though, was not easy. A cold and snowy winter was coming, a severe northern winter. We made dugouts that resembled bear dens, camouflaged them with pine logs, and at night covered ourselves with sprigs and leaves to keep a little warmer. We washed with snow and drank melted snow. We got food from the nearby villages, sometimes at the point of a gun, which led to anger and every now and then to resistance.

Soon we learned an immutable law of the partisan forest: in order to survive, you had to kill. Our camp sat in an almost inaccessible part of the forest, and from there we would suddenly attack German convoys or ambush lone trucks. During one of our first sabotages, at night, we cut communication lines and destroyed a power line. Later, after we got some explosives, we would place them under railroad track.

We were surrounded by enemy, and the Germans were not the worst. The biggest danger for us in late 1943 and early 1944 was represented by the Polish resistance of Armia Krajowa that received orders from London. The Polish members of the resistance lived in villages among their own people; they were anti-Semites and considered us communists that would resist creating an independent Polish state after the war. Often they were willing to cooperate with the Germans against us and that made any operation near a Polish village very dangerous. Once we requisitioned supplies at a rich Polish estate near Vilna. Armia Krajowa soldiers ambushed our team on the way back and attacked from a nearby hill. Our commander was Echonan Magid. He ordered me to delay the Polish to give the rest of the group time to reach the forest with the supplies. I set the machine gun by a fence and started firing in long bursts. The Poles stopped and lay low in the brush. Then they started to surround our position. There was about fifty of them and twenty of us. Fortunately the forest was close and Magid and I escaped. Two of our friends, though, were caught and executed at a homestead near the Polish estate. The partisans punished the people of the homestead severely. The following night the houses were burned and the residents killed.

Our other enemy was the population of small Lithuanian villages that cooperated with the fascists. Those Lithuanians not only reported our every movement to the Germans, but never missed a chance to shoot at us themselves. We responded. One day the Soviet Partisan Command sent a group of my fellow partisans on a raid to destroy a Lithuanian village that had been turned into a strongpoint for the German occupation administration. I was not part of that

group, but I was told later that the village had been burned to ashes and all the resident troops and a lot of the civilians had been killed.

Such was the cruel truth of that cruel war!”

Vilna, summer of 1944

In the summer of 1944 German troops were desperately defending the roads to Vilnius. The German command considered this city the last obstacle on the Red Army’s way to East Prussia and turned it into an impregnable fortress. In addition to the city garrison the Germans brought the 6th Armored Division and Division Großdeutschland of the 3d Armored Army under Colonel-General Georg Reinhardt to its defense. But the Germans could not stop the Red Army’s advance any more. The forces of the 3rd Belarus front under Army General Ivan Chernyakhovsky crossed the Neman River from east to west as rapidly as Hermann Hoth’s armored army had done west to east in June of 1941. The tables had turned in the Great War drama.

In early July fighting started on the streets of Vilnius. This is how a famous Israeli writer Ion Degen, who stormed Vilnius as platoon commander in the 2nd Guards Detached Armored brigade, describes it:

“The Lieutenant-Colonel said the enemy was defending their position with only about a hundred troops, a couple of German tanks and some field artillery, nothing to worry about. So our three tanks crawled along the streets unable to see one another. The Lieutenant-Colonel’s two German guns had apparently reproduced asexually, and we were fired at from every direction. We had barely enough time to destroy them. Apart from the Soviet troops, the Polish with red-and-white armbands (who received orders from the Polish government in London) and a large Jewish partisan team took part in those street fights. The Jews had red armbands. From July 9 on my tank stayed in the fight for 72 hours. We were lost in time and space. Nobody delivered ammunition to me, so I had to think twice before firing another shot from the tank’s gun. Mostly I would support the infantry with machine gun fire and the tank’s tracks. Urban fighting was a nightmare that a human mind could not fully grasp. The fighting in the city stopped on July 13. The Germans surrendered in groups. Remember the Lieutenant-Colonel’s estimation of the German’s numbers? It was a hundred. We took five thousand prisoners only.”

Our hero was one of the Jewish partisans mentioned by Ion Degen in his memoirs.

“The Soviet forces were approaching Vilna. Our partisan team received orders to mine the roads to Vilna and cut off the Germans’ ways to retreat. Everybody was in a happy mood. The end to the Nazi tyranny was finally in sight. On the outskirts of Vilna we met the first Soviet tank. I had the privilege of being one of the first liberators of Vilna. The Soviet commander ordered us to search for German resistance points in the city. I remember finding a German officer in one of the shelters. I told him, “There’s a Jew standing in front of you. Beg for mercy on your knees, murderer.” The officer was completely demoralized; he crawled in the mud by our feet as a pig and promised he had not done anything wrong. “Shoot him”, my friends said. But I did not. I gave him to the Soviet authorities. Later they found SS tattoos on his body. He could be the one to have murdered my family.

I tried to go back home, but found only ruins of the old life. The house was destroyed, my family was dead. There were no more Jews in Vilna. At night I would wake up from a

nightmare. I dreamed of piles of burning skeletons; I heard the voices of German and Lithuanian executioners; I saw a ball of hellfire fall to the Earth.

I was incredibly lonely on this burning hell of a planet. Even my last hope for my brother's survival in the Estonian concentration camp was in vain. A few Jews that had survived the Kloga and Vaivari camps returned to Vilna and told me that an Estonian policeman had shot my 16-year-old brother a few days before the Soviets came. That was an unbearably hard blow. I was alone in this world ruled by murderers. O Lord, what would you leave us with after this bloody war? The world of killers, who would not deny themselves the pleasure of shooting an innocent man while on the edge of their own grave. Where was justice in this world? Why did murdering peoples remain unpunished? The world had sunk into bloody madness, and you, Lord, would not interfere; you remained in your own twilight zone.

The war was ending and the Soviet forces moved on to the west to finish off the Nazis. I stayed in Vilna. I survived in a place on this planet where survival was impossible. I was almost 22; I had no family, no relatives, no home. I could not find a single happy light on the fire site of my city of birth."

This is a lament for Vilna.

"Cold terror and sorrow engulf me when I remember this lost city, the Lithuanian Jerusalem! No more Jewish schools of knowledge and education, no more world-famous schools of wisdom of Torah and Talmud. A culture of thousands of years has been executed. The lives of thousands upon thousands of families that lived here for centuries have been terminated. Everything is gone. I see those who did it, Germans and Lithuanians in fascist uniforms with swastikas. I hear shouts of the Nazi murderers that shot at Jewish children, women and old men on the edge of the Ponary pits. I will never forget the savage beasts drunk on the blood of Jews. From the bloody Ponary pits I hear begging voices of the innocent victims of Judeophobic madness that had engulfed the world, their call for justice, a voice crying out in the wilderness, "Where art Thou O Almighty Lord?"

Connecticut, Israel, Chicago, Vermont, Spring of 2003 – *Apotheosis*.

Our story is nearing its incredible climax that I promised at the beginning of this narration. As it has been mentioned above, the book "Letters to Relatives from XX Century" was published in 2002, and contained one pessimistic line about our hero Michael Okunev and his family: "No information available". I did my best to mail the book to every Okunev, close and distant relatives, everybody I knew of. Several copies found their way to Israel, and there...

Lo and behold! This is the climax of our fantastic story.

In Israel the book reached my distant relative Sophia Okuneva-Pavlova who had long before left Russia with her daughter Anna. As you can see in the picture of the two branches of the Okunev family tree, Sophia is a first cousin of the lost Michael Okunev and a second cousin to me. I remembered this beautiful girl very well. I had met her a long time before in Leningrad. I did not know much about her life after that. In early 2003 Sophia called me from Israel. What I had written in my



memoirs, “I hope this book, if not I, will find Sophia and Anna in Israel”, came true. The book had indeed found Sophia in a small Israeli town of Beit Dagan, and Sofia found me through some friends of friends. It was a common story.

From then on the events took an unpredictable turn. Sofia told about the book “Letters to Relatives from XX Century” to her relative from the neighboring town of Kfar Habad, a religious Israeli by a beautiful name of Rina-Eliza Persico. And Rina-Eliza recognized the Michael Okunev of the book as... her father who was living in Chicago!

They say it only happens in novels. I was matter-of-factly given the phone number of someone my family and I considered long dead and forever lost. As if Providence itself quietly rewarded me for my labor that many had thought fruitless and pointless, for the joy of the least of discoveries and the sorrow for what had been lost. Skeptics would say that there is no such thing as Providence. It may or may not be so. As Tatiana Tolstaya puts it, “it sits inside us like quiet water...; searching for Him we search for ourselves, denying Him we deny ourselves”.

Can you imagine how anxious I was when I called Michael in Chicago from Connecticut? My awkward attempts at explaining our relation in my broken English did not impress him. I guess he decided at first that a Russian immigrant tried to extort money from him and sell him a book. Eventually I explained three things to Michael: I was also an Okunev; I had written a memoir about our common relatives; I wanted to give him the book as a gift.

I ended up sending Michael a signed copy of the book. With the gift I included a letter in English:

Dear Michael:

Let me first introduce myself.

My name is Yuri Okunev, and I am your relative, namely: your grandfather Gershen Okunev and my grandfather Isaac Okunev were brothers, i.e. we have mutual grandgrandfather – Movshe Okunev. I am a scientist in the field of applied mathematics and a writer in the area of Jewish-Russian history, and I work and live with my wife in Connecticut. My son and daughter with their families live in New York.

I have known your address from Sophia Pavlova from Israel.

Now, let me explain the goal of this letter.

I write the history of our big family – all branches of the Okunevs. Recently Publishing House “Art of Russia” in Saint Petersburg published the first volume of my memories “Letters to dears from XX century” in Russian. I am attaching this book – you can find your family branch on page 433. And you can see our grandgrandfather Movshe Okunev on the cover of the book. Unfortunately, I did not know about fate of your family, when I wrote this book, but I intend to describe your family in the next publications. So, I would like to know much more about you and your family, especially about your son and daughters. Please, provide me with the proper information.

Finally, I am glad to find the Okunevs in the USA and I will be happy to continue our families contact.

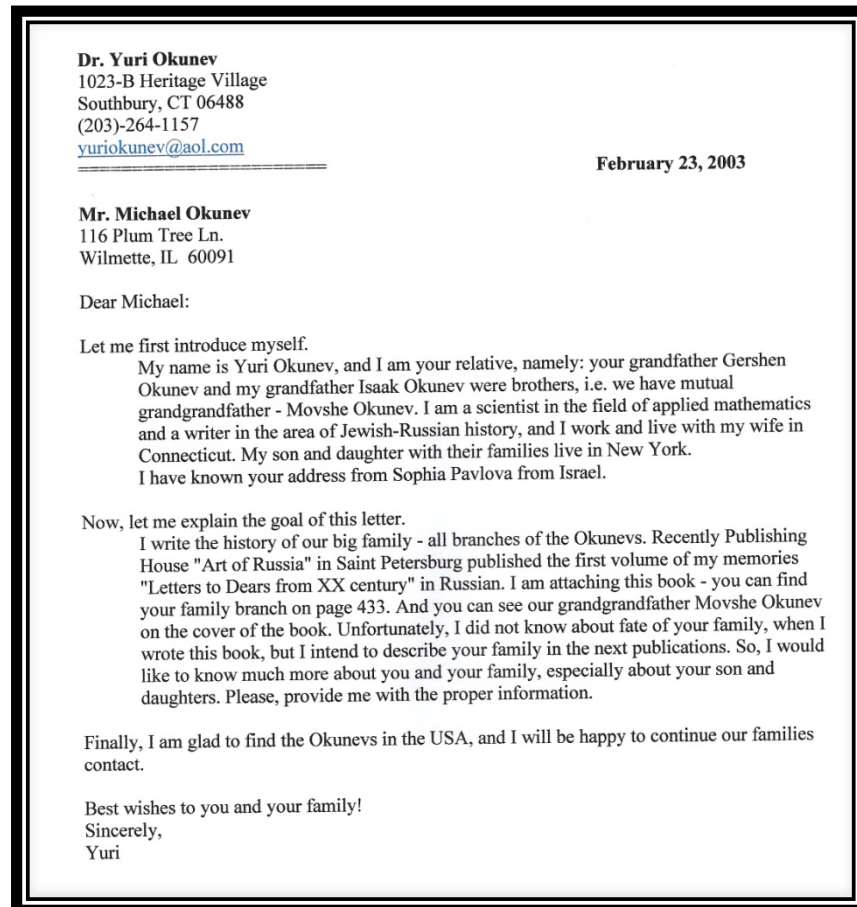
Best wishes to you and your family!

Sincerely, Yuri.

Back in 2003 I did not notice the significance of the date I mailed this letter on, February 23 of 2003. Much later I learned something that stunned me. It was Michael’s birthday and more – his 80th birthday! What were the chances of sending a letter to a stranger on his 80th birthday?

How often we miss miracles around us, the true signs of Providence that accompany us in our everyday life.

Several weeks passed before I got a call back from Chicago. I could tell that Michael was holding back tears. In one of the pictures he recognized his aunt Esther, his late father's sister, whom he had met in Vilnius in 1944. He found out from the book that he was not alone in this world, that he had family in Russia, his cousins Abram, Michael and Faina.



Photocopy of letter to Michael Okunieff in Chicago dated February 23, 2003

Michael told me the terrible story of his family, the quintessence of the tragic fate of the European Jews. I told this story as he had told it to me. After the war Michael found himself in Poland and from there went to Germany to study medicine. In the 1950s he came to the USA and married an American, Beverly Kailes, in Chicago. Now Michael is a physician with an office in Chicago suburbs. You can easily find it by typing "Doctor Michael Okunieff" in any search engine.

Michael and Beverly Okunieff have a son, Paul, and three daughters, Polly, Rhoda and Rina. Michael's son Paul Okunieff is a well-known professor at University of Florida; his area is medical radiology and he is the head of a cancer clinic. Michael's daughter Polly lives and works in Boston. She specializes in IT. Daughter Rhoda lives in New York and works in finance.

Daughter Rina (Rina Okunieff-Persico) lives in Israel in the town of Kiryat-Ono in the heart of the country. At present Michael and Beverly Okunieff have 13 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren, 10 of the grandchildren and all the great-grandchildren living in Israel.



**Left: Vermont, foothills of the northern Appalachians, spring of 2003, author meets Michael Okunieff for the first time;
Right: Boston, spring of 2012, author and Michael Okunieff at Michael's granddaughter's Bat-Mitzvah.**



Professor Paul Okunieff (left) and his grandfather Pinchus Okunev, who was killed by the fascists at the Ponary pits, Lithuania in 1941.

The life story of Rina Okunieff-Persico, daughter of Michael and Beverly, is amazing. She went to a religious school in Chicago and at age 15 left for Israel to join a youth Zionist movement Bnei Akiva. In 1980 Rina married an orthodox Israeli Haim Persico and gave birth to ten children, six boys and four girls. Now Rina has five grandchildren and her family is growing fast.

After our meeting in Vermont in 2003 Michael and Beverly visited Russia and Michael got to meet his cousins and their families in St. Petersburg. One of his nieces visited with him in

Chicago. Recently Michael, Beverly and I got together again at their grand-daughter's Bat Mitzvah.

What a story! Now we routinely keep in touch as families, but I still feel the elevated amazement Michael and I experienced at the climax of this story, when he found his close relatives and I found the lost branch of our family. This might be a more important result than that of any of my professional scientific inventions and insights. Even if it were the only one, I would never regret the sleepless nights spent contemplating the plot of "Letters to Relatives from XX Century". Do not believe those who say that family memoirs have no practical application. It all depends on what you mean by the notorious practical application and the way you look at it.

The Soviet Union, late 1940s

We interrupted Michael Okunieff's life story at the events of mid-1944. However, his Odyssey of survival in the world of no survivors continued for several more years in the post-war Soviet Union, Poland and Germany until his emigration to the USA in the 1950s. Michael remembers:

"My life was like wandering in a dark tunnel with no idea when I was going to see the light at its end. It was a perilous trip to the future."

Michael's forced "wanderings in a dark tunnel" of the post-war Eastern Europe could have made a plot of a large novel about young survivals of Holocaust. We are not writing a novel, though. And in this small essay we are restricted to giving limited information.

In the fall of 1944 a little flash of light reached Michael's tunnel. His aunt Esther, his late father's sister, followed the Soviet troops to the liberated Vilnius. Esther Okuneva was a psychiatrist in Moscow and had worked at a field hospital during the war. She was sent to Vilnius to set up a psychiatric hospital. She found her nephew and took him under her care. Michael believes that he became a doctor because of Esther. She talked to the hospital's head doctor, professor Rebelsky, who took a young stranger's troubles to his heart, and helped Michael avoid draft and then enter the Vilnius Medical Institute.

Michael was a hardworking student. He studied Russian, Lithuanian and English, and also Marxism-Leninism. But his happy life as a student did not last long. Esther left with the field hospital, and Michael stayed behind, with no guardian or means. The students were starving and many of them worked odd jobs, because scholarships were not nearly enough. Michael got mixed up with some guys selling moonshine and soon, due to lack of experience, was caught and arrested. Michael was charged with profiteering (thank goodness, it was not "counter-revolution") and jailed for the duration of the investigation. This is how he describes his time in jail:

"I was placed in a small cell with eight other prisoners. At night we took turns to sleep on the floor, and during the day we sat or stood. We were allowed to use the restroom once a day, and had to use the bucket in the corner of the cell for the rest of the time. Most of my cellmates were local criminals. The leader was a tall, burly guy with a large bumpy head, a habitual offender. That time he was arrested for stealing a cow near the front lines. He, of course, was an anti-Semite, nicknamed me "Abrasha" and would say over and over again that Jews did not want to fight, although he knew about my partisan past. My friend Sam Schimel sent me packages with food, but it got distributed among eight people. I was starving in a Soviet jail as

sure as I had starved in the ghetto. My daily ration consisted of half a pound of bread and a bowl of thin soup. I soon turned into a bag of bones.”

Michael spent three months in the Soviet jail waiting for the court and departure for a Siberian camp. He found himself on the brink of a tragedy once again and was mourning his miserable life. To think that he who survived the ghetto and dreamed of becoming a doctor would end up in a labor camp with common criminals. The fate, though, had another ace in the hole for him. The main witness of the moonshine case suddenly died, the case fell apart and they let Michael go for the “lack of evidence”. He did not realize then that they had let him go so they could use him as a stool pigeon to uncover other persons connected to the case.

It was winter of 1945. In the freezing and starving Vilnius Michael moved from one friend’s place to another, hiding from state security agents and the raids that were going on in the city. Desperately trying to avoid another arrest, one night he got into an empty railroad car and rode it to the town of Osmiany on the Belarus border. The Soviet authorities there were gathering Jews to be sent to Poland. Michael did not have all the necessary papers for legal immigration and had no money to bribe the officials. Empty-handed, he returned to Vilnius and tried to move in with his friend Samuel Schimel, but Samuel warned him that the special services continuously watched the house. Trying to avoid arrest again and survive, he decided to go to Minsk where an aunt of his had lived and worked as agronomist before the war. This is how Michael describes his trip to Minsk in the early spring of 1945.

“Here I was again in a cattle car, running from my pursuers, burrowed in a pile of filthy straw to stay warm, with a chunk of bread in my pocket and no money or papers. Lord, why was I born and why came to this world? Surely it was not for such pain? The train arrived in Minsk in the evening. The city was in ruins. A horrible picture of the Nazi military machine crimes spread before me – miles and miles of ruins and skeletons of once beautiful buildings and houses. The streets were littered with random fragments and my boots stuck in the mud. Minsk had suffered much more from the German intervention than Vilnius had, and the Jews of Minsk must have been totally exterminated. I realized that my search for relatives here would be in vain. Military patrols were all over the place and I, having no papers at war time, shuddered to think of the danger of being arrested and charged with espionage or deserting. I hid from the next patrol in a fenced outhouse that was basically a hole in some boarding over a pit full of refuse. The patrol skirted that filthy stinky place. I must have struck lucky again. Hungry, scared, covered in refuse I “successfully” returned to Vilnius, where my friend Sam told me that the police had been looking for me and they had interrogated him about me.”

Staying in Vilnius was not an option, and in the spring of 1945 Michael left his native city forever. He met the commander of a military convoy that was heading to Lvov. Michael told him about his life as a partisan and the man bent some rules and brought Michael along. In Lvov Michael tried – with no success – to continue his medical studies at a local college. He lived in a dilapidated shack with huge rats for roommates. The light was gone from the end of his tunnel once again.

Meanwhile the war ended. It became possible to illegally immigrate from ancient Polish-Lithuanian Lvov to the new post-war Poland that had been put together of the fragments of the old Polish state by the allies. Michael’s partisan friends from the Rudniki forest set up a farming community near the Polish town of Katowice, modeled after a Jewish kibbutz in Palestine, and Michael joined them. The Polish government at first supported the community and even armed the kibbutz residents so they could protect themselves from the local pogrom makers. The members of the community worked on the farm and prepared for illegal emigration to Eretz

Israel, but Michael got dealt a different card. The post-war German universities gave scholarships to the Jews that had suffered from Nazi prosecution, and Michael accepted.

The dream of this Jewish kid that had risen from the ashes came true: he became a doctor. But this is a different story.

In the early 1950s Michael Okunieff came to America. His fight for survival was over. He lived, and he won!

The late 1940s brought a forty-year-long cold war between the Soviet Union and the West. The iron curtain fell heavily and impenetrably divided the world into two separate parts. In the Soviet Union contact between common citizens and “the world of capitalism” had never been encouraged, to put it mildly. From the late 1940s on any connection to the West became mortally dangerous. People were afraid to receive letters and phone calls from their relatives abroad; they renounced their family in the West. Michael Okunieff’s Soviet relatives lost contact with him for almost 60 years. For them, he ceased to exist. They accepted the only safe possibility: Michael and his family had died in the war, and that was that! Only in 2003 I found him in Chicago, and that branch of the family tree was restored.

Epilogue – *molto appassionato*

At the corner of Tverskaya and Tavricheskaya in St. Petersburg there is a large five-storey building with garrets and a huge tower. It has been known through the Russian history as “Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Tower”, after the owner of a top floor apartment, a famous poet, philosopher and enthusiast of the Russian poetry Silver Age. In the early XX century the cream of the Russian creative intelligentsia would come together in the apartment below the tower. The brilliant golden-haired Vyacheslav Ivanov in a pince-nez and black gloves created an intoxicating atmosphere of artistic ecstasy. In the candlelight, holding glasses of wine, the guests would read literary, historical, and religious works; reflect on artistic and liberal philosophy with Nikolai Berdyaev; listen to Alexander Blok reading his “Stranger”, to the poems of Osip Mandelstam and the young Anna Akhmatova, with her braid touching her heels. They discussed the plays of Vsevolod Meyerhold and the majestic premiere of Alexander Skryabin’s symphonic poem “Prometheus”. They led heated arguments about the ways and destiny of the Russian culture and Russia itself. Never before and never again in the Russian history we can find such a powerful union of bright minds and great talents.

They discussed the Jewish question. Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote an essay “On ideology of the Jewish question”, in which he said very powerful words that explain the true Christian understanding of God’s ways regarding Jews.

“I believe that Jews are our testers of Fate and eternal examiners of Christian peoples on our love to Christ and our faith in Him. And when we learn His glory, their needs and expectations will be met. If we were with Christ, we would not fear the testers, for love defeats fear.”

Did Christians pass the test on “Love to Christ and faith in Him”; did they pass the exam in humanity? No, they did not. Vyacheslav Ivanov died in Italy in 1949, after the horrible crimes of the European Christians against Jews had been uncovered in all their horror. He had a chance to see that his hopes for the Christians to follow God’s commandments had failed. Sadly, His glory

fell into the dark abyss of the Ponary pits and Babi Yar; it suffocated and burned in gas chambers and ovens of Auschwitz. God of Christians died at the point of a bloody bayonet that pierced the body of a living Jewish child. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, a French philosopher, said just that: "God died in Auschwitz, at least the God of the Christian West did". And Sebastian Vilar Rodriguez, a Spanish writer, concluded: "Europe died in Auschwitz ... We killed six million Jews and replaced them with 20 million Muslims. In Auschwitz we burned a culture, thought, creativity, and talent."

How did Jews manage to survive? How have they been able to preserve the existence of their nation for forty centuries of prosecution aimed at their spiritual and physical extermination? The philosophers Jean-Jasques Rousseau, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Nikolai Berdyaev, the historians Heinrich Graetz and Paul Johnson, the writers Mark Twain and Alexander Kuprin, as well as other major philosophers and politicians, historians and writers tried to find answers to these questions, and failed.

Mark Twain, an American writer, who studied Jewish history thoroughly and visited Palestine, stated with amazement: "The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities, of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Alexander Kuprin, a Russian writer, also pondered over the secret of immortality of the Jewish people: "Amazing, inscrutable Jewish people!... Through tens of centuries it has come, remaining fastidiously aloof from all other nations and concealing in its heart age-old grief and fire. The motley, vast life of Rome, Greece, and Egypt has long ago become the property of museum collections,... but this mysterious people that was already a patriarch when they were in their infancy, not only continues to exist but has kept... its faith, full of great hopes and petty ritual, has kept the sacred language of its Holy books and its mystical alphabet, in the very outlines of which the letters breathe millennial antiquity. Versatile and immortal, it lives on, as if in fulfillment of some supernatural predestination. Its whole history... is drenched with its own blood: centuries-old captivity, coercion, hatred, servitude, torment, bonfires of human flesh, exile, dispossession... How has it remained alive?"

In the present time Alexander Solzhenitzyn, a Russian writer, noted when answering a question whether he had figured out the place of the Jewish people in history: "No. I have my guesses... but no answer. This is a metaphysical question, a hardest one. I think that experts – real experts, not like me – haven't figured it out either. Human mind cannot fully comprehend it. It is unfathomable. It will always be somewhat a mystery."

This story of Michael Okunieff is still somewhat a mystery too. When he first stepped on the American soil, the first question they asked him was: "How did you survive?" Michael says: "I have been asked this question so often that I almost feel guilty that I survived against all horrible odds, that I lived when almost everybody died."

I see this story as the quintessence of the mysterious and unfathomable fate of the Jewish people; to be killed time and again, and yet time and again miraculously rise, sometimes after a

generation or two. The Vitebsk pharmacist Gershen Okunev, our hero Michael's grandfather, had 10 children, but all of them and their families found themselves in the grinders of Hitler's physical and Stalin's spiritual genocide in the terrible gap of the mid-XX century. Some of them died, some lost their national identity. It seemed like this branch fell off the Jewish tree and vanished forever. And then something unpredictable happened. After three generations Gershen's young great-granddaughter and the daughter of the Holocaust miraculous survivor Michael, heard a sudden call of Fate to go to Israel and there gave birth to ten children, the same number as her great-grandfather Gershen Okunev had a hundred years before her.

There must be a lot of stories and lives like that out there. Every one of them can be explained quite materialistically as a chain of events with known cause and consequence. However, when these stories are added together to form a force that moves the Jewish people forward in time as a whole, the materialistic chain of cause and consequence falls apart leaving its elements surreal and unfathomable, like elemental particles of matter whose behavior quantum physics can only explain through laws of probability.

Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev admitted: "I remember when I was young, when the materialistic approach to history attracted me, when I tried to test it on lives of whole peoples, I thought that the greatest obstacle in the way of my work was the history of the Jewish people, that it was completely impossible to explain from the materialistic point of view. From any materialistic and historical point of view this people should have long ceased to exist. Its existence is strange, mysterious and miraculous. It proves that this people have a truly special destiny."

Daughter of the miracle survivor, Michael, gave birth to and raised ten Jews in Israel, as if to fulfill the "special destiny" of the Jewish people, as if to disprove the cruel laws of history, according to which "this people should have long ceased to exist".

The life story of Michael and his family brings to memory the words of a great British prime-minister Benjamin Disraeli, lord of Beaconsfield, about the mystical life force of Jews:

"The attempt to extirpate them has been made under the most favorable auspices and on the largest scale; the most considerable means that man could command have been pertinaciously applied to this object for the longest period of recorded time. Egyptian Pharaohs, Assyrian kings, Roman emperors, Scandinavian crusaders, Gothic princes, and holy inquisitors (*and we can add Khmelnytzky's cossacks, Russian pogrom makers, German fascists and their numerous accomplices in nearly all the European countries, and modern Islamic fascists – Y.O.*) have alike devoted their energies to the fulfillment of this common purpose. Expatriation, exile, captivity, confiscation, torture on the most ingenious, and massacre on the most extensive scale, with a curious system of degrading customs and debasing laws which would have broken the heart of any other people, have been tried, and in vain."

The criminal world of Judeophobia failed to break the heart of this people that has risen from the ashes over and over, like the magical Phoenix.

And it will ever fail!

Yuri Okunev
Winter of 2012–2013