

My Father's Journey

A Memoir of Lost Worlds
of Jewish Lithuania

STUDIES IN ORTHODOX JUDAISM

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My Father's Journey

A Memoir of Lost Worlds
of Jewish Lithuania

SARA REGUER

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On the cover: Watercolor portrait of Moshe Aron Reguer, entitled "He-Chalutz", by Thaddeus Rychter, Jerusalem, 1927; Photograph of Simcha Zelig Reguer and Moshe Aron Reguer, Brest-Litovsk, 1937. Courtesy of Sara Reguer.

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press@academicstudiespress.com

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In Memory of

My parents

Moshe Aron Reguer

Anne Shabasson Reguer

My paternal grandparents

Simcha Zelig Reguer

ראב"ז בריסק רזיטא

Sorke Rudensky Reguer

*And my aunts and cousins
murdered by the Nazis in
Brest-Litovsk in 1942.*

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This book took years to write in part because of the personal nature of the material. There are some people who warned me not to publish it; others urged me to go right ahead. Some people offered to “do me the favor” of publishing my grandfather’s letters and all of my photographs. The right time has finally arrived to put it into print.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Ezra Y. Schwartz for helping me understand some of the halakhic issues discussed in the primary sources. I also want to acknowledge the help of my copyeditor, Sharona Vedol.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the unfailing support and encouragement of my family: my husband Raffaele Gershom Fodde, whose artistic talents are in play in the layout of the book, and my daughters Dr. Anna-Alexandra Fodde-Reguer and Elizabeth Ruth Fodde-Reguer, who are the heirs of the burden of “yichus.”

FOREWORD

After my father died, I packed away his letters and documents, figuring that some day, when I had time—well, nearly anyone can finish that sentence, and know what happened next. The time finally arrived two decades later, when my own family was downsizing and I had to go through everything, once and for all. So I found his diplomas, his photographs, his passports, and then a small treasure trove of letters from his family in Brest-Litovsk, written between 1936 and 1941. The most precious to me were those from my grandfather, but the most newsy were from my Aunt Esther. They are written, with one exception, in Yiddish.

At the bottom of one carton were some black, soft-covered notebooks, which seemed to contain a number of Hebrew essays which had been corrected and graded by his professors. I flipped through the first, wondering why my father had kept it, and then found out why: I turned past the last essay, and my heart stopped. On top of the next page was written—in his beautiful Hebrew script—“Hakdama Le-Zikhronotai,” “Introduction to My Memoirs.” In the spring of 1926, on the eve of his departure for Eretz Yisrael, my father had recorded his experiences until the age of twenty-three.

The memoirs follow the path of a young Lithuanian yeshiva student, immersed in the world of Torah, Talmud, and *musar*—that is, the systematic study of ethics. In describing his experiences, he was a witness to the the yeshiva system during World War I and its aftermath. At first he studied informally in Volozhin, then more formally in a yeshiva run by Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer in Slutzk, and then he traveled to Kremenchug in Ukraine to study in Rav Finkel’s—known as the “Alter”—branch of Slobodka Yeshiva, Knesset Israel. In Kremenchug, and in nearby Karilov, he survived three major pogroms and various life-threatening illnesses. There are few surviving first-hand accounts of pogroms and pandemics.

The memoirs describe my father's exposure to the politics of the time, the lure of *Haskala*, or Enlightenment, the rigidity of the yeshiva system, and the final confrontation between yeshiva administrators and a young man who wanted more than just a Torah education.

Memoirs are selective in that the author chooses what to write about, but these choices also reflect what is important to the writer. Thus, what is left out is almost as important as what is included. In the case of my father's story, these omissions are supplemented by the interviews he gave much later in life and stories that have been related to me over the years. I was always interested in the missing people of his past, namely the women in the family, the social structure of Lithuanian Jewry, and family life in "the old country."

So there are letters, memoirs, stories, interviews, and photographs. How to organize this book was a major problem—should it be arranged chronologically? Or ought each primary source to be placed separately? Should there be historical analysis of each item? In the end, I decided to let the material speak for itself as much as possible, with my comments and explanations—in a different type-face—run in with the text, which I arranged, for the most part, chronologically. I know that I like a straightforward story with as few digressions as possible, and have attempted to provide the same for the reader.

Why did a twenty-three-year-old write his memoirs?

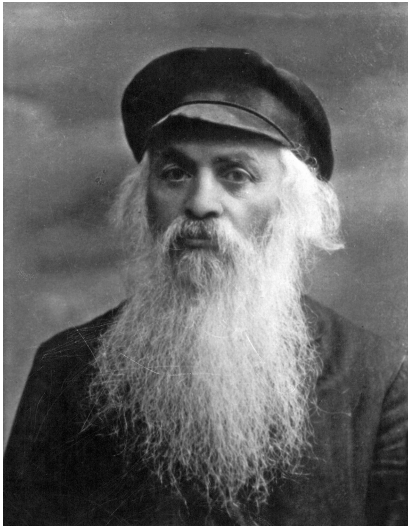
It turns out that what my father wrote is not strictly a memoir, but a kind of autobiography that bridged into a memoir. According to scholars, the critical issues in an autobiography include a description of one's inner life; a confession-like tone; and a realization that the narrator is both the teller and the subject. The autobiographies written by Eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth century typically described a loss of faith and were written by brilliant adolescent males, who needed to tell their story. Earlier in the century, young men like them had turned to the Haskalah, calling for cultural and social reform. By the end of the century, they were turning to socialism or to a new means of Jewish revival, namely political Zionism.

My father's choice to write in Hebrew was an act of identification with both the Haskalah and those who believed there was a need for educational reform, as well as a nod toward Zionism, which reflected his faith in the future. Again, he was not alone in writing his

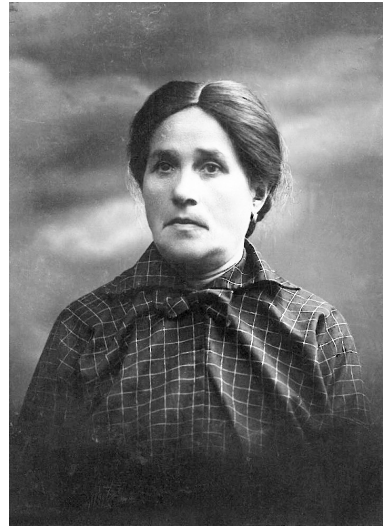
Foreword

story: there was even a call via Yiddish newspapers by people like Y. L. Peretz, Yankev Dinezon, S. An-sky, and Simon Dubnov to other Jews, requesting that they record and catalogue their experiences during the First World War, which was seen as a watershed, and to send historical documents to them or to educational and historical institutions for preservation and use by scholars. My father was probably aware of these requests.

While the reflections began as autobiographical, their focus shifts from the writer to the events witnessed as the First World War breaks out, followed by the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War. “Zikhronotai” becomes a historical narrative. It develops into one of the windows through which a reader can view Jewish life as it transformed at this crucial juncture of time.



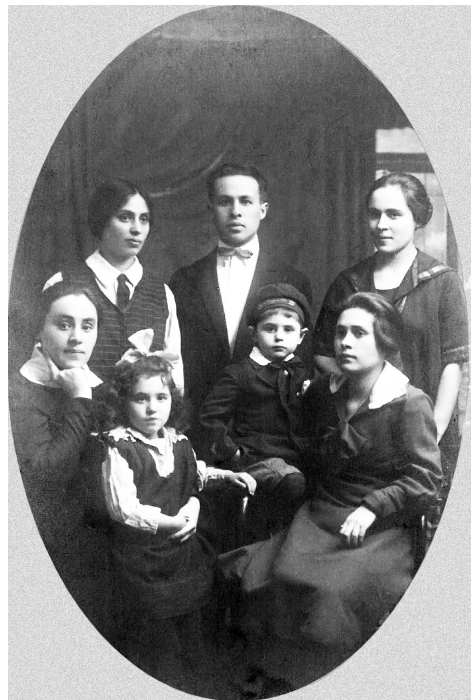
Simcha Zelig Reguer, 1900



Sorke Reguer, 1930



Moshe Aron Reguer
Bar Mitzvah, 1916



Moshe Aron Reguer & sisters,
niece, nephew, 1926



Takhkemoni, Bialystok, 1922;
 Rabbi Polachek (fourth from left),
 Moshe Aron Reguer (second row, fourth from left)

Takhkemoni, Dr. Balaban (center) headed the branch in Warsaw,
 Moshe Aron Reguer (front center), 1925



Part I

EUROPE

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Lithuanian Jewish history begins with the general move of Jews from western and central Europe eastward. While the Crusades were a push factor for migration, a pull factor developed in the fifteenth century as the kings and nobles of Poland and Lithuania encouraged Jews to settle in their lands. They knew of the typically high education level of the Jews, of their skills, and of their trading ties.

Fifteenth-century Poland/Lithuania was feudal, with huge estates and a large peasant population. It needed managers for the estates, and people with business acumen for trade. A number of the region's new Jewish residents fit the bill, and by the end of the sixteenth century they had become managers for noblemen, as well as craftspeople, traders, and customs collectors.

These Jews, who were of the Ashkenazi tradition, brought with them the language that their people had developed in Germany and, since they lived separate from both native peasants and rulers and did not find themselves challenged intellectually by their new environment, Judeo-German, also known as Yiddish, remained their language. As with all Jewish languages, Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters.

Intellectual life was focused on traditional talmudic scholarship, and a variety of academies, *yeshivot*, were founded. The highest level of scholarship was reserved only for the most promising young men, but the majority of the Jews received basic education, and most men were literate. Education was part of communal structure, and there were thousands of Jewish communities, large and small, throughout the region. These communities were largely autonomous, and each provided its members with the necessities of Jewish life.

In a move that was unusual in diaspora Jewish history, the Jews of Eastern Europe set up a kind of Jewish parliament, the Council of the Four Lands, which regulated Jewish life in the region from the late sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century. It was a lay body

with rabbinic representatives, and it functioned through a network of regional and local organizations.

The Jewish community of Brest-Litovsk, also called Brisk de-Lita, probably started in the fourteenth century and gradually became one of the main centers of Lithuanian Jewish life. Located on the Bug River, it was at a junction point of a number of commercial trade routes. The local Jews were involved in commerce, and traded in textiles and furs with Poland, Germany, and Austria. By the late fifteenth century the community also boasted commercial ties with Venice. As the Commonwealth of Poland/Lithuania (which also included the Baltic States and Belarus) came into being in 1569, Jews were heavily involved in crafts, tax-farming, and government jobs. The Jews had charters of protection, and Brest-Litovsk took a leading position in the communal and cultural affairs of the Council of the Four Lands.

When Hasidism came into existence in the eighteenth century, with its stress on prayer, piety, mysticism, and the role of the *Tzaddik*, or leader, the Jews of Brest-Litovsk took a leading role in fighting this new interpretation of Judaism, which they viewed as heterodox. These opponents of Hasidism were called *Mitnagdim* (pronounced in Yiddish as *Misnagdim*) and were led by Elijah of Vilna, known as the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797).

Meanwhile, on the political stage, Brest-Litovsk, along with huge chunks of Eastern Europe, was incorporated into the expanding Russian Empire. Russia was expanding both into territories that had been under Ottoman Turkish control and westward into Poland, which was partitioned with Austria and Prussia. Russia—a strongly antisemitic nation—now found itself in control of a large population of Jews which it did not want to “pollute Holy Mother Russia.” Thus was the Pale of Settlement born: Jews could only reside in the areas they were already in, and could not relocate to places like St. Petersburg.

When Nicholas I became Czar in 1825, a new solution for dealing with the Jews was found: a quota of Jewish boys to serve in the military was established. The term for military service was twenty-five years, starting at age eighteen, but Jewish boys were taken at age twelve for special units and were known as Cantonists, until they turned eighteen, when they went into the regular military units. During this time, great efforts were made to convert them to Russian Orthodox

Christianity. The Jewish communities called the recruiters *Khappers*, or “kidnappers,” and, since community leaders were responsible for meeting the quotas, the system caused great antagonism within the Jewish world as well: the rich protected their own sons at the expense of the poor.

In 1881, Czar Alexander II was assassinated, and the Jews were blamed. A series of pogroms organized by the government took place in the Pale of Settlement. Western pressure led to a government investigation into the causes of the pogroms, an investigation which placed the blame squarely upon the Jews themselves. This then resulted in the May Laws of 1882, which, among other things, expelled Jews from many villages and placed quotas on how many Jews could attend universities.

There is no doubt that these pogroms and antisemitic laws began the major demographic move from Eastern Europe to the Americas. The other major factor was the economic pull of the Americas, especially the religiously tolerant United States. For those Jews who remained, an attractive ideology was socialism in all its forms. For a very small group, Zionism was perceived as the solution to the Jews’ problems.

Meanwhile, in Brest-Litovsk, the Russians threw down the Jewish quarter and in 1832 erected a fortress in its place. The government then built the Dnieper-Bug Canal in 1841, which led to the further growth of the city, including the erection of a tobacco factory, large mills, a hospital, and a new synagogue, despite the destruction of the old quarter.

The Jewish population of the city grew from over 8,000 people in the middle of the nineteenth century to over 30,000 by its end, making up seventy percent of the city’s population. Then came World War I, and life changed.

The nineteenth century brought another change to Jewish Lithuania: a new structure to the yeshiva system, with its tradition of intensive study of the core texts of Jewish literature by elite, advanced students. This came about in part as a reaction to the challenges of modernization. The history of the Enlightenment is complex and is intimately connected with the philosophical and intellectual revolution that took place in Western Europe, which led to the secularization of society as well as

to modern nationalism. Some Jews saw the benefits of modernity and wanted to spread the new ideas of the Enlightenment, known by the Jews as the Haskalah. Beginning in Germany with the writings of Moses Mendelssohn and his followers, the Haskalah reached the Jews of the Pale of Settlement through a complex route that involved writing about modern ideas in Hebrew, as most of the Eastern European students did not know German but were well versed in Hebrew. Hebrew textbooks and literature laid the groundwork for the language's revival. By the end of the nineteenth century, the same was true for Yiddish.

For traditionalists, modernization was more complex. They could not countenance overthrowing a system and society that was based on respecting authority and precedent. If change were to take place and succeed, it would have to come from within the traditional system.

The yeshiva system of Eastern Europe had a long history, and the schools were traditionally communal institutions. The new type of Lithuanian yeshiva, however, was independent of the community, and its economy was based on the collection of funds by traveling emissaries rather than on local community support. The new yeshivot were built in small towns rather than in big cities, and each *rosh yeshiva* or academic head ran his institution autonomously. This isolation from the local Jewish structure also encouraged strong student organization. Students were often dependent on the yeshiva for financial support as well, adding to the power of the *rosh yeshiva*.

A typical *rosh yeshiva* gave regular lectures, but most study was independent. The yeshiva was for unmarried teenage boys, and their building that was just for them and was not intended for any community purpose. Attendance was not compulsory, and acquiring rabbinical ordination was not a priority. There were also, generally, no regular examinations. The focus was on student discussion. Spiritual development was the concern of specially appointed supervisors or *mashgihim*.

Traditional yeshivot reacted in a variety of ways to the challenges of modernity. One way was to reform study methods, returning to earlier methods, and this was advocated by the Volozhin Yeshiva. A second was to reform social values through the study of ethics, or *musar*, and this was characteristic of the Slobodka Yeshiva. A third strategy was to reform the organization of education using such modern methods

Introduction to Part I

as dividing students into classes, having examinations, and setting up procedures for accepting students, and this was adopted by the Telz Yeshiva. The fourth, and most radical, method was used in Lida Yeshiva, and involved reforming the curriculum to include secular education.

My grandfather was a product of the Volozhin Yeshiva and spent most of his adult life in Brest-Litovsk. My father, born there, remained there until his teenage years, when he began his travels in search of a way to achieve his educational and intellectual goals. He studied for a while in the Telz Yeshiva and for a number of years in the Slobodka Yeshiva, both in Ukraine during World War I and back in Lithuania after the war.

Introduction/Preface to *My Memoirs*

(Written 25 Heshvan 1926)

About six months ago, an idea ignited in me to begin to write a “memoir of my childhood” that would open a window on my early daily life and would be a memento for the coming years. I began to feel the need for such a memento especially in the last few years. I left the stage of youth and entered the stage of young adulthood. My development has grown and widened. My world outlook is expanding. My life has become more nuanced, and my comprehension has grown until I am now able to analyze, more or less, various events and dreams. Because of all this, my life has become more important and relevant, so that it would be a shame if it passed and disappeared without a token or memory: it is a life that could be important for future years. So I decided to act on my thoughts.

Another important impetus—and it may be the most basic one—influenced me to follow up this idea. My life left the peace and tranquility of youth and became more agitated. I could not distance myself from the various winds that had begun to blow. The [Zionist] pioneer movement and the potential life of liberating labor in Eretz Israel have forced me to face a very difficult question. My life up to now, with its various yeshivas

and afterwards the study of secular things, with perhaps a glowing future career, versus the lure of the pioneer Zionist movement, fought and are still doing battle within me. There is no peace for me. My heart is in a constant internal struggle, which rips me apart with its flames. I think that my memoirs will serve me well, giving me the opportunity to think through my ideas and my emotions. I was to have begun this at the start of the summer, but I pushed it off until after the holidays for a variety of personal reasons. Since I want the memoirs to be complete, to shed light on my development, I will attempt to do my best to record the details of what happened to me from my birth until now.

Q. What year were you born—what is written on your passport?

A. November 20, 1905. **[He was in fact born in 1903; the passport stated 1905 for reasons that will be discussed—Ed.]**

Q. In what city?

A. Brest-Litovsk

Q. Where is that?

A. Now it belongs to Russia. **[While this was the case at the time of this interview, now it is in Belarus—Ed.]**

Q. To whom did it belong in 1905?

A. Also Russia, but under the Tsar.

Q. What were the names of your parents?

A. Rav Simcha Zelig and Sorke.

Q. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

A. I had two brothers and four sisters: Chaim, the oldest, Shimon, Feigl, Golde, Esther, and Peshke.

So began the first official interview of my father, when he was seventy-three years old; the second was four years later. He had always told me stories of his life, and when I was small they seemed like children's stories. As a product of a Lithuanian yeshiva education, he truly did not know fairy tales. When my mother told him to put me to bed and I demanded my story, however, she wouldn't take over. Instead she told him, "Tell her what you know." In this way I learned gory and exciting legends of the Jews, in addition to the tales of my father's youth. As I grew older, I saw my father sitting at the dining room table with his Talmud or with other Judaica, studying and crying. The American attitude that "men didn't cry," was not part of my experience, for I observed that when the *yahrzeit* of my father's parents arrived, and he learned a set of *mishnayot* in their honor, he always cried over his losses. It was not long after I achieved realization that my father began to tell me stories of his mother and father and granted me a self-censored slew of family lore. I say self-censored because he kept in mind that I was a little girl and would not understand things like Nazi brutality, Communism, Zionism, Bolshevism, Freudian relationships, and hubris, to name a few. That understanding came gradually over the years.

But I could never get him to sit down in front of a tape recorder. What the reader cannot hear through these written transcripts, of course, is the intonation of the words. For example, the laughter accompanying the first question—"What year were you born—on your passport?" We all knew that my father was not born in 1905 but in 1903. His documents, however, dating back to his visa to Mandatory Palestine in 1926, listed 1905 probably in order to ease his way out of Poland, which was drafting young men who were not students into the army. A twenty-three-year-old would have raised suspicions, as the assumption would be that his education was complete; a twenty-one-year-old could easily be assumed to be a student.

Q. Tell me about your mother. Who was your mother?

A. In Brisk my mother was called Sorke Reb Simcha Zelig's because Simcha Zelig was the Rosh Av Bet Din in Brisk, and there were other women named Sorke.

Q. What was your mother's background?

A. She was born in Volozhin to Rav Avraham Yaakov Yoykhens and Rotke [Rudensky].

Q. She was the oldest? The middle?

A. She was the oldest and had two sisters. [**She also had three brothers—Ed.**]

Q. What about your grandmother and grandfather? What did your grandmother look like?

A. Rotke was well known in all of Volozhin because she supported her husband—he studied Talmud and made *siyyums* on all of *Shas*. They lived in Volozhin the whole time. Rotke used to sell whiskey to the Gentiles who would come several times a week from the villages. She knew how to deal with them—she spoke Russian well, as well as Polish, and they had great respect for her. It was a whiskey store and the house was at the side. The store was big, and there were tables. And she was the only one who could control them because they respected her so much.

Q. Did they have anyone else helping or did she do it all herself?

A. When a niece grew up—Rav Yoykhens's daughter Feigl—she helped her. [**This was the daughter of Sorke's brother Yochanan Rudensky—Ed.**]

Q. How did she get the store to start with? Did she rent it? Buy it?

A. I don't know.

Q. Do you know anything about Rotke's parents?

A. No.

Q. Did you ever visit them in Volozhin?

A. During the First World War we were forced out of Brisk. Father and Reb Haim [Soloveitchik] traveled to Minsk and we continued on to Volozhin.

Q. How long were you in Volozhin?

A. A year. Until we could go back to Brisk. We suffered from Feigl's awful attitude.

Q. How many of you went?

A. The whole family. My brothers were not in Poland.

Q. What about your grandfather Reb Avraham Yankl?

A. He was quite a type, which you don't see often even in Volozhin. There were two Avraham Yankls, so to differentiate, they added the third generation, Yoykhn, to the name. He would *daven* [leading the service] on Yom Kippur because the Netziv [**acronym for Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, Rosh Yeshiva from 1853—Ed.**] asked him to. He was originally from Volozhin. He was a very good-looking man with a nice beard and very clean, because Rotke was very strict about cleanliness.

Q. What did she look like?

A. He was a little taller than her. She was some personality and it showed in her face, in her voice, in her actions—in everything. I have very seldom found such a woman.

Q. This is your mother's side of the family, and they were Volozhiners. Your grandfather had the responsibility of marrying off his three daughters. How did he find a husband for your mother?

A. The Netziv told my grandfather that even though there were 500 students in the yeshiva, he felt that there was no one suitable to be my *Zayde's* son-in-law. This is what he told me.

Q. Was your grandfather so special?

A. Yes. The Netziv said that there was a *meshulach* (emissary)—the same one who had brought the Meitchiter Illui [**Shlomo Polachek of Maitchet—Ed.**] to him as a child of seven—who had just come to tell the Netziv that during a visit to the small town of Ilya, close to Vilna, he had met a young man who was a *Baki* in *Shas* and *Yerushalmi*, a *Masmid*, who knew more than any other young man he had met. [**Volozhin Yeshiva was the first yeshiva to become independent of community support. It did this by sending emissaries out to collect funds. This gave the yeshiva autonomy, and the rosh yeshiva great authority. Baki was a colloquial term for someone extraordinarily knowledgeable—Ed.**]

Q. What did your grandfather do as a result of that?

A. He immediately took my mother Sorke and went to meet with my father in Ilya.

Q. The marriages were arranged, but the woman had to agree?

A. They had to see each other—just to make a wedding without seeing or meeting? Never. It just happened that the floor of the inn was of earth and uneven and my father sat where it was low and my mother cried all night thinking that he was very short. [**The fact was that she was very short herself and probably had images of midget-size children—Ed.**] In fact he was much taller

than she was. My mother was twenty-three and my father was twenty, and they informed him of this [age difference].

Q. How about your father's parents?

A. My father's mother was named Peshe and his father was named Reb Dov, and they lived in Navaradok and he was a teacher of Talmud. And this is what my father told me—don't laugh—because he was a very weak child my *Zayde* and *Bobbe* bought a goat and they would milk the goat and give him the milk so that he would be stronger. There was once a storm and the goat was killed and because of this they left Navorodok and came to Brisk. My *Zayde* immediately found work in a Talmud Torah. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik [Yoshe Ber]—the author of the *Beit Levi*—tested my father, who was only seven. He said that my father would be a *gadol be-yisrael* (a major scholar).

Q. Do you know the year your father was born? Can you approximate?

A. No. I can't. [**Research shows that this was likely around 1863—Ed.**]

Q. So how did he get from Brisk to Ilya?

A. His father could not support him—how much did a melamed make?—and he had a brother, Rav Alter, and a sister too—so he went to Ilya because we had these relatives. In Ilya he sat and studied day and night and he “ate days” [**ate at the tables of various rich**