

ישישוק שטתל

THERE
ONCE WAS
A WORLD

A NINE-HUNDRED-YEAR
CHRONICLE
OF THE SHTETL
OF EISHYSHOK



YAFFA
ELIACH



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

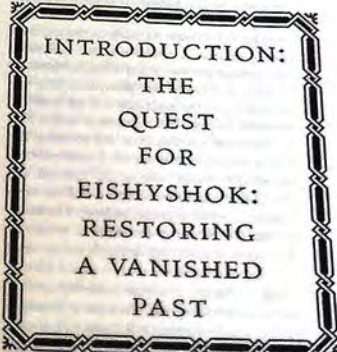
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IN AUGUST 1979 I WAS ON MY WAY TO RUSSIA, IN THE MIDST OF A FACT-FINDING MISSION with making a recommendation for an appropriate United States memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, I had spent several days traveling to the various capitals of the Holocaust Kingdom — Warsaw, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Plaszow among them. Now, flying south of Vilna (Vilnius), on a plane from Warsaw to Kiev, I became aware that somewhere beneath the clouds lay the town of Eishyshok, home to the early years of my brief, interrupted childhood.

Eishyshok (the Yiddish name for Ejszyszki, as it is known in Polish, and Eisiskes in Lithuanian) had been home not just to my family and to several thousand other Jews just before the Holocaust, but home to generation upon generation of Jews, going back to the eleventh century. In fact, Eishyshok is the site of one of the oldest Jewish settlements in that part of the world. My paternal ancestors had been among the first five Jewish families to settle there in that long-ago time, and their descendants had lived on its soil for all the centuries since then, under all the various governments that had fought for control of its Lithuanian, Polish, German, Russian, and Soviet. But now, in the post-Holocaust era, it was for the first time in all those hundreds of years a town without Jews.

Nine hundred years of Jewish history in Eishyshok had been wiped out. In Eishyshok, as elsewhere in Poland and Lithuania, nearly a millennium of vibrant Jewish life had been reduced to stark images of victimization and death. During my travels I had been struck by the fact that, insofar as the world knew anything about the Jews of Eastern Europe, it knew them as skeletal concentration camp survivors and huge piles of corpses, ashes in crematorium ovens, pitiful targets of history's most astonishing epidemic of mass genocide. What kind of memorial could possibly transcend those images of death and do justice to the full, rich lives those people had lived, I wondered. At the time, the question seemed merely rhetorical to me, a question that could never find a satisfactory answer.

Thinking these grim thoughts as I flew over my former home, while remembering what I could of the colorful, intricately detailed tapestry of my own family life before that tapestry was so brutally shredded, I suddenly saw that there



INTRODUCTION:
THE
QUEST
FOR
EISHYSHOK:
RESTORING
A VANISHED
PAST

PERHAPS THE EASIEST
WAY OF MAKING A TOWN'S
ACQUAINTANCE IS TO
ASCERTAIN HOW THE
PEOPLE IN IT WORK, HOW
THEY LOVE AND HOW
THEY DIE.

Albert Camus
THE PLAGUE

families carried them beyond the shtet to new lands. When beautiful Dora Zlotnik was about to leave Eishyshok to marry Naftali Berkowitch in Eretz Israel in 1931, his father, Reuven-Beinush, wrote to cousins there, hoping they would ensure that the old customs were indeed perpetuated:

My dear ones, please see to it that immediately upon Dora's arrival they should be led to the wedding canopy and marry according to law and tradition. It is painful

Rabbi Szymon Rozowski (third from left), sitting with his new son-in-law, Rabbi David Zalmanovitz, amid family, friends of the groom, and prominent members of the Mizrahi movement. (The Agudat Israel boycotted the wedding.) Most of the people in the photo, including the rabbi's son Avraham, second from right in the top row, were murdered during the Holocaust. The rabbi was buried alive, the last victim of the September 1941 massacre. YESC. ROZOWSKI

that we cannot be present at the wedding of our beloved son Naftali. However, we are writing to you, dear Feigle (Zipporah) and asking you to place and assure that all will be done that

The wedding was indeed a traditional one, held at the beautiful synagogue of the Rothschild family. There the witnesses included a prominent halutzim from Eishyshok, a member of the family. Mordechai Lewinowitz, a friend of the groom's from back home, had written the invitations and travel arrangements. The groom's cousin Yashkov Schneider, and his wife, Zipporah, led the couple to the canopy, as had been requested. Velvel Schneider, who had emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1924, was host at the celebration, followed, near his own circus ground-



Russian being spoken. One is in the Land of the Hebrews, and yet it sounds as if one walks in the streets of Moscow. It took the entire trip of its unique charm."²⁰

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Meir was quick to learn that the Hebrew language had fared much better in his own street than in the Land of Israel, where the Ashkenazim of the Old Yishuv spoke Yiddish, Baron de Rothschild's colonists promoted the study of French, and the majority of the halutzim spoke Russian.²¹ Meir also learned early on that life in the new land was hard. Beneath the bright blue skies Palestine was a bleak, malaria-ridden place demanding many sacrifices and presenting many dangers. The result was a life of often back-breaking manual labor, dedicated to reclaiming the barren land with one's own hands, and acquiring a veritable "Religion of Labor" in the words of Aaron David Gordon (1859-1922), the Tolstoyan figure who was known as the secular saint and mystic of the Zionist movement. Not surprisingly, Meir Wilkanski embraced this new religion with as much fervor as he had observed the ancient traditions as a young child in the home of his parents. For him, as for so many others in the Second Aliyah, the dream of rebuilding a homeland and reviving the Hebrew language was brighter than the bleak reality. Publishing under the name Volkani-Elzari, he would prove one of the most optimistic chroniclers of that idealistic time, writing inspirational stories that depicted the lives of his fellow halutzim.

From 1904 to 1908 Meir worked as an agricultural laborer in Petah-Tikvah, Rishon Le-Zion, Mikveh-Israel, Rehovot, and wherever else he could find an honest day's work — which was not always easy, since the Jewish farmers of Baron de Rothschild's colonies preferred cheap Arab labor. He dug irrigation ditches in orchards, picked oranges, olives, and grapes, and dug wells. And always, despite the hard work and the scarcity of money, the idealistic young



Sarah Rubin (center) on her journey to Eretz-Israel in 1908. She is surrounded by her family: her father, her mother, her brother Isaac, her sister Herta, her brother Shimon, and her brother David. The Wilkanski family was one of the first to arrive in Eretz-Israel.

man was excited to find himself in a land where the chapters and verses of the Bible were so starkly coming alive before his very eyes. "We are digging a well! We are doing what Abraham and Isaac did, and in the same land. We are creating our beloved land with sweat!"²² What he had studied in books in bed he was now experiencing firsthand.

As might be expected, Meir was an avid respondent, and his letters about the beauty of his new land, the joys of working to reclaim it through the labor of his own hands, were widely read throughout Eishyshok — not just in his sisters' Hebrew-speaking clubs and the various Zionist gatherings, but in the beths midrash as well. To many of his peers back home, Meir seemed the very embodiment of success: a young man who had had the courage to leave and thereby realized all his dreams. Some were inspired to follow in his footsteps; others who did not have the same courage (or the same support from their parents) took from his letters the hope that one day they too might reach Eretz Israel.

Meir was particularly fervent in encouraging his family to join him. In one of his letters he urged his father, Reb Layzer, to make the permanent journey of "Next year in Jerusalem!"²³ And eventually the whole Wilkanski family would do so. First came Sarah Rubin, Meir's sister, and her siblings Mordechai and Eizik. They were followed by Meir's sister Herta and her brother Yitzchak, and Yitzchak's wife, Sarah. In 1908 Leah came in response to Meir's letter. In 1908 Sarah Wilkanski returned to Eishyshok to persuade her parents to join her and her siblings in their new homeland. Though Reb Layzer was hesitant to make aliyah, as he was

still waiting for the Messiah to show him the way, he agreed to accompany Sarah to Eretz-Israel, Happers. The sage of Kuzim said to Sarah: "If you can promise that your father will create the same loving sun and support in Eretz-Israel as he did in Eishyshok, then he should go."²⁴ "Definitely not!" Sarah replied, in an emphatic voice. The Haffner Happers got his blessing: "Since Sarah says so, then it is all right for you to go!" Later that year Reb Layzer and his wife Batsa joined the rest of the family in Palestine.

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THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF ZIONISM

By the turn of the century at least a few Eishyshokians were active in Zionist organizations not just on the home front, but at the national and international level as well, and many others were

The Wilkanski family poses for a photo in the early months of their stay in Tel Aviv (right to left): Sarah and Herta, and Yitzchak (Yehuda Sarah and Layzer Meir) sitting, and in center, Reb Layzer, and Leah daughter. They are on the ground in Herta's new residence.

