

MEMOIRS!

By Yosef Hillel Trifon,
(aka Yonye, 1894-1980)
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INTRODUCTION

Y. H. Trifon

This will be the life story of an ordinary man. One of many, who was born and bred in Russia, emigrated to Israel, lived, worked, toiled, shivered with malaria, took quinine pills, suffered and reached a ripe old age. Surrounded by sons and grandsons, great grandsons not yet, though age wise there could be a few great grandsons. When from time to time they hear my stories about this and that, of the events of this long period - nearly seventy years in the Holy land, eighty years upon the earth - they are impressed and beg me to write them under the heading "memoirs" ...I have accepted.

Another event induced me to start writing my memoirs. In the mid fifties, one of my sons studied in London, England. An Englishman, a history professor, met him and told him of his intention to travel to Israel, and asked my son for the name of someone who could guide him there. My son gave him my name. The man arrived, Professor Crawford. I met him, brought him to my house and he, the professor, got right to the point. He started to ask questions: who, what, when, where, how?

I started from the beginning. I told him in minute details of the beginning of the emigration, pioneers, Turks, the British ... everything was new to him. He, the "Brit," pumped me for knowledge on the British. The historian wanted every detail, asked for more and more. For three hours I have lectured to the professor of history. He asked me when I was in England? Where did I learn? I explained that I did not go to England. The British were here, and my English is not "Oxford," but not "Cockney" either. He was amazed and complimented me.

When he thought he had a "bagful" of knowledge that would satisfy his curiosity about the history, he turned to me and asked, "What are you doing now?" I told him I am a pensioner, working in my garden, reading, working for my wife in the kitchen, but my main occupation is translating Pushkin's and Hiene's poems into Hebrew. Still under the impression of the historical stories that he heard from me, he said excitedly, "Leave it alone, man! Leave Pushkin, leave Heine, and start writing your memoirs! Do it for the next generations!"

That was a short introduction - maybe not so short? And, here is the story in front of you.

I would advise you not to look forward to something very interesting. The events were not written by a skilled hand, writing is not my strong side. I am neither a poet nor a writer. I am a water carrier and lumberjack; as simple as that. Some people wonder, how does the name Trifon arrive to a Jewish family in the center of Lithuania?³

Trifon is a common name amongst the Russians, as well as amongst the Greeks. When I meet Greek men, and I do from time to time, they tend to talk to me in Greek. I know the Greek alphabet, but not the language.

Had I been at least fifty years younger, perhaps I would have started to investigate the roots of this name. The Trifon descendents are scattered all over the globe. Such an investigation would be very hard. Josephus Flavius mentions the name Trifon a few times in his book, "The Wars of the Jews," but it is hard to imagine that the name tumbled for thousand of years to arrive at a Jewish family in Slotzk.

And, This is The History of Yitzhak-Asher Son of Aharon Triffon

Aharon begat Yitzhak-Asher. And Yitzhak-Asher was 26 years old when he married Chaya-Ita, daughter of Alexander Cherkinsky, in the village Grigorovka located in the Ukraine. Chaya-Ita was not barren. After a year she gave birth to her eldest son Michael. The second was Chaim, and a daughter Sara-Sonya, and a son Moshe-Eliezer, and a daughter Riseh, and a son Yosef-Hillel, who is writing these memories, and a son Reuven, and the youngest daughter Batya-Malka (in our late father's pronunciation – God rest his soul – she was Basha Malke the Lithuanian way). Our mother, Chaya-Ita, gave birth to three more male babies during the time, but they died as babies. Mother, father, five brothers and three sisters emigrated to Eretz Yisrael.⁴

Our father, Yitzhak-Asher, the head of the family, was born in a small town, Slotzk, Minsk district, in White Russia. He studied in this town's "Yeshiva," received a rabbinical diploma, traveled to Bobroisk⁵ which is near Slotzk, and from there arrived in Grigorovka. Later on I will tell how he arrived there.

Grigorovka – a large village bordering on three districts: Chernigov, Kiev and Poltava, in the heart of the Ukraine. The Ukraine was a large, rich, fertile land, but evil, and drenched in Jewish blood by Chmelnizky, Hydamaks, Cossacks, and in later days Petliura, and Machna, (who did not shame their predecessors). Yet the Jews, without paying attention to all these, and despite all, proliferated and succeeded and had "fun."

The village Grigorovka – probably got it's name from some "atman,"⁶ a gang leader whose name was Gregory, who excelled in robbery and murder, and settled there.

The village was a typical large Ukrainian village. At the entrance was a sign announcing that 550 families lived in the village (a large size); that part of its lands belonged to two landlords - "Paritzim" as the Jews called them. One was living most of the time in Paris, and leasing his land to whoever wanted to lease it.⁷ At one time our father leased 100 "Zisyatin" – 1000 dunams approximately.⁸ He sowed oats - I do not remember if he

succeeded with it.⁹ All the rest of the lands belonged to farmers. Tall, big, muscular “Muzhiks”¹⁰ There were exceptions – good farmers by those days’ standards, peaceful quiet people according to Russian definition. They had the generous Russian nature, song lovers, vodka lovers, who loved life and enjoyed it according to their concepts - carefree, always happy and gay.

One should not forget that, at the mentioned period, the farmer’s liberation from their landlords by Czar Alexander the 2nd in 1861 was fresh in the memory of the elderly and old farmers. They called him the “liberating Czar” and mentioning his name brought them joy.

However, to be merry they did not necessarily need Alexander’s name mentioned. In the village there was a “Monopolska,” an Institute that sold vodka as a monopoly.¹¹ The Government took care of this. An institute, that without it, life would not be “life.” An institute that was the cause of constant raised spirits. In winter they would drink to warm the body, in summer - to lift the soul. (As kids we avoided passing near the “Monopolska,” as a meeting with a Ukrainian farmer is not very pleasant, and if he were drunk, even worse). But none of this affected their way of life. Their work was done properly (apart from confirmed alcoholics). It showed in the state of their farms - they were excellent workers. A workday of fifteen to sixteen hours was a regular thing.

To their credit, it must be said, that at the high-load work season they drank little. Their health and physical state were beyond human conception. What a gentile farmer could carry or lift, no outsider can perceive. Nearly none amongst them was sick. In the village there was something resembling a pharmacy that was run by a chemist. The Jewish residents called him “Feldsher,” or “Chvarshef” as the Ukrainians called him, who knew how to bandage and apply iodine on a wound. (It is no wonder that our doctors say, “healthy as three gentiles.”)

At a distance of about twenty “varstas” from Grigorovka was a hospital with a German doctor. Most of his patients were Jewish. Once a month a government doctor came to the village, as well as to the other villages in the vicinity, from the district capital, Konotop, to treat the patients that could not travel far. By the way, the literal meaning of the word Konotop is “sinking of the horses.” The village elders tell that once, tens of years ago, in the autumn, in the rainy season, carts drawn by horses passed there and some horses sank in the sticky mud of the black soil, hence the name.¹²

When I talk of the medical standard in the village, one needs to tell a short story that will give an idea of that standard. The story is a true one. In the village lived a farmer who claimed that he treated teeth when he served in the army. A member of our family, who suffered a toothache, went to ask for this expert’s help. The man used a rope to tie our family member to a chair converted specially for this purpose and pulled out the aching tooth.

It is interesting to note that these simple primitive people had a special talent - call it sense of humor - to stick names and nicknames to people and things. Here are some

examples: there was a Jew in the village with six fingers on one of his hands - they called him "shostopochky" meaning six fingered. A tall one – a rarity amongst the Jews – was called the "long one." One with a big paunch was called "pozmi" – literally translated is "paunchy." A crippled shoemaker was known as the "limping one." Our father – God rest his soul – excelled in explaining things, politely and smoothly, so he was called "Zamenko," which means the seducer or the convincer. So much so that once a farmer addressed him as Mr. Zamenko. When he was corrected he apologized and said he was sure that was our father's real name. One who played the flute was called "Rodka" – flute.

A farming village was in need of a variety of professions, like blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, wooden cask makers – for transportation of water. Tailors were Jews, who were involved in the village life, but without land.

One will not say that the people in Grigorovka, like the people in the rest of Ukraine's villages, were highly educated. The majority was illiterate. One primary school could not and did not give the opportunity of learning reading and writing to all the villagers. The question was not if there was enough room for all the village children, the main question was what knowledge did the school give to those who went there. School was not obligatory and not many attended. The Jewish kids were not prevented from going, but the word "Zhid"¹³ that they heard everywhere they went was not a good incentive.

The eldest brother Michael was amongst the "graduates" of this school. Sister Sonya went there as well, but when mother needed her help she would send the school principal – an old maid who loved the bottle – a big tasty cake, with a bottle of vodka, and she allowed sister Sonya not to participate in class. To the subject of the education method of the Jewish children I will come back later.

School was a new institute in our village as in all villages; it is not known when it was first conducted. Maybe around the time of the farmers' liberation. But, they did not feel its absence; their every day life was not worse for it. They raised large families; they enlarged their country's population, providing a lot of soldiers for the Czar. (Until the first steps of the revolution at the beginning of this century - they were staunch patriots.) The question of population control did not worry them. They married young and if they had "illegitimate children" they did not throw them out. They did not excel in modesty. Both young sexes spent a lot of time together. The gardens, woods and clearings in front of the houses were excellent places for having a good time in summer. In winter they would gather in one of the participant's houses, to partake in what they called "Rosbitky" which means "until sunrise." A number of boys and girls would gather in one of the houses - suitable houses were not in short supply - and with full consent of the parents, who had done the same in their time, had a good time all through the night till sunrise, hence the name. One doesn't need to think that the time spent there was passed in reading prayers.

The larger the family the more important it becomes. The crowded living quarters did not bother them. At times three generations were living under the same roof. They did not

know the concept of a “bedroom.” Beds were not to be found in the rooms, usually there were two rooms in the house. The kitchen, toilet, and washroom were outside. They never heard of the existence of a “shower.”

In one room there was a brick oven for heating, baking and cooking, as well as a big table, heavy, usually made of oak wood and around it long heavy benches that were attached to the floor. In the second room - wall to wall to the full width of the room - were wooden planks attached to fixed supports. These planks were padded with felt or some other soft material - they had never heard of real mattresses - and on this board, slightly padded, the whole family slept, no matter how crowded.

There was another ideal sleeping place above the oven, about a meter under the roof, a sort of platform was constructed, wall-to-wall; the old folk and the little children slept on it. It stands to reason that in winter, when the oven was lit, it was not cold there. When the family grew in numbers till it was impossible to fit them all on the wooden board, “polati,” or the place above the oven, another room was added, as the yard was large.

I stated before, there was no kitchen in the house. It was not needed - for baking and cooking there was a large capacity oven. There weren't any kitchen utensils either. They didn't use cutlery. Plates of any sort, flat or deep were not used. The food, the famous Russian “Borsht” – today it is sold in glass jars by “Tnuva”¹⁴ - was served to the table in one large wooden bowl, and all the family, which was seated around the table, would eat from it with wooden spoons. Had my grandchildren seen it they would have been horrified, crying: “what, from everyone's mouth back into the soup?”

If the family was very large, so that the people seated at the ends could not reach the center, they would add another bowl. At the end of the meal they washed the bowl and put it upside down in the room's corner. And, for just a number of wooden spoons there was no need for a kitchen cupboard.

Showers were not to be found in the houses either, not as a result of water shortage, God forbid, water was abundant, but they didn't take advantage of the fact, did not think of using it. By digging a few meters deep in the rich, fertile Ukrainian soil, which is rich in water too, it is possible to get plenty of water. Near every eight or ten houses there was a well. No pumps were used. Near each well was a wooden post stuck in the ground and at its top was a horizontal pole. A weight was connected to one end of the pole, and at the other end, which reached the well's opening, was a pail. It was easy lowering the pole with the pail to the well, filling it with water and raising it with the help of the weight.

In winter the water would freeze and it was necessary to break the ice in order to enable the people to reach the water. The row of posts all along the road was a magnificent sight, especially in winter, when all the posts were covered with frost and snow. In fact, not all water was potable. Some wells were used for washing, laundry and animal watering. There were wells that the Jews called “Tei Wasser”- tea water. These I remember particularly, as the “tea water” supply was my responsibility.

Water for washing and laundry was near our house. At the age of twelve to thirteen, I had to walk with a pail full of water some two hundred meters from the appropriate well to our house. Sometimes, for balance, I was given two pails. (When, five or six years later, I had to supply water carried on a donkey's back in the settlement, Mitzpeh, I found that carrying two pails manually was trivial).¹⁵

Water wasn't always carried manually. Sometimes, when larger quantities were needed, an “advanced” device was used - a sort of two wheeled cart with a barrel on it. It was taken for a longer distance, like to the end of the village. Near the windmills that were concentrated in one place, was a well with the best water in the entire neighborhood. Older boys made this transport. A few more words about wells. Wells, as mentioned

before, were plentiful, however, so were playing, frolicking boys in the streets. The gentile farmers' children were no better than our own "Tsabarim,"¹⁶ who when they found a dead cat anywhere, had nothing better to do than throwing it into one of the wells. And if one, why not another? Maybe alive, as it is well known what its end will be in the well's water. To tell the truth, the "muzhiks" were not endowed with too much sensitivity, so these "cat's waters" were used for quite a long time, till it was impossible to use anymore. Then all the neighbors would gather and empty the well. This action was not done with the pole, since quick action was necessary before more water would rise in the well. Everyone with a bucket tied to a rope would quickly bring water from the well until the "treasure" was found at the bottom. This was done a few times until new water would rise with no cat smell.

The village dwellers, gentiles as well as Jews, were not too squeamish, although they were very eager for external grandeur, as I'll explain later. Cleanliness and hygiene were beyond their conception. Sanitation devices were not to be found in their homes, they didn't know of pesticides against mosquitoes or flies. In the summer the windows and doors were open and thousands of flies became the place's landlords. No one bothered with washing fruit or vegetables before eating them. When you walked into a farmer's home on the coldest winter days, a warm steam would engulf you. The stove that was built at the center of the room heated the house. The room's windowpanes were doubled for the winter. The external doors were covered on the outside with a special cover, usually felt blanket, which would cover all the doors. The "better" the landlord the more heated the house was. Come spring all the coverings would be removed.

In front of the oven opening was a small surface, "Pripitsk", which means "in front of the oven," which was part of the oven on which stood cooking pots that needed heating. Underneath the "Pripitsk" was an empty space that was used as a small storage for various household tools. Sometimes, - I saw it in the Jewish homes particularly- some chickens, who needed fattening, were kept there as outside was too cold for them. Such a house, almost hermetically sealed, emitting a lovely smell of live chickens - defies description. And, in spite of the described "sanitary" conditions, the condition of the people was wondrous. They lived long, and old people surrounded with great grandchildren were a regular phenomenon.

When someone, leaving such a steaming, heated house to go out into the winter cold, and God forbid caught a cold, fell ill with pneumonia or another illness and died later for lack of medical treatment, there was no fuss. People were sorry for the loss of a helping hand that would be missed at the beginning of the work in the coming spring.

The "Samovar," a tea-urn, played a very important role amongst the farmer's utensils. It was standing at the head of the table, always steaming. All the family members, as well as guests, would sit around it drinking cup after cup - wooden cups - of tea. One didn't put sugar in the tea nor stir it with a teaspoon, hence no need for a teaspoon. Each person would hold a piece of sugar and lick it before each sip. At mealtime the samovar would be taken off the table and put in one of the corners of the house.

The samovar was not missing from any Jewish house either, although its use, as well as the tea drinking method, was different. Drinking glasses and glass saucers were used as well as teaspoons. The tea was sweetened with sugar cubes in the glass and not by licking. I remember the samovar well, as it was my job to look after it. When I was twelve to thirteen years old, our father would wake me in the early hours of the morning to prepare the samovar. Wash it, fill it with water, put the coal in its chimney, light it and tend to the fire with an upside down boot, which was used as a bellows. No matter when the tea drinking would start, I had to stand near the samovar, half asleep, and work the boot-bellows. I was short of many hours of sleep.

In the farming community there was no poverty, but there were differences in earnings. Some had three to four “diastin” of land and some had up to sixty to seventy or more. (“diastina” – ten dunams). Accordingly, some owned one horse (“Kliatshe”), some two or three, and some owned three pairs of horses or more. The same situation applied to the rest of the household stock. There were no “Dutch cows” in the village. But, milk was abundant; people drank and ate without restriction: cheeses, butter, cream, and sour milk by the jugs. As well as lamb and veal, there was no shortage of meat. The theory of proper nutrition was never studied, but everybody ate a lot of everything. Still, they were very “healthy as gentile.”

The farmers were diligent. And no piece of land was left uncultivated. Their fields were divided into three parts:

- A) For winter crops they sowed rye, as in this part of the Ukraine wheat was not known. They sowed the rye in the autumn, and after germination the snow covered it for the duration of the winter; the more it snowed the better the chances for a good crop.
- B) For summer crops: barley, oats, buckwheat and other crops would be sown with the disappearance of the last of winter signs of snow and cold nights.
- C) A part that was left unsown: “Toloka”- uncultivated - a year later would be sown with winter crops, and later, summer crops - a three year cycle.

Success would depend on Heaven’s will - lots of snow in winter and lots of rain in summer.

There were drought years as well, though very rarely. On such occasions, all the villagers, young and old, led by the priest, the “Pope”¹⁷ and his helpers, the “Deacons,” dressed in their glorious uniforms, would go out to pray and plead to God to have mercy and bring the much needed rain. The pope and deacons would gently swing a vessel filled with frankincense (a wonder essence, loved by God and hated by Satan even more). The farmers were so sure of the pope and deacons’ influence on heaven, they would take raincoats to keep dry on their way back home, after their prayers would be accepted at the appropriate quarters.

The farmers were very devout and believed in the supernatural. Important parts of their home decoration were the saint’s icons, which hung under the ceiling along all the walls.

A person entering the house would bow to the icons and make the sign of the cross three times.

The church filled their spiritual world, if one can talk about a “spiritual world” of these primitive people. The pope and deacons ruled their lives completely. If a farmer stole something, especially from a Jew, he would go to the pope, with a proper gift, and the pope would tell him that God forgave him, and so the thief’s conscience would be clear again.

As deep as the belief in God and his Saints was their belief in ghosts and demons. Whole chapters can be written about their superstitions. The difference is that while God has representation on earth in the form of popes, the saint’s icons, statues of Jesus, sacred objects, churches and church bells, the demons have no representation on earth. But, there is no doubt they exist. The demon has many names: ghost, joker, mischievous. Everyone can tell a story about meeting one of them in one form or another.

(There is a song written by Pushkin named, “The Demons,” one of his beautiful songs. It’s based on superstition: travel at night, in winter, a stormy night, and a diversion from the road. The driver attributes all this to the demon’s pranks. He, the demon, is standing in front of him in the form of a frightening beast and pushing the horses to the ditch. There is no escaping him).

In this belief in demons and ghosts, the Jews were not much different from the farmers. The following story will attest to it. This is not a song, it was not written by Pushkin, nor is it the fruit of an imaginative person. This is a true story: When our grandma was due to give birth (I don’t know to which child – she was giving birth every year), our grandfather Rabbi Alexander¹⁸ went to a neighboring village, larger than Grigorovka, to bring the midwife, the “Babe.” It was in the middle of winter. The means of transportation in this season was a horse or a pair, hitched to a sleigh. The landlords’ sleighs had backrests. But the farmers’ sleighs were simple, wide, open on all sides and were used to transport supplies as well. The sleigh would be covered with straw and the Babe would be placed on it, covered with furs. The travel took a long time and being “comfortable” the Babe fell asleep and fell off the sleigh. When she fell she woke up and called after him, “Sender”...“Sender!”¹⁹ And Sender, hearing the cries and his name being called in the night, the vast snow in empty fields around him, was sure that it was a demon, the devil who wants to harm him. He started whipping the horses. The horses were good and ran as fast as they could. After a long distance when the shouting stopped, he decided that they were out of danger and turned to the Babe to tell her about the “incident,” and how they were saved from the demon’s clutches. To his amazement he didn’t find her on the straw. He then went back and found her dragging her feet, at the end of her strength, lamenting her fate: “Sender, ‘Tayere’ (dear), what have you done to me? The wolves could have devoured me!” Well, the wolves didn’t devour her and Grandma gave birth - “Mazal Tov”²⁰ - to a son – I don’t remember his name.

The primitive “muzhiks” loved external grandeur, ceremonies, and liked dressing up and showing off. There was the well-known embroidered “Rubashka.” The summer’s

topcoat, the fur that was worn tight about the waist, both with embroidered collar. High boots, with the lower part made like a bellows, smeared with tar, making a squeaking sound when one walked. (By special order the shoemaker would add a piece of leather underneath the sole.) The boots were used for effect in summer as well as in winter; although some would wear felt shoes in winter. Obviously, such splendor was used by the young people.

The richer the family a young man (called a “shaygetz” in Yiddish)²¹ came from, the more embroidered was his fur, the squeakier were his boots, the more smeared with tar. Such glamour was used especially on public occasions, such as Sundays and holidays in church, on happy occasions like engagement parties and weddings. On such occasions, there were special ceremonies. The bride would wear a colorful wreath, like a crown, and she would go from house to house to invite people to her wedding. On these occasions the horses and carts would be decorated, as well as the people. The line of vehicles would pass by for display, the leading carriage with the nicest horses. Colored ribbons would be tied or pasted on the bridles, and bells would be fixed on the “duga,” the wooden arc that connected the wagon shafts to the bridles. The bell chimes would announce the approach of the convoy. A chorus would sing with no guidance, no conductors, but their singing was rich and full. The amount of vodka consumed on such a parade was immeasurable. The festivity would last a few days - even up to a week.

The Jewish residents were not much different from the farmers. They tried to imitate them in everything; in their way of life, dress, food (the difference was in the “Kashrut”²² and their customs. Jewish weddings were no less noisy and extravagant. While the farmers usually got engaged to someone inside their village, the Jews, being few, were nearly all obliged to look for partners in other villages. Therefore, the fuss around a Jewish wedding would be greater. While the farmer’s wedding convoy would be in their own village, the Jewish procession would pass many kilometers, from settlement to settlement, with no diminishing of the grandeur and splendor of the participants. The same ornaments were on the carriages and horses. The same bells on the bridle arch, the same air of festivity and merriment, a little less vodka perhaps. The gentiles would stand to the side, watch and enjoy themselves. Some, neighbors or acquaintances, would take part in the affair.

Once a year the Jews would let loose and go wild in the village streets. It was on “Simchat Tora.”²³ Anyone who could stand on his feet would be out on the street. Singing, dancing, and drinking, wine or vodka. Dancing, singing and dancing, the merriment was tremendous.

The farmers used to call it, “the Jewish holiday that calls for a lot of drinking.” Who better to appreciate the value of drinking? They would watch and enjoy it. When someone enjoyed drinking, by the way, his appreciation of the holiday would rise a lot.

But, let’s go back to the farmers; about the Jewish folklore I’ll tell you later. The farmers liked festivals and showing off, but they knew how to work as well. The majority of their time was spent on hard, back-breaking work; every season had its labor. One needs to remember that at that time most jobs were done manually. Agricultural machines were

not known; plowing was done with a pitiful plow, with a single blade, that demanded tremendous effort in the heavy, sticky Ukrainian soil.

Many had wooden plows, “Suha,” similar to the Arab plow, which was a remainder from the era when they were serfs to the landlords. Many of Russia’s poets mentioned the “Suha” as a symbol of the miserable farmers. It is true that a little later the “Zomostvo,” a government department that dealt with the farmers and agriculture, issued harvesting machines, to be paid for in installments, which were operated by a pair of horses. But, few bought such machines, since not everyone had two horses and not everyone wanted to get into debt. Thus, the harvest was done by scythe. (A few people, who were owners of smaller pieces of land, even harvested with sickles). Harvest by scythe was a hard tiring job. Not everyone could get good results with it. A little detail: we lived next to a farmer, I even remember his name, Tarsenko, owner of one of the better farms in the village; a good looking heavy man, father to many sons, all good workers, but none was near his rank. He was especially famous all around in the neighboring villages, as an expert harvester using the scythe. He was able to work for many hours, without rest, without tiring, and most importantly, he would cut the grain crop as if he was using a razor. Close to the ground – as the bull would eat – and the lines would be as straight as if arranged by hand.

He taught me the job and promised me I would be a good “koser” – scythe harvester. I didn’t get to his level, but I knew how to use it well. It was an impressive sight to the bums, to the onlookers, when hundreds of pairs of hands wielded the glowing scythes in rhythmical movements, in the open space of yellow grain stalks. The girls’ job was gathering and tying the stalks. Without frills or ribbons the girls would make a string of straw and tie the stalks, put them on the cart and bring each to its own area. A special place for the stalks, like a barn, was not known there. “Collective farming” had not arrived yet. Harvesting the fields and collecting the stalks lasted about two months. It was the most difficult work season.

The work was done at a fast rate, as the rainless days had to be utilized. The threshing was done in the autumn and winter months, slowly with no hurry, inside special buildings with hard floors made for that purpose. An implement made from two sticks did the threshing. The longer stick was held in the hand, the shorter was attached to the long stick by a leather band, so that when used it could make a circular movement around the long stick. The implement was used in measured flicking movements. It was not a sophisticated “machine,” but one needed skill to use it; a wrong movement could cause head injury. On the cold winter days, three or four farmers would gather for the threshing at one’s place and in turns they would go to the second and so forth. The work in a closed, nearly sealed place was very boring if one person alone did it. That was the reason for a few farmers gathering together, as the threshing was one job that could be done in a group. The threshing was done during the winter months and the farmers were then ready for the new year’s jobs. Farmers, who owned smaller plots with a lot of mouths to feed, looked for a side income. They would chop trees in the wood and bring it to the villagers, mostly to the Jews, or to the residents of close-by towns.

All the afore-mentioned toils, easy or hard, never troubled the farmers. Hard work did not make him tired, his spiritual world was limited; he was not worried by anything. His country was rich and his natural surroundings were beautiful. Each season had its own particular beauty.

The spring splendor is famous. To describe it appropriately, one needs to be a great poet. (It was described many times by Russia's poets and writers.) It is only possible to fully enjoy the spring for a short time, because when the snow melts the entire universe is covered by water. Only when the water subsides and you can move around again, you are stunned by what your eyes see. The green of the fields, the flowering of the trees, the smell of the flowers, the murmur of the streams, the song of the birds that woke from the winter sleep. All types of colorful birds, and above all, the nightingale, the magic nightingale, the sorcerer that tingles the heart, that snares every soul in his net. The farmers attribute a supernatural power to its singing. There is no man or boy, no matter how deeply he'll be preoccupied, that will not listen to its charming singing.

(Our eldest brother, Michael, when he was a boy of seventeen going on eighteen, needed to go from the village to the district city, "Konotop," to take a girl to the shops. The transportation method then was by cart hitched to a horse. He would choose to take the six to seven hours journey at night, in order to enjoy the smell of the buckwheat flowers and the songs of the nightingale. The way passed through woods and forests where nightingales lived).

After spring - the summer. With unending fields, green fields that slowly turn into a golden yellow sea, sometimes quiet and sometimes wavy, when the wind rocks the crop. Who else can behold such sights? Any of the inhabitants of cities or citizens of small countries the size of a cornfield?

And autumn, the one melancholic season of the year. Not for lack of splendor of nature, but because you could not see it. Because, rich or poor, you had to be inside your house. You could not walk on rainy days in the mud of the black, heavy, sticky earth.²⁴ (There were no paved roads then, maybe there are today?) But the minute you had the chance to be out – you could not believe your eyes. The abundance of water, the streams' channels, the flow of rivers, the verdant color of the trees, the wonderful fruit trees, that thrills anyone who wants to be thrilled. The sight of oaks, enormous in size and circumference, carrying their heads to the sky. Flocks of birds flying south, black clouds above your head, even the ominous sky, everywhere you look - grandeur and beauty.

¹ Giora Triffon is the 2nd great grandson of Chaya-Ita Cherkinsky, 3rd great grandson of Sender Cherkinsky, grandson of Michael Triffon and grandnephew of the author, Yosef Hillel Trifon.

² Robert S. Sherins, M.D. is a 3rd great grandson of Eselj (Iosel/Joseph) Cherkinsky, who was a brother of Sender (Alexander) Cherkinsky. Sender was the grandfather of the author.

³ The Triffon ancestors were culturally Lithuanian Jews, who lived in Minsk Gubernya, Belarus (White Russia). Originally, Minsk was part of Lithuania-Poland after 1386, when the Union of Lublin united the Grand Duchy of Lithuania with the Kingdom of Poland. The marriage between the Polish Queen Jadwiga, daughter of Hungarian King Louis I of Anjou, and Lithuanian Archduke Wladyslaw II Jagiello, de-facto united Christian Poland and pagan Lithuania. Jagiello had converted to Christianity.

⁴ Land of Israel. In 1906 the Triffon/Cherkinsky family immigrated to Palestine, then under Turkish (Ottoman) authority.

⁵ Also spelled Bobrojsk.

⁶ Refers to a Cossack Hetman, or chief, named Gregory.

⁷ Absentee landlords, who were often from Polish noble families, created a huge socio-economic problem for the Ukrainians. Jews frequently served as both the rent and tax collectors for the nobility. The absentee Polish landlords and Jews were despised by the Cossacks, who agitated the peasants and encouraged them to rise up against the foreigners. The resultant rampages and massacres were known as pogroms.

⁸ Dunam = 1000 square meters.

⁹ Most Jews had been prohibited by the Russian Czars from owning land. Some Jews were able to lease land for farming; mostly Jews were traders and merchants.

¹⁰ A term referring to Russian peasants prior to 1917.

¹¹ Vodka sales were a government monopoly. Perhaps it was sold there at a subsidized rate.

¹² Another version of the story related to the time when the horses of the Russian cavalry became mired in the mud in the military campaign of 1634. That was the date of first mention of the origin of the town of Konotop, which was owned by a Polish noble family. The Russian Czar Michel Romanov attempted to regain that region from Lithuania-Poland. As a consequence, the Ukrainian Cossacks entered the battle and were able to defeat the Russian army and evict the Poles.

¹³ Derogatory term for Jews.

¹⁴ An Israeli food company.

¹⁵ Mitzpeh is a settlement in the lower Galilee in Israel founded by the author and his family.

¹⁶ Nickname for the Israeli born.

¹⁷ The religion of the farmers was Russian Orthodox, not Roman Catholic. Their local clergy were priests. The word, "Pope," was used to denote a higher religious official, who was most likely the regional Bishop, although he was referred to as their "Pope" in their local vernacular. There are Orthodox "Patriarchs" chosen to administer the various Orthodox Christian sects, i.e. Greek, Russian, Serbian, and Ukrainian.

¹⁸ Rabbi Sender Cherkinsky.

¹⁹ Sender is the abbreviation of Alexander (Cherkinsky).

²⁰ Good Luck or Congratulations.

²¹ A young male gentile.

²² In accordance with Jewish dietary laws.

²³ The Festival of Rejoicing in the Law or Torah – the Jewish Holy Books.

²⁴ Due to the black sticky earth of this area, maps often refer to this region as Black Russia.