

Beyond Belief
A Holocaust Survivor's Story





Hanoch Teller

Based on the testimony of Salek Orenstein

BEYOND BELIEF

A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S STORY

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Beyond Belief: A Holocaust Survivor's Story

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*This book is dedicated to those who were
murdered at the hands of the Nazis.*

ה' יקום דמם

*Hershel (Herszek) Tzvi Alter Orenstein (Orensztajn)
January 10, 1896–ca. October 1942 transported to
Treblinka extermination camp, father of Salek*

*Nacha Ella Orenstein (Orensztajn)
1896–ca. October 1942 transported to Treblinka
extermination camp, mother of Salek*

*Yehuda Fischel Orenstein (Orensztajn)
1922–1945, murdered in Schlieben
concentration camp, brother of Salek*

*Schifra Leah Orenstein (Orensztajn)
1928–ca. October 1942 transported to Treblinka
extermination camp, sister of Salek*

Salek Orenstein's parents-in-law:

*Shmuel Merel
October 11, 1890–August 28, 1942, murdered
in Auschwitz, father-in-law of Salek*

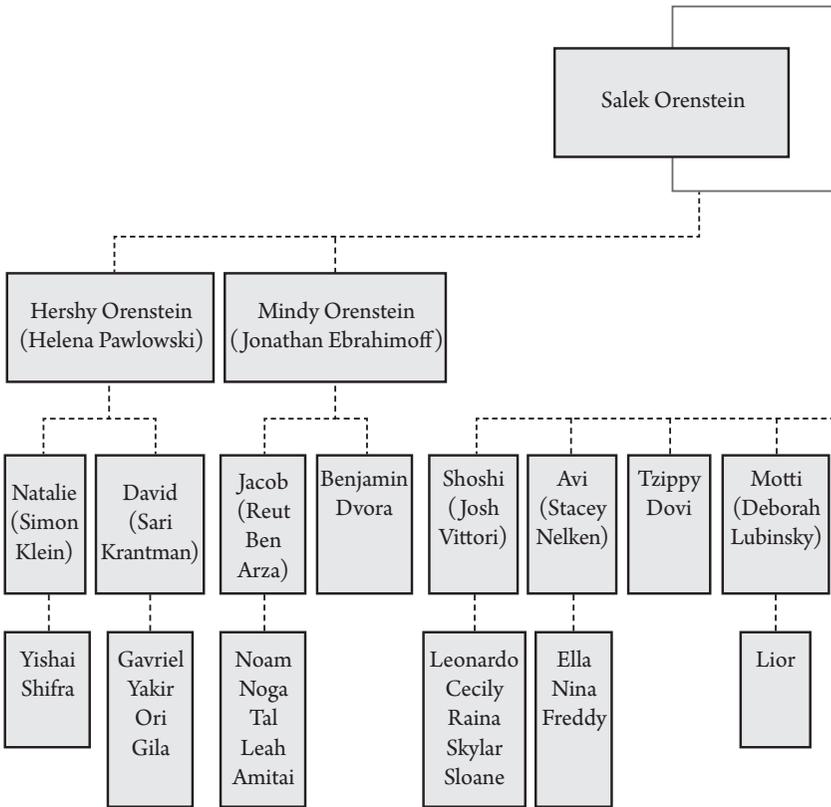
*Mindel Merel
January 8, 1890–May 18, 1941, murdered in Rivalsaltes
concentration camp, mother-in-law of Salek*

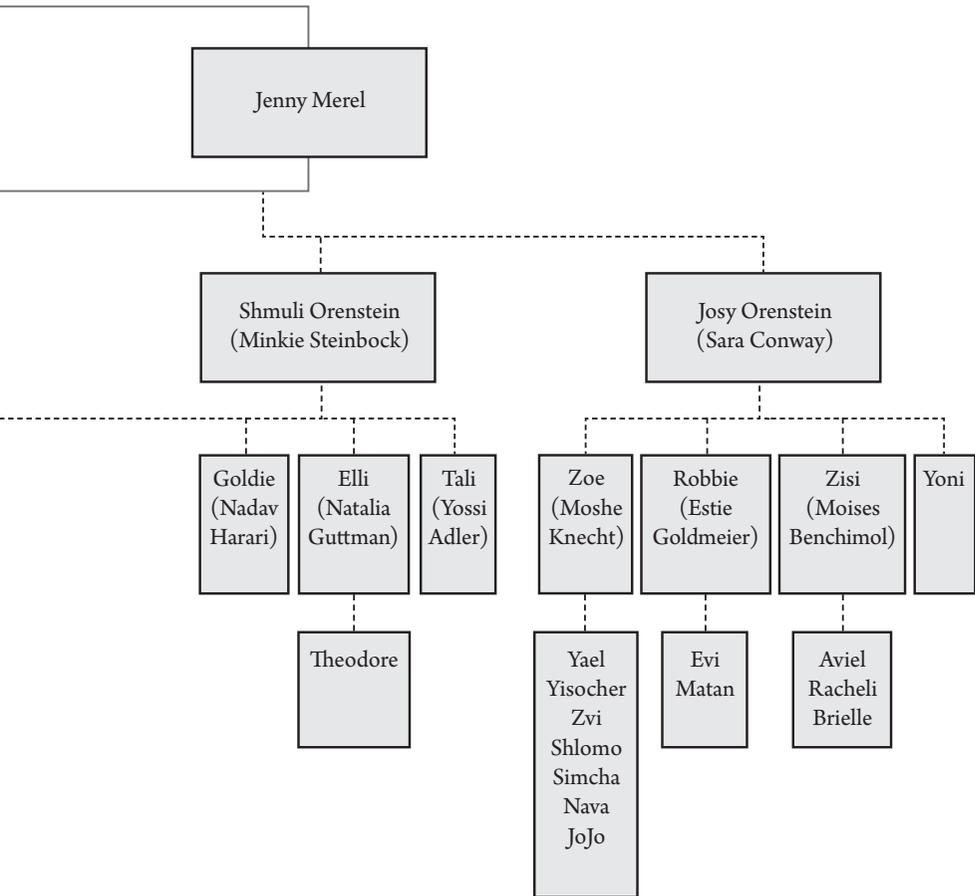


In 1996, Salek Orenstein presented each of his children with a book compiled by Martin Gilbert, called The Boys. It is the story of 732 young concentration camp survivors, children who shared wartime experiences that were terrible beyond imagination. Some of his personal experiences are recorded in that book. Salek's dedication to his children reads as follows:

*To my dear children,
May these horrific personal memories and testimonies
of the very few Jewish survivors be an eternal
documented lesson to all the future generations – to
stand on guard against the antisemitic world who
never relinquished its aim and wish to destroy us.
Love Dad, Saba, 4th November 1996*









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Preface

When it comes to loss, people speak of time as the great healer. I can tell you; time is not a great healer. Sometimes it does not heal at all, for it puts an ever-expanding distance between the living and the dead. With death, an axis of love is broken. A world within a world breaks its moorings, never to return.

It began with the Holocaust, when time stopped. A horrible crime, visited by the wicked on the innocent. The Holocaust was not only sinister and horrifying, but also an event not easy to comprehend in conventional terms. It was an event that has been written down in its own code, a code which had to be broken first to make understanding possible.

From a philosophical standpoint, my father's suffering and the years since his passing have taught me the hidden potentials revealed in his personal account. His unique encounters and rare combination of circumstances describe the Holocaust while he undertook the unrewarding and painful task of recounting events that we (and he) preferred to leave unspoken. Victimization of Jews and the progressively dehumanizing impact of coercive authority

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reign. Not enough has been done after the Holocaust to disarm these conceivably gruesome effects. Over seventy years later, the terrible relics that concentration camps hold are disintegrating, and with the passing of its last witnesses, we are now faced with unprecedented questions about how to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

This book is intended as a small and modest contribution to what seems to be the long-overdue task of bringing one survivor's story to bear witness. Through the eyes of a child driven by grief and horror, it is testimonial proof of the events it embodies. Journeys of brutalizing squalor; trains leading directly to gas chambers; kilos of human hair shorn from the living and from corpses; barracks; barbed-wire fencing; watchtowers; starvation; indescribable human suffering; violence; cruelty; dying and death...an abundance of evidence.

My father's account not only passes on his legacy to future generations, but it is a means of keeping his memory alive. It is a way of acknowledging the grandparents who gave me life but whom I never had the privilege of knowing. They never had longevity (אריכות ימים), for the Nazis systematically persecuted and destroyed them all. If there were adequate words rather than just ashes, perhaps the pain would be less. Something to hold on to. The heart demands it. But life goes on. It can be no other way, of course.

This foreword would not be complete without acknowledging two of my father's friends who also survived forced labor camps and death marches. Even as a little girl I knew who they were. They had accents, and like us, they had few relatives. My father, Sender Riseman, and Solly Irving were members of the group of 732 young concentration camp survivors who became known as "The Boys." Proud of their Jewish identity, they rebuilt their lives in London and became lifelong friends. These "boys" deserve a special mention for their unerring belief in all things Jewish, and in the State of Israel. Solly would engage young audiences, who would listen in

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silence to his personal experiences of war, abandonment, imprisonment, and survival. In their lifetime, my father Salek Orenstein and his two friends became a living bridge between destruction and rebirth. Our families established friendships across three generations and till today share Shabbat meals together.

My father's story bears witness to the triumphs of the human spirit. It is the story of a man who was proud of his heritage and faith. It is the story of a Jew and a Zionist who pledged continued moral commitment to remain faithful to God's covenant, which he might so easily have rejected. This story is his gift to the next generations and reminds us that it is up to us to ensure, "Never Again."

Mindy Ebrahimoff (née Orenstein)



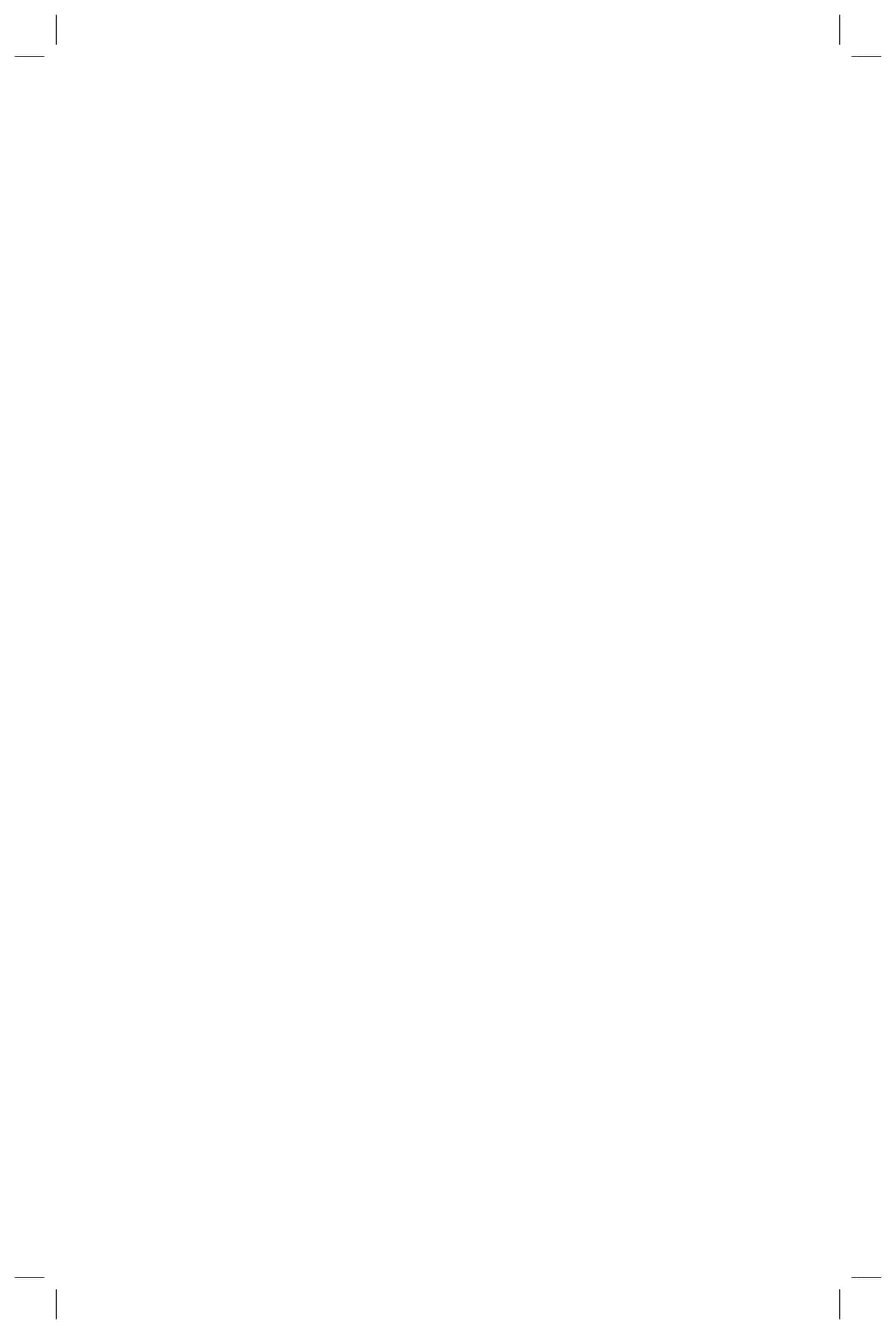
Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Judy Goodkin for helping us create this book. With patience, time, and creativity she encouraged our father to find his voice and transcribed his oral testimony into writing. This took skill, sensitivity, and compassion, and we are extremely grateful for her hard work and dedication. Her manuscript forms the essence of this book, without which its publication would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank Koren Publishers, Matthew Miller, Aryeh Grossman, Reuven Ziegler, Caryn Meltz, Debbie Ismailoff, Gila Chitiz, and Tomi Mager, who made distinctive and often invaluable contributions to this book.

Finally, a sincere thank you to Rabbi Hanoach Teller for writing *Beyond Belief*.

Family Orenstein



Introduction

For urban dwellers, life in a town is nearly unfathomable (albeit, perhaps quaint). Reducing even further to townlet, village, and hamlet, somewhere along the way would be the *shtetl*, the Yiddish diminutive for *shtot*, which means “town.”

Figuratively, the word “*shtetl*” implies a small community (although it need not have been one) in Eastern Europe prior to World War II. It equally implies a simple life, greatly governed by religion or at least tradition, where a Jew, usually much of the population – despite privation and arduous labor – always felt at home.

The twin pillars of the *shtetl* were *Yiddishkeit* (Jewish governance of all aspects of life) and *menshlichkeit* (moral sensitivity and noble behavior toward one’s fellow man). No two ideals could have enjoyed a more symbiotic relationship than was practiced in the *shtetl*, where the sacred and the profane were seamlessly fused. The *shtetl*’s grounding in *Yiddishkeit* and *mentschlichkeit* were most readily discerned in the synagogue, the home, and the market.

For most Western Jews, exposure to the *shtetl* came from the 1964 Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Based on the stories of

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Sholom Aleichem, and set in the Pale of Settlement in 1905, the plot concerns how Tevye, the *shtetl* milkman and father of five daughters, endeavors to maintain his religious fidelity as outside influences and the czar's edicts undermine the traditions of his family.

When *Fiddler* debuted on Broadway in the 1960s the majority of American Jewry had little connection to a *shtetl*, nostalgic or otherwise. On the contrary, American Jews, by and large, certainly those who could afford to, were moving away from religious centers that were once immigrant neighborhoods. Suddenly, Tevye was their first lesson in Tradition.

And whereas *Fiddler on the Roof* conveys how tightly knit the Jewish communities were, it fails to portray how paramount Torah study and boundless acts of kindness were in the *shtetl*. And this brings us to *Beyond Belief*, the most intimate, informative, and enchanting description of a non-fiction *shtetl* I have ever read or heard about.

In *Beyond Belief*, Salek Orenstein recounts in rich detail what he witnessed growing up in the *shtetl* of Apt (Opatow), providing the readers with a personal, up-front view of a world that was, from the water shlepper to the rebbetzin, from the grain merchant to the beggars, to the *Shabbos goy*, and absolutely everyone in between with humor, pathos, and angst.

It should be noted, as Salek makes clear, that Apt is not just any *shtetl*. It was the home of four of the major founders of the early hasidic movement, a fact that transformed this *klaynshtetl* into a megalopolis – by *shtetl* standards – of over sixty-six hundred souls by the time Salek frolicked on its dirt paths.

When Reb Yisrael of Koznitz (Kozieice), an early leader of the hasidic movement, was born in Apt in 1733 there were less than one thousand Jews living in the entire vicinity. In the late eighteenth century Reb Moshe Leib of Sasow, one of the most revered names of early *Hasidus*, established his court in Apt, rendering it a major hasidic center. Reb Yaakov Yitzchak of Przysucha,

renowned as the *Yid HaKodesh*, also graced Apt with his presence, causing the population to swell to three times its size.

And then Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the saintly rebbe who had led various communities beforehand, settled in Apt. Reb Avraham Yehoshua was so enchanted with Apt that he requested that his name always be associated with the town, and indeed he is eponymously known as the Apta Rav (Rabbi of Apt).

The Rebbe of Apt also merited another moniker, which his contemporaries – all disciples of the famous Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk – and his disciples attested that he richly deserved. The Rebbe of Apt was known and revered far and wide as the *Ohev Yisrael*, a sobriquet adopted from his magnum opus.

Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk said about his prized disciple, “His name is reflective of his very being. He has *ahavas Yisrael* (love for his fellow Jew) like Avraham Avinu, and a princely look like Yehoshua; his mind is as sharp as his grandfather Reb Heschel.” Reb Elimelech once commented to the Chozeh of Lublin, “The very prayers of the Apta Rav build the celestial Temple and insert within them the ark and the tablets.”

The Apta Rav was the youngest of Reb Elimelech’s primary disciples, which made him the oldest of the torchbearers of the hasidic flame for the next generation. His word was a command to anyone with hasidic allegiance in Poland.

Of this fabled and holy shtetl of Apt less than three hundred survived the Nazi onslaught. Salek Orenstein was one of the few survivors, and through his enchanting and at times heartbreakingly stark memoir, the reader is able to vicariously experience *shtetl* life and the gruesome closing of this glorious chapter of Jewish history.

Hanoch Teller



Chapter One

Life in the *Shtetl*

Salek Orenstein was born and raised in the Polish town of Opatow, better known to the Jewish world as “Apt.” Many have heard of this tiny town – it took only ten minutes to traverse – because of her proudest son, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel, better known as the *Ohev Yisrael*, the disciple of Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk.

Apt was an economically depressed town, though rich in Torah scholarship. There was never a shortage of *rabbanim* in Apt to rule on halachic issues and they were consulted all the time.

The heart of Apt’s economy was the “market” that was conducted every Wednesday. On this day people would come from the countryside to sell their wares, including ducks, cows, and all sorts of livestock and agricultural products. At the market they would also take the opportunity to purchase any dry goods they needed for the week.

Most people in the *shtetl* were involved in small-scale trading. They worked as tailors, shoemakers, store owners, and the like. Salek’s father, Hershel, was a timber and wheat merchant who was in business with three of his cousins.

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Salek saw his father only on Shabbos; during the week the head of the family was away on business. Each day, which started early in the morning, was devoted to traveling across the countryside to meet with Polish landlords on their estates. It was there that Salek's father made his purchases of wheat and timber. Before World War II he also did a fair amount of trade with Germany.

Salek's mother, Nacha Ella, was a housewife who was assisted by a non-Jewish woman named Zosia. Even though she spoke an excellent Yiddish (she was brought up in the Orenstein home) Zosia was never relied upon to help with the cooking.

A moderate upheaval took place in the Orenstein home twice a month when an elderly, non-Jewish woman would arrive to do the laundry. Like any fairly large family, they generated a good amount of laundry, but they did not have the machinery to deal with it.

The laundry lady would haul in her own zinc tub and place it on the stove to boil. Then the soiled clothes would be placed within it to soak. This method was no different from how the Orensteins dealt with their dirty dishes except that the laundry lady had some cleaning agents to add to the water.

After the clothes had been laundered, they would be taken up to the loft and hung out to dry. The laundry lady would return only a few days later to take down the load before placing it through a mangle as a prelude to ironing. All in all, it was a major operation.

As the youngest boy, Salek did a lot of chores around the house. His older siblings were far more adept at getting out of most jobs. His little sister, Shifra Leah, was considered too small for this kind of work. Nacha Ella made sure, though, that Salek was rewarded for his efforts.

Sour milk, butter, and other items that needed to be kept cool were stored in the cellar. Salek was assigned to transport items to and from the cellar, and he would go down there with the aid of a candle.

Salek was also entrusted with taking the chickens to the *shochet*. After slaughtering the animals and extracting the blood, the *shochet* would place the chickens back into the basket in such a way that by the time Salek returned home there were no longer any visible traces of blood.

After the chicken that Salek brought home had been plucked and cleaned by the non-Jewish maid, his mother would open up the bird herself in order to inspect its insides and *kasher* it with salt. Occasionally she would discover some imperfections, such as a liver that had a strange appearance or a fracture in a small bone, which might render the chicken non-kosher. Naturally Salek was dispatched to the *Rav* to verify the fowl's *kashrus*.

Salek arrived at the rabbi's house and was greeted by the reb-betzin who would inquire regarding the nature of the visit. She would then go to summon the rabbi. The rabbi would place the chicken on the table and open it up. The first question he would ask was, "Is this for Shabbos?" Salek assumed that his response had some bearing on the ruling.

Presumably, if the fowl was intended for the Shabbos meal and there wasn't enough time to find a replacement, the rabbi would attempt to be more lenient in his *pesak* – but not before launching an investigation. "Was this bone broken before or after *kashering*?" Salek would shrug his shoulders in ignorance. If the imperfection was borderline, generally speaking, the *rav* would approve it and instruct him, "Tell the Mammeh it is kosher."

The boy's other weekly chores included bringing the *cholent* to the baker on Friday afternoon. The Orensteins' pot had a special blue and red ribbon tied around it for the purpose of identification. This way when Salek collected the steaming *cholent* on Shabbos morning he was able to recognize the Orenstein pot immediately and not bring home somebody else's food!

Beggars were a regular fixture at the Orenstein home, except on Shabbos. Otherwise, from the early morning until late at night

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the needy would camp out in the Orenstein apartment, usually without bothering to knock before entering. The majority of the beggars were women, who wore shawls over their heads and often carried babies, which was most effective in ensuring a sympathetic response.

When Salek was old enough, he was placed in charge of the vital task of providing for the needy visitors. Basically, all he had to do was distribute the bread that his mother had already baked and sliced.

Sometimes the hungry would complain that they did not want bread for they had already had enough that day. What they wanted, they insisted, was a few lumps of sugar. Once they caught sight of the kettle simmering on the stove their visits would always become more protracted. They would hold their hands over it to warm themselves and invariably ask to sip some hot water.

Like virtually every other dwelling in Apt, the Orenstein home did not have running water. Some residents had a pump, but usually the water for daily needs was stored in a big barrel in the kitchen.

Jewish water carriers would refill this barrel once or twice a day. The water carriers would take advantage of their services by asking Mrs. Orenstein to serve them a little hot water (with a dash of tea) if they saw the kettle standing on the stove. "*Gib mir a bissale heiss wasser*. Give me a bit of hot water," they would beg.

Zisskind was one of Apt's water carriers and Salek would provide him with a cup of hot water – but it came with a price. "Zisskind!" the little boy would demand. "*Tehillim perek heh, pasuk lamed-alef? Pesachim, perek chamishi, der dritten Mishnah!*" No matter what he was asked, this humble water carrier knew the answer without a moment's hesitation. He knew the entire Bible and Talmud by heart!

One day, Zisskind somberly informed Salek, "Your water barrel is lined with dirt."

As there was no filtration system, the water from the well was polluted with fine deposits that gradually settled at the bottom.

Zisskind refused to fill the barrel until it had been thoroughly cleaned. Alas, this *talmid chacham's* agenda was not merely to ensure the purity of the water...

“If you give me a *gleizalle tei*, I will take the barrel downstairs, wash it out, and you will have nice, pure water.”

Salek must have been seven or eight years old at the time, but he was wise enough to realize that clean water was better than dirty water, and the two of them made a deal.

When Zisskind saw the little boy huffing and puffing to ignite the flame for the hot water, he suggested adding a bit of paraffin. In his eagerness, Zisskind spilled the paraffin, resulting in a singed beard. Eventually he got his drink and Salek never mentioned the episode to his mother.

Cooking in the *shtetl* was arduous. Every time the stove needed to be lit it was necessary to climb into the loft and haul down timber and coal. Then began the hard part: It was a Herculean task to light the stove. The wood was often too moist for kindling, so paper and other ignitable materials were added to move things along. And all the while a crew would simultaneously puff their lungs out so that the spark would catch.

That's why hot water was such a coveted prize and Zisskind had to bargain so much. When he would depart with his empty pails his lips were aflame, reciting *Tehillim* or folios of Talmud by heart. No matter where he went and no matter what time of day, he was always engaged in his devotions. Despite an obviously rough life punctuated by abject poverty, Zisskind would always boom, “*Baruch Hashem!*” when asked how he was doing.

Feivel the milkman was another fixture in Apt. Everyone knew when old Feivel was coming to make his deliveries. He would trudge from house to house every morning – no matter the weather – hauling two large buckets of milk with a zinc measuring cup attached by a chain to one of the buckets. The cup would rattle and thump as Feivel shuffled around town making his deliveries.

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The other way that you knew he was coming was his unmistakable visage. Feivel was a small man with broad shoulders and a long, wide, red beard which practically covered his entire face. When he spoke, you saw the beard moving up and down and you could hear a voice, but you could never quite see through the crimson forest to pinpoint where his mouth was.

Feivel's attire consisted of a sackcloth apron tied around his belly with a red hand towel of sorts oddly attached. This cloth was versatile; it was used to wipe Feivel's beard and it also had two knots within it which functioned as a bank. One knot housed the coins that he used to provide change for his paying customers, and the other knot was allocated for coins that he would save for his personal Shabbos purchases.

Whenever Feivel was running late with his deliveries he would declare: "I first went to the ladies who have just given birth," and base his tardiness on an elusive text. "*Azoi shteit geshriben!* Is this not what it says?" As members of a kindly, sharing community, the residents of Apt understood that Feivel was loosely ascribing his actions to a Torah precept that mandated looking after the needy first. Had there actually been as many new births as Feivel claimed, then tiny Apt would have been triple Lodz's population!

In Apt, as in so many other *shtetlach*, one Jew was always ready to extend himself on behalf of his brethren. The sense of kindred and brotherhood was heightened by the fact that the residents were surrounded by illiterate and hostile non-Jews. Apt's Catholics received their basic education from the local priests, who exhorted the masses to hate the Jews, who killed their god. If the non-Jews had not required employment by the Jews they never would have tolerated or spared the Jewish majority.

Salek's father's three cousins were his business partners in the grain business, just as their fathers had been. The goods were transported to the nearest station by horse and coach in the summer and by sleigh in the winter.

Except for an occasional taxi that was traveling from point A to point B with Apt in the middle, motorized vehicles never ventured into the *shtetl*. The nearest railway station was over twelve miles away in Ostrowiec, and any major journey had to begin there.

Salek's father conducted his business slightly outside the town boundary, just beyond the arched gateway to Opatow that, with the Church wall, formed the official entrance to the town. He had a large yard, a stable with four horses, and a barn. A family of storks nested on the roof of the barn every spring. When the youngsters of Opatow saw the storks flying overhead, they always knew that summer was approaching and they would joke, "The storks are bringing the babies!" Salek enjoyed watching the mother stork feeding her chicks on the top of their barn, their beaks open wide. It was a very special sight.

Salek visited Ostrowiec only once. This visit was long in coming, for Hershel had never agreed to take Salek along to Ostrowiec, until one day he finally caved in. That was the first and only time that Salek ever met his older cousin Avraham, who was a left-wing Zionist, and the only family member who did not have a beard.

Avraham was a very handsome man; his wife was rather stout with a pronounced squint. Everyone assumed that Hershel's cousin must have married for money, for why else would he have consented to marry someone with such an obvious deformity? Their daughter, however, was adorable, with a head full of blond curls.

The first time that Salek ever saw a train was during this visit to Ostrowiec. It was also the first time that he had ever seen a real city. The Jewish population in the city was more than three times that of Apt, which is why Ostrowiec had a world-famous rabbi.

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Salek never wanted to leave cosmopolitan Ostrowiec, but at the end of the day he was ordered into his father's horse and buggy. He spent the drive home pestering his father about the locomotive, asking about its steam and wondering how such a giant machine could move without horses. When Salek returned to Apt he told all of his friends about what he had seen, and since no one else had ever seen a train before, he was able to wildly exaggerate and spin magic with his tale.

As primitive a mode of transportation as the sleigh may seem, in the eyes of the youngsters it was very appealing. When Salek would ride in the coach, holding the reins and guiding the two horses harnessed with sleigh bells all by himself, he was sure that his heart would burst from pride.

Salek's father had a large yard, a stable with four horses, a storehouse, and a barn, all located outside the town boundary. Since grain kept in sacks for a long period will ferment, they would lay out the grain thinly and regularly rake it to aerate the grain and avoid having moisture build up.

The father of Zosia the maid fed and watered the horses, and at times he also acted as coachman, accompanying Salek's father on business trips in the winter. This enabled Salek's father to sit wrapped up in his great coat to keep warm and avoid hypothermia.

Salek's greatest enjoyment was to accompany his father on his road trips to the wealthy landlords who resided in the countryside. It was a treat to watch the farmers plowing their land or harvesting their crops and significantly more appreciated than spending the day in school.