I am Gottlieb's Daughter

Pnina Talmi

CONTENTONOW

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Senior Editors & Producers: ContentoNow
Translation: Maya Ehrmann
Editor: Sacha Fabian-Gorelik
Illustrations: Pnina Talmi
Graphic Design: Ksana Kravtsova
Book cover: Ksana Kravtsova

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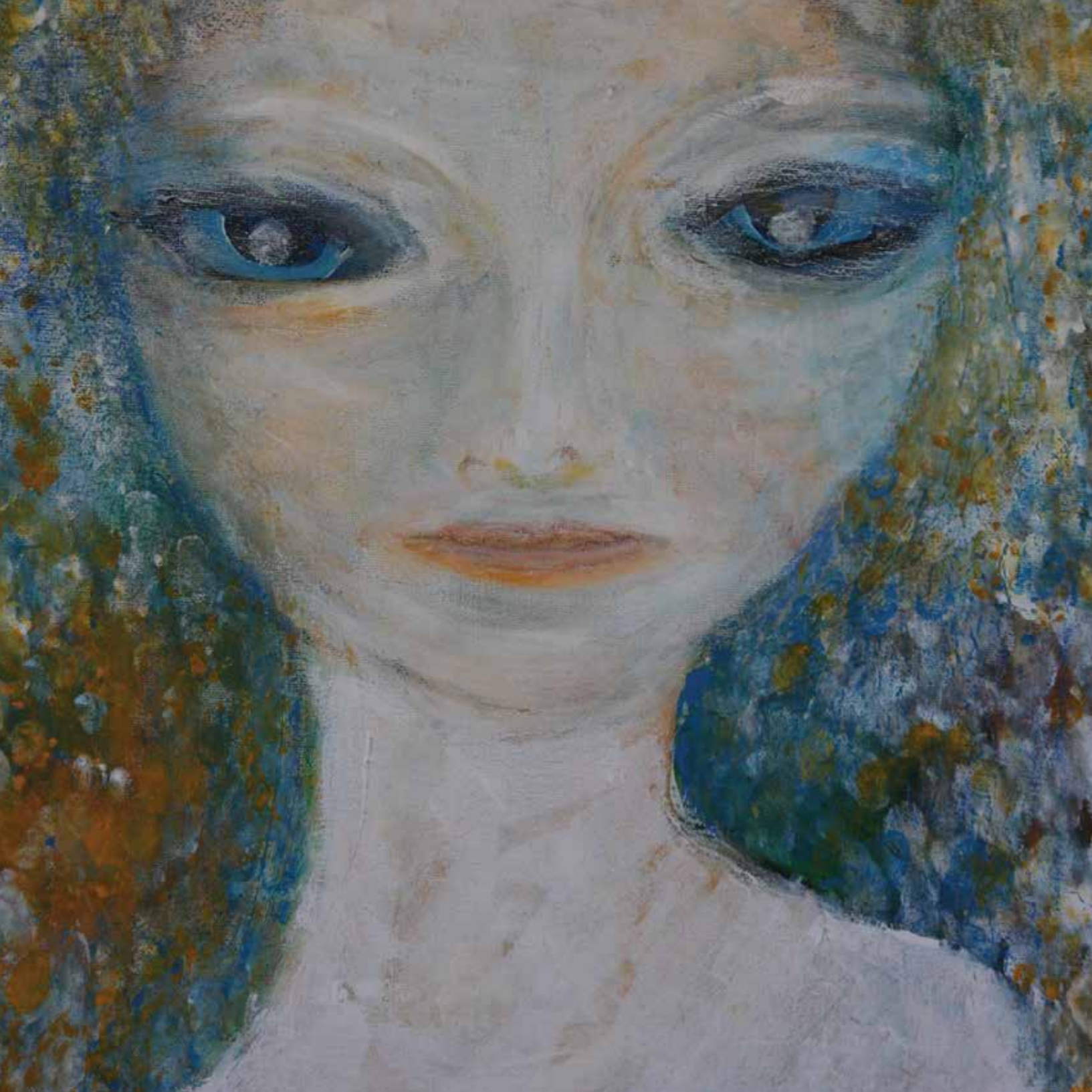
Opening letter

Good evening, my dear grandchildren,

If you are reading these words, it's a sign you have reached the age of 12 and are busy writing your family heritage project, just as your parents did at your age. One by one, they came to me each year over the past decade to interview me for the project. In truth, they didn't know exactly what to ask me. Perhaps they were embarrassed, perhaps they didn't want to hurt me, or perhaps they trusted me to share with them the story of their familial roots. Here I must confess that my background is unclear. I didn't have anyone to ask, and so my knowledge consists only of my childhood memories. Now I give you my contribution to your family heritage project. As it happens, my memory is like a very strong bridge and can extend beyond time and space.

You are not here yet, so I still don't know you; when it's time for this lesson about your family, I will no longer be here. Therefore, this must be a virtual meeting. Despite this, I love each and every one of you, my future kin, and I happily share my life story with you, first hand.

Your family heritage project is a gift from me to you, my dears.



1 An Orange Fire in the Darkness

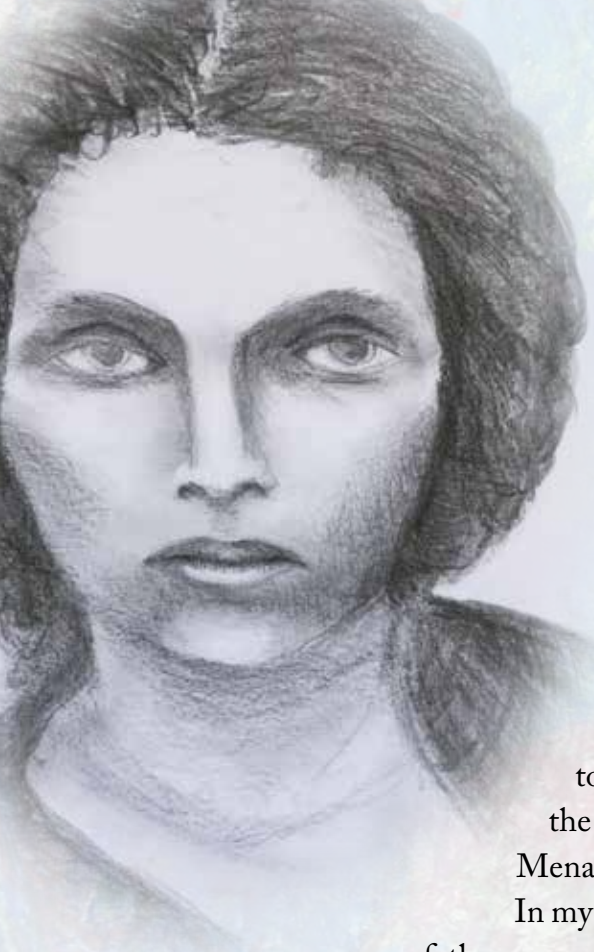
WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE A MOTHER

My children – your grandparents, and my grandchildren – your parents, my name is Nini, a name similar to yours – Ninai[1]. It was the play on words of a grandmother, a woman who didn't know how to punctuate. Somehow, without realizing, I won the world war. I was a winner who continued to miss what most people can take for granted; a happy childhood and a family.

I wanted to tell my story; to write it down. But writing is not how I most easily express myself. So, I thought it would be easier if I spoke with my father. I'll write him letters. That's it, letters to Father. Although we lived together for a very short time, I have stronger ties with my father than I have ever had with anyone else. My father died when I was seven. That is all the time we had together. I had even less time with my mother. She died when I was three years old. Before her death, she was very ill with tuberculosis, and I was forbidden to see her, lest I too become infected.

The tuberculosis spread around our house. Each time one of my brothers or sisters coughed – we were seven in the house, and I was the seventh, the youngest – my father went into a state of tuberculosis alert and made whoever was coughing drink milk. Apparently that was the treatment back then. With mother, he went to all sorts of clinics to try to heal her, but this did not work. When she was home, in between trips to the clinic, I was not allowed to approach her. I only remember her

1 Hebrew for 'great-grandchildren.'



passing by and entering her room. I was only allowed to stand at the entrance to the room and look at her. She in her bed, and I in her doorway.

My mother appears in my memory like photographs, sometimes moving, sometimes still: first picture – everyone sits around the table and I am underneath it, on the red wooden floor. I put a hat on my head and see everyone's feet, including my mother's. A circle of adult feet peeking out, from the edge of the table cloth.

Another picture from that same house – I am sitting in the apple garden under the tree and she is in the window. And another one – the house is on fire; my mother hands me over to my older brother who takes me out of the burning house. Father runs to open the barn door. The first house burned down together with the red wooden floor, apple garden, and the cows. Only the cow named Menaya remained.

In my story, I often mention the cups of milk and bread and the butter my father gave us, and this would not have been possible without Menaya the cow. Menaya the cow was the only survivor from the first house, the red house. All the other cows must have burned.

Menaya moved with us to the second house – a gray house with a gray floor. Father set up a small barn for her. In the morning, he would open the latch of the wooden fence surrounding the house and Menaya would join the herd of cows that the herder collected from all the houses along our street. In the evenings, she would return home fat and satisfied from a day of greenery, enter our small yard, and go to the barn, content to soon be released from the abundance of milk. At this moment, father would take out the bucket and start milking her. As always, I stood next to him with a big clay mug and waited for him to fill it with warm, steaming milk, straight from Menaya to me. "Drink – It's

healthy," and I am proof that it works. That same milk was used for cream, butter, and to my feeling of abundance.

That is, until they took her away from us too, together with other things which were taken.

The picture from the second house – my mother is laying in bed after returning from one of her treatments, she quickly passes by me without touching me, I stand at the door of her room, and from far away, she shows me a shirt she embroidered for me – I don't move closer. She smiles at me from afar.

Last picture – night. Father wakes me and my brother Itzik in the middle of the night. He dresses me, combs my hair, ties my shoelaces, and tells us Mother has died. He says that I may now kiss her, because the illness is no longer contagious. I cannot reach her. Father lifts me closer to my mother's face. I give her a kiss – the first and last. Her face is yellow and cold and I do not feel her. Until this day, poor Mother, I do not feel you. I have no memories of touching you. How do I feel Mother? What do I feel? My whole life, I have missed something that I never experienced.

Then, it was morning. Mother was laid out on the floor and covered with black fabric. Her legs faced the door, and two candles were lit by her head. In the afternoon, everyone went to her funeral and I stayed in bed alone. I dreamt my first dream: I see myself scrunched up in bed, sleeping, and then a tall woman dressed in black approaches me and hands me a cold bronze statue – she reaches out her hand with the statue and says – "This is Mother – Take it." I did not want to touch it. Now, after all these years, I still feel the cold touch of my mother's face and the touch of the statue in the dream. The pain of the unknown is still embedded in my soul – it seems the soul is ageless. The soul does not grow old – it only expands so that it can hold all that is to come.

Mother died on Yom Kippur eve, and so we fasted. I went with Father to the synagogue, and was hungry the whole time. When we returned, the house was cold and dark. We stood, my sister Meryl – Miri and I, and I told Father, "I'm hungry," and he asked Miri: "Do we have food in the house?" And she answered, "No, just potatoes, but they're not cooked." Father said, "So turn on the oven." (The oven was inside the wall and required going to fetch wood; it also caused smoke to rise from the chimney.) Miri said, "But they will see the smoke, and it's still Yom Kippur. We're still not allowed to

light a fire." But I'm hungry, so Father says, "It doesn't matter. The girl is hungry." That sentence stayed with me as a kind of conception of my father; that there is nothing holier than the need to feed this hungry girl. My sister lit the fire and cooked me potatoes. And so we desecrated the sanctity of the day, Yom Kippur and the day of my mother's funeral, and the smoke rose from a single Jewish home because of me. The Forgiver will forgive my transgressions.

Sorry for breaking the sanctity of the holy day. Sorry for the hunger. Sorry I was so small that the only pain I felt was hunger, accompanied by fear of that illness, tuberculosis. With that ends the chapter of Mother – three years of cold and emotional hunger.

HAND IN HAND WITH FATHER

Once again I returned to Father, who always tried to fill the void, and succeeded till the day he died. He died of hunger in the woods while trying to feed three children. I always return to him, as one returns to a wellspring of love and dedication.

When Mother died, Father had to take care of the young children who were still at home. Father was everything to me. I think he loved me. I'm sure he loved me.

Up until the day Mother died, he spent all our savings trying to heal her. I know he loved her even more than he loved me. He tried everything: Those trips to the hospital and the herbs... Father and Mother weren't home, and I understood that this was the reason we were so poor, because all our money was spent on the treatment.

My father was a very special man. He had hands of gold and knew how to do everything. He wanted us to also know how to do everything. For example, he would give the boys a clock to take apart. He would say, "If you want to take apart a clock, take it apart, but only as long as you put it back together with all the screws inside. The clock should work without a single screw left outside. That is my condition." The boys did this. The girls would paint on fabric and make pillows. I remember the house was filled with pillows of all shapes and sizes, in warm colors like sunflowers. When I touched them, I would feel the rough texture of the paint. I would find myself in a state of observation and absorption. I wandered around, among my older brothers, and would snuggle up to my sister Miri, who became my little mother.

I think my eyes were the part of me that most developed in my life (I'm not sure about my brain)

as well as my hands, which touched, stroked, and felt in search of a loving touch. My father did all kinds of labor. We had a workshop inside the house where he would do all sorts of carpentry work. I remember the smell of wood and wood chips. Since we didn't have a tiled floor in the house, we would spread wood chips on the ground in the winter to prevent mud. Father worked inside the house and in the yard. We had wool-combing machines in the yard. The Ukrainian peasants would come with sacks of wool, probably from sheep, and sit in the yard waiting for their turn. The combing machines – I don't recall if they were automatic or manual – would rotate, and the wool would be combed and turned into balls of yarn. I would watch and see the Ukrainians sitting and eating whole wheat bread with pork. Watching them cut the meat and fat with a knife and placing it straight into their mouths gave me a huge appetite. We weren't rich and no one noticed if I ate or not. One day I came to my father and said, "I really want that! Whole wheat bread and ham." I remember sitting next to the table and saying to him, "I want that! I want what they're eating." And he answered me, "You can't eat 'that' at the table, but if you sit under the table, I'll bring you that." And he brought me black Russian bread with ham. Fat is fat, so it didn't have an especially great taste. Yet till this day, I remember the appetite it gave me and I still long for the taste of that bread, for the forbidden.

Father was a country boy. He was born in the village. He didn't have a beard. He wasn't a thick-bearded Jew. He was blond with blue eyes, tall and skinny. At the time, he appeared tall to me. Itzik resembled him; I don't know who I resembled. I think I looked like my mother. I have only one picture of her from before I was born. It is black and white and has a lot of other family members in it. I'm not sure my mother had blue eyes. I have no idea, because I never saw her eyes. She was always too far away. I saw her from afar. I remember her general shape, her facial structure with her high cheek bones, and her black hair. I think it was curly. Unlike me, she always wore her hair up.

Father smoked. I think that maybe this fault of mine is rooted in my close connection to him; I also wanted to smoke. He would smoke and even let me fill the thin papers with tobacco (I guess the muscles of my little fingers were developed). He taught me to roll the tobacco in the paper. Afterward, he would light up and smoke. Nowadays the youngsters smoke things like that. It's not drugs. It's tobacco. Somehow it became fashionable again.

Father knew how to do everything. He would join the peasants' games as well as build and fix anything in need of his smart hands. The peasants called him "the mechanic", because he would build flour windmills for them. Somewhere beyond the field, before I was even born, we had a slaughter-house, and Father used to go there. I remember one Saturday when he was home and dressed nicely, he took my hand and together we went to the field beyond the river. It was a wheat field strewn with light blue flowers, star-thistles; he taught me to make a wreath out of them, to string two flowers together and roll them. Together, we made a wreath in the golden field, and he placed it on my head! I don't have pictures. It's a shame I don't have pictures of that girl in the golden field with the light flowers on her head. It's a shame that I don't have a picture of that man. I have one photograph, probably from long before I was born. Unfortunately, I don't have a single photograph of myself together with him. Yet, in my soul, I have a picture; I have a picture of him within me. My father taught me everything I know today... I have a feeling that this most important man in my life taught me the most significant first lesson of my life. That he wasn't a doting father, he was a teacher.

Father would sing Hassidic songs to me that he learned from the Rabbi in the nearby village. He used to go there from time to time for a "tisch". My sister would also sing to me. I, too, sing a song of color, smell, trees, and bread; the smells of home.

I recall it always already being dark when Father returned from work. He would sit me down on his lap with my face toward him, loving and close. I held him and caressed his face; I doubt there is a more intimate exchange. We usually hold our children with their back toward us, and only face them toward us when they are small or when they are babies, in order to burp them

I used to touch my father. Till this day I can feel the texture of his skin. I also remember the touch of his hand. I always used to walk hand in hand with him. I remember walking past a fence on our street, hand in hand, and then he saw a piece of bread on the ground. I don't say sidewalk, because there wasn't one. I truly mean the bread lay on the earth. He picked up this piece of bread, unsliced like we were used to. He blew the dust off of it, cleaned it, and kissed it. He said to me, "It's sacred! Bread is a sacred thing. It shouldn't be thrown away. Now, let's put it here beside the fence. Maybe someone will need it. Maybe the birds will eat it. It is bread."

Till this day, it is bread. I can't stand seeing what is done in our bread-room. The bread is sliced and thrown out in piles. There are those who take it to the horses or dogs. If someone eats it, that's ok. I take bread on Fridays because then it is hot and fresh and it's a shame not to take it. I take a little bit, a few slices. I try not to eat bread because it's fattening. I notice that often the bread I take becomes moldy, so then I have to throw it out. And I do. I say: "Father, I'm throwing it out, because no one will eat it." I have to return it to the bread-room and I know they will throw it out.

So that is the lesson about bread. Bread is sacred. I wish I could pass this on. I wish I could give bread to all the hungry children. There are so many who are hungry. I know what hunger is. It's not a craving for something or because I didn't eat breakfast that morning. I know the hunger from days of not eating, not finding anything edible, and not waking up to anything hot to drink. This is hunger so total that you stop feeling pain, that your stomach stops hurting. Do you know the feeling when your stomach growls and you think: *I'm really hungry*? Nonsense. It's nonsense. In this world of ours, we are never truly hungry. We eat. My father would say, "People aren't pigs. They eat everything..."

Father is the man who loved my beautiful, sick mother. Father did everything to make her well again, to protect her so that she wouldn't leave him. They lovingly gave birth to seven children. I am the seventh, and I'm the last token of love between them.

Maybe that's the reason he guarded and protected me after Mother's death, so as to prevent that same love from disappearing. Father was everything to me. He filled me with seven years of memories, love, and dedication. This was his gift to me.

The memory of touch: You lift me with my back toward you to kiss Mother who has passed away. You cover her with a warm blanket and take me away from the lit fireplace, straight into bed. You take me on a walk in the wheat field beyond the river and weave me a wreath of blue star-thistles. You return from a long work day and sit me upon you, close, face-to-face. You sing to me and I look into your light blue eyes. The night we fled, you transported me across the river by carrying me on your shoulders. The night we fled, you held my hand during the entire long journey.

One doesn't forget touch. Till this day, I hold your hand and can feel the scars on it.

My father's name was Aharon, Aharon Gottlieb. This father raised and provided for seven children.

SMELLS, COLORS, AND SAWDUST

My oldest sister – the firstborn of the seven – was twenty years older than me. I didn't merit to know her. I know she was beautiful, that she was chosen as the county's beauty queen, and that she had to hide because of a Polish doctor who fell desperately in love with her. She was moved to another city and married a Jew. He was big with red hair. They had two daughters who were my age but twice my height. They identified me as the little sister of Breindel, beautiful Bruriah. A year later, my sister Nechama was born. My memory of her is her cough and Father giving her milk. Nechama married our cousin in the nearby town. They, too, had two children.

Yehoshua was born after Nechama. I remember him as a handsome lad with blue eyes. He used to help Father with carpentry, and Father would give him milk for his cough. He was recruited to the Russian army, and that is how he escaped execution.

Leibel/Leon, was born a few years after Yehoshua. He was a beautiful boy who didn't like to study. He would return home with his knuckles bruised from the teacher's ruler. He liked doing carpentry work, to take apart clocks with Father's one condition that not a single piece will be left out of their reconstruction. For some time, he lived and painted in Milan. Today he is buried there.

Who else did we have? Afterward, we had Miri, Meryl. She replaced my mother. She raised me. I will talk about her later, because she is very important to me.

And then there is a break of 10 years. Father traveled to America to prepare a place for us in the New World.

When he returned, everything was in place to bring his family there. The family at the time was not very big – three or four children and a wife. My mother's mother, Grandmother Devorah, refused to go to America, and she didn't want her daughter to go and leave her. So we didn't go to America. We all stayed in Vysotsk, and we all know how that decision turned out.

Father spoke English with another man in the town. It was a funny language. Soon, my brother Itzik would be born and I three years after him. I knew and loved Itzik. He was handsome and gentle and I accompanied him everywhere like a shadow. We used to play war – like the neighbors. I joined him when he went to school. I sat outside, leaning against the sun-stroked wall. When he came outside at the end of the day, he would automatically extend his hand towards me and we would hold hands.

I had three sisters. One was known for her beauty, the other for her illness which she caught from Mother, and the third for her kind heart. The third acted as a mother to me. They were all pretty and talented, especially in art.

I also had three brothers, all older than me. They would create, break apart, and build toys, slides, and ice skates from wood; and I, the youngest, enjoyed all their talents. It's too bad they have all been shot and killed.

I loved and still love my deceased brothers and sisters. I try to revive them in my memory. I mostly miss my sister/mother, the one who raised me and gave me her milk in the ghetto. She breastfed her baby son and left a little for me, in secret, because I was small and needed something nutritious.

I remember you as a beautiful, talented, and loving group of youngsters. My earliest memories of you are full of smells of oil paint and fresh woodchips – the fruits of your labor and creation, in which I wandered and immersed myself to my knees. There, the smells have solidified and accumulated.

GRANDMOTHER DEVORAH ASCENDED TO THE HEAVENS

Grandmother Devorah, my mother's mother, was almost one hundred years old. No one remembered when she was born, because there was no one else around as old as her. Even she could not remember or even count so much. She was as small as she was old.

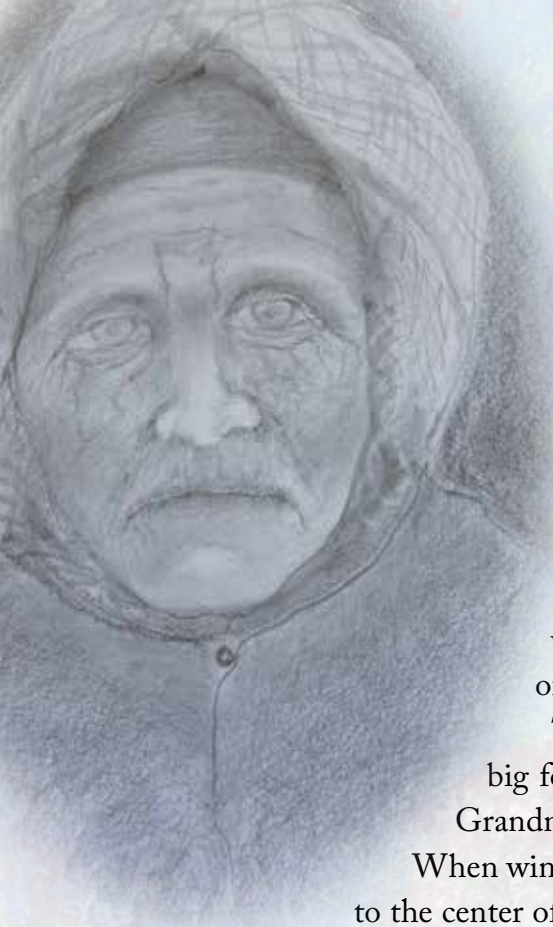
Her body was covered with many layers of clothing. She wore large shirts tucked into four skirts, one on top of the other. Three were various shades of gray and one, the one closest to her body, was white with a knitted hem. She always wore a kerchief on her head that hid all her hair. Only a small piece of hair, like a triangular bird's beak rising toward her forehead was visible. It's tip revealing gray and black hairs.

Only her face and hands were exposed.

Her hands, which shall be spoken of later, appeared too big for her small body.

Her face resembled a walnut. When you see a whole walnut, you see all the wrinkles on its face, like dry earth.

Her face had a net of thin wrinkles, and each line of wrinkles veered in different directions. This gave the sensation of a map of the earth with hills, valleys, and terraces. Her mouth was tucked inward like all the lines that led inward inside her. She rarely spoke and certainly didn't shout. It felt as if she was shouting inward, into her small body, collecting her entire face into her mouth.



Within the net of wrinkles, there was a pair of eyes, blue like clouded skies. No one knew if she could see beyond the clouds in her eyes, but she would sometimes close them. Then it was clear she could see from the outside in. For example, she always knew if there was a boy or girl beside her who was too quiet or sad. She would lift her skirt a bit on the right side, along with the second and third skirts, tucking the edges into her belt, and her large hand would dive into the big pocket of the white skirt. She would take a candy out of the pocket and extend this comforting sweetness toward the child, meaning towards me.

After she gave and comforted, she lowered the skirt edges in reverse order and was once again small and covered entirely like a flower of the night queen.

The hands that peeked from her sleeves, those hands that were too big for her body which shrank over time, were like a butterfly's antennae. Grandmother Devorah could feel the change of weather with those hands. When winter was near, she would bring a large clay pot, full of whispering coals, to the center of the house. She would grab both sides of all four skirts and stand before the coal-filled pot. The skirts swelled up and there was no longer a need to hold them by the sides.

Grandmother Devorah went and swelled up and was filled with warm air, until she resembled a parachute that would soon ascend to the ceiling. Her wrinkled face remained scrunched up by all the wrinkles, and her blue eyes blinked in delight.

Grandmother Devorah remained nearly a century in the house in order to first protect her children, and then her children's children. There was no one left who could remember where all her children were. I remember only one of her daughters who she watched over until she died and then she watched over me.

One day she disappeared. She laid in the bed covered in a large down blanket and gave me one last candy that she had saved beneath all the down. She just shriveled up and faded away; she took with