

ATTACHMENT #29

**SONYA'S TALE: RUSSIA, TZEDAKAH, KVETCHING &
IMPOVERISHED DESPAIR**

Discussed in conversations of Barney R. Radov and Clare Levin

Those left behind in Russia – having survived starvation, World War I, civil war and pogroms – faced life in a Ukraine under increasing attack by Stalin, who instigated something of a genocide against those unhappy with communist rule. The civil war which followed the Russian Revolution left over 1.5 million people dead in the Ukraine, the Great Famine killed another 3.3 million, and the Terror of the 1930s killed another three quarters of a million Ukrainians. (It is ironic that the Great Famine, a combination of general crop failure, expropriation, Stalinist terror, and banishment or murder of those complaining, often called the Holodomor, is sometimes blamed on Jews. Because some Jews were communists, as were many more Russians and Ukrainian non-Jews, Jews were blamed for a famine they themselves typically fell victim to. As Snyder recounts in *Bloodlands*, a newspaper reporter for *Pravda* residing in Moscow, whose Jewish family lived in Ukraine, received a letter in 1933 from his father: “This is to let you know that your mother is dead. She died of starvation after months of pain.” Her last wish was for their son to recite the *Kaddish* for her. Blaming the many for the sins of the few is at the traditional heart of anti-Semitism).



Passers-by no longer paying attention to the corpses of starved peasants on a street in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in 1933.



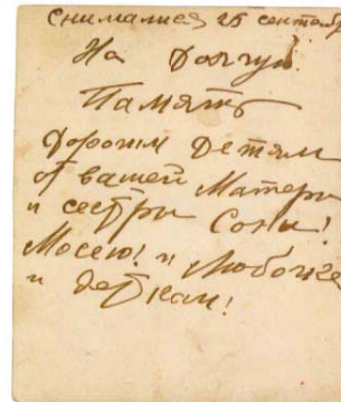
Holodomor Memorial in Kiev.

Tragically, hardly anything is known of the life of the family left behind. A little information does come from a letter from Luba's mother and her sister Sonya. The letter is an appeal for money, one suggesting dire straits, and interestingly, it reflects the tone of a similar letter, also addressed to Luba and her husband Morris Radov, from those who had it made out, but were living, if not in political terror, in economic squalor in Brooklyn, namely Cherna Bass and her family.

The two letters, lost for decades, were found in 2013. The first, below, is a typical picture postcard of the old type: namely, not displaying interesting scenes, but more like the holiday greetings cards of today, showing a picture of the family. Morris is referred to by his Hebrew name, Moshe, and Luba by her full Russian name, Lyubochka.



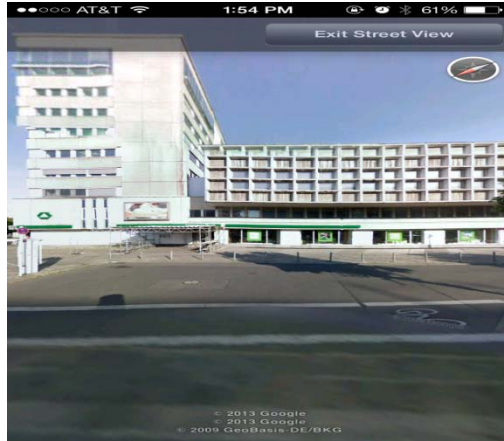
Снимались 25 сентября
На долгую память
Дорогим детям от вашей матери
и сестры Сони.
Мошею и Любочке
и деткам.



Taken on Sep, 25.
For lasting memory
To dear children from your mother
and sister Sonya.
To Moshe and Lyubochka and kids.

The envelope shows a Russian return address, with the Erie, Pennsylvania mailing address showing that Sonya had been married to an E. Belostotsky and had moved with her mother to a new city. She was then living in Krivoy Rog at 35 Karl Liebknecht St. Whatever the attractiveness or, undoubtedly lack of it, of that residence, today, per Google maps, the curb appeal has changed dramatically.





35 Karl Liebknecht St.

Krivoy Rog (now Kryuyi Rih in Ukrainian) is near the Ekaterinoslav of the Radovs, now Dnipropetrovsk. It was founded in the 18th Century by a one-eyed Cossack named Rih. Despite a beautiful riverfront, it is ugly, industrial and plagued by Stalinist architecture. Today, covering a length of 80 miles (the largest in Europe) and having 660,000 people, because of abandoned mines, old factories and terrible pollution, it is considered to be almost unlivable.



Krivoy Rog, at the confluence of the Inhulets and Saksahian Rivers



Industrial Krivoy Rog



Map of Modern Ukraine



More Industrial Krivoy Rog

Jews came to Krivoy Rog under pressure by Stalin, who declared it to be a Jewish National Administrative Region in 1928. The earlier Jews, who had been there since the 1860s, were generally craftsmen, while those who came in the 1920s and 1930s were mainly factory workers. Of the approximately 13,000 Jews in Krivoy Rog when W.W. II began, the Germans murdered over 7,000. However the Central Database of Shoah victims for Krivoy Rog shows only one Bolostosky, Isaak Yitzkhah (b. 1900). Jews remain in the city today, with a synagogue.



Heroes Memorial at Krivoy Rog



Krivoy Rog Synagogue

It is said in Jewish folklore that people die twice: first at the time of their physical death and again at the time when family and friends cease to speak their name. With the recovery of Sonya's picture, her second death is now erased.

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Of the many Yiddish letters sent among the family for decades, then, the only two surviving, apparently, are the pair from Sonya and her mother in Russia and another from Cherna (Jenny) Bass in Brooklyn. They were sent to Morris and Luba Radov, at about the same time, around 1934, and only recovered with the death of Barney R. Radov upon sorting his effects.

Both Cherna and Sonya in different ways were experiencing grave difficulties. They had asked before (and, at least in Cherna's case, often asked again) for money from Morris, who, by all accounts, regularly contributed, although hardly enjoying excess wealth while running a scrapyard in Erie at the height of the Depression. The logic of these contributions constituted something quite different than charity: instead they were a religious duty, the traditional Jewish obligation of *tzedakah*. The word in Hebrew literally means justice or righteousness, not charity, and in that both Sonya and Cherna ask for the money, they remind Morris of his obligations, even in a scolding and chastising manner.



Cherna (Jenny)
Radov Bass



Lena Carol Smith



Morris and Luba Radov



That tone, called a *kvetch* or *kvetching*, refers to finding fault with the person to whom a *kvetch* is addressed. The relationship here between the *kvetch* and the injunction to do one's obligation hardly seems a good psychological or personal strategy to gain success. The *kvetch* serves as a reminder of the listener's weakness so, once criticized, they can be more generous. As we can see in Cherna's letter, she scolds Morris for not inquiring adequately of the health of Leika (that is, Lena), about not understanding his silence (not writing), and saying "perhaps something befell you" in an overtly sarcastic way. She then continues with a

more general criticism of the family at large, writing that she has not "received a letter from anybody. I keep thinking about it." After reminding them that she is "very alone and "I am as forlorn as a stone," she admits that she already has promised to repay the money but has not. That said, she goes on the offensive yet again, claiming that her difficulties have unfairly caused her to be labeled "not a reliable person."

March 19

Dear Yissachar,

Regarding our health, by now, it's – thank G-d. I wrote to you about Leiki, and you haven't even inquired about how she is, after she's been so ill. I can't understand your silence. Perhaps something befell you. Write to me. I also asked you to notify Zusie and Cirka, and we haven't received a letter from anybody. I keep thinking about it. Write to me about what happened by you.

Now I ask of you, Yissachar, I can't get help from anybody, because I am very alone, I am as forlorn as a stone. I ask of you please keep me alive here with 50 dollars. It is Erev Yom Tov and I sit here without anything.

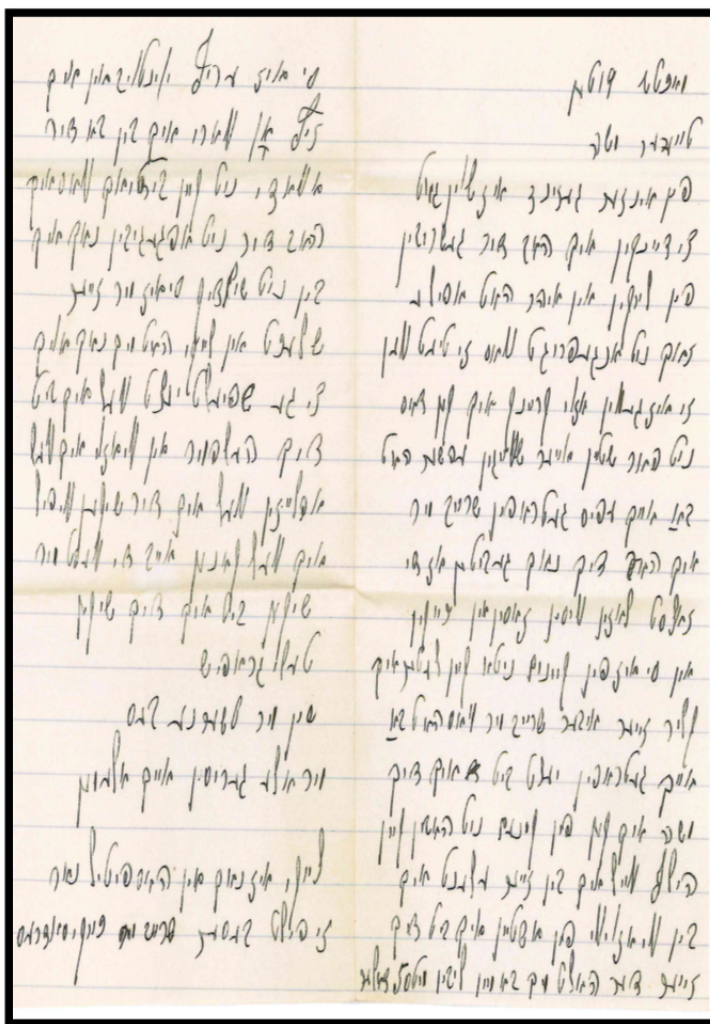
I'm certainly not a reliable person in your eyes, because of (the money) I haven't yet returned to you. But it's not my fault, I've been through very difficult times, and Leiki was an additional (burden) for me. Now that I ask for assistance; when things will get better I'll return as much as I can. If you'll be able to send, I ask you, please send via telegraph.

From me, Charna Bass

We send you all best regards.

Leiki is still in the hospital, but is feeling better.

Please write to me Cirka's address



The Yiddish in both Sonya's and Cherna's letters is traditional Ukrainian-Yiddish, extremely difficult today to find anyone to translate. Americans with Yiddish have greatly modified it, and no longer recognize the European original. Perhaps the only reliable method of recovering old Yiddish is to use Yiddish-Translation.com with Rabbi Schmu'el Elbinger in Israel.

The tone of the letter from Sonya and her mother is much the same. It begins "how long will I have to ask you write a letter? It is costing me my health. This winter I almost died." Duty is then brought out, reminding that "all the darling children should write to me." She, like Cherna, reports her health "I am already old and sick."

Dear Children,

How long will I have to ask you write me a letter? It is costing me my health. This winter I almost died. I had "grip" three times, in this one year. It was a very difficult winter for me.

Darlings, I ask of you, please write me letters.

All the darling children should write to me. Tell them they should know that they have a *bubba* [grandma]. Other people get letter from their children and I have no luck.

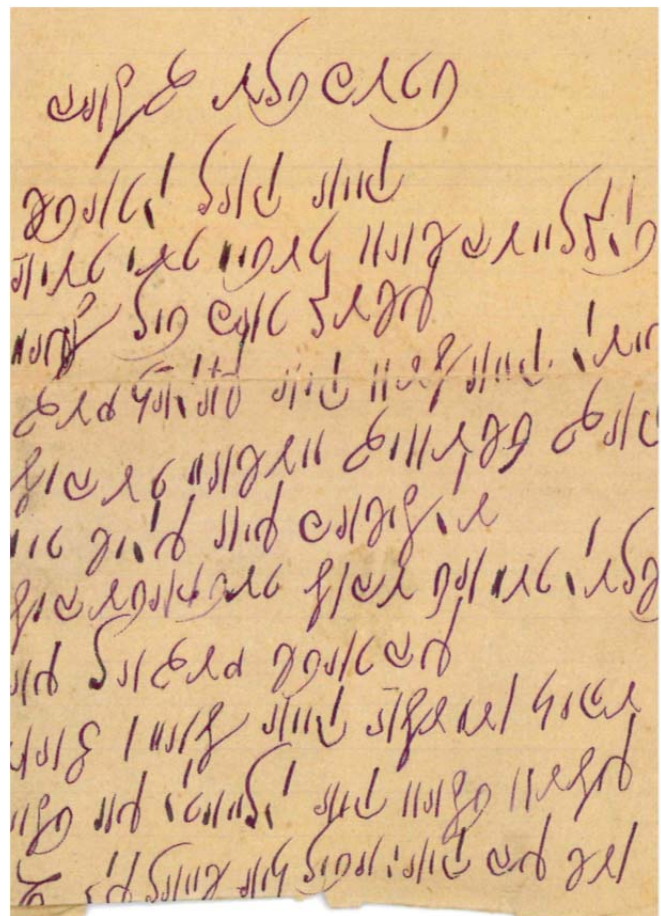
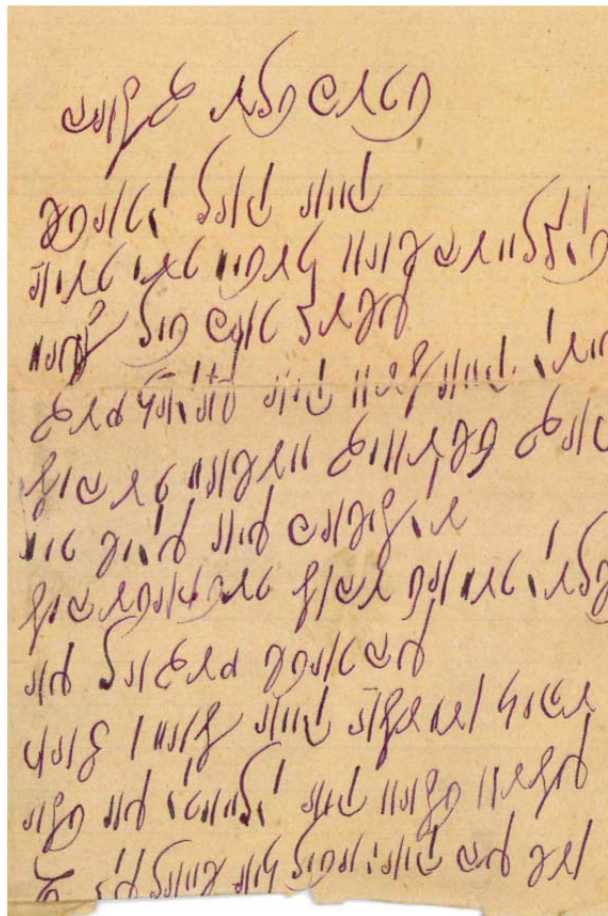
There's no news here. I am already old and sick, I would at least want to see you all once, and then die.

Dear, dear daughter, if you could send me one *pasilke* [postal package.]

Darling, whatever you manage I will never forget it.

Your mother, who misses you very much.

Reply quickly.



Morris and Luba Radov did send money, often and generously, (as certainly did others, as for example, Muni's on-going bail-outs of Bill Carol). Zusie and Cirka (Joe and Sarah Radov) had been the early benefactors, spending all their money to get the relatives out of Russia. Morris and Luba supported much of the family for decades. In a smaller way, money was lent or given (typically there was no real difference) to many, often resulting in small grievances, insults, and unrelenting sarcasm, but never in any break in family relations, any shunning or pushing aside, and hardly any lording over by those who (usually temporarily) had a few dollars as opposed to those who did not. The strategy of insulting someone as a predicate to asking them for help is difficult to fathom today. It, perhaps, could only be understood in the traditional religious context of the meaning of *tzedakah* as righteousness, fairness or justice and, as a reminder from those asking to those giving that it is really a favor conferred on the wealthier by taking their money, as it is well-known that *tzedakah* is one of only three acts one can perform to overcome a less than favorable heavenly decree.



Tzedakah motif on a Jewish gravestone. Located in a Jewish cemetery in Otwock, a small town in Poland.