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My Home Town, Kalvarija (Lithuania)

54°24' / 23°14'

by Israel Matz

Translated by **Gloria Berkenstat Freund**

Israel Matz was born in Kalvaria in 1869. After emigrating to America in 1890, he became an accountant, then entered the pharmaceutical business and founded the Ex-Lax Company in 1906. Matz was both a Zionist pioneer and a lifelong philanthropist and supporter of higher learning. In 1928 Matz founded Gan Khaim in then-Palestine to develop an orange plantation. His continuing legacy includes the Israel Matz Foundation in New York to support the publication of Hebrew literature and philosophy, the Israel Matz Institute for Research in Jewish Law at Hebrew University, and the Matz Chair in Organic Chemistry at the Weizmann Institute. Israel Matz died in 1950, two years after writing this memoir about the town where he grew up for the LITA Yizkor book, published in 1951.

In my childhood, the era about which I write the following memories, Kalvarija had a population of approximately 10,000 souls, 80 percent of them Jews. Later, at the time of the First World War, the Germans set fire to the town before they escaped from there, and only a few streets remained with complete houses. The Jewish residents, for the most part, then scattered to various cities and never returned. Only 1,500 souls remained.

The Jewish population in Kalvarija consisted completely of *misnagdim* [traditionally observant Jews], except for one *hasid*, “Gershon the Hasid,” he was called. He came from somewhere in Poland and married in Kalvarija, where he remained.

The Jews in Kalvarija were great “linguists.” Almost all spoke at least six languages. This does not mean that they really knew all six languages. However, for daily use, at home and at their businesses, often with the help of both hands, they all could converse in six languages:

1. Yiddish—this was their mother tongue that everyone knew at the time.
2. German—everyone knows that those from Kalvarija were specialists in this. At that time, who had not heard of Kalvarier German?
3. Russian was then the language of the government and even those who had never

studied in a Russian school had to know how to converse in Russian when they had business with the *starostnik* [watchman]. For example, a shop could only be kept open until 12 noon. Exactly at 12 o'clock, a *starostnik* would call out: “*Lavochki zaperet,*” that is, “Close the *kremelekh* [little shops], which strongly insulted the Kalvarier shopkeeper. That is, he made fun of their shops [*kromer*] by calling them “*kremelekh.*” Often it would happen that a Jew was caught selling a herring on Sunday after 12 noon or a basket of mushrooms. Then the Jew had to use the Russian language, along with a few coins, it goes without saying, and the *starostnik* annulled the decree.

4. Poles lived in the city, and would come into the shops to trade. One had to speak Polish!
5. And the main income was drawn from the Lithuanian peasants, with whom it was necessary to speak Lithuanian.
6. The language that all Jews learned in *kheder* [religious elementary school]. They read their newspapers and *seforim* [holy books] in this language and carried out their correspondence, both letters of friendship and letters that were concerned with business. Here I mean, Hebrew. However, essentially one did not speak Hebrew; it was not then the style. The only one with whom a Jew would “speak” Hebrew was the Polish maid while making *kiddush* [the blessing over the wine]. Suddenly noticing that the maid had forgotten to place the *challah* on the table, or that a knife was missing, the head of the house was forced to say in Hebrew: “*Shifkha, nu lekhem?!*” or: “*Shifkha, nu sakkin?!*” [“Servant, well, the bread?” or: “Servant, well, the knife?”] because one cannot interrupt a prayer in the middle of *kiddush* in the language of the weekday.

Jews in Kalvarija began to emigrate to America more than 100 years ago. When I came here in the year 1890, Kalvarier Jews already had deep roots here in New York and in other cities in America. They had their own stores and factories, were already real estate agents, and played a significant role in communal life in New York. The late Yitzhak Spektorski, my friend from Kalvarija, was then the superintendent of the Educational Alliance. The Kalvarija *shul* on Pike Street already had a reputation as one of the oldest Orthodox synagogues in New York—with famous rabbis and cantors. One of them was the Vilna city cantor, Kuper, who was specially brought over, and he was held in great respect to the end of his life.

When I disembarked from the ship that brought me to America in 1890, I saw several dozen Jews who had come to meet their relatives who were on the same ship. I did not have anyone to meet me. And when they noticed me—a young man who was, alas, all alone in a strange land, without any relatives who would know at least how to take the first step in the great Golden Land—they began to console, encourage and express sympathy for me. After all, Jews are merciful and sons of the merciful! But when they asked me, “Where are you from?” and I answered, “From Kalvarija,” the sympathy changed into a sort of expression of envy. If this was so, they said, you are already taken care of—Kalvarier Jews here are all well off.

In later years, Kalvarier Jews played an important role in New York in various areas. One of

the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York, the richest Reform temple in America, was the well known Dr. Samuel Shulman, born in Kalvarija, who came to America with his parents when he was still very young and later traveled to study in Berlin. Dr. Shulman is 86 years old and now the Rabbi Emeritus of the same temple. This same temple again chose a Kalvarier *landsman* [person from the same town], Dr. Goldenson, who is still the chief rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, as Dr. Shulman's successor. [Author's note: Since this article was written, Rabbi Goldenson has become Rabbi Emeritus because of his age.]

Who has not heard of the Eron Preparatory School, a school that has already existed for 50 years? It gave thousands and thousands of young immigrants the necessary education so that they could enter colleges and other educational institutions. A great number of those students are now famous lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers in various cities in America. Do you know who the founder of this important teaching institution was? It was one of my friends from Kalvarija, the late Josef Eliyahu Eron, with whom I studied under Yisroel Meir Elkes, the most distinguished *gemara-melamed* [teacher of talmud] in Kalvarija, who was the father of two well known doctors in Kovno. A third son of the same teacher, Yehuda Elkes, now lives in Buffalo, New York and is one of the owners of a large “chain store” organization. In 1914, when the American Socialist Party had the honor of electing a Socialist candidate for the first time, the successful candidate was again a Jew from Kalvarija, Meyer London. [Author's note: See Hillel Rogof's article about Meyer London in the second volume of *Lita* that will be published soon. Translator's addendum: This article does not appear in *Lita*, vol. 2, published in Tel Aviv in 1965.]

London was the son of Efraim London, a Talmudist with revolutionary ideas, and came to America with his family in 1888. Meyer London's father was a publisher of the radical weekly *der morgnstern* [*The Morning Star*] for a short time. He did not actually accumulate any possessions—the only inheritance he left for his son, Meyer, was his progressive ideas and his continual striving to better the condition of the workers. Meyer London usually had many political opponents in Congress, but everyone respected him for his honesty and his devotion to his ideals and to the working class in America, whom he served with devotion until the end of his life. A half million people accompanied him to his eternal rest. And we can list a hundred more Jews from Kalvarija who became successful and famous in all fields in America.

It was not just chance that Jews began to leave Kalvarija for America earlier than from other cities in Lithuania and Poland. Kalvarija is only a few miles from the German border. Kalvarija merchants would travel to Konigsberg to buy goods. Dozens of Kalvarier business owners would spend ten months a year in Konigsberg as *comisionern* [those who sell for commission]—middlemen between the wheat merchants and the shop owners of Kalvarija and the large merchants in Konigsberg. When these *comisionern* would come home for *yom-tov* [religious holidays], they would speak about the miracles and wonders of Germany, about German culture, about the progress that Jews had made there—their temples, their rabbinical schools, their great learned men who wrote books in German about Jewish learning.

Thus, little by little the tree of knowledge was absorbed as everyone strove to become

civilized. The well-to-do young people began to study Russian and German in addition to *gemara* and *tanakh* [rabbinical commentaries and Bible]. The people began to speak *deutschmerish* [Germanized Yiddish], a “Kalvarier German” that is known all over the world. Long caftans and long side curls were rarely seen. Respected members of the householder class, about whose piety there was no doubt, began to subscribe to *ha-magid* and *ha-melitz*—the younger ones to *ha-shahar* [Hebrew daily newspapers], the *Wschod* [Polish language newspaper published in Lviv]. Others also subscribed to daily Russian newspapers in order to know what was happening in the Russian world.

We couldn't make any sense of the letters that would come from America. The young men who would go to America did not bring any education from home with them and did not acquire any new education in America. Their letters, of necessity, consisted of half bad Yiddish and half still worse English. I remember one letter from America that I was given to read and which ended with approximately the following words: “*Eksciuz mi, vos ikh muz finishn meyn leter. Ikh muz geyn mit meyn loer in court bikoz meyn lendlord wil mir makhn tzu mufn* [Excuse me that I must finish my letter. I must go with my lawyer to court because my landlord wants to make me move].” The *letters* were permeated with words such as *weydgas* [wages], *biznes*, *ryelesteyt* [real estate], *saydwoks* [sidewalks], *skuls* [schools], *djodjes* [judges] that no one understood. Yet one read about the wonders of America in the newspapers—that everyone there was equal; that a Jew was not persecuted because of his religion; that he could live wherever he wanted and do what he wanted, without anyone asking whether he had a passport and...that hoards of gold were just lying around in the streets.

The economic situation in Kalvarija, as in all Lithuania, was very serious. There was no industry in the small towns, only shops and craftsmen, the majority of whom had to make a living from each other. Many families lived in great need. Herring was a good commodity in Kalvarija. In many houses, bread and herring would be the only meal, except for *shabbos*, when a pound of meat helped to give the entire family the obligatory pleasure of *shabbos*, for which Jews would wait impatiently the entire week.

The Jews were not overly concerned about eating—where is it written that Jews must eat roast goose? Let the landowners eat it—for them, only the body and worldly pleasures exist—let them have pleasure. Yet Jews were blessed with large families, with grown daughters for whom marriages could not be arranged without dowries. And then, is it a disgrace for a Jew to raise a daughter in his house until her braids are long? This is not thought about for long and the father grabs the silver candlesticks that he inherited from his parents and takes them to the *gemilas khesed* [interest free loan society]—a charitable institution that lends money for pawned items without interest—and receives the needed sum to buy a ship ticket. Meanwhile, the mother packs a large package that consists of biscuits with three pounds of hard cheese and they send their eldest son to America. They are sure that as quickly as the son begins to earn, he will send a ship ticket for his father, and after that they will both bring over the entire family to America. In very many cases such calculations were realized and in this way hundreds and hundreds of families from Kalvarija moved to America.

Another cause of the great emigration was the problem of “military service.” Under the Czarist regime, a Jewish boy had no desire to sacrifice the best years of his youth to the government that rewarded him with a “Pale of Settlement” and pogroms. When the time came for the young man to appear for conscription, he would be dressed in a *sermiga* [robe made of coarse cloth], disguised as a Lithuanian peasant, and was smuggled across the border to Germany. From there he arrived in America without difficulties.

Several “specialists” in Kalvarija were involved in the matter of smuggling emigrants across the border, from whom they made their living. They were close friends of the *pogranichnikes* [border guards], employed to guard against such thieves at the border. After a good drink of whiskey with a bribe of a ruble or two, the border guards would suddenly stare at the moon and keep looking at it until the Jews in the *sermigas* crossed the border. Then the border guards would again lower their heads and begin to guard the border.

In 1881, a great emigration from Kalvarija, as well as from every other Jewish city in the Russian empire, began again, when the Russian Czar Aleksander II was shot and a new wave of pogroms against Jews began under the new czar. True, only a few small *shtetlekh* in Lithuania experienced pogroms, but the Jewish population was dominated by the fear that sooner or later the Jews of Lithuania would also be attacked. Great masses of Jews left their cities and towns and escaped to wherever their eyes took them—to America, Argentina, South Africa and other countries. It did not occur to anyone then that this seeming catastrophe would in time be seen as a remedy for the plague of Hitler. Hundreds of thousands of Jews survived because they escaped from Russia.

In addition to the above reasons, the influence of the *haskalah* [Jewish Enlightenment] in the 1870s and 1880s also contributed to the large emigration from my birthplace. This was the time when every Jewish young man would read, devour, everything written in Hebrew. They had never had the privilege of seeing a Hebrew writer, but they imagined that he was some kind of special personality, a sort of prophet whose every word becomes holy. Who still talks about Peretz Smolenskin, publisher of *ha-shahar* [*The Dawn*] in Vienna? He, more than any other writer, enchanted the Jewish youth with his impetuous articles and short stories. His words were the holy of holies. In his *ha-to'eh be-derekh ha-khayim* [*Errors on the Paths of Life*], Smolenskin describes a small town young man who floats around in a world of chaos, rambles from one town to another, from one settlement to another, from one Hasidic rabbi to another. He keeps on wandering, searching and he himself does not know what he is searching for. He remains bewildered, cannot find steady ground anywhere on which he would be able to take a secure step and find the possibility of survival.

The moral that one could draw from that book was evident, that the Jewish young people could not advance further in such a way. Jewish young people must prepare themselves for a career—they must seek a purpose. This book made a strong impression on the young of Lithuania. For the young, their homes became crowded and uncomfortable. Young people began to feel there was no air to breathe in the small *shtetlekh* and decided to muster all their strength to leave their narrow confines and to seek a purpose and a goal in life.

The older Jews would even make fun of those “civilized nail searchers” [educated good-for-nothings], but the young were not very bothered by this—let the old people stay in the small, dark *shtetlekh*, go on selling *herring mit klumpes* [bunches of sliced onions, garlic and black pepper] and split hairs about a *maharsho* [commentary on the Talmud by Samuel Edels]. They, the young, were educated, progressive people, belonging to a modern generation with modern ideas, a modern world view, and could no longer remain there. They had to leave.

But where to go? Only a few had the means to travel to study at a *gymnazie* [high school] somewhere or where there was a technical school. The mother began to look for the means, and packed a package of zwiebacks with cheese or herring. The father had to agree and escorted the young man on his way; he gave him a *tefillin* [phylacteries] bag, offered a *tefilat ha-derekh* [prayer for the traveler], and with luck, the young man would make his way to America.

The remaining Jews in Kalvarija continued to live their own lives, content and at ease with their ideals and their strivings. These were Jews who lived not for the body, but for the soul. Jews were tormented by desperate longing, asking: “Where will we get help? Where will we grab some small earnings to be able to feed our household?” There were times when there was literally not a loaf of bread in the house, yet in addition to so many lacks, school tuition for a child was always necessary as well. Eating, clothing, a roof over the head was often forgotten and money for the teacher had to be raised. A loan was made from the interest-free loan society. The silver knife and fork that lent beauty to the house, that had been received as wedding gifts, were pawned—and the needed tuition was assembled. This very child, as it happened, often went to *kheder* half hungry. When there would be money, he would be better cared for, but for now he had to go to *kheder*, he had to study *torah*—it could not be otherwise.

There was a market in the city—an event for which all of the merchants and ordinary small tradesmen waited all week long. It would be, God willing, a small rescue: a householder could pay a few of his debts; another could maintain his status. Reb Khaim, the owner of a dry goods store, passed the dry goods store of another, thinking of him as a competitor with whom he had once argued over a customer. However, the evening before they had both sat at the Talmud Society studying a page of *gemara* and there everyone was entangled with a *tusfus* [commentary on the Talmud by Tufus] that was “tough,” very difficult to understand...hairs were split and labored over and no correct interpretation could be found. On the day of the market, Reb Khaim entered the store of his competitor and called out with a joyful voice, “Do you know, Reb Dovid, what just occurred to me? Indeed, about the *tusfus* that we could not work out last night...” Reb Dovid halted his “business” and as for his customer—never mind, the Gentile would wait—and he listened to Reb Khaim's idea with patience.

And later in the afternoon, when Yona, the hardware merchant, went to *daven minkhah* [say the afternoon prayers] and on the way saw a competitor still standing in his shop who might, God forbid, miss the afternoon prayers, he ran in energetically and with a yell, “Reb Shlomo, it is already late, *minkhah!*” They both immediately left and went arm in arm to the

synagogue to *daven minkhah* together.

Communal prayer was strongly embraced in Kalvarija. The men would leave their work and their businesses at *minkhah* and go to the synagogue or to a house of study. Firstly, it was a great *mitzvah* to pray collectively, and secondly, coming together for prayer was a part of their communal life. At the afternoon and evening prayers, there were small discussions about politics, new edicts on the Jews, the new mayor in the city...was he a friend of the Jews or, God forbid, not.

A *magid* [preacher] would often come to the city to hold a few *droskus* [sermons], which very much delighted the congregation, particularly when one of the famous “worldly preachers,” such as the Kelmer *magid* or Reb Khaim Rumshishker would come. Then, Jews stood head on top of head in order to hear. Once, I remember, a *magid* did not do very well with his *droshe*. The evening before, the crowd had not put as much money for him in the plates as he expected. *Nu* [Well], he began to attack Kalvarija and its Jews in his second *droshe*. He said, “Kalvarija consists of two words: *kal* [Hebrew: “light, little esteemed”]—the Jews here are lacking in *mitzvos* [good deeds], *u-ra* [Hebrew: “bad”]—and they are bad...” However, before the *magid* could finish speaking, Reb Arele, a Jew, a *gemara* teacher, ran to the *bimah*, with his thick stick in his hand and yelled to the *magid*; “Get down from the *bimah*, you insolent person. How dare you have the nerve to curse our Kalvarija Jews!” The shamed *magid* immediately left the *bimah* and took the first wagon that left for Mariampol.

After *maariv* [the evening prayer], all the members of the Talmud Society would sit around a long table in the synagogue and study the daily page of *gemara* together. In this way every evening, except for Friday night, they studied page after page, chapter after chapter, tractate after tractate, precisely, systematically, until in seven years they had finished the entire Talmud. With great satisfaction, the conclusion of the reading of the Talmud was celebrated with a grand parade, a large banquet, in which all the householders of the city took part, even those who had never studied a page of *gemara* in their life. At this banquet, everyone would bring his own fork, knife and spoon. There was no shortage of liquor and there was great rejoicing that was remembered until the next completion of the Talmud reading seven years later.

In addition to the Talmud Society that consisted of Jews studying the *gemara*, there was a Mishnah Society, in which there were no great scholars. Often they would make use of a rabbi who would help them crawl through the *mishnah* chapter every morning after prayers.

There was also an Ein-Yakov Society [*Jacob's Well*, title of a 16th century book of rabbinical commentary]. It consisted of simple, but honest Jews, who would come together in the synagogue every *shabbos* night after *havdalah* [the conclusion of the Sabbath]. Borukh Itsel, the *gemara* teacher, would recite from the *ein-yakov* and then immediately translate it into Yiddish. Jews would come to every Torah lesson with great eagerness. Firstly, it is not proper for a Jew to be a complete ignoramus and, secondly, they had great pleasure from the beautiful stories from the *ein-yakov*, which Reb Borukh Itsel, with his beautiful grey beard and his easy-going face, had so finely and clearly translated.

There was no *gymnazie* in Kalvarija. Several dozen parents sent their children to the Mariampoler or to the Suavlker *gymnazie*. Only well off parents could do this. It also required great effort at that time to send children to a *gymnazie*. Pious Jews said, “All the children were required to write on *shabbos*.” This was half-true: writing on *shabbos* was not required, but the anti-Semitic teachers as good as boycotted the Jewish students who refused to write on *shabbos*. Such students could not remain in the *gymnazie* for long.

At least there were, *on ein-hora* [without giving an evil eye], enough *khederim* and *melamdim* [teachers] in Kalvarija. There was someone in almost every family who was a teacher. Without exception, every teacher lived in great want and need. Often, the *rebbitzen*, that is, the teacher's wife, helped her husband earn a living. One had a spindle in the *kheder* itself, on which she spun flax. A second had a goat and would sell the milk to her neighbors. Others were shopkeepers. Also the shop with the goods was often in the *kheder* itself. The shop was a sort of “department store” where many good things could be gotten: needles, matches, soap, nails, herring, pencils and what-not. When these women earned a few rubles on market day, the store was left with empty shelves. One of them sold *dreydlekh* [spinning tops used in a traditional *chanukah* game] and Haman rattles that she would sell *erev chanukah* and *erev purim*. The *rebbitzen* made the *dreydlekh* herself and she was proud of her production. A very dignified student would have the privilege of seeing how the *rebbitzen* poured the hot lead into the wooden forms and a few hours later out came the beautiful, finished *dreydlekh* with Hebrew letters on four sides of every *dreydl*.

In my time, in addition to the old-fashioned *khederim*, there was a Jewish school with five levels in Kalvarija that was founded by several progressive middleclass men. *Gemara*, *tanakh*, Russian, German, geography, history and a few other disciplines were taught there. When the school was founded, the *melamdim* protested vigorously as to why their livelihood was being taken away. There were several more or less intelligent local teachers and *melamdim* who were employed in the new school. The rest were brought from other towns. One of those employed locally was the German teacher, Yehuda Blumenzon, an aristocratic Jew who did not wear a cap, but a hat, and he wore gloves the entire year, both summer and winter. He came to America during the 1890s and became a worker at the *yidisher tageblat* [*Yiddish Daily Newspaper*] in New York.

There were also many traditional *talmud-torahs* [free religious elementary schools for poor boys] in Kalvarija to which very poor Jews would send their children to learn for free. The schools were supported by the entire town's householders, and the *shames* [rabbi's assistant] of the *talmud-torah* would go around with a *pushke* [small box used to collect money for various charitable purposes] to collect the weekly contribution.

The same method of collecting contributions was used by all of the other charitable institutions in Kalvarija, as for example, *somekh noflim* [help for the fallen], *hakhnosas kalah* [assistance for poor brides], *gemilus-khesed* [interest-free loans], *hakhnosas orkhim* [extending hospitality to poor travelers], and others.

Money for Passover goods for the poor was collected *erev Pesakh* [on the eve of Passover] and the householders considered it a holy obligation to contribute. It once happened that a Jew, a rich man, refused to contribute for the Passover goods; he went bankrupt—no one had any further dealings with him.

This was the city of Kalvarija where I was born, where I spent my childhood years. It is now an extremely long time since I left the town. I lived for all these years in a different country, under other circumstances. However, today I am still bound to my birthplace by so many memories, partly pleasant, partly sad. However, even the sadness of the memories always has for me a force of attraction and I cannot forget them and will not forget. The panorama of the town—the physical and the spiritual panorama—always appears before my eyes.

Here I see the fine, courteous proprietors who lived a pious life, even when they stood on cold winter days in their open, unheated shops or sat at a workbench in a small, poor apartment. The first thought for all of them was to earn a living in order to satisfy the soul, so that their children could study *torah*, so they could support a poor relative, so they could make the weekly contribution to all of the charity institutions when the *shames* came to demand it every Friday.

And who can forget the good-hearted Jewish women who would often go around with a red shawl gathering money for a needy family? They did not say who the family was and no one dared to ask in order that no family be humiliated. But everyone threw something into the shawl. Everyone knew that when such women went collecting, it was a matter of saving a life, that people were starving or that someone was, God forbid, ill.

And how can we forget those young, inexperienced, idealistic young men who so naively aspired to become independent in order to satisfy their ambition to better the condition of the Jewish people, or the lot of suffering humanity?...

And the homey Friday night floats in my thoughts, how every Jew cast off his earthly clothing, all earthly thoughts as if through a spell and entered a world of ecstasy in a world of nobility, of elevation and Godliness. Suddenly, they forgot all of their troubles and suffering, all edicts against the Jews—they forgot everything—on *shabbos*! Today is *shabbos*; the house was cleaned, the *shabbos* candles already burned in the silver candlesticks, the table was prepared with the needed crockery on the snow-white tablecloth, the bottle of wine with the *kiddush* cups waited for the father to make the blessing. The father came from the synagogue with a guest for *shabbos* and after a joyful *gut shabbos*, he immediately began to sing *shabbos* songs in sweet *shabbos* tones. No one actually saw the *shabbos* soul, but it was felt in every corner, perceived on everyone's face when they sang the *shabbos* songs with the father—the mother, the children and the guest.

What were they all singing? Were they celebrating a victory of the people on the battlefield? Were they praising with song the greatness of the heroic field marshal who annihilated cities and countries and enslaved and murdered millions of innocent people? No, they were singing: *shalom aleikhem malakhei ha-shalom* [Peace upon you, angels of peace]! They were

praising with song the peace in which Jews have always believed, the world peace that their prophets preached thousands of years ago.

And is it possible to forget the modest *tisha b'av* when all Jews went to the synagogue and sat on the ground and recited Lamentations, lamenting the destruction of the Temple, the loss of their national home and when the *khazan* [cantor] sang with his mournful voice the “*tzion halo tishali shalom asiraikh* [Zion, will you not ask how your prisoners are?],” the congregation was consoled... The *khazan* asked of Mother Zion that at least she should listen to them a little, she should at least inquire about her persecuted, homeless children. The entire congregation cried with the *khazan*. They asked and they hoped that Mother Zion would again stretch out her arms and call her exiled children back home...

And how can we forget the past *erev yom kippur* when the congregation prepared for the great Day of Judgment? *Yom kippur* is a day when God and his angels seal the fate of every person: who will live and who will die, who will live through the year, and who, God forbid, not. All made efforts to make amends for the sins they had committed during the past year since last year's *yom kippur*. If someone felt he had committed an injustice to someone, he went to beg forgiveness. The very pious went to the synagogue to receive 39 lashes [to indicate the desire to repent]. Every housewife was busy preparing the *erev yom kippur* meal—not too much salt, not too much pepper, so as not to cause thirst during the 26-hour fast. When the meal was finished, there was a traditional custom that the entire family went to the grandfather for a blessing—the sons, the daughters, the sons-in-law, the daughters-in-law, the grandchildren. The patriarchal grandfather, already dressed in his *kitl* [ceremonial white robe], placed his hands on each one separately and in a weak, earnest, crying voice said, “May He bless you, May you be blessed, my child for the new year, may God hear your prayers and your cry, may He forgive your sins and seal you for a year of life, for health and a good livelihood.” Then after blessing everyone, the grandfather said, “You should all know, my children, that when you go to the synagogue on *yom kippur* to repent, you must regret the sins you committed with your whole heart. When someone simply says the words, I will sin and repent, the sins will not be forgiven. That is what the *gemara* says,” the grandfather concluded.

Everyone went to the synagogue together for *kol nidrei* [*erev yom kippur* services] and I went with them, carrying with me so much respect, so much love for the old white haired grandfather, for our beautiful traditions, for our *torah*, for our people.

My town panorama, still fresh in my thoughts, is rich with yet more memories. I was always drawn there. I traveled several times to Lithuania from America and always felt at home there, as one of the residents. The last time I was there was in 1938. The Jews felt comfortable there—satisfied with their Hebrew and Yiddish schools and *gymnazies*, with their institutions, with the culture. Alas, they could not foresee the murderous hand that was already outstretched to annihilate all of them. Now there is no more Lithuanian Jewry. Everything is a ruin, all that remains are memories.

New York, 1948