

A STORY TO REMEMBER

Memoirs of the Vainer Girs Family

This book is the result of the joint efforts of Isaac Vainer Girs,
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A STORY TO REMEMBER
Memoirs of the Vainer Girs Family

IF WE ARE TO KNOW WHERE WE
ARE GOING, WE MUST FIRST KNOW
WHERE WE COME FROM

This book comprises a compilation of information, stories and anecdotes on two immigrant Lithuanian Jews, the founders of the Vainer Girsh family in Mexico, Moisés and Nechama. The purpose herein is to provide a legacy for future generations –the story of the family's roots, traditions, customs, and anecdotes about ancestors as well as photographs.

Moisés and Nechama lived through World War II, and were amongst those who experienced Jewish genocide in their own family and were forced to flee their home. This may explain why they blocked from their minds a major portion of their past in Lithuania, and why their children do not have all that much information on grandparents and great-grandparents, and even less on earlier generations. We now want our children, grandchildren and future generations to know where they come from, to have a reference book that may answer their questions and satisfy their curiosity. We already have a family tree that we are sure someone will keep up.

A series of coincidences, or even miracles, had to take place at a given moment in time for this family to take shape, namely:

Moisés Vainer

- Orphaned in Lithuania, his aunt and uncle decided to bring him with them to Mexico.
- Once in Mexico, penniless and not speaking the language, he sold merchandise on consignment to build up his future.
- With money won in the lottery he sent for his future wife to come to him by ship.
- He was given a business, to pay in installments, and secured financial peace of mind.

Nechama Girsh

- Through referral from her cousin Tzilla, Nechama began to correspond with her future husband in her sister's place.
- She decided to travel alone to Mexico, at age 24.
- She crossed through part of Europe in July 1939, just a month and a half before the beginning of World War II.
- Nechama reached the shores of Mexico on one of the last ships that managed to leave war-stricken Europe.
- Had Nechama stayed in Lithuania, she would have met the fate of her entire family, murdered at the hands of the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators.

Together, Moisés and Nechama embarked on a new life in Mexico, starting from scratch, lacking for much but with plenty of work before them. Sharing similar, deep family and religious roots as well as many traditions, the couple fared well and established a legacy through a family of children and grandchildren, successful professionals and entrepreneurs, solid people who keep up family tradition and who became the cause of much satisfaction for the couple. We are convinced that their great-grandchildren and future generations will not stray from this path.

We dedicate this book to our beloved parents Moisés and Nechama, with our love, admiration and respect.

Isaac, Marta and Enrique

INTRODUCTION

One might say that it was mere chance that a decision was made to write this book; then again, perhaps there was some coincidence or underlying cause...

Many events had to take place for the descendants of the Vainer Girsh family to have gotten as far as they have and hold the position they occupy today.

If we stop to think about it, we must conclude that there were many things along the way that could have hindered events from transpiring as they did.

What if... Maishe had not been invited by his aunt and uncle to go with them to Mexico? What if he had not accepted the invitation and had remained behind in Lithuania, struggling with hardship?

What if... Tzilla had not given Nechama's name to Maishe so they might become acquainted through correspondence? What if they had taken a dislike to one another and not fallen in love?

What if Maishe and Nechama had not decided to marry by proxy, even before ever laying eyes on one another? What if this procedure had not existed or been impossible for them to carry it out?

And, what if Maishe had not won the lottery, and hence not had the money for Nechama's ship passage on the ocean liner Orbit that brought her to Mexico?

Suppose Nechama had not boarded ship to Mexico in 1939, just 40 days before the start of World War II? Then again, once in that country, what if Nechama had not been the strong, courageous, daring woman that she is to this very day, and had not withstood the difficulties and deprivations of those early years?

These are just some of the many questions that come to mind when we think of the story that follows. Understanding and answering these questions has led us to tell this *Story to Remember*.

PROLOGUE

The northern region of Lithuania, where cities such as Pamušis and Linkuva lie, is where the Girsh family came from. This region has been inhabited since the 15th century. However, true development in the region began around 1915 when the Germans built a train station there during the Great War, or World War I.

On September 1, 1939, at the start of World War II, Lithuania—thus far independent—became a part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Two days after the Nazi invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, news of the retreat of the Russian Army spread throughout the region. Lithuanian police collaborated with the German conquerors and took charge of the Jews. One week later, the Jews of the region received the order to report to the police station. A great number were arrested, imprisoned and kept without food and water for several days, during which time the Lithuanian guards mistreated and abused them.

Sometime during the night of July 1st, a group of Lithuanians murdered some elderly Jews. The next morning, all members of their families were seized from their homes by brute force and almost all were murdered. The few survivors ended up at the Siauliai ghetto.

On July 23rd, all the Jews of the region—some 700 men, women and children—were forced to walk to a nearby forest. Here they were murdered at two different sites: some at the doors of Linkuva and others at Dvarukai. Their very own Lithuanian neighbors, together with the Nazis, pulled the triggers.

Buried in mass graves, there was no way to identify remains. No marker with a name lies over each body, nor for years did anyone pray for the eternal repose of their souls. Let us, through these pages, pay homage to their lives and memories.

May their memory make us better people, better Jews, and even prouder of being who we are.

PART ONE
ON GRANDPARENTS
AND PARENTS

Chapter I

NOCHEM HERSHL GIRSH

Pamušis, a *shtetl*, or *small village*, in Lithuania (56°05' N, 23°40' E), also known as Pamoosha, lies on the riverbank of the Muša. On the opposite bank lies its neighbor, the town of Dvarukai. A lush forest of poplars, elms and willows borders the river. In their branches nestle hundreds of species of birds, ranging from the smallest of sparrows to the whitest of storks to the majestic eagles. Those living in the region at the end of the 19th century enjoyed a landscape of uncommon beauty, mixed with bountiful crops of wheat, barley and linseed, as well as potatoes and beets, the necessary ingredients for local cuisine.

The local population, interspersed with the few Jewish families living on the other side of the river in Dvarukai –the Jewish side of Pamoosha– lived and tended the fields together, tilling the soil and harvesting the crops in due time. Friends and neighbors worked side by side, helping one another in their farm work.

At the entrance to the town stood the mill, owned by a wealthy Jewish family and it was at the service of all equally. All neighbors had grazing plots for their livestock, where they would store their crops for sale in autumn. This helped them to withstand the harsh winters.

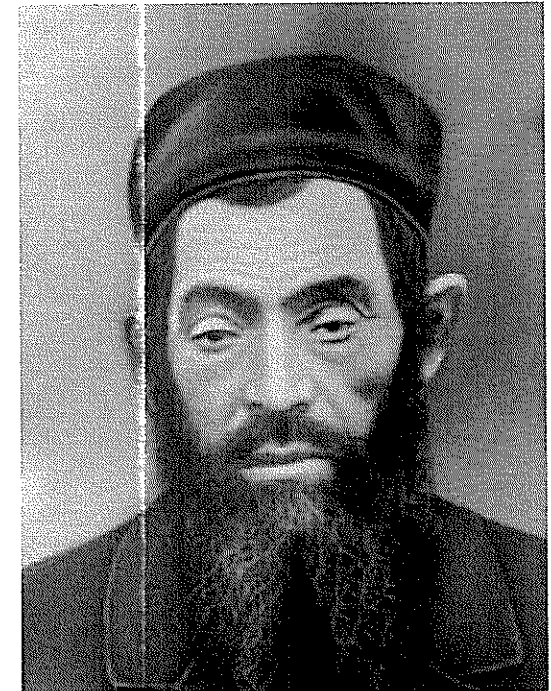
Nearby, no more than 5 kilometers away, lay the neighboring town of Linkuva. Some three hundred Jewish families made a living there in through trade, farming and the sale of handcrafts. Mondays and Fridays were market days, and the people of Pamoosha were wont to walk over there to make their purchases: candles, soap, garments or pieces of fabric, as well as any tools they might need. Once a

year, a fair was set up, lasting a whole week. Then it was possible to purchase all sorts of items from a much broader array.

This was the small town where Nochem Hershl Girsh lived with his family. The Girsh family was in the habit of helping their neighbors, Jews and Gentiles alike, during the harvest, and in turn received help from other when it was time to bring in their own harvest.

Nochem Hershl was the second son of Moishe and Dveire (pronounced Dvay-ray) Girsh, both devout, practicing Jews. From early childhood he understood his responsibilities, worked in the fields, and carried out the chores assigned to him, as they were to all members of the family. However, in 1898 he was recruited into military service by the Russian army. The many years of hard work on the family farm, in addition to his army service through 1902, made him very strong and healthy, endowing him with a broader world vision than that of most people he had grown up with in the *shtetl*. Given this outlook, he was pleasantly surprised upon returning home to learn that his brothers Laizer and Lipe (pronounced Lec-pe) had immigrated to the United States. That was the kind of world he now sought, one far beyond the edges of his farm, his town and even his country.

Life at the ranch had left him unsatisfied, and he anxiously awaited his brothers' letters telling of their progress in working and settling down in the United States. Some money orders came, well folded into the thin sheets of paper letters were written, as did repeated invitations for Nochem to join his brothers and try his fortune. As he was still a young man, single and with no ties, he decided to emigrate.



Moishe Girsh, 1920.
Father of Nochem Hershl Girsh and
grandfather of Nechama Girsh.
Moishe Girsh died in
Pamaosha in 1929.

The new century, just four years old, welcomed him aboard a ship crossing the Atlantic in the company of his cousin, Snayer Hark. Although at night they shared a cot in the filthy and crowded hold reserved for immigrants who could not afford the luxury of lodging in on the upper decks, Snayer would spend the entire day leaning on the railing or peering at the horizon through a porthole, trying to make firm land materialize. Nochem Hershl missed the green fields of Pamušis, evenings at home supping on made from vegetables grown by his own family, and he also missed prayer time in the town synagogue where he was often called on to sing with the *chazzan*.

Finally, after a nineteen-day-crossing, the cousins arrived to the coast of Pennsylvania and dropped anchor in the port of Lock Haven where two men who only faintly resembled the brothers that Nochem Hershl remembered awaited them. Their American suits, shiny new shoes, and elegant hats made them virtually unrecognizable to the new immigrants. After the initial embrace, the first few questions on the well-being of the family, and the tell-me-all-about-life-here, where do you work, how do you make yourself understood, and where do you live, they all became lost in enthusiastic conversation without head nor tail, attesting to the joy of both parties at being reunited.

Soon enough it became clear that the life that Lester and Lipman Hirsh (for they had both adopted American names and changed the original G to an H in their last name) wrote about in their letters was somewhat less glamorous than what their readers in Pamoosha had interpreted it to be. The days were long, and the commissions earned as consignment collectors of merchandise carried on their backs for long distances and sold on install-



Nochem Hershl Girsh,
father of Neehana.
November 2, 1916.
Photo taken at
Crassea Prison Camp.

ments—including some train rides to cross the largest portions in the vast state—was not exactly the definition of the «golden land» where you could just pick gold up off the streets.

Hardship was aplenty, and the backache at times was unbearable. Nochem Hershl, still undecided on the American name to adopt, attempted valiantly for a time to be enthusiastic about this future; he accepted help to acquire merchandise and went with his brothers to the vast warehouse where they collected their wares. They introduced him to those who would soon give him merchandise to sell without their intervention, once he had made his first sales and proven that he could meet the terms of consignment wares.

He did not want to be the one to throw a damper on his brothers' and cousin's efforts and illusions, but he simply could not get caught up in the spirit of things, could not be optimistic about rising before dawn to face another interminable day of rejection and scarce sales. His biggest problem was loneliness.

Nochem could not stop thinking about his elderly parents—whom he would never see again if he were to remain in America. Moreover, they had received a letter from their mother in which she informed them that Father had taken ill. She asked for someone to return and take over the property, the land, and the animals.

His brothers tried to convince him that he could help more by sending dollars with which they could hire help, and in due time save enough to send them their passages. Nochem Hershl had not confessed the second reason he so longed for the homeland: Channa Mer, a girl he was in love with.

She was the main reason that Nochem Hershl boarded ship

once again, this time to the old world. He would ask her to marry him.

Getting a ticket to return was both less costly and less difficult. Traveling alone this time, Nochem Hershl bade his brothers farewell, begged them to stay in touch, and crossed the ocean once again. This time he did not have to guess what he would find there, nor worry about how to earn a living or learn a new language.

Upon arriving home, he was met with the news that his father had finally succumbed to a long illness, and once he made sure that his mother would be taken care of, he went off to propose marriage to Channa and embark on a new life with her.

Nochem Hershl was a good man, devout in religious practice, and upon his return once again the custom of discussing topics related to Judaism among neighbors was taken up. His melodious voice was often required for leading *chazzan* at the *shul*. This was a single-room structure, built of wood, like all the houses, and whitewashed on the inside. Here prayers were said, and the central table was also used for *bet ha-Sefer*, meaning school, for children to gather around and study. In the evenings the townsfolk from the *shtetl* could convene there to discuss important matters.

On occasion, religious scholars, or *lerers*, would come to the *shtetl* to speak of the Torah and various religious themes. Nochem Hershl welcomed them into his home, and they would speak and read the Torah to the family.

Nochem Hershl took great pride when he heard people talking about his *semicha lerabbanut*, or rabbinical knowledge. This knowledge he acquired first from his parents, and then through his own interest in pursuing the study of his religion.

Farm work was hard, the crops were sometimes poor and sometimes better, but he had learned to live with hardship as long as there was abundant love.

Fate would not allow Nochem Hershl to stay put in one place for long; at the outbreak of World War I, he was once again called into military service and forced to leave his family. In the army he became known for his love of music and song, and was commissioned to play the baritone horn—a wind-brass instrument with a large mouthpiece that is similar to a trombone only smaller—in the military band. This enabled him to set the war scenes aside and find refuge in music.

He left home for the battlefield without knowing that Channa was pregnant at the time of his departure, and she had no way of letting him know. Months elapsed, and a baby girl was born, needing a name. Channa talked it over with her parents and sisters, and they decided she should be named Nechama, in honor of her papa, whom they believed to have died in battle.

To everyone's great joy, some time after that Nochem Hershl came home to tell about his experiences as a German prisoner of war.



Nochem Hershl Girsh.
November 1915.
During captivity in Germany.
World War I.

Chapter II

MOISÉS VAINER

In Vaškai, Lithuania (56° 10' 0 N, 24° 12' 39 E), very close to Riga, Latvia, just 45 kilometers from Panevezys, Maishe was born on May 7, 1907. At the time of his birth, his father Itzjok Mane Vainer and his mother Sore Rivka Tuj already had two sons and a daughter: Yekutiel, Esther Ita and Refol. At the end of the 19th century, the family decided to change their surname from Rishon to Vainer.

Itzjok Mane was a contractor and worked in all tasks related to construction. His income was contingent on the work he managed to get, often by virtue of traveling to neighboring cities and communities for months on end to work and collect money for his work. A wealthy gentleman who lived in Latvia appreciated and valued Itzjok Mane's work, hiring him often, and was willing to pay for it.

For Sore Rivka, a hard-working woman and devoted mother, it was very hard to spend so much time without the support and presence of her husband. Sometimes, in her loneliness, she would recall her husband's oft-repeated words: follow the work wherever you find it.

Itzjok Mane went to Riga often in his cart to pursue work. From early childhood, Maishe liked to con with his brothers and father, though upon returning home he would complain to his mother that as the youngest, his brothers would pick on him, especially Refol. In this manner he learned to move around from one place to another, proving to his mamma and brothers that even the youngest could earn a few coins to take home.

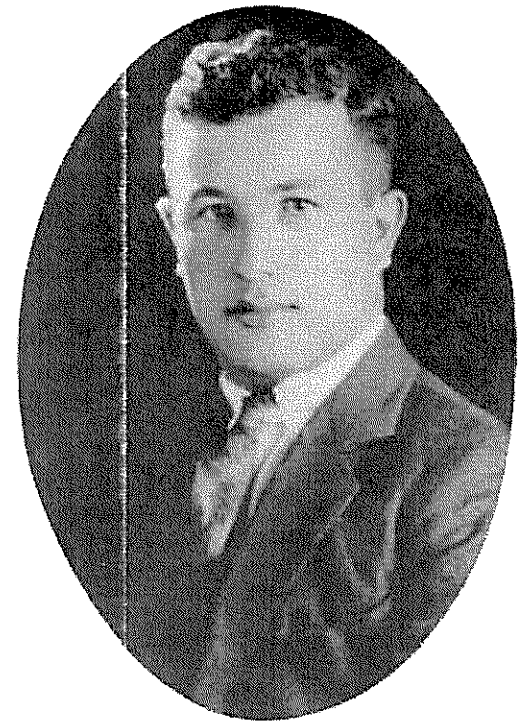
Finally, the dark day dawned when Itzjok Mane did not come home, and his whereabouts were unbeknownst to all. His family made futile attempts to find

out what had happened to him, to find him alive or recover his body if that were the case, but they were forced to conclude that he had been robbed for the few bills of money he may have been carrying home, or had lost his life in some difficult construction maneuver. Thus his four children were left fatherless.

Poverty, hardship and health problems unleashed by the war led Sore Rivka and Maishe to hospital. They both suffered from typhus. There was no one left to take care of them, for Yekutiel – Kisel – had emigrated to Mexico after serving in the army, and shortly after had sent the passage money for his sister Esther Ita. Refol, married and with a year-old baby, had moved to South Africa with his new little family and a brother-in-law to try his luck there. The hardships, poverty and rising anti-Semitism led them to the tough decision to emigrate.

Maishe and his mother suffered greatly in hospital; in addition to the fever, abdominal swelling, mouth sores and diarrhea caused by typhus, there was a man, a patient, who entertained himself by beating Maishe when the nurses were not around. Even so, Maishe survived, though his mother Sore Rivka lost her life in hospital. What a sad burial in the Jewish cemetery of Panevežys, where her tomb could be found to this day were it not for the fact that the Soviets while occupying Lithuania removed grave markers and made a park out of the cemetery.

Alone in the world, with little education and penniless, Maishe went out into the world with no plan beyond that of mere survival. At fourteen he was an orphan, and for years fended for himself, doing odd jobs and errands in exchange for food, and sometimes forced to steal a loaf of bread for sustenance.



Moisés Vainer, 1926.



Sara Rivka Tuj.

His family was spread all over the globe, cousins and aunts and uncles in England, and his siblings in remote places beyond the scope of his imagination.

When he was about to turn 19, his aunt and uncle, Dina Tuj and Tzodik Wulfovich, the only members of his family still on the old continent, proposed that he accompany them to Mexico.

«Sell the house, take what you can get for it, and come with us», said his Aunt Dina. «You are orphaned; you have to fend for yourself for a long time now. How you have managed we will never know, but the time has come for you to come with us and reunite with your brothers in Mexico. We will not leave you behind».

With a single suitcase in hand, no education, no language skills or money, he boarded ship to seek a place he could call «home».

The ship docked in the port of Veracruz, and he disembarked with his Aunt Dina, his Uncle Tzodik and his cousin Esther Jaye. They planned to stay in Mexico only briefly, for they wanted to settle in the United States, the land of golden opportunity. To Maishe it was far more important to see his siblings again, wherever they might be.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
Esther Ita Vainer;
Yekutiel «Kisel» Vainer
and Refol Vainer in the
Lithuanian Military Service.



Chapter III

NECHAMA GIRSH

It would appear that Nechama's life, begun on the Shabbath after Shavuot, or equivalent to May 15, 1914, would turn out to be as unexpected as her father's. When she was still a newborn baby, the government of Lithuania requested that the civil population move into Russian territory to be protected from the dangers of World War I. Her siblings, Masha, Golde and Shimon, and her mother, bearing her in her arms, clambered into a wagon together with one of the cows by their side, and took off on the journey with the rest of the relatives and neighbors. They turned and gazed at the homes they left behind, praying to the heavens that they would one day return and occupy them and take up their familiar way of life again.

The years spent on the Russian border were some of the most extreme hardship they had ever endured, more so even than what they had undergone in Pamoosha without Nochem Hershl to help make a living. Although the children found the journey to be a novel and exciting adventure, as the days elapsed they began to understand that there would never be enough food, and the cold was much fiercer than when they snuggled under blankets at home with the stove warming them.

To distract baby Nechama, Channa would obtain lumps of sugar to entertain her with and stave off hunger pangs.

Fortunately, to all things there is a season, and the time came when they were ordered to return. The hostilities were over, and it was determined that it was safe for civilians to return to their places of origin.

Channa Girsh and her family were in for a big surprise, for upon their return they found that Nochem Hershl had come home. Exhausted and hungry, their surprise at finding the father they believed to have died in the war alive was overwhelming. The family was overcome with tears and hugs, and so many unanswered questions. Everyone wanted to know where Nochem Hershl had been and how he managed to survive. There was a pressing problem, for now that her father was alive Nechama could no longer bear the same name as him. The entire family attended a naming ceremony in the town's only synagogue; Nechama was renamed Jaye, Hebrew for *life*—both hers and her father's. Nonetheless, she never ceased using the name Nechama.

Equally important was to pick up family life once again, celebrate festivities, bake the *halloth* for the *Shabbath*, and gather together with the rest of the family to celebrate the New Year and pray on the Day of Atonement.

The entire country needed to pick up the pieces of its life and move on now that peace was back. A farm reform was introduced, including a movement to organize coops; national currency was braced, and schools and universities opened—to which Jews had little access given the quotas.

However, in Nechama Girsh's world the days slipped by quietly. In the summer, groups of boys and girls would spend the day near the Muša river fishing for sardines—*shprotn* or sprats—that they would string together much as a necklace. They swam in the waters of the river, sticking to the areas designated for men and women, and in general spent many happy hours splashing in the water.



Nechama Girsh, 1936.

They had to walk to Linkuva to go to school. They could have ridden in the wagon, or even horseback, but Nechama preferred walking with her friends, having a good time before and after school.

The word «impossible» simply was not a part of her vocabulary. She worked hard tending the crops, on a par with the menfolk. From a very early age, Nechama would go out into the fields with the Lithuanian day workers employed, pick up the scythe and cut wheat at the same rhythm as the men. She carried heavy loads, milked the cows, made cheese and allowed no one to tell her what work she could not do because it was the work of men or adults. This made her a strong, brave and daring young girl.

Though Nechama truly enjoyed the company of her sisters Goldke and Mushke, and her brother Shimon, she was hungry for more –she yearned for knowledge, life in a big city, and trying new things. In time, she found seasonal work in Linkuva at the shop of a Jewish family that let her work behind the counter. Nechama loved all work: backbreaking farm work and the hardest tasks in the store, keeping the books, ordering merchandise and handling inventory alike.

She deeply loved her sisters, and learned to respect the differences in their personalities.

Her sister Goldke, small and slender, with copper hair and green eyes, did not like to eat. When they were still quite young, she would sell her food to her siblings for five pennies, and Nechama seized all opportunities to buy it from her.

She also spent many long evenings with the eldest, her sister Mushke, singing and chatting whilst they plucked feathers from



Nechama Girsh and her friend Rivka.
October 15, 1929.



Nechama Girsh (center),
Mushie Kruger (far right)
and a neighbor.
November 18, 1938.

geese to fill pillows and coverlets. Mushke also taught her to embroider cushions and napkins beautifully.

The embroidery work was for their hope chests; though a wedding might still be a dream only, they worked lovingly to fill their chests with embroidered sheets, coverlets and comforters and garments so that their future family might one day enjoy these handmade articles. There was always much to do in anticipation of a wedding.

The first to marry was their brother Shimon. Never one to work in the fields, he quarreled ceaselessly with his father Nochem Hershl, who wanted him to do his share in contributing to the well-being of the family. Shimon fell in love with a girl from a much larger town, some 15 kilometers from Pamoosha, called Radviliškis, in the Panevezys district, in the Kovno province. There was a much larger Jewish population there, far more than the fewer than one hundred living in Pamošis.

His bride's family owned a hotel, where Shimon was set to work. During that time, people traveled from town to town selling their wares, and Radviliškis was a good place to put down for the night.

The fact that Shimon had been reluctant to do farm work by no means meant he did not care for his family nor wanted to spend time with them. Quite the contrary: as often as he could, he would slip away from his duties at the hotel and travel to Pamoosha to visit his parents and sisters, laden with gifts.

Chapter IV

THE NEW CONTINENT

To disembark in the port of Veracruz, Mexico, one had to prove financial solvency in the form of a one hundred dollar bill in order to enter the country. Maishe simply did not have that money, but his uncle let him borrow a bill to show, which upon setting foot in Mexican soil he promptly returned. He came to the new continent bearing one leather suitcase filled primarily with dreams and hope.

Upon arrival, the young man did not have much time to get to know this new place and roam the port city, letting his mind soak up the idea of this foreign land becoming his new country, for his brother and sister awaited him in the city of Toluca and he was anxious to board the train and reunite with them.

What a vast and varied country! So many towns and cities flashing by his eyes! Face glued to the wagon window, Maishe tried to imprint all he saw in his memory, wondering whether or not this land would open its doors to him and let him make a living. Optimistic as he was, he soon decided that it was up to him, and him alone, and he determined that nothing would stop him from succeeding.

With this attitude and a burning desire to feel part of a family again, Maishe climbed down from the train into the open arms of his brother Kisel and sister Esther Ita. Time and distance had separated him from them, and oh, how he needed to mourn their mother's death with them, tell them of her burial place, tell them how he had sold the wagon that had served him so well to make a living, and reminisce together on that long-ago family life forever vanished!

After their first meal together as a family, Maishe felt a pressing need to walk the streets of the city center and begin to absorb the smells and colors, begin to let the language enter his ears. So much seemed new to him that he began to believe that not only had he come to a new country, he had entered a new era. Standing on the sidewalk, eating *jicama* after *jicama*—which would keep him awake with indigestion that first night—he watched cars, the newest models, drive by, sharing the streets with donkey-drawn carts bearing entire families dressed in coarse cotton, the men sporting straw hats and the women with brightly colored ribbons in the braids wound round their heads. Too much to take in all in one night!

Toluca, he later learned, was a *Nahuatl* word, this being the language spoken by the original dwellers of the region. In that language the name of the city was *Tollohcan*, meaning Place of the God *Tolloh*. Centuries later, in 1861, local legislature changed the name of the city by decree to Toluca de Lerdo, in memory of Mexican politician Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, who had died that same year. Maishe's language lesson that first day consisted in learning to pronounce the name of the city.

Soon after arriving, and once he had settled in a room where his brother had paid the first month's rent for him, Kisel introduced Maishe to Mr. Freidberg. The latter was the wholesaler for all sorts of sundry hardware articles, and upon seeing the boy walk into his warehouse, asked him where he was from. Hearing that he hailed from Lithuania sufficed for Freidberg to give Maishe fifty pesos worth of merchandise on consignment so that Maishe might get to work.



Kisel Valner.
Toluca in the twenties.
At his "business",
similar to Moises Vaiter's.

Maishe spoke no Spanish, but Mr. Freidberg had taught him the one key phrase to get by and make a living: «*De a tostón*» (Fifty-cent piece each), showing him what the coins were and explaining their worth and how to make change.

And with this, Maishe opened his suitcase of dreams and hope and walked out into the city with a firm step, determined to conquer the world. He was young; so young that he shaved for the first time in Mexico. Packing up his consignment merchandise, he began to travel to the towns neighboring the city of Toluca to set up his stand. He rode horseback or bicycle, strapping his pant legs so they wouldn't catch in the spokes, and traveled to Zinacantepec, Metepec and San Mateo Atenco, and other outlying communities. In due time, he went from cash sales to selling in installments, and week after week collected payments.

His entire life was stored in his room: in the wardrobe next to his bed he hung his other set of clothes, and beneath it stowed the articles he would take to sell the next day. He was happy, he felt safe, thankful to have his family close by and to have enough to fill his stomach every day. Maishe felt he needed no more in life.

His kind, open personality made him many friends. He met León (Loba) Korenfeld and Mauricio Rubiszewsky, who became his best friend and confidant.

Time stands still for no one, and the years slipped by while Maishe worked selling his wares, practicing sports—he especially loved boxing—and riding bicycle, and whenever possible he went hunting with his friends.

There were times when he made an effort to reconstruct in his memory what life had been like before his arrival in

LEFT:
ABOVE: Gregorio Valner,
Sarita Valner and Moises Rubio.
BELOW: Moisés Valner, Cecilia Valner,
Boris Rubio and Kisel Valner.
Cuautla, Mexico, 1930.

RIGHT:
Moisés Valner with friend
León «Loba» Korenfeld.
Toluca, Mexico, March 1, 1929.





Nechama Girsh.
January 3, 1936.

Toluca, digging in the back of his mind for memories of important events, going to school, or his *Bar Mitzvah*, but he only managed to see those images as in a dream. Perhaps he was trying to erase the suffering, the years of loneliness he endured in the wake of his parents' deaths.

When his sister-in-law Cecilia Onjas -called Tzilla in Yiddish- wife of Kisel (daughter of Golde, sister of Channa Mer, mother of Nechama), told him it was time to start thinking of getting married, he looked at her fondly but paid little heed to her words. It wasn't until 1939, when more than a decade had elapsed since his arrival in Veracruz in 1926 that his sister-in-law's words finally began to seem important, and he sat down with her to try to think of a suitable girl for him to wed.

There were few young Jewish women in Toluca, and the family had little contact with the Jewish community in the capital city of Mexico. Tzilla suggested that he strike up correspondence with one of the Girsh cousins, still living in Pamoosha. Mushke, the eldest, wanted to move to Palestine and was preparing for this transition, so Maishe began to correspond with Nechama.

Letters came and went, back and forth, and they exchanged information on their likes and habits, their families and friends, their dreams and plans for the future, but most of all love began to blossom between the lines of those folded pages. Little by little they drew up a plan to meet and end up in the same place.

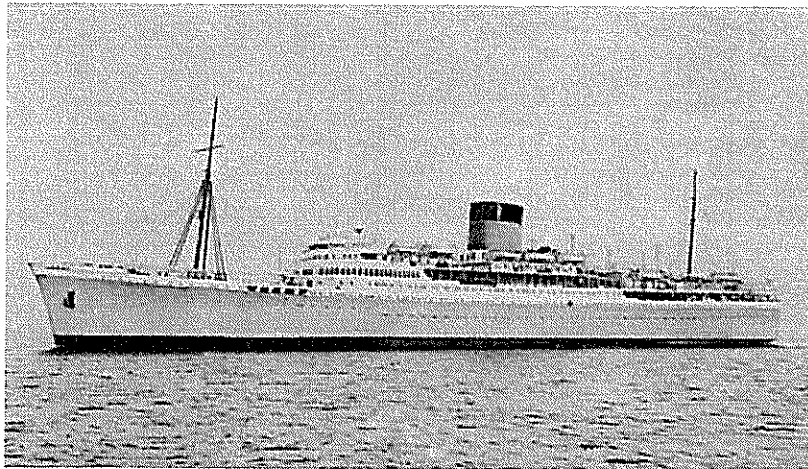
Chapter V

UNDER THE SHADOW OF WAR

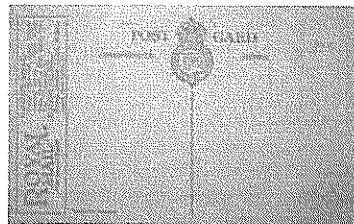
When night fell, the people gathered in the minute *shtetl* of Pamoosha could progressively hear the drunken men of the town shouting out how much they wished to rid themselves of all Jews. Fear and helplessness spread in the small Jewish community, forcing men, women and children to turn out lights at dusk and move their beds into the middle of the rooms in their homes, away from the darkened windows.

Increasingly there was talk of families planning to move away from the town to live elsewhere. It was difficult to determine the proper plan of action; it would cost money, of course, and even contacts in other countries so that one might have somewhere to stay initially. Many, for lack of money, could not even dream of emigrating; others were old or sick. Yet others were more optimistic that things would go back to the way they had always been, that it was just a matter of playing deaf to the nocturnal threats of the Lithuanians.

In June of 1939, there were many reasons to stay awake at night in the Girsh home. In addition to the shadow thrown by Hitler all the way in Germany, there was growing anti-Semitism in the region, and Mushke had contracted tuberculosis. What began as a marked pallor had progressed to include fever and night sweats, leading the family to believe that she had taken ill owing to overwork at a farm managed by a Jewish organization that was training and preparing her for life on a *kibbutz* in Palestine. The work consisted of planting and sowing barley, and a rumor began to circulate that contact with this cereal could bring about malaise. However, when her symptoms progressed and included weight loss and coughing up blood, the family decided to accept the diagnosis of tuberculosis and prepared to do battle with the dreaded disease.



The ship -Orbit-, sailing from
Marseilles to Veracruz.
July, 1939.



Nechama and three Jewish passengers
whom she met on board the -Orbit-
on route to Mexico.

There was nothing for it but to take her to a hospital in a neighboring town where she would receive the best treatment possible.

Nechama had received a ticket from Mexico to board ship on the Orbit, leaving Marseilles for Veracruz on July 18. She knew that once she left home it was highly unlikely that she would ever set eyes on her parents or siblings again and thus spent the nights curled next to Mushke, drying her sweat and warming her body with her own. She fed her sister teaspoons of honey-sweetened tea so she might feel comfort, and talked to her hours on end about their childhood exploits, the songs they would sing while sewing or embroidering, about their friends and shared secrets.

She wanted to be in both places at once: across the ocean to finally meet Maishe while at the same time she prayed to stay in the home she had grown up in, inside those walls that made her feel safe and tied her to her past.

Maishe and Nechama had made the difficult decision of marrying through proxy without ever having laid eyes on one another. This was the only way that she would be allowed to enter Mexico—by stating that she had come to reunite with her husband. Her cousin Tzilla had been the go-between in the arrangements, helping Maishe with all the necessary permits and paperwork. Tzilla and Maishe had gone together to the Civil Registry office and married in name and representing Tzilla's cousin Nechama.

What should have been the happiest stage of the young woman's life had become the most painful, for she witnessed her sister's gradual decline before her very eyes.

Post card sent by Nechama to Mosés, notifying him that she would be sailing on board the -Orbit- to Mexico. July 14, 1939.



Mr. J. Páez
 La Alameda No.
 Coloso Mexico.

Handwritten Hebrew text, likely a postcard message, written in cursive. The text is dense and covers most of the right page. It appears to be a personal letter or notification, possibly related to the postcard mentioned in the caption on the left page.

As night fell, with the lights out, Nechama would sit and talk to her parents Nochem Hershl and Channa, gaining their assurance that to leave at precisely this time was the right decision, but also to listen to their advice on marital life, on how to face the journey alone, and any other subject they had to share with her. Both tears and laughter flowed alternately and at times there were moments of silence in the quiet family home.

Between them sat the wicker basket that would travel with Nechama. In it lay a tablecloth and napkins lovingly finished with crocheted appliques, cross-stitched, beribboned sheets, and towels bearing crocheted borders. Nestled in the basket also lay a couple of hand-made comforters filled with down and the cushions bearing embroidered daisies that the sisters had made together months before. These down-filled cushions were traditionally the bride's dowry, and Nechama had packed several of these in her basket, each measuring a half-meter square. Making these cushions and comforters in preparation for a wedding was so labor intensive that those who came to help with the task were given milk, homemade cheese and other farm products in exchange.

The bride's dress that Channa and her daughter's had made was packed away in a suitcase with the rest of Nechama's clothes. Nobody said so out loud, but they were all aware that would not be seeing Nechama walk down the aisle in a far-away *shul* in a foreign land one day. She herself, though officially married by proxy, had trouble believing the ceremony would actually take place.

All this sadness was divided between Mushke's grave condition and the imminent moment of Nechama's departure.

Nochem Girsh and Channa Mer.



Handwritten text in Hebrew, likely a letter or document, written in cursive script. The text is dense and covers most of the page.

Handwritten header in Hebrew: *דברך ד' אדר-39 מכתב*

Handwritten text in Hebrew, continuing the letter or document. The script is consistent with the first page.

Dvarukai 17/11/39

Dear Moishe,

This week I received your letter. I am very pleased to learn that you suffered no harm due to the problem in Mexico, and that once again all is well. I also am very happy that our correspondence has increased from one letter every six weeks to one every two weeks, and I hope we shall soon be able to converse in person.

Yes, you have written to me of the delays, as is always the case, and I myself cannot yet take part, and you have faced many difficulties. All I can do is wait, and hope that all goes smoothly and we can achieve our wish.

There is not much news here. Things are quiet for the time being. We hope this continues and that there may be health and peaceful times. We cannot expect much joy, for in general there is not much happiness in the world. We must each be content with our lot.

Yes, time does fly. Soon it will be Pesach and winter already bores us. What is the weather like where you live?

I close my letter with warm regards from all of us.

To Tzilla and her family, may they enjoy health, and I wish you a loving and kosher Pesach in Tzilla's home.

Everyone here sends loving greetings to all. Thank you for your promptness and I wish you good health.

Your Nechama

Chapter VI

WEARING HIS HEART AND HIS HAT,
ACCOMPANIED BY HIS BEST FRIEND

Maishe held his marriage certificate in his hand. He still had trouble believing—and at times found he was surprised—that he was officially a married man. It was not necessary for him to read it, he knew its contents by heart, and he now also knew that his sister-in-law's surname – Cecilia (Tzilla) – was Onjas de Valner (when Kisel arrived to Mexico the authorities had made a mistake when writing their name, and now one brother was Vainer and the other was Valner, and nothing could be done about it), and that the certificate was signed by proxy with Nechama Girsh's authorization to validate the marriage. He still smiled upon remembering the day he bought the winning lottery ticket, thanks to which it had been possible to buy Nechama's ship passage. It surprised him to think of all the coincidences that had to take place for this marriage to come true: that Tzilla had a cousin, that he and this girl had fallen in love via correspondence, that he had bought a winning lottery ticket, and were all this not enough, that this girl had managed to escape from war-torn Europe.

Thanks to all this, and more, he now stood on the pier in the port of Veracruz with his good friend Mauricio Rubiszewsky watching the Orbit loom closer and closer. Yes, he was nervous, pacing back and forth until his friend literally clamped his hand on him and stopped him.

«The ship dropped anchor,» he said, holding him still. «People will start disembarking soon.»

Mauricio said this just to calm Maishe down, for it was well known that authorities very often detained the new arrivals for hours under any reason, keeping them from disembarking.

In due time, the immigration and health authorities walked up the gangplank, led by the captain of the ship, who had carried out the initial paperwork an hour ago. The immigrants were given instructions to take their luggage and wait on deck.

The government authorities set up their office on deck, and began calling out names one by one. They first examined the travelers' eyes to make sure they were not suffering from trachoma, then they required that the travelers' show them their money to make sure they had the minimum amount required on them.

Maishe could see that there was a lot of movement on deck, and was burning with curiosity to lay eyes on Nechama for the first time. The hours dragged on, with nobody walking down the gangplank.

«Let's go get something to eat,» suggested Mauricio. «There is food for sale across from here.»

Maishe would have none of this, wanting to be ready to show the authorities the marriage certificate if so required. Without insisting, his friend crossed the street to buy some sandwiches for both of them. People began to trickle down the gangplank—tired, burdened by their belongings, looking for a familiar face or somewhere to spend the night.

At last, they spotted her, based on her photograph and the fact that she was the only girl who appeared to be traveling alone. Maishe thanked his lucky stars for having had the foresight to ask Mauricio to accompany him. Those first few minutes for the officially married couple were very tense and uncomfortable.

At long last face-to-face, they were tongue-tied.

It was Mauricio who, after initial introductions, asked her how the trip had been, to which she answered that she felt quite tired. She had in all likelihood contracted tuberculosis from her sister, but for her great fortune the sea air and being able to spend days on end without working had helped her overcome the disease. Additionally, she experienced great sorrow at having left her family, never having been away from them before. She still felt that tightness in her throat and heart when she remembered her father running alongside the train she was on to catch one last glimpse of her.

While they chatted, with Mauricio bearing her large basket and Maishe her suitcase, they reached the train station where they boarded the train to Toluca.

To make conversation during this part of the journey and help break the ice with Maishe, Nechama told them some of the events that she experienced on her journey by land from Lithuania to London, where she had attempted to find Laizke her cousin, an actor, son of her Aunt Golde, to whom she was to deliver a pair of gloves. She found the address she had for him, but he was not home, and neighbors informed her that he had gone away on tour.

From there she went on to Paris, a city that stole her heart. There she had purchased the gloves, hat and coat that she wearing. From Paris she journeyed to the port of Marseilles, where she boarded ship to Mexico. She told them how she had felt somewhat lost on all the trains she had had to take, all the time surrounded by soldiers. On one of the many trips a soldier had pinched her, and had it not been for a Jewish lady who called out

to her in Yiddish to come sit next to her, she would have been at a loss as to how to keep them from bothering her.

Nechama made her traveling companions laugh when she told them that the ship stopped in Cuba to pick up several more passengers, and one evening a young black man asked her for a dance. She took fright and scurried away, never having seen skin that color before.

Thus the hours slipped by, amidst laughter and chatter. Though she kept it to herself, it seemed odd to her to spot signs from time to time that read «dangerous curves», for the word *kurva* in Yiddish meant something entirely different than a turn on a highway... just thinking about it made her blush!

Kisel and Tzilla awaited them in Toluca, for Nechama was to stay with them until such time as the religious ceremony took place and they became man and wife before God and the world.

Nechama Girs, 1930.

The following page shows the Marriage Certificate for Mosés Valner and Nechama Girs, with the name of the bride appearing as Cecilia Onjas de Valner standing in for the bride who had not yet arrived in Mexico. The surname Girsch loses the h as of this document and henceforth, now in Mexico Girs.



Chapter VII

TWO WORLDS, TWO LIVES

Less than two months after Nechama's arrival in Toluca, Maishe gave her the news that Hitler and his Nazi army had invaded Poland. Back in Lithuania she and her family had followed the news of Hitler's rise to power and how he had re-militarized the country –rejecting the Versailles Treaty– and had implemented an aggressive foreign policy and Pan-Germanism, inspired by his search for *Lebensraum* –the regrouping of the German population of central Europe under one State.

Nechama knew, for instance, that Hitler had declared that the primary objective of his foreign policy would be, in part, to recover the territory that Germany lost after 1918. She understood that the constant claims for territory affected international stability, for Berlin, increasingly aggressive, openly proclaimed its intention to rebuild the Great Germany.

She was with her parents and sisters when they heard the report of the Anschluss events of March 12, 1938. These had been the first major steps in the expansion of Germany that Adolf Hitler was bent on attaining. They had also learned of the return of the territory of the Saar to Germany, which had been under the control of the League of Nations for 15 years, pursuant to the Versailles Treaty, and followed the news of the inclusion of Sudetenland later on in 1938, followed by the invasion of Poland in 1939.

Nechama was visibly concerned when she heard the most recent news; being so very far away from the region where her loved ones lived made the somber news even harder to bear. She wanted mail to travel faster, or some means by which she could receive news of the loved ones she left behind in Pamoosha. She knew that

scarcity of even the most basic articles made life so much more difficult for her siblings, and she always sent care packages along with her letters to make life slightly easier for them.

Nechama and Maishe had just enough money to get by, for the young couple was beginning life together with financial limitations. Even so, they felt the need to help their loved ones. When she didn't send ready-made garments, she sent them fabric for sewing, or other small items that would fit in a package and arrive in one piece and not spoil.

She could imagine her mother's and sisters' faces when they opened their letters and packages, and would so liked to be with them and explain why she had chosen the pink dress with the white collar and pockets at hip-length for Mushke, or why she had thought of Goldke when she sent the hair ribbons, or the colorful hand-knit shawl for her mother.

Amidst all this international upheaval, Nechama had to adjust to everyday life that was not easy either, and to an entirely new situation. During the time she stayed with her cousin Tzila she tried in vain to convince herself that the change was not so drastic, that there just might be some similarity to the small town she had left behind, but she soon realized that language was a true barrier, that customs were different from what was familiar to her, and that the food and ingredients were utterly foreign to her. Moreover, the very room she lived in at a tenement on Allende street made her think she would be better off at home in Pamoosha.

Just days after her arrival, the marriage ceremony that officially bound her to Maishe was performed. She knew that now her life was intertwined with his, and though she wanted to do



Moises and Nechama Vainer.
Toluca, July 1939.

her share to help him so they might make a good life together, it took her a while to understand exactly what he did for a living. Nechama knew he has some tools and equipment of sorts stored under the bed, but watching him come and go and knock on doors with people coming out to give him small sums of money, she began to believe her husband was a beggar, asking for charity house to house. The truth was that Maishe had become a collector of installment payments for goods sold, and he collected these sums on a weekly, twice-monthly or monthly route.

Upon marrying Nechama, Maishe had decided to sell his wares only close to the city of Toluca for he no longer wanted to travel to other towns and leave his new bride alone for long periods of time. He still saw his friend Carlos Hank, a fair young boy dressed in cotton pantaloons that he had met some time back in Atlacomulco where he was wont to make sales visits. They had built up a solid friendship, and Maishe stopped to visit with him and converse when he was in the vicinity. Who could have guessed that this young boy would later become a rural teacher, then mayor of Toluca, then Governor of the state of Mexico, followed by Governor of the Federal District, then Minister of Agriculture, and ultimately one of the most influential politicians of the country.

Maishe's good heart sometimes stood in the way of collecting money, for he often noted that his clients suffered hardships even worse than his own. Even so, he wanted to join in Nechama's efforts to send help to her family, and though it meant tightening his own belt, whenever possible he sent remittances of \$10 dollars to his in-laws.

RIGHT:
Moués and Nechama Vamer with
niece Sarita Valner.
Toluca, 1939.

On the next page is the last letter
that Nechama received from her
parents in April 1947.
The Nazis took Litbaniá in
June of that same year.
Nechama never again heard from
her family. On the last line
one can still see the signature of
her mother, Channa Mei.



Chapter VIII

HARDWARE AND HOUSEHOLD GOODS STORE, GUNSMITH'S SHOP AND A FAMILY

The forties brought major changes for Maishe and Nechama. As the days turned into months, they became friends with the families living on the same property: a captain, Mrs. Chanita, Mrs. Pepita and the engineer, Mr. Segal, Mr. and Mrs. Blanco newly arrived from Spain, Mrs. Abdo, the Guerra family and Mr. Antonio Abraham, the last three mentioned all from Lebanon. They had also become friends with the few Jewish families living in Toluca, and, naturally, not a day went by without Nechama being in touch with her cousin Tzilla, with whom she spoke in Yiddish. Tzilla was always at the ready with advice, and was her guide in navigating customs and objects of Mexican culture that were still unfamiliar to her. They were very close.

All these social contacts helped them, not only to integrate into city life, but also to practice their Spanish. Given that Maishe had arrived at such a young age to Mexico, he had learned Spanish to nearly the same degree as his mother tongue, with barely a hint of Lithuanian accent—with the latter in time completely erased from his memory. Nechama, having arrived at age 25, never really lost her European accent. Both had made a firm decision to learn to read and write Spanish, and succeeded through their own efforts.

More important than friends or acquiring language skills, during this decade Nechama and Maishe enlarged their little family of two to include Isaac, their firstborn child, born in 1940 and named after Maishe's father. This arrival filled them with excitement and joy, with hope for a bright future for this small new person, full of progress and optimism. However, Maishe was saddened at the thought

of remembering his parents and knowing they would never meet their grandchild nor witness the continuity of the family.

Hunting had always been an outlet to him, a way to forget his everyday responsibilities and ponder other difficult matters. He enjoyed hunting ducks and turtledoves at two farms, Rancho Santín and Rancho San José. He would come home laden with his hunting spoils, and Nechama had the hard job of plucking and cleaning the birds for cooking. In time, she blamed this for her arthritis, though more likely the source was genetic rather than due to plucking bird feathers. Were this not enough, one had to chew carefully because more than once bullet shells would appear in the cooked dish!

One of his prize hunting trophies was a gray, stork-like bird known as *water dog*. Proud of his catch, he had it stuffed and mounted, displaying it on a pedestal in the sitting room. Over time he put together a collection of other animals, such as falcons, a duck that Isaac had hunted, and hung them on the wall as though they were flying. Whenever he especially liked something he had hunted, he had it stuffed and mounted.

Nechama, on the other hand, with no reliable news of the fate of her parents and siblings in Europe, had a photo taken of the baby and sent it off to Lithuania, proud of her firstborn, and hoping in her heart that her family could soon meet him. They referred fondly to the little boy in the photograph in their correspondence.

Maishe continued to sell and collect on consignment, albeit the sale of hardware articles had improved his income. Isaac was enthralled with all the hardware store articles and watches that were stored in his home. Whatever he laid his little hands on



Isaac and Marta Vamer.
Toluca, 1946.

was something he needed to «fix», and in that manner he «fixed» a great many items, including watches. He would pry them open; scratch them up, and perform surgery on them. Maishe was a gentle father, and never scolded him for this.

When Maishe's friend Mauricio Rubiszewsky decided to move to Mexico City and give up his hardware store in Toluca, Maishe's chance to take over the business came up. He didn't have the means to do so, but Mauricio would take no reasons from him.

«I am moving to Mexico City –you can have and work the business,» he declared, refusing to take no for an answer.

Nechama encouraged him to accept, as it was such a good opportunity, and she promised they would work together to



Moisés and Nechama Vainer at the
hardware and household goods
store and gunsmith's shop,
«La Moderna» in Toluca.

ensure that the business would prosper. In this manner they became the proprietor of «*La Moderna*», where they sold hardware and household articles, and supplies for gunsmiths. The store hours ran from 9 AM to 1:30 PM, and from 3:30 to 7:30 PM. On Fridays people from neighboring communities came in to shop, so the store remained open through the lunch hour, with Nechama firmly planted behind the counter, while on Fridays Maishe would take the bus into Mexico City to stock up on merchandise. Sometimes he took Isaac with him, and other times he traveled alone. When in Mexico City he would invariably make a stop at «*Las Ramblas*» on Motolinia Street, a restaurant specializing in hot turkey sandwiches. The family at home anxiously awaited his return to enjoy the delicious treat for supper.

By then Nechama had learned enough Spanish to handle herself with assurance at the store, and communicate fully with employees and clients. Whenever someone came in with a big order or wanting to buy wholesale, it was she who organized the employees to quickly select and pack up the merchandise.

In addition to the typical items found in a hardware store, the Vainers sold the percussion shotguns used in the neighboring towns with all the ingredients necessary so that whoever bought them might prepare their own ammunition. They also sold ammunition, shells and items to make firecrackers. The store was at its busiest for celebrations of the town's patron saints of around Independence, September 15 and 16. Their clients were primarily makers of firecrackers.

Experience taught them to collect payment first and then prepare the orders, otherwise their clients would go off to the «*Faro*», a nearby bar, where they would proceed to spend every



Nechama and Marta Vainer
at home on Allende Street.
Toluca, 1948.

last cent on *pulque*, a regional alcoholic beverage. Once full of liquor, they would return to the store and ask Maishe to give them credit. At first he did, but ended up with far too many bills pending collection. Thus, if he required them to pay first, when the clients came back to pick up their orders everyone was happy.

There were also chemical products that were so volatile they could ignite just by dipping a spoon from one barrel into another. These included potassium chlorate, saltpeter, antimony, sulphur, and many others. Fortunately, and thanks to the care Maishe always exercised, there never was an accident; between what he sold and his brother Kisel in his business just a few blocks away, they could have caused a huge accidental explosion. The brothers would both go to work every day sporting a suit and tie, covered by a duster. This was how they worked, every single day.

Chapter IX

GROWING FAMILY, BUSINESS AND FUN

Around 1869 Mariano Riva Palacio, then governor of the State of Mexico, had hired the renowned architect Ramón Rodríguez Arangoity with the task of giving the City of Toluca a distinctive hallmark. This architect had achieved a style that many called «Neoclassical Porfirian» which involved building a series of portals and a cathedral. But it was not until the government of Filiberto Gómez, in 1930, when the modernization of the city actually started.

By 1946 the Vainers had moved to a modern house located at 1 Galeana Street, across the portals and were already the parents of a pretty little girl born in 1944 named Sore Mushe, but whom they called by the Spanish name of Marta. Nechama had assumed maternity as everything in life, without being intimidated by what she had to do and taking on all the responsibilities entailed. Meanwhile Isaac, who no longer had on hand the goods that his father used to keep at home to play with, started «operating on» his sister's dolls. He would tear their arms off, a leg, a hand or even the head.

Although Maishe was a hard-working man, work was not everything to him. He enjoyed being sociable and getting along with the new neighbors among which there was Pancho who owned a tire repair shop, or Don Tito Macedo, a Spanish gentleman owner of a grocery store. Everyone knew and greeted each other. Maishe would walk down the street raising his hand to greet one and all. He liked walk-

ing fast and those accompanying him had trouble keeping pace. On the street and in his store, his friends, customers and neighbors called him «Don Moisés». Though fully integrated into the Toluca lifestyle, he never lost his identity.

As soon as Isaac and Marta could do so, they held hands and went to visit their father at the hardware store. As they walked through the portal, there was always a photographer who would take a picture of them and rush to sell it to Don Moisés, who never refused to buy it.

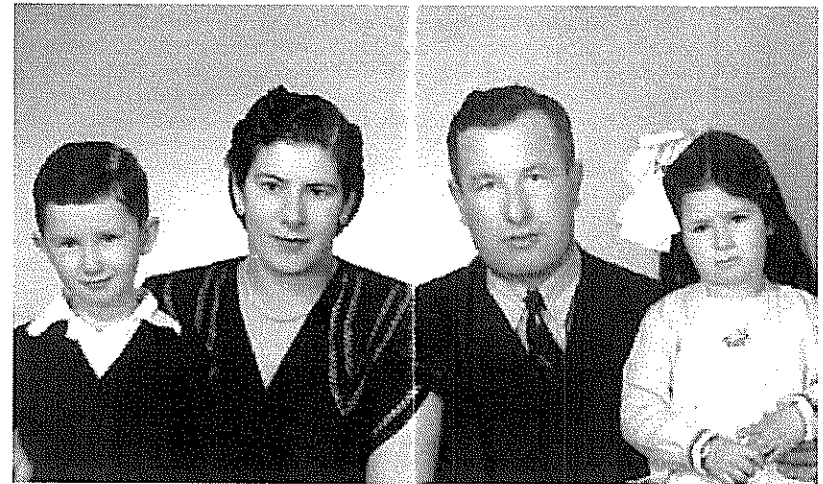
Life was quiet at that time and Toluca was a small, convivial town and a neighborly spirit. If Maishe ever needed to stay in his hardware store by himself late at night to deliver an order, he never had to worry for his safety.

Maishe loved playing a good joke. Whenever he saw a car or a plane from the window of the store, he would tell his brother Kisel or his cousin Esther Jaye, «looks just like what we had in Vaskai!» —when it was obvious that back in those days they only had carts and horses over there.

But even more than jokes, Maishe loved the hot springs of Ixtapan de la Sal. He used to tell his friends that he was the first Jew to have gotten into the hot springs and discovered this wonder of nature. He never stayed long, tending to go on holidays when he did not have to open the hardware store. Whenever there was a long weekend he would take Nechama with him, and later on the children as well.

Enrique, the youngest, was born on April 25 1952, and Nechama said that the newborn was going to be a hard-working

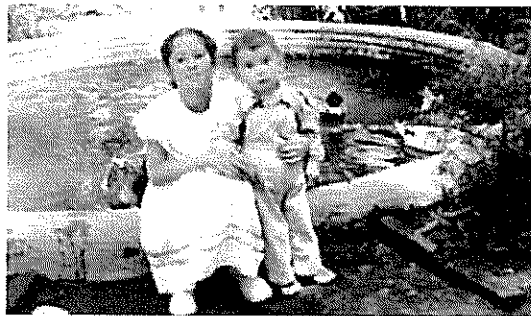
Moisés and Nechama Vainer with
their children, Isaac and Marta,
in 1947.



man for having been born at 9 a.m. on a Friday. This was the time stores and markets opened up for business in Toluca.

On the occasion of Enrique's birth, Isaac's mother instructed him to go to the closest furniture store to purchase a cradle. «Go to the Mueblería Continental (furniture store) and pick up a cradle for you brother,» he was ordered, «and tell Don Mario that as soon as we can leave the house we will go and pay for it.»

Despite being just a 12 year-old boy, Isaac made a very good choice, buying a rocking cradle for which he and Marta would fight to decide who was going to rock the cradle for the new baby.



Marta and Enrique Vainer
at «La Alameda»
Toluca, 1954.

From a very early age, Enrique was also included in family vacations to Ixtapan de la Sal. Usually the three children went there with their mother and their Aunt Cecilia. Maishe would catch up with them during the weekend. They would travel in jeep type vans with several rows of seats, painted in red and yellow on the outside and which were known as «bedbugs». Sometimes they were full-sized buses. Although it was a three-hour journey, Nechama and her cousin prepared sandwiches for the trip; they always carried an extra sandwich for the bus driver. Midway, one of them would get up and offer the driver a sandwich, which was always very well received.

In Ixtapan they met up with friends, but the Vainers also had clients there. One of them was a fireworks manufacturer named Víctor Gómez. Don Víctor owned a sour orange tree and part of the excitement was going to visit him because he would always give them a bag of these, which they would later enjoy at home.

The children also loved to buy sweets made of seeds, as did their parents, but the most exciting moment of all was getting into the hot spring at 7 a.m., cover their bodies with thermal mud and be the first to enter the warm, clean water before the rest of the visitors came to bathe.

Once at home, the entire family would sit down and watch tv. They had purchased a Sromberg Carlson set in a dark wood cabinet and Maishe liked watching the news with Guillermo Vela, and also took pleasure in watching bullfights, football, or boxing, but the last only if fighters were Welter weight or upwards. That was what he most enjoyed watching.

Maishe would walk down
the street raising his hand
to greet one and all.
He liked walking fast and
those accompanying him had
trouble keeping pace.
On the street and in
his store, his friends,
customers and neighbors
called him «Don Moisés».
Though fully integrated into
the Toluca lifestyle,
he never lost his identity.



Moisés Vainer walking to
his store in Toluca.

Chapter X

THE UNFATHOMABLE REALITY OF PAMOOSHA

Nechama had always been very close to her family. She often received letters from her cousins in the United States, and her first cousin Margaret Kleimbart, née Hirsh, daughter of her Uncle Laizer, came to visit her once. Nechama always held a special place in her heart for her cousin Margaret, calling her her English teacher. Nechama wrote to her in Yiddish, and Margaret answered back in English, a language that Nechama did not speak but always managed to understand.

There was another cousin, Grufie Pesis. In their correspondence they had never talked about whether or not they were still kosher, as they were back in Lithuania or not. One day she just came from Indianapolis to visit her cousin Nechama.

What a surprise was in store for her: the Vainers were no longer kosher! She couldn't eat a thing. Nechama now bought kosher meat only for *Yom Tov* and not for everyday use. She tried to obtain kosher meat especially for Passover, at which time she also exchanged all the dinnerware and thoroughly cleaned the entire house. Living in Toluca it was very difficult to follow *kashrut*, so she adapted as much as possible by not mixing dairy with meats, and not eating pork or seafood, and by buying live poultry and turning one of the servants into the *shojet*, or slaughterer of the animals.

She stayed in touch with her mother's sister, Tante Bashe (Doña Bertha Kaplan in Spanish, but Tante (Auntie) Bashe to the family), who lived for a number of years in Monclova, Coahuila, in Mexico, and attempted crossing over the border into the United States many times. She finally moved to Colombia in 1950,

joining her husband, Moishe Kaplan, and her children. They were all very fond of Nechama.

Nechama also corresponded with her cousin Charles in South Africa – Charles «Jonke» Kruger, son of Zorech Kruger and Feige Reisa Girsh, her mother's sister, and sometimes with her cousin Leibke, brother of her cousin Cecilia.

What she loved the most was receiving news of the family in Pamoosha. Even as late as 1944, when Sore Mushe was born, she sent them a photo of the newborn child, wanting to share her joy with them. Nechama knew that it was her sister Goldke who went to the post office to pick up the mail and packages, and that it was she who wrote to her enquiring when they could expect to receive another package. Her letters insinuated that the deprivations were increasingly drastic. «We killed a goose, made bread, and used the goose fat to spread on the bread...» Goldke wrote in one of her missives. Nechama then understood that there was no butter, cream, cheese or sausage to be had to eat with the bread. She was also well aware that after 1941 everything that she sent to Lithuania was returned unopened – be it letters, bundles or packages. Though she suspected the worst, she had no confirmation of what might have befallen them.

Some time later she received a letter from the International Red Cross through her cousin Ben or Uncle Laizer in which she was informed that no family members had survived, but this did not seem real to her until Rivka – her friend from Pamoosha who after 1940 moved to Russia and subsequently to Israel – got in touch with her and told her what Pamoosha was like after the war.

Nechama never threw these letters away, particularly the one that read «there is nothing left, nothing of what we once

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
 TOP: Mushe Girsh (Nechama's
 sister, Shimon Girsh's brother in law,
 son of Itze, Beile (Nechama's first
 cousin), eldest daughter of Uncle
 Zorech Kruger, Nechama Girsh,
 Mina (fourth daughter of Aunt
 Mijle Girsh and sister of Beile) and
 sister-in-law of Shimon Girsh.
 BOTTOM: Zorech Kruger, cousin
 to the bride's mother, mother of
 the bride, Feige (bride), Shimon
 Girsh (groom), Channa Girsh nee
 Met, Nechem Girsh and a cousin of
 Nechem Girsh.

Feige and Shimon's wedding day:
 Radviliskis, 1917.



knew, you and I ...nothing...». Countless were the times she read and reread that phrase trying to extract a different meaning in it from that which was obvious! How difficult it was to absorb this information, to let it penetrate and sink in... the news that none of those who stayed behind had survived the war. «Do you remember when we used to walk from Linkuva to Pamoosha when the Shabbath came round, how we used to look at the candles lighting all the windows? That candlelight is forever extinguished, there is no one left to light the candles...». And then Nechama would pull out the only photograph she had of her



Nechama, Mushe Kruger (cousin),
Golde (sister), Shimon (brother),
Rivka (friend) and other friends.
Pamoosha, 1935.

friend Rivka, in which the two young and innocent girls peered at the camera, and she tried to make sense of the time that had elapsed, and how things had taken place that neither could have possibly imagined. Rivka would tell her how her father, Nochem Hershk, had the cow tied to the wagon. Mushke died of tuberculosis but they never let Nechama learn of her death. The remaining family members had packed up their few possessions in readiness to depart but they ran out of time. They were too late.

It wasn't the concentration camps that killed them in the end. It was the Nazis together with their own fearsome neighbors who did it, and in the most aggressive and brutal manner.

Over time, the stories cropped up, each more cruel and heartbreaking than the one before. Through a friend who survived, Nechama learned that her brother Shimon, wild with worry about the rumors of violence and cruelty exhibited by the Lithuanians themselves, had attempted to get to Pamoosha to make sure that his parents and sister were alive and well, only to be brutally beaten and murdered by other Lithuanians. His young wife and precious baby girl, concerned because Shimon had not returned home, took to the road to go to Pamoosha and look for him and were both murdered on the way.

She also heard that her Aunt Golde, the mother of her cousin Laizke whom she had looked for in London on her way to Mexico, had also lost her life.

But what pained her and made her weep the most for many long nights was to learn that her family, her beloved parents and siblings, had been murdered by their very own Lithuanian neighbors, and, together with the rest of the Jewish population of Pamoosha, had been thrown into a mass grave.