

ZEKHARYA CHESNO

**All Rivers  
Flow into the Jordan**

Contento de Semrik

Zekharya Chesno

## **All Rivers Flow into the Jordan**

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*In loving memory of my dear wife  
Bela Chesno*

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## *Introduction*

**W**hat shall I compare a human life with? Perhaps the most suitable comparison is that with a river. A river starts from a tiny brook and as it flows it gathers strength and now calmly carries its waters, now begins to seethe and boil when it comes across some rapids or another obstacle. And so it goes on until finally its waters disappear in the sea.

Since our early school years, we had known what sea (or sometimes other river) a certain river falls into. Let us remember: “The Nieman falls into the Baltic sea.”

Similarly, our lives also seemed to go in a simple, absolute order. But, as time passed, it became more and more evident that life is unpredictable and often asks such questions to which it is hard and sometimes even impossible to find single answers.

Yes, I know very well where the rivers that flowed through my life finally came into: the Spree—into the Oder, the Viliya—into the Nieman, the Kama—into the Volga, the Cheptsa—into the Viatka.

But besides physical geography, my memory holds quite different geography.

For me, a boy brought up in the Jewish tradition, since my young years the guiding star had been Golden Jerusalem. All the roads in the world lead to this wonderful unique city. And likewise today I can claim that all the rivers of my life flow into the Jordan.

So, in my memoirs I want to tell about my life, about the things I have seen and the people I have met on my way to the Jordan.



*Chapter One*

**SPREE, BERLIN (1928–1933)**

**T**he story of my life begins at my birthplace, the city of Berlin in the year 1928.

Even a brief acquaintance with history suffices for us to know that this was a peaceful year.

After World War I, Germany had time to recover from the shock and humiliation that followed the Treaty of Versailles. Five years remained before the rise and seizure of power by Hitler. For German Jews, the period was serene. They numbered about half a million and enjoyed far more favorable living conditions and a better quality of life than those of Russian and Eastern European Jews.

Since the time of Bismarck, Germany was unified, and all its citizens were called German. Nonetheless, all identity cards specified religion in addition to citizenship: Catholic, Lutheran, and Mosaic (Jewish).

My family, the Chesno family, belonged to the last named category. Even by modern standards, it was a wealthy family. Our house was comfortable with many rooms and a staff of servants as well as other workers.

Both German Jews and other Germans were visitors on an equal basis. This was never in question.

Male visitors used to kiss the hand of the “honorable lady” (my mother), in accordance with bourgeois custom. In the evenings, after the local chess club closed, men would come to visit my father to play in our chess room. My father was a noted amateur player who rejected any idea of becoming professional. He used to say mockingly: “I just move the pieces.” All his energy and his efforts were employed in developing the family business “Chesno Brothers” which amply supported the whole of our extended family.

My grandfathers, Zekhariya and Yitzhak Chesno, who were cousins, had created and developed fairly large leather

plants. By the time I was born, the founders had died, but the enterprise they established was well and capably run by the second generation. The firm prospered and expanded. Where the family came from originally and where its roots were, I never really ascertained. One version said Latvia; another said Southern France.

What I mainly remember of life in Germany was the strong and peculiar smell of leather in the family plants in Düsseldorf and Berlin. The raw material was purchased primarily in Eastern Europe, where cattle raising were widely developed. The firm eventually had branches all over Eastern Europe. They bought the raw material and took charge of the preliminary stages of production.

One of these plants, in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, was later my father's responsibility. He went there quite often and had established good relations with the Lithuanian Embassy in Berlin.

In 1933, when I was five years old, I noticed a marked change in the dress of a number of our guests. Their elegant suits suddenly became brown and black uniforms. The new atmosphere that then ensued was both predictable and frightening.

I recognized that atmosphere again in 1994 when visiting Berlin at the invitation of the Mayor of that city. The Berlin municipality used to invite former inhabitants, at least once in their lifetime, among those who had been forced to leave as a result of the Nazi takeover. This event took place annually. On the occasion of my visit, I found our old house. It had not been harmed during the war. I believe that this was due to its location adjacent to a large hospital. I was particularly surprised at finding the yard so small, when I remembered it as quite vast.

Our home was the second from the corner, where a school named after Mendelssohn stood. My brother had been educated there. I remembered a blind soldier, a World War I invalid accompanied by a German shepherd

guide dog. He never asked for charity but sold small items of merchandise. He had a small table upon which were cigarettes, matches, candles and chewing gum, all of which he sold. On one occasion, I tried to pat the dog, and it attacked me. The blind soldier could hardly take control and calm it down.

This was in 1933 when Hitler's Nazi party was elected to the Reichstag and Hitler himself was named Chancellor of Germany. Shortly thereafter the famous arson of the Reichstag took place that was the pretext for launching murderous pogroms in Jewish neighborhoods. This definitively destroyed the illusion of German Jews that they were an integral part of the German nation. As long as the Weimar Republic lasted, German police protected the Jews to some extent during pogroms and attacks. Nevertheless, these were the first signs of the tragedy to come.

Initially, few Jews thought it necessary to leave Germany. Non-Jewish friends among our regular guests were clearly and uncomfortably of the opinion it would be preferable to leave Germany temporarily, until the menace was over.

Jewish identity cards were stamped with a capital "J" for Jew, and the name Sarah was added to all Jewish women's names, as was that of Israel to all the men's.

The Ministry of the Interior created a new department. Its task was to identify all Jews born to "mixed" families, even down to the second generation. Racial purification was thus begun.

As mentioned above, our family's non-Jewish friends advised us to leave, although even they had no idea of the lengths to which events would lead. They kept repeating: "Germany is an extremely cultured nation," mentioning Goethe, Schiller, Bach and Beethoven. "You," they said, "are actually German Jews. We shall surely drive away immigrants, but you have nothing to fear. Leave for a while. Let your neighbors have your keys. In a month or two, order

will prevail, and you will be able to return home.” Thus, they tried to reassure their German friends of the “Mosaic religion.” Other Germans told us more clearly: “Get lost!”

Where to go seemed easy. We would travel to Lithuania. Admission papers should be easy to obtain, given our good relations with the Lithuanian Embassy in Berlin.

What actually happened was told to me later by my parents when we lived in Kovno. We were in a first class compartment on the train. Eitkunen was the last stop on the German side and Kybartai was the first on Lithuanian territory. German border soldiers entered the train, took my parents’ passports, stamping them “Not valid.” Once in Lithuania, we were then already refugees, stateless people, entitled to special refugee passports known as Nansen passports.

*Chapter Two*

**RIVER NIEMEN: SENSE OF FREEDOM  
(1933–1939)**

**R**efugee status obliges one to obey the law scrupulously. I recall an event when I was nine or ten. At that age one is already responsible for one's acts. Not far from our house, was a textile store, owned by a Jew name Arkus. One sunny day, my father told us that Arkus had insured his new show window for a huge sum of money. I was intrigued, less by the amount named than by the glass itself. My father's story indicated it was a unique glass imported from Italy. In those days, I had a small slingshot that I used for target practice.

I took my slingshot and went out. I pulled the rubber band as far as it would go and shot a stone towards Arkus' newly installed glass window. The show window shattered. Loud voices aroused the entire street. A crowd of people approached to observe and evaluate the damage. In the crowd, I stood, the small criminal. Suddenly, a policeman pulled my ear, asking: "And what is that?" He pulled the slingshot from my pocket, and there was the proof of my crime.

Immediately thereafter, having been called by the police, my father and Mr. Arkus arrived. There was no need for any formal investigation to be held. They said they would mutually agree to the appropriate compensation. The Jews nearly always preferred not to involve local officials in their disputes.

This, however, was not quite the end. My good father, who had never previously punished me, whipped me with a belt, thereby teaching me an unforgettable lesson. He explained that this was far more significant than an irresponsible



**The 1930s letterhead of the leatherwork firm, “Chesno Brothers”**

childish trick. Lithuania could easily have deported us, since we were, in essence foreigners.

It was a good lesson for me. Never again did I indulge in glass smashing.

Our refugee status affected our economic situation, even though my mother insisted on keeping a servant and a chamber maid. Born to a wealthy family, she simply could not even imagine any other possible life style. However, compared to others, our situation was fairly good.

My father successfully managed the Kovno plant and even turned out to be a successful businessman as well. The branch, at first housed in a small, rented cellar, grew sufficiently in a few years to be a real leather manufacturing plant. Father constructed a three story building to house it.

At first, at home we discussed returning to Berlin. When I asked my mother, “When will you buy me a bicycle?” she answered: “When we return home to Berlin.” The situation in Berlin, however, went from bad to worse, and the idea of returning there was transformed into such strange words as “Palestine” and “Jerusalem.”

In our family, making Aliya (going to the land of Israel) had always been a possibility. With that in mind, my older brother and I were sent to a Hebrew gymnasium, to prepare us for eventual enrollment and study in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Kovno was in fact the scene of important preparatory work by its Jews for eventual Aliya.

There were four high schools there. All courses—except for Lithuanian language, literature and history—were taught in Hebrew. Each gymnasium belonged to a different Zionist party and each one had its own special hats. Our were red. On our gymnasium building was a sign in carefully designed bold letters: “The First Hebrew Gymnasium in Kovno,” together with a Star of David. It had been built by a well-known contractor named Bendler. This man’s daughter, Sara Doron, was later a member of the Israeli Parliament and a Minister in the Begin government.

In order to obtain an official diploma, the school had to comply with the Lithuanian scholastic program. Thus we studied, as mentioned before, Lithuanian language, literature and history, as well as Latin. (It must be remembered that Lithuania is primarily a Catholic country.) Next door, separated only by a fence, was the Tarbut Gymnasium affiliated with the Socialist Zionist Party; called the Mapai in Israel (Israeli Labor Party).

There was also the Yavneh Gymnasium that belonged first to the Mizrahi (religious) and later to the Mafdal Party. There prayers were recited and boys and girls studied in separate buildings.

A fourth gymnasium of Revisionist Zionist orientation was headed by Dr. Schwabe and was thus called the Schwabe Gymnasium. Dr. Schwabe soon went to Israel and, during the 1930s, became Rector of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

I learned Hebrew in school, but the street taught me Yiddish, the spoken language of Jews in Eastern Europe. At home with our parents we spoke German. In the street, I tried to twist the German words so that they would sound like Yiddish. My Jewish playmates laughed at me and at my childish attempts to speak Yiddish. In time, however, I learned to speak, write and read Yiddish quite well.

The same was true of Lithuanian. My Lithuanian was so good that I later graduated easily from the Lithuanian University and worked for 25 years as a journalist in Lithuania.

Hebrew/Yiddish relations at that time reflected a specific controversy that involved ancestral feelings for the land of Israel. All gymnasiums hosted various Zionist bodies. I, for instance, belonged to the General Zionist Party youth movement. Not all these bodies were in favor of the Pioneer movement that aimed at founding new Jewish settlements in the land of Israel. In the room I shared with my brother was a small table above which hung a map of the land of Israel. These maps were distributed by the “Keren Kayemeth” (the Jewish National Fund), together with the traditional blue box for collecting coins to buy land in Israel. Pins decorated with minute Shields of David enabled us to mark all the new settlements founded in the land. We obtained the information concerning these from the newspapers “Jidische Schtime” and “Oventblat.”

However, among the Yiddishists (as we called the students of the Shalom Aleichem Gymnasium, the attitude was totally different. In Tsarist times it had been funded by the Bundist movement. Later, the Bund was taken over by the Lithuanian Communist Party. However, at that time, this Party was outlawed in Lithuania and functioned underground. The conflict between the different existing youth groups was visible at the railroad station when we saw off those who left to settle in the Promised Land. This almost always took place after the Holiday of Succoth.

Certificates or formal papers ensuring entrance to the land of Israel were distributed by a Mr. Brick, head of the Jewish Agency in Kovno (then called the Palestine Office).

His son, Aaron Barack, later became President of the Israeli Supreme Court. Mr. Brick provided these certificates in accordance with the sums of money donated to the Keren Kayemeth. The Parties also distributed such documents.

There were many candidates, but only those who had spent more than a year in agricultural training camps, administered by the Palestine Office were eligible to receive such documents. They testified to the qualifications earned by work done on an agricultural farm rented from a Lithuanian landlord in the village of Marvalla.

Now to return to the railroad station and the parting ceremonies organized for young pioneers leaving for the land of Israel. There were often real fights between different parties. Anti-Zionists and, in particular, their leader, Yudel Marek, tried desperately to intimidate the young people and their mothers. "In Palestine you'll be confronted with hunger, malaria, Arab rivalry and many other problems."

Following instructions from our various movements, we guides would pull out whistles that were an integral part of our blue uniforms (with which we wore white ties and a white ribbon under our left shoulder). By whistling we tried to disrupt our rivals' speeches.

Much later, when I arrived in Israel in 1972, I learned that Yudel was also there and that he worked in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This was indeed proof of the failure of the Yiddishists. So much for the battles between various Jewish groups.

The real war, however, still awaited us and, in fact, was even then nearing the borders of Lithuania, that tiny neutral State.

*Chapter Three*

## **THE TRAP CLOSSES (1939–1941)**

**U**ntil 1938, the situation in Lithuania was almost serene. In 1938 the first knell of the bell of History sounded. It was the Austrian Anschluss and the Munich surrender that led in turn to the conquest of Czechoslovakia and last, but not least, the fall of Klaipeda (Memmel), Lithuania's sole port. Everybody was aware that the end of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian independence was at hand.

September 1st, 1939 was a lovely warm day. The radio, tuned to Poland, broadcast pleasant music. Then came the voice of Polish Radio Warsaw: tearful, dramatic: "Attention, attention, enemy planes are overhead!" We all knew that bombs were falling some two hundred kilometers from home. Twenty five minutes flight time separated Warsaw from Kovno. Yet we did not realize that this marked the beginning of World War II.

Soon, Polish Jewish refugees appeared in town. I remember one Saturday evening, my father, returned from the synagogue, bringing with him the Zuckerman family. They had a small daughter called Ilona. She was pretty, like a little doll. They lived with us for several weeks until they found another place.

My parents listened attentively to our guests' stories and decided not to wait until the last moment, but to leave. Where to go was never in doubt. It was Palestine, the Land of Israel. The problem was how. And that was not simple. In the year 1939, Great Britain announced, and put into effect, its White Paper, severely restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine. The only exceptions made were for students who were going for academic studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and for those who acquired so-called "capitalist"

visas. For the latter, one had to deposit in a British or Palestinian bank a sum of money of one thousand pounds minimum. It was strictly forbidden to take money out of Lithuania. However, my father found a way. German firms, since Kristal Nacht, had ceased all commercial contact with Jewish firms abroad. These were then supplied by French or British firms. The entire world was preparing for the Great War. Millions of soldiers required boots. My father cultivated contacts with British companies. It was agreed that part of the money due him for leather transportation would be deposited in the East Midland Bank of London. At the end of 1939, via the British Embassy, we obtained our longed for “capitalist” visas.

I remember my mother saying: “From Sunday on, you boys will stop going to school. We are leaving for the promised Land.” I was delighted, as was my brother.

This, however, is where the tragic comedy begins, without which everything would have ended differently. Several days after obtaining the visas, my father came home saying he had received a telegram from London, asking for another leather transport at double the price. He asked us all whether he should accept or decline this offer.

My mother replied by asking: “How long would it take you to comply with this order?” His answer was “two to three weeks.” Then my mother said, with great determination, “Palestine is a poor British colony; extra money would do no harm. After all, what are two or three weeks compared to two thousand years of exile?”

But more and more orders followed, and each time, with mother’s approval, my father accepted and filled the orders. As a business man, he was probably encouraged by the pull of success. Meanwhile, the war came closer and closer, to our very doorstep. We sat on our suitcases but, in fact, never left.

And one day, everything changed brutally. It was June 15th, 1940. At midday, I had an oral Bible examination in school. On that occasion, the Lithuanian Ministry of

Education Inspector, Mr. Pobleitis, was present. He had also been the Lithuanian language and literature teacher at our school. In 1930 he had been named inspector of Hebrew education. Recipient of a governmental grant, he was sent to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and mastered both Hebrew and Yiddish very well.

On that day, it was my turn in the Bible examination to answer the examiner. The noises of the tanks, filtered through the open windows. Everybody stared at the windows to see the USSR red stars, and the hammer and sickle designs on the tanks. They were on their way to the bridge over the Nieman, the German border.

Inspector Pobleitis then turned to me and asked: “Do you happen to know by heart the ‘On the Way’ prayer?” I replied that I knew several prayers, for food, for washing hands—those required by the examinations—but the ‘On the Way’ prayer was not one of them.

He then said, without smiling and in a profoundly sorrowful voice: “You must learn the On the Way prayer, since you will need it soon.”

That evening, at the dinner table, father told us in Yiddish (instead of in the German usually spoken at home), the tale of the English writer Rudyard Kipling. It concerned a peculiar working method used in India for catching apes of a highly valuable kind. These apes were extremely vulnerable. A minor scratch or blow caused their death. But there was a weakness about them: they were greedy and once they got hold of some fruit they would not let it go. So the hunters made use of this weakness. They designed a cage allowing the animals to insert their hands to grasp the fruit inside. The way back was more complicated since they would not let go of the fruit. The hunters thus caught many apes. Father ended the story with the words, “I am the ape.”