

Wilhelmina

Heavenly Bread Crusts

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Part 1.
Starvation: Lust for Food



Lepyioshka, Naan and a Trunk

The first person who came into the trunk with me was Srulik. I initially heard his real name “Israel” in the darkness of one night. We were in the *kibitka*, the muddy hovel where we lived.

The two of them, both the trunk and Srulik, disturbed the routine of the *kibitka*, changing my life completely. I was accustomed to the sight of bundles of clothes, bound by a simple strap. The glamour engulfing the ornamental nail-studded trunk amazed me.

The luxury of a leather belt to hold it together... all representing some kind of extended reincarnation of a big *chemodan*¹ that was common in our part of the world.

Srulik was a plump child when he first came to join us. He was actually the only plump refugee I met during the entire

¹ *Chemodan* - Russian name for a trunk

war. In days to follow, he, too, would become skeletal - a shrunken version of his former self, marked by hunger like the rest of us. But until that happened, I managed to enjoy the soft plumpness of his body which I felt when we sought isolation together in the trunk.

That same dark night, the trunk and Srulik arrived together with a man. I discovered afterward that he was Srulik's father, although the boy called him Vladek, not *Tateshi* as was the custom. I found out, later on, that Srulik actually did not see his father for almost the entire duration of the war. Occasionally, he would steal into his wife's house, only at night time, awaken the child, and shower him with all the smuggled merchandise from which he made his living. Then he would disappear again.

Although everyone called the child "Sruklik," his uncle, Mr. Kritzevsky, who was our partner in the *kibitka*, insisted on calling him *Israel*. He said "Israel was the name of my father. My sister named him after *Tateshi* who was nicknamed *Der Mazeldiker*," the lucky one, so that the child would bring her luck. He also described Grandfather Israel's great fortune before the war, when he had a beautiful wife, successful children and a large estate. He explained to me that *Israel* is the name of Palestine. But I could not understand how you could name a child after a curse, the same word that children used to curse me, "*Jidki do Palestiny*," Jew to Palestine. That was incongruous. I wondered how that

name could bring luck, when his father was captured by the army, then deserted, and continued to live in constant danger underground, and his mother was imprisoned in the “*tyurma*,” the jail of the N.K.W.D, the Russian secret service.

“She was imprisoned because she was a devoted communist,” I heard my mother explaining. My Grandmother, who never believed that, said that Stalin was only looking for excuses to lock up the wife of a deserter, a Jew and a black market smuggler, who made his money on the backs of the simple Soviet proletariat. I now understood that their son was left alone with us, without a mother or a father. He came to us with only the treasures in the trunk, to find refuge in our *kibitka* in Uzbekistan.

Although it was night time and I pretended to be asleep, I was aware of the sudden arrival of the father, the son and the trunk.

We, the children of the *kibitka*, knew that we were not supposed to see such things, nor know too much, for fear of being caught.

Through half closed eyes, I saw the “*lepyioshka*,” the pita bread that Srulik clung in his hand. He would not let go of it even when he was put to bed in the corner on a blanket spread out on the floor for him. The moment I saw the scene, I knew what the night would bring after his father’s stealthy departure. I waited for the stifled moans.

I knew that the inevitable crying would follow; I knew that the crying that should not be heard would come soon.

Hadn't I also swallowed my tears not so long ago in the depths of the night? My mother had covered my head with a blanket to stop me from looking, but I saw the voices, the shouts of the soldiers, pulling my father outside, dragging him with a terrible force. I already knew that that was the way they recruited their men to the Red Army.

I blocked my ears to the sound of the boots kicking my mother and her screams begging to be allowed to say farewell to her husband.

She would not see him again until after the war, when he would be declared "dead." In our family he would be known as a *sovyetsky geroi*, a Soviet war hero.

Right now I peeped out of my blanket, eyeing Srulik's hand tightly clasping the *lepyioshka* which his father left him before disappearing again, leaving him alone with a strange uncle.

From the moment I saw the *lepyioshka*, sleep was lost. To tell the truth, it was not Srulik's moans that prevented me from rest. It was the *lepyioshka* which robbed me of my peace. I could not take my eyes off it.

I had already seen *lepyioshka* before in the market but had not had the privilege to taste it. *Lepyioshka* was not exactly the bread of poor refugees. I liked the *lepyioshka* because it had a lighter color than *naan*, the bread of the Uzbekis. It had thick parts of soft dough, and it made a crunchy noise when I touched the burned parts.

Naan, when in supply, was as black as night. People claimed that all kinds of different substances were added to the flour in order to deceive its weight. You might find a bit of black flour in the ingredients, a fair amount of sawdust and soot, and other additives to darken the bread even more. The inside was gooey, moist, and sourish. It was difficult to swallow and left one's throat with a burning sensation. On the other hand, the crust on the outside was hard, and within hours those miserable crusts would turn to stone, and we would crave that disgusting black stuff day and night.

Whenever half a loaf of *naan* arrived at the *kibitka*, it would brighten our darkest days. Eating *naan* was no simple matter. We would start by eating the inside part. Then we would leave the crust and place it under the pillow. I would collect many dried crusts over days and days, which would grow even darker and darker.

When I would lift up my pillow at night, the crumbs would form an image of black twisted worms on my tattered blanket.

Whenever I was hungry and when not even half a loaf

would turn up at the *kibitka*, I would draw out the time sucking on one crusty worm for hours!

I was mainly hungry at night. Sucking the crusts, with the taste of food filling my mouth, would lull me to sleep.

Much later, when I visited a dentist in Israel, he was astonished by the unnaturally high structure of my palate. The dentist did not understand what might have been the cause of such an unusual feature.

After the same night that Srulik's *lepyioshka* robbed my sleep, all the grown-ups went out to the market.

At the age of five, I was always left on my own, in charge of looking after the *kibitka*. That day I was also left in charge of Srulik, eight years old. My job was to stop his cries which would betray us all.

Sruklik and the *lepyioshka* remained planted in the corner where they had been told to lie down last night. The *lepyioshka* looked wet from the tears Srulik had shed. The edge was torn, and there were holes in the center, but it was still a *lepyioshka*, and I craved it so much.

“Do you want to play Mommy and Daddy?” I asked him, interrupting his moans momentarily.

He did not answer but nodded yes; yet he did not move from his spot nor indicate whether he would be in the game or not, or even what he would do. I realized that I would have to lead the game.

“I am Mommy, and you are Daddy,” I told him.

He did not respond, but I assumed that he was in the game. My instinct told me that it was pointless to play “Kissing Mommies and Daddies” because he had hardly ever seen his parents together.

I had an idea. “I am Mommy sitting in prison in the *tyurma*.” I received the desired reaction immediately. Srulik stopped moaning and groaning. Encouraged by my success, I drew near the trunk, untied the leather belt, lifted up the lid, and jumped inside, dragging the lid over my head.

I was welcomed by soft embracing darkness and a slightly stale odor. A smooth, cool touch brushed against my body in the gloom. I lay down in its midst, my sick lungs drawing a deep breath of the scent of foreign lands. For a moment I forgot that I had left Srulik outside the *tyurma*. I lay inside the bundle of clothes belonging to Srulik’s imprisoned mother, inside those same goods that his father, that “bourgeois deserter,” had managed to pack and smuggle into our home with Srulik under the nose of the N.K.W.D. I felt the cool caress of silk, utterly unfamiliar – the touch of black-market racketeers.

I was awakened from my intoxicated world of the *tyurma* by Srulik’s groans. I lifted up the lid of the trunk for a split second and informed Srulik in Yiddish, “*Srulik, mein*

tayere, dain mameshe ist hungerik in ihre tyurma.” My darling, Mommy is hungry in prison.

Srulik did not move.

“She wants to eat,” I explained. Srulik stood nailed to the ground.

I had no choice. I spelled it out, explaining one step further.

“Srulik, darling, let me eat your *lepyioshka*.”

That he understood, but he did not seem to remember that he was still clasping the *lepyioshka* in his hand.

I lifted up the lid of the trunk, straightened up, grabbed a piece of *lepyioshka* and dived back with it under the lid.

The *lepyioshka* had already dried up by that time and lost its fresh taste, but I moistened it up, licking and sucking, not immediately swallowing, making it last in my mouth for as long as possible. Once again, I forgot Srulik’s existence until his cry awakened me.

I lifted up the lid of the trunk and addressed him in a parental tone, “Children are not allowed to cry. Otherwise the N.K.W.D will come and capture us!”

I could see he understood, so I gave him instructions to continue the game.

“Mommy is in prison, and Daddy keeps smuggling *lepyioshka* for her into the *tyurma*.”

I showed him how to break off a piece of bread, and from then on, I would lift the lid, and Daddy would smuggle a piece of *lepyioshka* into my world. My hand would reach out over the lid and take a piece inside. I would suck on it slowly between layers of silk and mold.

“*Mamashe, ich hob schon nicht mehr kein lepyioshka,*” Srulik announced suddenly.

That’s it. My *lepyioshka* is finished.

I realized that I would have to change the course of action in order to keep Srulik interested in the game.

I crawled out of the trunk, stretched out in front of him and announced that from now on we were not playing “mommies and daddies,” but rather “mommy and baby.”

Mommy started ordering her son to empty all the contents out of the trunk.

Srulik, *my son*, listened to *Mommy*. He emptied the trunk, and I saw treasures that no soul in Uzbekistan had ever laid eyes on. There was a silken gown from China adorned with peculiar painted birds; sheets and quilts with embroidered monograms; silk stockings; and a beaded purse containing all kinds of “colors” to smear on your face, the make-up of those days.

I decided to make good use of these treasures to distract Srulik’s giveaway cries.

I put on the gown and the silk stockings and made up my face with all the colors in the purse. I started walking like Sabina, the Kritzevski’s daughter, when she would try on a new dress and go out to the market to meet her current Cossack suitor.

In Mommy’s voice, I told Srulik that now the N.K.W.D was looking for him too, so both of us, mother and son, must run away and hide.

Then I burst into song with “*Ziplonek parvoy*,” which children were forbidden to sing. Srulik understood the implications and laid a finger on his lips as a sign of warning. He started singing silently with me, mouthing those threatening words about the half-roasted, semi-charred young chick which had been seared by fire, and was desperate to survive. But he was caught and arrested and thrown into prison. It was a clear reference to the fate of his mother sitting in prison, and I, as Mommy in the game, hurried back to my hiding place in the *tyurma*. I jumped into the trunk, pulling “my son,” Srulik, inside with me, to save him from the N.K.W.D.

Terrified of the N.K.W.D, he too hurried just as quickly inside.

We huddled closely together in fear. His breathing was choked by suppressed weeping. Yet his hand was groping for his mother. I responded to his search, hugging the abandoned boy, comforting him in Yiddish, “*Sha, shtill. Mamashe wert zurick kommen.*” Calm down, my son. Mommy will be back soon.

The boy was comforted. I gave myself a huge pat on the back. In time to come, I would remind my own mother of that moment, in order to achieve the recognition from her too that I thought it so rightly deserved.

Since that first game of “Mommies and Daddies,” Srulik and I frequented our trunk many more times. My hands would occasionally brush against his bones which were

beginning to protrude over time. Yet despite that, I used to love going into the trunk with him. I was willing to ignore the fact that he had begun to steal my crusts of bread, and I would not even consider ratting on him or divulging that sin, in case he would refuse to come back inside the trunk with me.

Unlike Srulik, the trunk accompanied us far and wide, remaining with us long after Srulik had left our lives. He vanished from our midst, when one day his father sent someone to collect him after they heard his mother had disappeared from the *tyurma* without a trace. After many, many years when we were already settled in Israel, we heard rumors that his father had married a woman from Uzbekistan and fathered Uzbeki children, brothers for Srulik.

We never learned what became of Srulik, the grandson of the “*mazaldiker*,” the lucky one. Did he ever enjoy his grandfather’s good fortune?

Since Srulik’s era, the trunk has had many visitors.

Later on, it accompanied us to Israel, already cracked and broken with the nail decorations gone. It was bound by coarse rope instead of the leather belt. It was in the way everywhere – in our room in the New Immigrants’ Center and in the tiny room where we lived in south Tel Aviv. But it still served me faithfully. More than once, I was hurt by

the jeers and laughter of the “*sabras*”¹. They called me soapy, female soap, because of my accent and my head that had been shaven upon arrival to the country. I would retreat then into the trunk and not want to come out at all.

Like many possessions from back “there,” the day finally arrived to bid farewell to the trunk, too. But, unlike the others, its departure and death was filled with glory, befitting a magnificent life. The final journey it so rightly deserved was a voyage to the bowels of the sea.

When it became obvious that we had no space in our tiny room for my Grandmother’s bed, and we would have to position her bed in the same alcove where the “obstructing” trunk lived, I felt it was time to say goodbye.

The moment everyone’s eyes rested on the trunk, I instantly realized its fate was doomed.

“What do we need to keep Srulik’s *schmates*² for? Looking after the stuff, in the hope that one day he might come for it all? Anyway, there’s hardly anything left of the quilts and the Chinese silk gown, munched away by mice and cockroaches,” said my mother determinedly.

“Let’s take advantage of this opportunity, and put the top part, the head, of your old Zinger sewing machine inside the trunk. It’s already fallen to pieces, and we’ll get rid of all the *alte zachen*³ together,” my father added.

1 *Sabras* – native Israelis

2 *Schmates* – rags

3 *Alte Zachen* – old things