

Yuri Okunev



From ROOTS
to LEAVES

YURI OKUNEV



From ROOTS to LEAVES

Essays on the Okunev Family Tree

Translated by Anna Tucker

BOSTON • 2021

YURI OKUNEV
FROM ROOTS TO LEAVES
Essays on the Okunev Family Tree

Second Edition, corrected

Copyright © 2020-21 by Yuri Okunev

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

ISBN 978-1-950319541

Published by M•GRAPHICS | BOSTON, MA

 mgraphics.books@gmail.com

 mgraphics-books.com

Cover Design by Larisa Studinskaya © 2021

Printed in the United States of America

*The author dedicates this book to his father
Benzion “Boris” Isaacovich Okunev –*



and Benzion's grandchildren Irina Shifrin and Simon Okunev.



Content

FOREWORD	6
--------------------	---

CHAPTER I

THE ROOT OF THE TREE MOVSHE OKUNEV AND THE THREE BOUGHS OF HIS DESCENDANTS	13
---	----

CHAPTER II

THE BOUGH OF THE DESCENDANTS OF HERSHEN OKUNEV

A drawing of Hershen Okunev's bough.	29
The founding father of the bough Hershen Okunev and his wives.	32
The branch of Sonya and Sholom Okunev	38
The branch of Pinchus Okunev.	49
Brayne, Rachel and Esther Okunev.	84
The branch of Joseph Okunev	91
The branch of Mindl-Dvoira Okunev.	108

CHAPTER III

THE BOUGH OF THE DESCENDANTS OF ISAAC OKUNEV

The bough of the descendants of Isaac Okunev.	130
Isaac and Raisa Okunev, the start of the bough.	133
The branch of Ida Okunev	144
The branch of Pinya Okunev	156
The branch of Abram Okunev	163
The branch of Rachel Okunev	181
The branch of Benzion Okunev.	193

CHAPTER IV

THE BOUGH OF THE DESCENDANTS OF BASYA OKUNEV

Basya Okunev and her descendants.	244
The branch of Pinchus "Pinya" Lvin	253
The branch of Sheina "Sonya" Akselrod	254
The branch of Haim "Efim" Lvin	286
The branch of Moses-Ber "Boris" Lvin	288
The branch of Anna Ezrochi-Lvin	290

CHAPTER V

THE VELIZH AFFAIR.. . . .	318
----------------------------------	------------

CHAPTER VI

WHO AND WHY SEARCHES FOR THE 'RITUAL' TRAIL? . . .	325
---	------------

CHAPTER VII

DEATH OF THE VELIZH SHOCHET	330
--	------------

CHAPTER VIII

PORTRAIT OF A FAMOUS RABBI OF LUBAVITCH, THE BIRTHPLACE OF CHABAD, IS FOUND	340
--	------------

CHAPTER IX

SAGA OF THE RISEN FROM THE ASHES	350
---	------------

CHAPTER X

FROM EITHER SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC: MY PARENTS' LOVE STORY.	370
--	------------

AFTERWORD	372
----------------------------	------------

REFERENCES	374
-----------------------------	------------

Foreword

First embarking on this research of the Okunev family tree I asked myself the very question any thinking reader would: “Why write another book about the same thing when *Letters to Relatives from the 20th century already exists?*”

Allow me to remind you that *Letters* were published by the publishing house “Art of Russia” in St. Petersburg in 2002. The print was sold out and the topics of the book became the basis for a historical and philosophical essays collection *The Axis of World History* that was recognized by USA Book News as an «Award-Winning Finalist in the World History category of the National Best Books 2008 Awards».

Letters was the first book about my family and a desperate attempt to preserve at least some information for future generations. I remember the exact date I sat down at the computer, opened a new file and typed with one finger: “*Letters to relatives from the 20th century*”. It happened on June 4, 1999 in a small, cozy American town of Southbury, Connecticut. A grave illness pushed me to tell my children about their ancestors. I suddenly felt personal responsibility before my descendants for preserving the family history and the memory of the endless line of our ancestors. Who else would tell this story to the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren? It’s easy to ask “Who else?” Having bravely typed the book’s title I suddenly realized with horror that I myself knew very little about my parents, aunts and uncles, something vague about my grandparents, and next to nothing about my great-grandparents. It required much effort to overcome my fear of the difficulties on the way to restoring the lost family history. I cut my way through the jungle of ignorance, searching for information in old letters, bringing back the faces and temperaments of the long-gone relatives in the old photographs with barely legible messages written on their backs, and asking questions of the few surviving older family members. I ended up with a family tree that had been nurtured from bits and pieces with hard labor, but that still had many gaps and broken branches. Several branches and even boughs had disappeared as if they had been cut and thrown into the fire of the terrible tragedies of the 20th century.

My research was complicated by the fact that my ancestors that had lived in the USSR never bothered to leave behind any truthful memoirs. They had good reasons, because the Soviet ideology only allowed the mostly fictitious past that fit the communist dogma, and the Soviet moral code rejected and despised the real past “dark and devoid of light of Marxism-Leninism”. Let’s have it out straight: the older generation of the Soviet era were afraid to provide truthful information about their ancestors, because they were not free people but slaves of the Red Pharaoh. That was not his fault but their tragedy. They were made to “forget” their religious forefathers, the clerics, they were afraid to mention the family members that had been declared “enemies of the people” and murdered or persecuted in the years of Stalin’s terror.

It has been almost twenty years since I wrote *Letters to Relatives*. “Different times come, different names rise”. I hoped that the book, upon having reached its reader, would start developing and perfecting itself, like a living organism. This small hope, unexpectedly for both the author and the reader, turned into something true and powerful. The branches that had been cut off by the ax of oblivion, the twigs and leaves of the family tree read this book or just heard about it and started coming back together to take their rightful places on the half-bare boughs.

I would like to point out to those who compile their families’ memories the amazing phenomenon of a printed word, the Word that according to the Bible arranges and governs our lives and fates. Publish your research work far and wide as essays, books and articles on the Internet and through any other medium. Your word will resonate and return to fill in the gaps in your knowledge of the past of your family, kin, and people.

Some of the feedback the author received from the readers of *Letters* seems like improbable legends and yet... What can be more beautiful than truth that looks like legend? The outcomes of these stories are akin to scientific discoveries. Some of them are worth mentioning ahead of time.

One of the branches of the Okunev family tree perished in the fire of the Holocaust to the last man. According to their close relatives, the head of this family Pinchus Okunev was killed along with his wife and sons in the Vilnius ghetto during World War II. That is what I wrote in *Letters*: “Alas, this is a sad fact. This branch of the Okunevs

is lost forever.” My mistake was not believing in miracles that have been happening to our people throughout its history. As Ben-Gurion said, “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles”.

Several years after *Letters* came out I received a message from Israel from my distant cousin on behalf of a granddaughter of Pinchus Okunev. This granddaughter was an orthodox Jew who did not know any Russian. The message said that her father Michael Okunieff, one of only a few surviving Vilnius ghetto prisoners, was living and working in Chicago. The message also included his home phone number. I was struck speechless by this unbelievably simple answer to the problem that two generations of my family had been trying to solve. Here I had the number that would lead me to the branch of my family that according to our common belief was gone forever. After I recovered, I picked up the phone and learned the story of great courage and unprecedented heroism. Like the Phoenix, my cousin from Chicago, whom I had never met, brought forth from the fire and ashes of the Holocaust a branch of the Okunev family that now has almost fifty heirs of their ancestor that died in the Ponary pits. That branch is growing and blossoming.

This amazing tale of a miraculous survival of a doomed ghetto prisoner and later a brave fighter of a Jewish partisan team in the forests of Lithuania, as well as the fantastic story of how I found him in America, is told in the book *Saga of the Risen from the Ashes*. Here the reader will find these stories in their brief form.

Other discoveries *Letters* brought were no less amazing if somewhat less dramatic.

One day I received an email message from a strange lady from Moscow. It went: “Dear Yuri Benzianovich! I am your second cousin Dariana Dmitrieva from the Schmerling family on the side of your Vitebsk ancestors.” Soon after I met Dasha in New York. She uncovered a whole new branch of my family tree on my mother’s side that grew from a Vitebsk merchant Hirsh Schmerling. As a result of my communication with this side of my family, members of which now live in Russia, America, Israel, Germany, Canada, and Australia, I wrote a book that was published in the USA in 2018 titled *Deliberate Contemplations Around the Family Tree: Essays On Family History*.

Another response was no less wonderful and fruitful and uncovered a bough of the Okunev family tree that I knew almost nothing about. This was the bough of Basya Okuneva, daughter

of Movshe Okunev. Through an online literary magazine where I published my essays on family history I was found by a Moscow attorney Eduard Ezrochi. He wrote: "I am immensely glad to have found a relative in this wide world, beyond the seas and ocean... Your cousin, Eduard." It turned out that Eduard's grandmother and my grandfather were siblings. Eduard opened to me a new large bough of our family tree, one of the three boughs of the Okunevs. Now comes the time to write about it.

I suppose after the long excursion into the history of *Letters To Relatives From the 20th Century* there's no need to answer each question posed in the beginning of this foreword separately. A new book about the Okunev family tree is definitely due.

In essence, this book *From Roots to Leaves* is a sequel to *Deliberate Contemplations Around the Family Tree: Essays On Family History* and the second volume of the large family chronicle of the Schmerling-Okunev family. The first volume travels back in time on the author's maternal side and the second talks about his paternal relatives.

This second volume contains a foreword, ten chapters, an afterword, and a list of references.

The first four chapters are dedicated to the root and the three boughs of the Okunev family tree which stems from a Velizh *shochet* Movshe Okunev and they describe in all possible detail all its branches and leaves. Below you can see a rough drawing of the tree that explains the structure of the main part of the book.

The next six, shorter chapters are essays on certain events in the lives of a number of Okunev family members mentioned in the first four chapters.

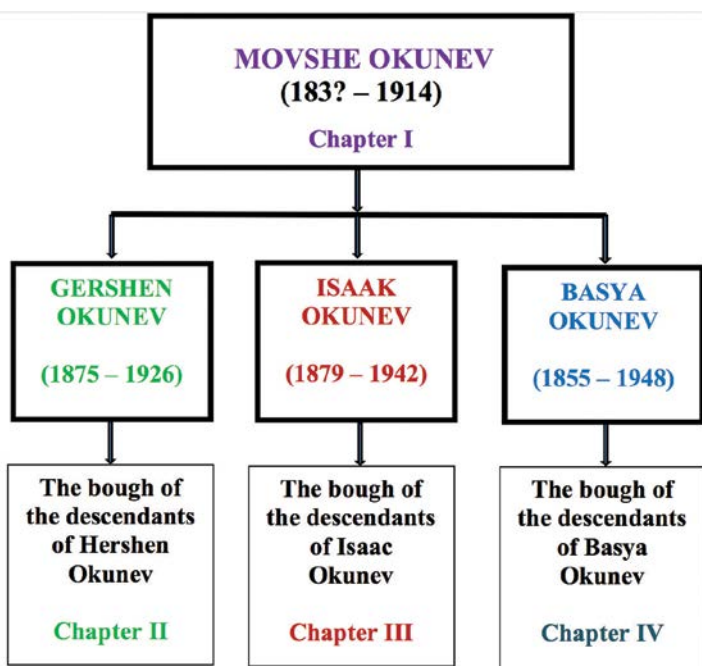
The list of references contains books, essays and publications that the text of this book refers to and that the author recommends the reader to explore on the topics that this book touches upon. The list is alphabetized.

Let me explain something about this text. In some chapters and sections an attentive reader will notice repetitions of parts of the narration and even photographs. This is not the author's mistake that he should apologize for but is done on purpose to keep the independent status of each essay, because each essay is a separate research or story and can be read separately. The author tried to make sure that a reader that is particularly interested in a certain theme or

character could find the necessary information without having to dig through the rest of the book.

Some people look at the Okunev’s huge family tree and ask, ”What unites us? We live in different languages countries and on different continents. We often speak different languages. There are believers and atheists among us and even the believers are of different faiths. We identify as belonging to different ethnic groups and have different cultural preferences and tastes.”

Simplified Okunev family tree and the structure of this book



This is all true, but also true is the fact that we have something in common, an undeniable common root, whether someone chooses to recognize it or ignore it. The first and most important part of it is simple: we are all descendants in six generations of only one man – Movshe Okunev who lived two hundred years ago in a small town of Velizh on a bank of the Western Dvina in the

Vitebsk province of the Russian Empire. Yes, my friends, we all carry the genes of our common ancestor Movshe Okunev, whether we like it or not. Genetics and biocybernetics are still relatively young sciences, however, they have already established that genetic traits are passed not only from parents to child, but can surface after many generations and each of us carries a message from our distant ancestors. Recent genetic research shows, for example, that all descendants of Ashkenazi Jews who appeared in Central Europe over a thousand years ago carry certain common genetic markers. I am sure that soon we will see many amazing discoveries in the field of human genetics.

The knowledge about the past of our family and respect to our ancestors may not be important to those who have already passed on, but it is essential to us that are still here, for it is said in the Bible that was written by our distant ancestors: *«Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.»* Exodus 20:12

I consider this book a start of a large research that will continue and develop. Many of my kin on three continents helped me in this work. I would like to express my immense gratitude to them for their valuable assistance:

Dmitri Kapitonov, Mikhail Brio, Faina Okuneva, Valeria Naumova, Maya Krimer and Zinaida Maizelis of St. Petersburg, Russia
Sophia Pavlova, Irina Kaplan, Rina Persiko and Boris Yakobson of Israel
Eduard Ezrochi, Julia Ezrochi, Evgenia Berezhetskaya and Marina Polonskaya of Moscow, Russia
Michael, Beverly, Paul, Polly and Debra Okunieff and Boris Lvin of Chicago, Florida, Boston and Washington, USA

I am happy that the list of those who selflessly and sincerely helped me to comprise this family chronicle is so large. The help of Dmitri Kapitonov and Eduard Ezrochi was especially important and constructive and without it this book would not have been so rich in information.

I am grateful to my immediate and extended family and my friends on three continents for their kindness and support of the author in this difficult work.

Many of those who provided substance for this book have already sadly passed away. I will always remember them with gratitude.

The author hopes that these essays on family history motivate all the adult Okunevs to join the project, to bring up the interesting facts that they store in their memory, to find and send in documents and photographs, and maybe even write about themselves and their families. I harbor the hope that one of my younger, energetic and courageous relatives will translate this chronicle into Hebrew.

This fruit of a collective labor effort is waiting for someone of the 21st century generation to be continued.

Yuri Okunev
March, 2020, New York, USA

Chapter I

The root of the tree

Movshe Okunev and the three boughs of his descendants

“...we feel him close to us, our contemporary in relation to that underworldly gorge of the past, into which he too, now so distant, has already peered. He was a human being like us, so it appears to us, and despite being so early in time was, mathematically speaking, as far as we from the beginning foundations of humanity..., since those in fact lie in the abysmal darkness of the well’s gorge. And so in our scrutiny either we shall have to hold to conditional pseudo-beginnings that we confuse with real beginnings..., or we shall be lured backward, ever backward, from one coastal backdrop to another and into immeasurable depths. “

Thomas Mann, Joseph and His Brothers

translated by John E. Woods

The Okunev family that includes no less than two hundred members on three continents of the planet Earth comes from one man - the male root of the family tree Movshe Okunev who lived in the 19th century in the town of Velizh of Vitebsk province of the Russian Empire.

Movshe Okunev was a man of strong faith, a cleric, and a professional *shochet*, “butcher”, and was well-known among the orthodox Jews of Velizh and its surrounding boroughs of Ilyino, Usvyat, Liozna and Lyubavichi.

If it were possible to start the life story of the Okunev family with Movshe’s ancestors, this family tree would have been much bigger. However, the information about that distant kin has been consumed by Thomas Mann’s “underworldly gorge of the past”. The only thing in the author’s power is to tell the reader of the origins of the name Movshe Okunev and make assumptions about Movshe’s roots.

The given name Movshe, or Moshe, is the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews' version of the biblical name Moses. The founding father of the Okunev family was a namesake of the greatest prophet of the Hebrew people that lead them out of the Egyptian slavery and brought to them the Ten Commandments. Moses was the founder of Judaism and monotheism and the legendary author of the first five Books of the Bible.

The Jewish family name "Okunev" comes from the name of a town in Warsaw Uezd, "county" of the Russian Empire in the territory of the Kingdom of Poland where my ancestors supposedly lived before Poland was joined with Russia.

To paint the full picture we should begin this story with the origin of the name Okunev, or at least the Jewish variant of it.

On the outskirts of Warsaw about 16 miles from its center, where the rivers Długa and Zonza meet, up to this day stands a little village by the name of Okuniew. It has a small market, a beautiful St. Stanislaus church, the ruins of the Lubenski family mansion and the remnants of their park, an old abandoned Jewish cemetery, a famous stud farm and the Fellowship of Knight Okun building.

The village of Okuniew grew here in the first half of the 16th century and was named after the knight Stanislaw Okun, who received the ownership of the nearby lands on the trade route from Warsaw to Russia and the right to hold markets and fairs from King Sigismund I the Old of Poland himself. In 1634 Andrzej Święcicki wrote in his work "Topography, or Description of Mazovia": "On the other side of the Wisla the Warsaw land spreads wider and envelopes the little towns of Okuniew and Stanislawow". This area is connected to many historic events. In 1656, a Polish national hero hetman Stefan Czarniecki defeated the Swedes by Okuniew, and in 1703 King Carl XII of Sweden resided in Okuniew. At the time of the November Uprising of 1830 the Polish rebels fought the Russian military between Okuniew and Old Milosna, right before the battle of Olszynka Grochowska. Fired at by the Russian army, Okuniew burned down on February 18, 1831. The well-known Battle by Okuniew, in which one of the Polish national liberty movement leaders Piotr Wysocki fought, took place the same year.



**An old crest of the town of Okuniew and
the Catholic Temple of St. Stanislaus**

In 1795, after the Polish state fell as a result of the Third Division of Poland Okuniew became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a border town. During the Napoleon wars Russia annexed Warsaw and the surrounding area, including Okuniew. The Russian rule ended in 1915 and Okuniew found itself occupied by the Germans that lasted until the end of WWI. In 1920, during the Polish-Soviet war the front lines cut through Okuniew. In the following years, on the bumpy road through history of the 20th century, the village of Okuniew suffered every misery and trouble that befell the distressful Polish land. Those events do not need further comment.

Jews came to Okuniew in the 18th century. The first synagogue was built here at the same time. According to historical evidence the village of Okuniew “belonged to the lands where Jews could reside with no oppression”. In the middle of the 19th century the village had a population of 532, including 105 Jews; and according to the 1897 census, 287 out of its 1119 residents were Jewish. At the time of the 1921 census about 500 Jews lived in Okuniew and a lot of Jewish social, religious and cultural organizations operated here. In September of 1939 Okuniew was occupied by German troops and in April of 1940 Germans deported the Okuniew Jews to Warsaw ghetto. Nearly all of them died. There are no Jews in Okuniew at present and the only reminder of them here is a small Jewish cemetery with a dozen tombstones.

In the early 19th century, after the three divisions of Poland and the end of the Napoleon wars, the Okuniew Jews learned that they now were the subjects of the Russian empire with the right to

reside inside the Pale of Settlement in Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and part of Ukraine. The break-up of the Commonwealth of Poland, the administrative chaos and the collapse of the economy in the former Polish-Lithuanian lands pushed Jews to migrate east. That was then, in the first quarter of the 19th century, that my great-great-grandfather whose name I do not know left Okuniew for good and went searching for a better life far east in Belarus in the Vitebsk Governorate, closer to the eastern border of the Pale of Settlement, closer to the border of Russia, and settled in the town of Velizh on the banks of the mighty Western Dvina.

Last names for Jews were introduced in Russia in the early 19th century. “The regulation of the Jewish Affairs” of 1804 under the reign of Alexander I stated that “every Jew must have or accept his known family name or nickname, which must be henceforth kept without change in every document and record with the addition of the first name given according to one’s faith or at birth.” Having settled in Velizh our distant ancestor faced the need of picking a name for himself and the rest of the family. His relatives and he still remembered their old homeland well and so without a doubt chose the name Okunev, after the village in Poland where they came from. The next generation of the Okunevs bore this last name officially and it was kept in every “document and record without change”.

We do not know the date of Movshe Okunev’s birth. Based on when his first child was born, it should have been in the mid-1830s. He passed away in Velizh in 1914, the same year WWI started.

For a long time I did not have any pictures of my great-grandfather, the patriarch of our family Movshe Okunev. The story of searching for a photo of him is in itself fascinating and a good learning opportunity for those doing genealogical research.

Among the photographs my parents left for me there was one that I at first thought to be Movshe’s portrait. It was not signed, but by its placement among other photographs and by indirect notes on them I assumed it was Movshe. In that very professional image a handsome, self-assured man with pleasant facial features and a large beard looked at the camera with serious and cold light-colored eyes. He was wearing a conservative double-breasted coat and a tall tight-fitting fez on his head.

Here is where I started doubting. Movshe could not have looked like that in front of a camera, I thought. He had been a deeply religious

man and lived his life away from the cities in a small town in the Pale of Settlement. It was hard to imagine Movshe posing for a camera with that arrogant face and in such high-society garb. Besides, there were those cold light eyes. And most importantly, he did not look like an Okunev to me at all. Something else also bothered me. In that picture Movshe looked to be around 40 years of age, so the picture had to have been taken no later than 1870s. Was photography even available in the little Velizh back then? It was very doubtful that it was, not for the small town. In any case, there was not a single photograph in my collection dated before the early 1900s.

Bothered by these doubts, I asked my first cousins Maya and Natasha Okunev in Moscow and Roald Okunev in St.Petersburg to mail me some old family pictures in the hopes to find Movshe in them. This did not work out, since they did not have any photographs I needed. I felt that my last living connection with the past was about to be severed by the unstoppable flow of time. I asked Roald to find Movshe's granddaughter and his and mine first cousin once removed, Minna. Roald responded that Minna was not answering her phone and he was not even sure she was still living.

It seemed like it was time to give up the search for the real picture of Movshe and make peace with the fact that no future generations of the Okunevs will ever see their fore-father.

Unexpectedly, I received some news. Roald found Minna who was disabled and living in a care home for the WWII veterans, which was, in essence, a shelter for those who had survived the siege of Leningrad. The most important thing was that Roald got hold of Minna's son Michael Brio, and Michael "Misha", in his turn, found some old family pictures, including a genuine photo of Movshe. So it was that due to the efforts of Movshe's three great-grandsons – Roald, Michael, and yours truly – a rare photo was recovered; and I do not intend to let it get lost ever again!

Here it is in front of you. A noble fine-featured face is framed by a large grey beard. Dark, lively and somewhat sad eyes look over the spectacles that sit low on the bridge of the nose. He is dressed in a dark-colored coat or robe and wears a deep fur hat of Hasidic style on his head. Movshe is holding a book that must be either Torah or Mishnah. If you asked me to describe Movshe based on what I knew about him, I would come up with something very close to

this portrait. I cannot imagine a better symbol for our family, so charmingly simple and at the same time sublime.

On the back, the photograph is signed in faded pencil: “From Grandpa and Fanya Okunev for long memory”. Fanya was the second wife of Movshe’s oldest son Hershen. It appears that the photo was given to one of Hershen’s children of which he had ten. The photograph was taken in the early 20th century in Velizh.



**The root of the Okunev family tree,
a Velizh *shochet* Movshe Okunev.
Velizh, the early 20th century.**

Velizh, the place of origin of all the characters of this book, is located on the bank of the Western Dvina 90 kilometers northeast of Vitebsk, the center of Vitebsk region in the Republic of Belarus, and 134 kilometers northwest from Smolensk, the administrative center

of the Smolensk region of Russia. Nowadays Velizh is incorporated into the Smolensk region of the Russian Federation.

The town was founded in 1536. When the Okunev ancestors first settled in Velizh there were about 300 Jews living there, including ten merchants. According to the census of 1861 (when Movshe Okunev was a young man) 2105 Jews resided in Velizh and the total population was around 5,000. Despite being small and located on the outskirts of a great empire, Velizh became notorious through the widely-known Velizh Affair of a Christian boy allegedly ritually murdered by Jews.

A Velizh ritual butcher (*shochet*) Movshe Okunev, the son of the first bearer of this name from the Polish village of Okuniew and the founder of the whole modern Okunev clan, was born in the middle of the 19th century in Velizh and died there in 1914. Nowadays the town of Velizh that is situated about 56 miles northeast of Vitebsk on the bank of the Western Dvina is a part of the Smolensk province in Russia. At the time when Movshe Okunev's father, whose name we will never know, settled in Velizh, the town was the center of the Velizh uezd (county) of the Vitebsk province of the Russian Empire. About 300 Jews lived there, among them 10 merchants, and by the time of Movshe's birth there were over 3000 Jews in the area. According to the 1861 census 2105 Jews lived in Velizh making up 40% of the town's population.

The Velizh Affair (1823-1835) has been thoroughly researched and even novelized. Retelling those accounts is not the purpose of this essay. However, I strongly recommend reading about the Velizh Affair, both fiction and non-fiction, to understand the environment our ancestors lived in. Movshe Okunev's father may have been a witness of the Affair and Movshe himself would have heard a lot about it and been strongly influenced by it.

The population of Velizh reached its peak of 12,000 by the beginning of the 20th century. At the time, when Movshe Okunev and his son Isaac's butcher business was flourishing, there were ten synagogues in town as well as two Jewish trade schools, several Jewish schools, a Jewish library, three Jewish book stores, and a Jewish cemetery.

Early into the Great Patriotic War Velizh found itself in the path of the northern wing of the German Panzer forces that were surrounding Smolensk on the way to Moscow. On the twentieth day of the war, on July 14, 1941 the leading units of the 20th Panzer

Division and the 3rd Panzer Group of Lt.General Hermann Hoth seized Velizh. Velizh became an important logistics center for the German forces on the way to Moscow. In September of 1941 the occupational forces established a Jewish ghetto in private houses and a pig pen on Zhgutovsky Street. The people were forced to live in cramped and filthy conditions and were often summarily executed. On January 29, 1942 the Nazis and their collaborators in the face of the impending Soviet military advance destroyed the ghetto. Two thousand Velizh Jews were burned alive in the wooden buildings.

The main architectural features of Velizh – the Rathaus, “Town Hall”, the Russian Orthodox churches, the synagogues, and the Catholic temple - were completely destroyed in the two years of fighting, bombings, and artillery shellings. The modern Velizh has been rebuilt from the ground up and for the most part lacks its once rich architectural heritage.

The modern sights of Velizh are not very interesting. Before the Great Patriotic War the central town square held a multitude



The Veizh Rathaus, 1913



of shops. Nowadays only the former pub building remains. It now houses the Velizh Museum.



The Velizh Museum

After the war several other stone buildings of the old Velizh still stood, all in need of restoration. One of those buildings was the former Velizh Jewish school. It is still a school today, only, of course, not specifically Jewish anymore. This building was erected before the Revolution and paid for by the Velizh Jews that wanted to have a school for their children. My older relatives said that on top of the regular curriculum, Hebrew and German were taught at this school. I believe many of my extended family members, the grandchildren of the butcher Movshe Okunev, attended the school. These red walls have survived the horrors of the Great Patriotic War and they still remember those boys and girls, our great-grandparents and grandparents, of whom I will tell in the following chapters of this book.

It has been over two hundred years since the first Okunevs settled in the town of Velizh on the banks of the Western Dvina. It has been 75 years since any Jews last lived in Velizh. The population of the

town has changed as well as the town's appearance and only the Western Dvina still flows unchanged. Our ancestors must have seen it the same as it is in these recent pictures.



The former Jewish school of Velizh



I do not have much left to tell of Movshe Okunev. At some point it was believed that he had been married twice. It was based on the large gap between the birth of his daughter Basya and his two sons Hershen and Isaac. Later it was explained by the fact that back at the time many infants died and only three of Movshe's children survived to adulthood.

Movshe's wife's name was Minna-Dvoira. She bore and raised three children. Her name may be a variation of "Mindl-Dveira", for that was the name given to her granddaughter - the daughter of

Hershen Okunev. However, we shall use the name Minna-Dvoira as it is remembered by her family.

There exists a picture of her taken in the Velizh studio of M.A.Tevelev in the early 1900s. Her hands tell us about the hard life of this woman. On the back of the picture it comfortably says: “We keep the negatives”. Oh sweet ignorance! In a few years the peaceful conservative Velizh and all the photographic negatives would fall into the abyss of an endless chain of catastrophic wars and revolutions.



**Movshe Okunev’s wife Minna-Dvoira Okunev.
Velizh, the early 20th century.**

And yet this picture miraculously survived, and we can see what our ancestors looked like in the early 20th century.

Nothing is known about the later years and the deaths of Movshe and Minna-Dvoira Okunev. Their graves are lost to us.

“If you walk about a mile from the former Jewish school towards the town line you will find yourself at the old Jewish cemetery. It is totally abandoned with most gravestones fallen and many sunk in the ground. There is no attendant and no fences. I saw locals picking mushrooms in this cemetery that had turned into another part of the woods.

Somewhere in these woods lie Hershen Okunev and his parents Movshe and Mindl-Dveira”.



The remnants of the old Jewish cemetery in Velizh

Movshe and Dvoira had three children, the three boughs of the family tree: the sons Hershen and Isaac and daughter Basya.

Movshe’s children were very prolific.

Hershen had ten children with two wives: the sons Pinchus, Sholom, Joseph, Hirsh and Moses, and the daughters Sonya, Rachel, Brayne, Esther and Mindl-Dveira.

Isaac had three sons, Pinchus, Abram and Benzion, and two daughters, Ida and Rachel.

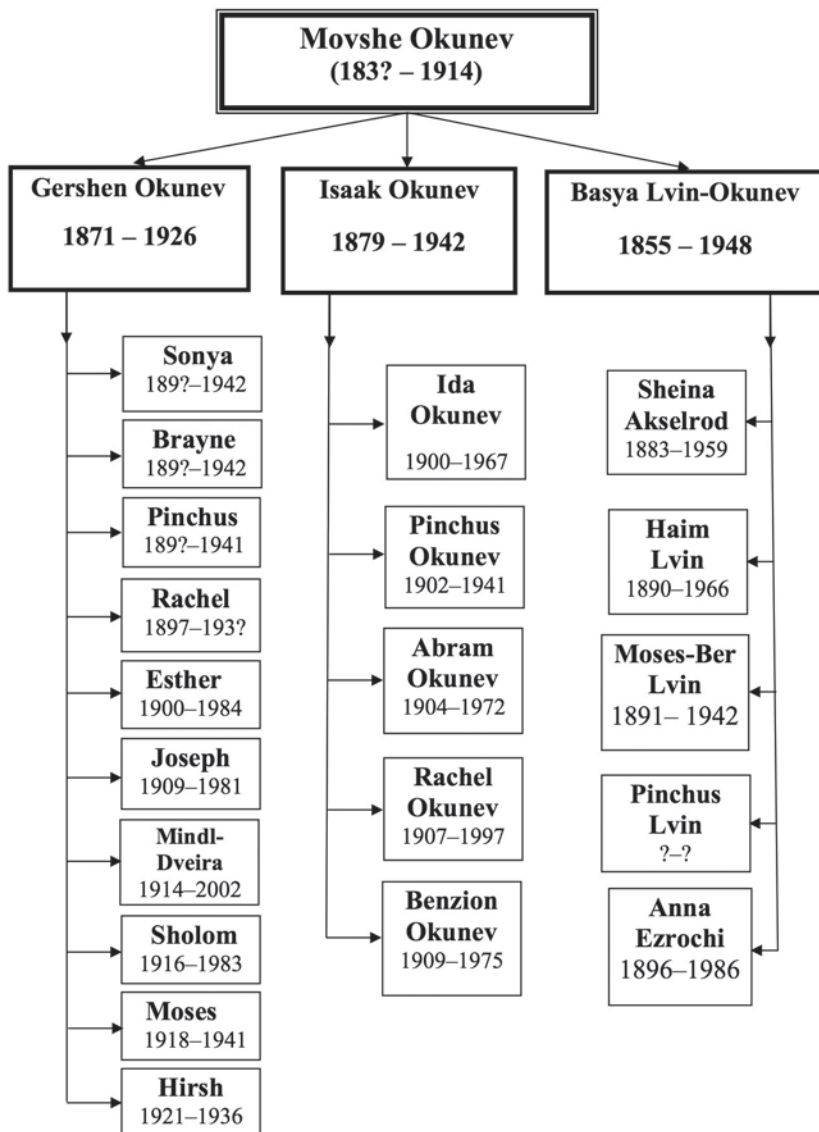
Basia had three sons, Haim, Pinchus and Moses-Ber and two daughters, Sheina and Anna.

So Movshe Okunev had a total of 20 grandchildren, twenty branches on the three boughs of the family tree. From these twenty branches grew and blossomed the rest of the mighty Okunev family tree.

The generation of Movshe's grandchildren was predictably not as prolific as that of his children's. The twenty grandchildren produced the same number of great-grandchildren. That generation got pulled into the bloody mess of the Russian Revolution and the fire of World War II. Most of them renounced the faith of their parents and accepted the ideals of atheism and communism. They survived the challenges of Stalin regime and never received their share of the glory. They passed away without faith or ideal and never understood what the purpose of their life had been. This is an enormous and complicated topic that shall be discussed later on.

Below is a general drawing of the Okunev family tree which takes its root from Movshe and Minna-Dvoira. The drawing includes the family founding father, his children and his grandchildren. The tree consists of three boughs that start with Movshe's sons Hershen and Issac and daughter Basya. It names all the grandchildren of Movshe and states the dates of their births and deaths, if known.

In the following chapters I will attempt in all detail possible to tell you about these three boughs, the branches, and the leaves of the family tree from their founders to the current 21st century generations of the descendants of a Velizh *shochet* Movshe Okunev.





Yuri Okunev is a scientist in the field of communication technology—the most modern area of applied mathematics and physics. He is regarded as one of the pioneers of the Information Century, and his scientific school found a wide application throughout the world, including countries as Russia, USA, Ukraine and Israel.

He also is a writer of several books in the genre of historical journalism as well as fiction in the Russian and English languages.

The author of this book has been working on restoring his family's history for over 20 years. At first, possessing only minimal information about his ancestors, he gathered and collected bits and pieces of data, found witnesses of the past and his relatives on four continents, involved in his search many people who had been long forgotten or lost their roots. The result of his work is a grand family tree restored with many boughs, branches, and leaves, with its roots going down into the depth of the past. He succeeded in discovering some forgotten or even seemingly lost branches and reconnecting the people who had once lost one another.

Yuri Okunev significantly contributed to the development of genealogical research and the genre of memoir in the Russian-language literature abroad. In essays and books, the story of his family evolves against the backdrop of the key events of the century and creates a unique image of that era: *Letters to Relatives from the 20th Century* (Art of Russia, St. Petersburg, 2002); *The Axis of World History* (Xlibris, Philadelphia, 2008); *Saga of the Risen from the Ashes* (M•Graphics, Boston, 2010); *Deliberate Reflections Around the Family Tree* (Слово/Word, USA, 2017).

As the finale of a great labor of many years, this book in English came out!



Hello, Yuri! I am a great-great-great-granddaughter of the Velizh shochet Movshe Okunev. I received your book "From Roots to Leaves," looked through the pages, studied the photographs and... felt a trembling, a trembling of a leaf. Yes, I am also a leaf on this large family tree. This simultaneously evokes a mix of feelings in me—anxiety, pride, tenderness, and sorrow... A huge thank you for this book! Thank you from all the living descendants of those remarkable people of the past whose stories and lives you discovered.

—Evgenia Berezhetskaya, Moscow

ISBN 978-1-950319-54-1



9 781950 31954 1



www.mgraphics-books.com
mgraphics.books@gmail.com