To My Children,

I am glad to start telling you about your "roots." Your maternal grandmother's maiden name was Civia (Sylvia) Fliss. She was born in 1888 in Krylov, Poland, a very small village in the middle part of Poland on the Russian border. My father Kuni Bermi was born around 1885 in a small Russian village, Austila, twenty kilometers away from Krylov.
Austila was in a strip of land that was sometimes Poland, sometimes Russia, depending upon who had won the most recent war between them.
My parents were married about 1907. It was an arranged marriage that

Civia was not happy about. My sister Sydine was born in 1908 and my brother Sam in 1910.

It was the time of Russian Pogroms and-in order to escape being inducted into the Russian army, Kuni had a professional "maimer" purposefully destroy his hearing in one ear. Then somehow through the help of cousins named Zucker in St. Louis, he came to St. Louis in 1910. My mother did not want to leave her family and did not come over with him. When World War I was raging and things were very bad, my mother was ready to join my father here, but was not allowed to leave the country. Finally, two years after the war the way was cleared for her and Sydine and Sam to join my father in St. Louis. That was in 1920. I was born in 1921.
Back in Poland, before the war, my mother's family had a very small dry goods store in which they sold notions, fabrics, ribbons and shoes. My mother was the one who ran the business, even in her teens, and I understand that during WWI when supplies were short she traveled by wagon and then train to Warsaw and smuggled things for the store back to Krylov—a dangerous thing to do.

Kuni in America
My father's first job was a horse and wagon milk delivering route. Besides delivering milk he was responsible for taking care of the horse. By the time I was born he had become and insurance agent for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and went door to door selling insurance and collecting premiums.
In 1932, when I was eleven, my mother went back to visit her family in Krylov and took me with her. I have vivid lingering memories of the six months were were in Poland. I'd like to tell you about these first hand experiences that I had with our roots, and will do so in another letter.

Back to Krylov, and more about my grandparents and my mother's extended family. All I can add to the kindness and gentleness of my grandparents that I already wrote about is that both had white hair, my grandfather had a white beard and both seemed very frail and old to me. As for the rest of the family my memory is very fuzzy. I have had to call my sister to find that there were, at the time of my visit, three sisters of my mother: Bassia, Chana, and Tobe; and two brothers, Mendel and Yisrael. A third brother,

Fischell, only 19 years old, had been taken out into the square and shot during World War I simply because he was Jewish. I can only imagine the loss, fear, anger, powerlessness, and injustice the family must have felt.

Bassia, Civie Tobe

I can't believe that everyone lived in this same small house, but if some lived elsewhere, I cannot retrieve that memory now. I have been trying for about a week now to remember more to tell you about the family. There is not a lot, but there is a pervasive feeling that my aunts and uncles wanted to relate to me, wanted me to like them, and wanted to do things with me, but I somehow remained at a distance. One thing is that they spoke Yiddish, and although I understood a lot, I could speak very little. This dates back to an incident my mother had told me about later. It seems that I spoke Yiddish until I was two, but when the kids in our non-Jewish neighborhood made fun of me, I came into the house and said in English, "never going to speak Yiddish again." She added that try as she might to get me to speak it, even to the point of withholding something or other from me, I never did again. Now I appreciate the richness of Yiddish idioms and am sorry to see it disappearing.

Writing to you about all this is turning out to be meaningful to me, Carol and Rick. For one thing, trying to put this together all week has brought forth a strong memory that is a more important insight than the language barrier as to why I held back from people as much as I did. Even though the family and other relatives showed live for my mother, it seemed to me that everyone who talked with her told her their particular sad condition and implored her for her help because they were, and it was realistic, so poor and she was a "Rich American." There was the expectation that she could and would help. My mother was torn apart by this. She wanted to help so very much and ended giving away I think more than she could afford. But there was not much she could do since we ourselves were living marginally during the depression in the United States. She had had a hard time scraping and saving enough money for the trip itself. I watched the terrible toll it was taking on her and felt that she was being drained of her blood. Remembering this as vividly as I am doing now, I know it had a lot to do with the intensity of not letting her out of my sight. I also sensed a prevalent general fear – understandable, after what had happened with Fischell and with the still very strong anti-Semitism in Poland. And I felt that there was no one strong enough to help her or me. I must have felt panicky. If anything happened how would we or I ever get back home. I think I need to stop now. There is more I can write about the house and other incidents and I will-after a rest. I had not expected it to be as meaningful as it has become.

I am back to writing after quite an interval. At this point I am going to write more or less chronologically, getting back to the beginning of the story

JOURNEY TO VISIT CLOSE RELATIVES IN Poland June through December 1932

US army bi planes soar over the ocean liner SS Majestic as it turns into its pier NY harbor 1931

When I was eleven my mother had saved enough money to return to Poland to see her family. Just before that she had been having severe and frightening hemorrhaging from her rectum. My sister had just married and I was sent to take care of my mother, a tremendous responsibility to be given to an eleven year old. This was June 1932 and I loved the trip to Le Havre France by ship. The choices of food and the food service were awesome to me, but the best part was a sailor who took me under his wing the whole trip, (He was able to spend a lot of time with me. Very different from the cruises of today.) I was relaxed on the English speaking ship with its American doctors, but the moment we reached Europe, I literally did not let my mother out of my sight for six months until I was on the ship back to New York. (My feelings of fear and responsibility were to the point of being highly abnormal, I think now.)

There were three classes on ships then, and we went Second Class. I looked somewhat wistfully at the first class decks above, but I still felt that Second Class was elegant and it was. I had never been waited on like that before. It was wonderful. Sitting in a deck chair under a blanket, watching the ocean and being served traditional English four o'clock tea. Also, I was in awe of the extensive menu from which we could order anything and as much of it as we wished. The waiters were most accommodating about my mother's watchful restriction to foods that she deemed Kosher, but I over and over again wished I could order some of the wonderful looking and sounding foods that I could not have. I often felt deprived and different from the other passengers. But that did not spoil the trip for me. (It's strange that the only food I remember, except for the tea time cakes and cucumber sandwiches, is the Bismarck herring that was on the breakfast menu every day.) All in all I loved being on the ship.

We landed in Cherbourg, France and somehow had to go through Paris. We stayed overnight in a small dilapidated hotel with no lobby but with the open laced, iron elevator typical of France. I was fascinated by the elevator, but also afraid that it was not safe to be in. As far as the room, the furniture was old and shoddy, but I realized somehow it had a French authenticity and charm. For one thing when you opened the door there was a small foyer and a step down into the room. I liked that. Also, I had never seen a bidet before and when I asked my mother what it was for she became just embarrassed and did not give me a direct answer. (Maybe she did not know what it was. But anything having to do with the facts of life was just off limits for discussion with me and I was terribly naïve until my sister talked to me when I was twelve.) During that day in Paris my mother asked a cab driver to take us on a small tour of the city. I remember the Eiffel Tower, of course, and the driver's pointing out the Trocaderro. When I saw that building in a confined part of the city. For

years I felt very proud of an octagonal glass tray with a picture of the Trocaderro etched into it. That was the only thing from France that we brought back.

Jardins du Trocadéro, with arguably the best view of the Eiffel Tower in town.

Our train the next day took us straight to Warsaw. As we passed through Germany, I was struck by how many window boxes with lovely, manicured flowers there were and how clean everything was, but there were no people around as I looked out the window. I felt a little uneasiness about the silence.

I don't remember going thorough customs into Poland, but coming back it was extremely traumatic. (I don't know whether I ever told you about that, but I will finally get to that part, a night that is still vivid.)

Unnamed relative

The relatives in Poland were lovely to me. I particularly remember the kindness and gentleness of my grandmother and grandfather. They lived in a two room and kitchen sort of cottage with dirt floors and no indoor plumbing.

A water carrier brought buckets of water for a kitchen pump, and I went to the bathroom either in the chicken house or else out in the nearby field. I am amazed still how will I adapted to these conditions (funny though, I can still remember how it felt when the cold air of December hit my bottom.) I can't remember now whether anyone else lived in the house. I do remember

sleeping on a mattress filled with straw under a huge covering filled with something soft and almost too warm.

CHAGALL OLD MAN WITH CANE

Times were very hard in Krylov. It was a very small village of Jewish families with not too many houses, and these were fairly far apart. The streets were just dirt and got very muddy. There was one row of shops. My relative's store was sparsely stocked: some shoes, some notions and ribbons and that's all. The Polish peasants lived on farms around Krylov and there was an exchange of food stuffs and services. The peasants I met had a good relationship with my relatives. Some remembered my mother with nice reciprocal feelings and she commissioned them to make some beautiful hand embroidered heavy linen tablecloths (that I wish were still around) and a ribboned peasant festival dress for me; but outside of this kid of coming together I constantly felt the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism both during the train ride through Germany and generally in Poland.

Main St. Chekhenove Poland

One thing that I remember strongly is the wagon ride my mother, one of my uncles, and I made from Krylov to Uschilug* to see my father's relatives. First the wagon, which had a wooden floor and wooden slats on four sides had to be dragged out and attached to a horse. It was difficult to do for some reason and took a long time. My mother sat up front with my uncle and I sat in the wagon on the bare floor. The ride itself, which was only a trip of twenty kilometers felt like forever for me. I am still surprised how vividly I remember the discomfort of sitting on the bare wooden floor. Now when faced with something like that I know I would stand up the whole way doing some kind of exercises. Maybe I just sat there because I had been told not to stand up. I don't know. I just kept thinking, "How much longer will this go on." It felt awful and sadly it was not in my character to speak up about whatever was happening with me. It's strange that I remember almost nothing about the visit itself: What relatives were there, what the house was like, what happened there—nothing of all that. There's just a vague feeling that it was a depressing place and depressing afternoon and that the people we saw, whoever they were, did not have the warmth and affection and the still-current zest for life that my relatives in Krylov had, despite the hard conditions.

Home from market L. Reiss 1938

Surprisingly, the uncomfortable ride that day helped me in a practical way some years later when I was taking an anthropology class at Washington University. For some reason I had missed the midterm exam and the then very unconventional professor of the class asked me to come to his office to make it up orally. I don't know what got me started, but I told him that my trip to Poland had given me more understanding

about cultural differences and made me more tolerant of my own family. I went on to say I had always railed about the Jewish Orthodox restriction of riding in a car on the Sabbath. It seemed ridiculous—riding was much less work than walking the two or more miles to the synagogue, but after that difficult ride in Poland I understood why riding was considered working. I further said that I could see because of the way my relatives had to work so long and so hard all week that the Orthodox Jewish Sabbath was a wonderful thing for them. I could see how the restrictions came into being and how ingrained they were for my mother. At that point the prof said we did not have to go on. I had passed my mid-term.

* **USTILUG**: Alternate name: Ustila (Yiddish), Austile (German), Ostila (Hungarian) and Ustilug (Polish). The town is located 87km from Lutsk. (Kuni Bermi came from Ustila.)

Continuation of Saga of my trip to Poland:

At some point in our six months stay with my grandparents and other relatives there was a decision made somehow that my mother might be helped to get well if she drank the mineral waters at a health resort in Krenyica Czechoslovakia. And we went there. The next part is still very vivid for my mother, my uncle Hershell, and I stayed in a large square room-sleazy but with lots of windows-in a small hotel in Krenyica, a town evidently well known for the healing powers of the mineral waters there. Near the hotel was a set of lovely hilly woods with bricked walkways and layers of steps. I marveled at the elegant architecture of the walkways in the setting of a lush forest. The therapy was to leisurely stroll along these paths, slowly sipping the heavily laden sulfur waters out of a beautiful china mug that had a china straw built into it. Two of these mugs sat in the living room for years and I don't know what happened to them or to the player piano that was there too. These are things I would still like to have, even though the delicate mugs with charming paintings on the outside had ugly, stubborn mineral deposits on the inside. As for the mineral water, it tasted terrible. I hated it but I tried to drink it anyway. I wanted to find out why so many well dressed Europeans strolling along were sipping it without making faces and why they came especially drink it. I ended up thinking the whole concept of its being able to cure my mother was ridiculous. Meanwhile, I was uncomfortable about the anti Semitism I felt when being with my uncle. His suit was very shabby, especially in contrast to the others there, he had a dark black beard,

and he probably wore a yarmulke. It's hard for me to admit that I didn't want to be seen with him. I feel now that I did him an injustice. He was really a gentle, kind man trying his best.
However the most vivid memory of the stay in Krenyica is this: My mother began to hemorrhage while we were there. A doctor came into the room, but I don't remember if he spoke English or whether he recommended anything. I was just terrified that my mother might die in this place where we were there strangers. Again my uncle was very well meaning and was being all the help he could be, but I felt that his experience outside the village of Krylov was very limited and that he would not be able to handle what would need to be done. In fact I worried that no one would be able to help me get back home. Thankfully she did not die and we did get back to Krylov and then to St. Louis. **Krynica-Zdrój** [krɨˈnit ʂa ˈzdruj] (till 31 December 2001 **Krynica**) (Rusyn: *Krenycja*) is a town in southern Poland in Beskid Sądecki mountains, inhabited by over eleven thousand people. It is the biggest spa town in Poland called The Pearl of Polish Spa.

The only thing I seem to remember about after returning from the spa is the weather. As December approached the increasingly colder wind left increasingly sharper impressions on my bare skin in that open field bathroom. Somehow, too, I did not expect that Krylov would have the same changes of weather as St. Louis. I was surprised about that and the fact that I had been there since summer. I hadn't expected to be.

In December we left for Warsaw and home on a third class train with uncomfortable wooden benches. I don't remember any of the good-byes. They must have been heart wrenching.

Warsaw 1937 Jewish quarter

Warsaw was quite a contrast from Krylov, but there were few cars. We had an afternoon free before catching the train to France. My mother planned to use the time to visit two more distant relatives living in Warsaw. She hired a cabby of a horse drawn carriage—of the type seen in Central Park, but more rickety-and thinking back I realize that the area was straight out of a movie depicting outdoor courtyard held nativity plays held in the fifteenth century. There were two massive wooden doors leading into a cobblestoned courtyard which had posts to leave horses. Surrounding the doors were old wooden buildings three or four stories high with a continuous balcony, forming the square courtyard. The scene in no way had the vibrancy of the players and spectators that once could have been there. Everything was dusty and dilapidated and were more depressing to me than the p poorest places I had seen in St. Louis. It is interesting that I had not found the homes in Krylov depressing. They were kept, for the most part, very clean, and although there was little greenery there was the redeeming feature of space and openness.

I was apprehensive climbing the unsafe stairs to the top floor, but the distant relatives we came to visit—a young married couple—were vibrant. They were delighted to see us, the probably served tea and cake, and they laughed a lot. I liked them a lot and I was grateful for the way they lifted my mood. I wonder now if a complex like this was the scene of the terrible tragedy a decade later, the heroic-tragic stand of the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto. I don't know why I feel that this couple

did make it to the United States. I hope this feeling is right. The cabby was still waiting for us. (Did he have our luggage? Had our large trunk been sent ahead? I don't know.) At any rate we arrived at the train station. It was not to be long before I was to live through a vivid, Alfred Hitchcock experience on that waiting train.

The Journey Home.

The horse and carriage ride from the medieval courtyard to the twentieth century train station is a total blank, but by no means the station itself. I can still see a small rack of paperbacks written in English and feel my excitement as I rushed over to it. The books did not look like the paperbacks of today. The covers were thin cardboard, not much thicker than the paper itself. No pictures, no promotional material, no color—all British mysteries on an adult reading level. My mother must have known how much I had missed books, for she bought me one without thinking of the cost. It's strange, all these years I have not been able to recall the title, but now part of it comes back to me: The Rue de La (something) murders. There is a Sherlock Holmes story with a title something like this, but I am quite sure this was not Conan Doyle. The writing was more sophisticated and difficult.

The train again was second class—compartments, upholstered seats two opposing rows. We put some of our luggage in the overhead open shelves but still had to put the rest of it on one of the seats. I propped myself up on something soft and plunged right into the book. When we reached the Polish side of the Polish-German border the train stopped. WE didn't know why. After quite a wait a uniformed man whose officious manner made me feel uneasy told my mother in Polish she must follow him to have our big trunk, which had been stored in another part of the train, inspected. I didn't understand why this occurred between Poland and Germany but not as I remember between Germany and Poland. My mother told me I must stay and look after our belongings. Although I didn't like being left alone, I figured she would be back in not too long.

Meanwhile I got back to the mystery which, convoluted as it was, was holding my attention. While reading I, at the same time was watching for my mother's return and after an hour or so I began to be actively concerned. I put the book down and went through the windowed door into the long corridor that lined the compartments. It was deadly quiet—there was not sign of anyone. I was so conscientious about looking after our belongings that I did not walk the length of the corridor to check the compartments to find out if there was anyone around. Because of the silence, though, I felt I was all alone on that train car.

storefront Vilna 1937

It seems hackneyed to write that the hours dragged on endlessly, but that's what they did. Interminably. Two hours and my mother was not back.

Three--four--five and still no sound or sight of my mother or anyone. She must have been called away about eight in the evening and it was now after midnight. My imagination as to what had happened to her and what would happen to me was running increasingly rampant. She would never come back. No one would understand my English. No one in this unfriendly, scary place could help me. I would never get home. I would have failed in taking care of my mother. (It's strange. I find myself beginning to cry at this point in writing.)

Thank goodness, though, there was one thing that helped me keep my imagination in check. I kept reading, and at the same time I found myself thinking: "Here I am alone on a deserted train in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night and what am I doing? I am reading a gruesome murder mystery!" I was, at age eleven, amused at the irony of the situation, and I am convinced that this amusement saved me from huddling up at the back of the compartment, paralyzed in fear. It's good that the book was a thick one. My mother finally returned about an hour or so later. I don't remember her telling me about what happened except that they had to go to a place that was underground and that took a long time. (I never found out why. The snail like pace of bureaucratic

Jewish refugees GermanPolish border

Poland/Russia?) It's strange that right now I cannot remember the emotion I had at her return. I do know that neither of us said anything to the other about the emotions we had during the six hour ordeal. But I can imagine the tremendous relief and thankfulness both of us must have had when she came back. She must have been as glad to see me as I was to see her.

At any rate, we finally left the Polish borders. I looked for and saw the window boxes again as we passed through Germany at dawn and I remember now why there were no people the first time. The train was going on high ground and I could see second stories only. It was eerie, anyway.

The whole ocean voyage home was fine. Sailor Jack again was my friend. He took me into a small closet like cubicle where he kept some ship equipment, (leaving the door open), taught me how to tie sailor knots, took a picture of me in a round life preserver while I was wearing his French Style sailor cap, and made me feel special—the way a person who likes kids can do. Nowadays it would be unthinkable for a sailor to let himself be alone with a young girl.

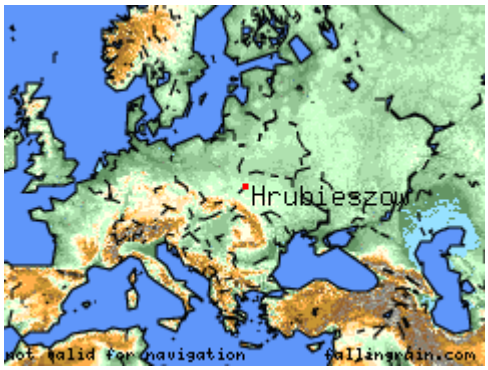
I don't remember what happened in New York when we landed. We probably were met by the Brooklyn cousins and were driven by them to the train for St. Louis. I liked sleeping in a lower berth with my mother in the Pullman train and also the elegant service in the dining car with its white table cloths and roses. (I'm nostalgic about this kind of travel.) Even so, I felt this was the longest train ride I had ever taken.

My father and sister were waiting for us at Union Station in St. Louis. I do remember my joy and relief at seeing them. Instantly, I felt the burden of my responsibility for my mother lift and returned to being a seventh-grader, now eleven and a half.

Susan Reisler: Name was Zibia of Beer-sheba. And Jehoash did that which was right in the eyes of the lord all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him. Second Kings chapter XII

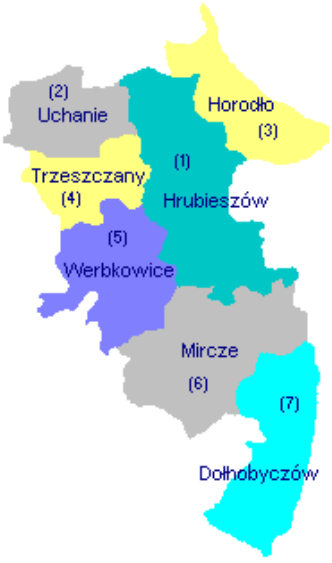
And it came to pass that Civie Fless Bermi became ill with typhus during the epidemic of 1917 in Poland and was given the second name of Leah in prayer and supplication for her life.

And civie Bermi was pious yet worldly Jewess in Krylow, a town in Lublin province, Poland, near the larger city of Hrubiewszow. And Civie became an entrepreneur, traveling to Russia and throughout Poland to acquire merchandise to trade and sell.



And Jews had been known to settle in Hrubieszow since the year 1444. And the Jews of Hrubieszow suffered from massacres, tartar incursions,

fires, and finally deportation and extermination.



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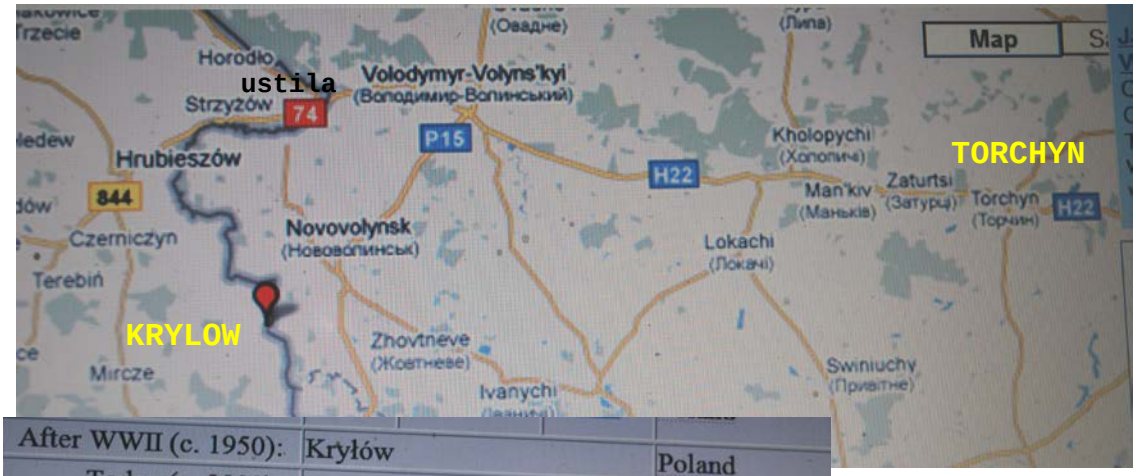
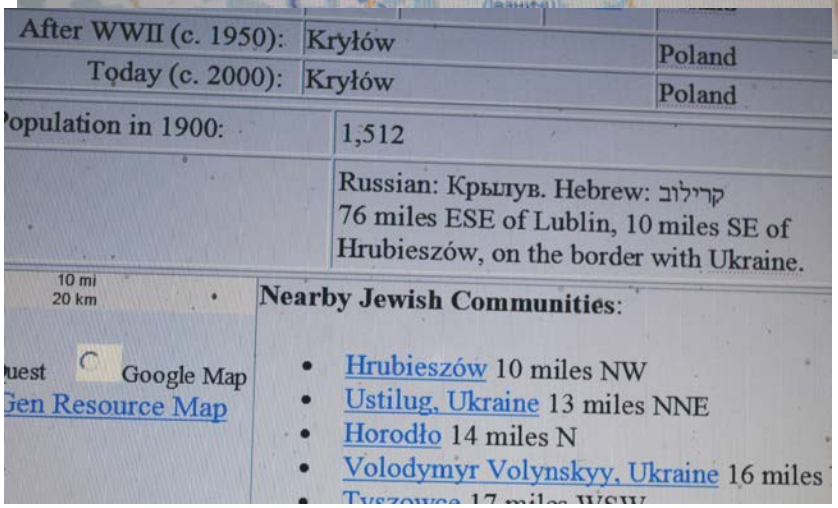




Mystery picture: One of our European kin sent a picture to his brother with love. The picture was taken at his

son, Eliyahu’s wedding to Malka. The person sending the letter was second to right in the front row. (because Syd doesn’t know these people we must assume it is the brother of Kuni or of Kuni’s father. Maybe relatives from Kuni’s home town of Ustilig, 13 miles away.

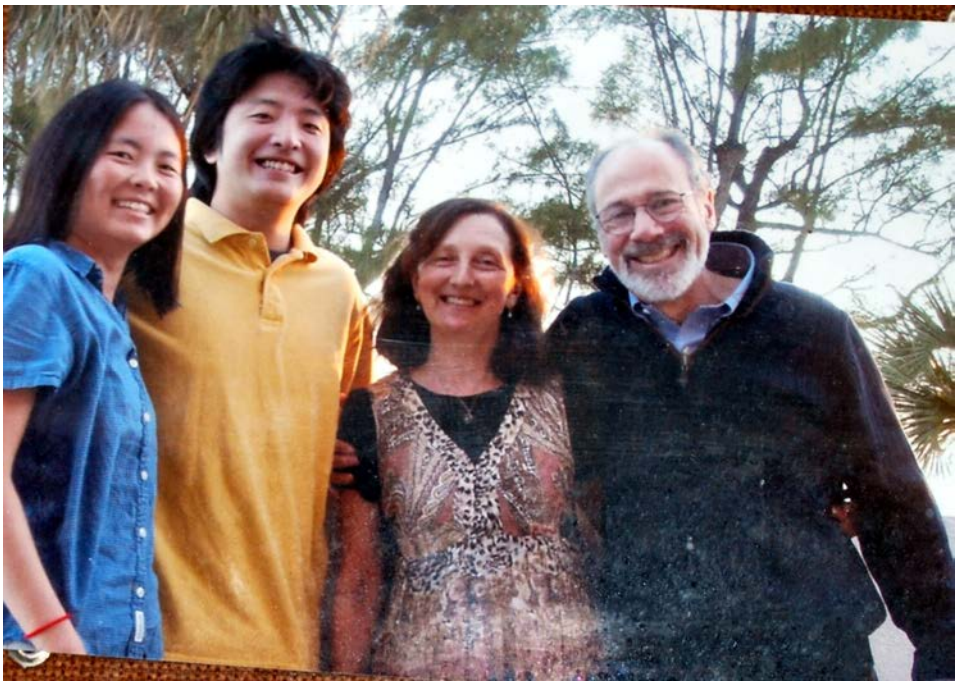
Back row: left to right:

Miriam	Shneer’s	Shneer’s	Malka	Eliahu	Sarah	Yisrael
Oldest	wife	brother	bride	groom	Baila	Rothstein
Daughter	Tzila	Shmuel		(son)	(daughter)	brother

Front row: left to right

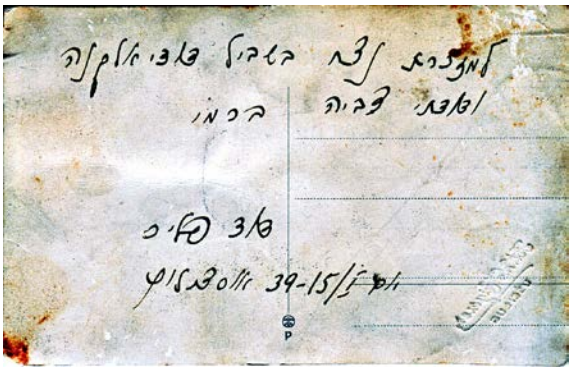
Avram	father and mother of bride		The brother & writer	his wife Gitel
Oldest			girl on lap	Bezalzel on lap
Son	Chanala On lap			

SONJA, JOSH, KAREN, RICK



CAROL

USTILUG: Alternate name: Ustila (Yiddish), Austile (German), Ostila (Hungarian) and Ustilug (Polish). The town is located 87km from Lutsk. (Kuni Bermi came from Ustila.)



This is a postcard and a picture from Ustilug. The other side is a photo of David Flees (Flees was Tvia Bermi's maiden name). It's dated January 15, 1939, 9 months prior to the start of World War 2, and was sent to uncle Elkenah and Aunt Tzvia Bermi

Landscape near ustilug 2008

(Ustilug (Ustyluh), pronounced Austila, is a town in Wolyn district situated on the Bug River and is now in the Ukraine. The Jewish community was established sometime before the 17th century and it was once a key depot for exporting grain and lumber. Jews comprised approximately 90% of the population of Ustilug by the middle of the 19th century. There were 12 synagogues in Ustilug. In 1939, the Jewish population reached 3,200 residents.

Kryłów is a village in southeast Poland, with a current population of around 350. 20 km. south of Hrubieszow, Krilow was situated on the Bug River on the border with Ukraine. During the First World War many Jews left the village because of its close proximity to the battlefront and moved to larger towns in the area. It is no longer a separate village.)

FLEES FAMILY AND TZIVIA.