

Four Orphaned Sisters from Prague and Their Widowed Mother

by Carole Garbuny Vogel

My grasp of Hebrew is limited to reading prayers and deciphering gravestones. So when I first glimpsed the Hebrew documents that Rabbi Yitzchok Stroh described in the previous article, “Utilizing Hebrew Records of Jewish Communities: Adding Depth and Breadth to Your Genealogical Research,” I didn’t comprehend their value. I never imagined that they could afford me a rare insight into the world of my ancestors. Translation was only half the challenge. I discovered the folly of interpreting events from 200 years ago in 21st-century terms. Nonetheless, after much struggle the following story emerged. It begins with the death of wealthy textile manufacturer Meyer Wolf Müller, circa 1822.

When Meyer Wolf died, his wife Zelda lost not only a husband, but she soon lost custody of three of her four young daughters as well. According to family tradition, Zelda was also forced to leave her home in Prague, Bohemia. Meyer Wolf had owned a factory in Prague that produced cloth for expensive men’s clothing.¹ In 1726, nearly 100 years before Meyer Wolf’s death, Charles VI, the Hapsburg ruler, had instituted Familiant Laws. These laws limited the number of Jews in Bohemia by setting a quota of 8,451 Jewish families. Each family was issued a registration number and only the first-born son—the heir to the registration number—was permitted to marry. Meyer Wolf died without a son.

Meyer Wolf and Zelda were my fourth great-grandparents. I have been unable to find any record of them or their daughters in Prague, but subsequent chapters in the lives of Zelda, her children, and grandchildren are recorded in an assortment of Hebrew and Yiddish documents. These can be found in the microfilmed collection of records from Mattersdorf, Hungary (later, Mattersburg, Austria), housed in the Burgenland, Austria, section of the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem (CAHJPJ).

Zelda was in her early thirties when she was widowed, and her four girls ranged in age from infancy to age eight. They left their house in the Jewish ghetto in Prague and moved to the small Jewish quarter in Mattersdorf, the home of Zelda’s father Jakob Pollak (ca. 1765–1836) and her four married sisters.² There, the orphans used the surname Müller and sometimes Böhm, the latter reflecting their Bohemian origins.

Zelda, like other women of her milieu, had few legal rights and she did not inherit from her husband’s estate. Her *ketubah* (marriage contract), however, provided for her. She was entitled to a sum of money from her husband’s estate equal to her dowry, as well as her clothes and jewelry. All of her money was placed under the guardianship of her wealthy father, probably with her consent, as he had origi-

nally provided the dowry and was in a better position to manage it.

Fatherless children did not automatically remain in the physical custody of their mothers. Under Jewish law, the children were designated as orphans and the *beit din* (rabbinical court) became the “protector of the orphans” and the arbiter of their custody arrangements. Two competing principles govern the custody of children in Jewish law. One emphasizes the best interest of the child, which was interpreted as placing all children with male relatives of their father. An exception was made for nursing infants, who remained with the mother until weaned. The other principle confers certain parental rights while also weighing the best interest of the child. In this case, orphaned girls typically remained in the custody of their mothers. (Mothers were deemed the best able to teach their daughters the Jewish laws of modesty and the role of women in their society.)

It seems that the *beit din* in Mattersdorf subscribed to the latter approach. Under this interpretation, boys sometimes were allowed to live with their mother until age six and girls were permitted to remain with their mother. Sometimes mothers were given physical custody of both boys and girls until they were grown.³

For example, the 1782 Jewish census of Mattersdorf shows seven-year-old Salomon Neufeld living with his half-brother, Moses Simon Neufeld, even though his widowed mother lived in town with his three-year-old brother and ten-year-old sister.^{4, 5} It appears that the court allowed the mother to keep her daughter permanently, but compelled her to give up her sons at age six.

A generation later, the outcome for the young widow Rifke Schischa née Breuer was much different. When her husband, Joseph Aron Schischa, died ca. 1804 leaving behind Rifke with four children and a fifth child born months later, Rifke was allowed to keep the children with her. The 1808 Mattersdorf Jewish census identifies her as the impoverished “Rebeca, wife of Josef Aron” with two sons, three daughters, and no husband. From other sources I know that the oldest boy was then about 15 years old.

It seems reasonable that 18 years later, the Mattersdorf court would have allowed Zelda to keep all four of her children, but inexplicably, Zelda lost custody of her three oldest daughters. The *beit din* appointed male guardians to take physical custody of them and manage part of the inheritance. Zelda’s father took control of the rest of the orphans’ considerable wealth. Johanna (Hindel) was about eight, Netti (Ester), was about four, and Lisette was just two. Only the youngest child, Charlotte (Mottel), remained with Zelda as she was a nursing infant.

The removal of the older girls was unusual. Had Zelda

been judged to be an unfit mother? If so, was she physically incapacitated or mentally ill? When the mother of orphans was dead or unable to care for her offspring, the maternal grandmother often had a stronger claim to young girls than other relatives or outsiders.⁶ Why didn't Zelda's mother, Rikila, care for the children?

Could financial interest be the motivation for taking the girls from their mother and placing them in different homes? When a child inherited substantial money in Mattersdorf, the capital was funneled into the informal banking system to preserve and protect it. Individual lenders loaned money directly to the borrowers, and loans were secured with collateral and/or promissory notes. Interest was charged. The *beit din* maintained records of the transactions to oversee the orphans' investments. In some cases, the proceeds were considerable. Surely, some portion of it must have gone to the guardians for child support.

Although the surviving records are incomplete, it is possible to trace how a portion of the sisters' inheritance was invested. In 1823, the guardian of Johanna used part of her inheritance to buy a new house for himself and his wife shortly after taking custody of the eight-year-old.⁷ Jakob Pollak, the orphans' grandfather, bought two new houses the same year.⁸ Were his house purchases also made with the children's money and was this a reasonable way of protecting it? Did he benefit by moving into one of the new homes?

Jakob Pollak was a rich and powerful man. This was reflected in his Hebrew title *katzin*, which signifies wealth. Did he allow three of his granddaughters to be taken from their mother and separated from each other to curry favor and reward friends? It is of course possible that all of these guardians were altruistic and acting in the best interest of the children. Absolutely no evidence exists that proves any wrongdoing. But couldn't a home have been found that kept the sisters together, especially since their inheritance could have been used to purchase a house? One of the guardians (Johanna's) had only one biological child. Why did he and his wife take just one orphan and not two or three? The kindest interpretation is that it was not feasible to keep the girls in one home.

The circumstances that led to the removal of the older girls from Zelda's care are unknown. But the notion that Zelda was unfit is cast in serious doubt as she wed for a second time not long after the three girls were placed with guardians. The marriage occurred at least three months after the death of her first husband. Zelda's new husband had two children. Why would any man marry an unfit mother and place her in the role of stepmother of his own children? Unless of course, the woman was actually a fit mother and the groom simply did not want to assume responsibility for her children from a previous marriage.

Zelda Takes a Second Husband

In February 1823, Zelda married Abraham Reiter, of Kaposvár, Hungary, who was born in 1787 and thus was

close in age to her.⁹ We know Abraham was a rich man because he sported the Hebrew title *katzin*, like Zelda's father. My colleague, Rabbi Stroh, found the couple's *tanayim* in the microfilmed documents of Mattersdorf. A *tanayim* is a prenuptial agreement hammered out between the families of the bride and groom—in this case between Zelda's father and the bridegroom—and signed on the day of the wedding. It was a typical arrangement for the time. Loosely translated it said:

The words of this pact and the conditions, which were spoken and agreed upon between the two parties at the time of the *chupah* (wedding):

(Side 1) The *Katzin* (noble, distinguished) Avraham, the son of Ber from Kaposvár.

(Side 2) The *Katzin* (noble, distinguished) Yaakov (Jakob) Pollack and his daughter, the widow Zelda.

The noble Avraham married, *mazel tov* (congratulations), the woman—the widow Zelda—with a *chupah* and *kiddushin* (the betrothal), according to the laws of Moses and Israel. He brought everything that is (belongs) to him. And Avraham also obligated himself to adopt her daughter, the girl Mottel, and to be a father to her, to clothe her, to put food on her table until she gets married. [When] she will reach marital age and leaves his house, he obligates himself to give 100 gulden cash [for a dowry] and if she will have to leave the house because of death [her mother's death] he will still give 100 gulden.

The noble, distinguished Yaakov brought a dowry for the bride Zelda, 800 gulden cash (this was a huge sum of money), and he also brought whatever she had. From now on the couple will live together and love as the custom of all the people on the earth and they will not abandon each other. They will share their belongings together and if G-d forbid Avraham will do to his wife, Zelda, things that she can't stand and (she) will need a court (to intervene), then immediately he will give her 10 gulden for food. And every month while they are separated, he will give her 10 gulden and all the jewels and clothing that she needs for herself. They will go to the court 14 days after she requests it. If the situation will resolve and she settles back in the house of the above-mentioned husband, she will bring back all that she has taken.

If G-d forbid, if someone dies, if Abraham will die within the first year of marriage without children from his wife Zelda, she will take whatever she brought into the marriage but not the additions to the dowry. If the husband dies in the second year without children, she will take whatever she brought in, plus half of the addition to the dowry. If she dies in the first year without children from her husband then Avraham will return whatever she brought in. If she dies in the second year without children, he will return half. From the third year of marriage on, whoever passes away, the husband inherits from the wife, and she gets the dowry. In whatever the case, she keeps her dresses and jewelry.

Made it legally binding

Tuesday, 23rd of Shevat 5583 (Tuesday, February 4, 1823) in Mattersdorf. 10

What is lost to history is Zelda's enthusiasm for this marriage. Undoubtedly, it was an arranged union, as was the custom of the time, and Jewish women were given the right of refusal. Did Zelda willingly move from Mattersdorf

and give up the possibility of seeing her older daughters, even if it was only a glimpse on the street in passing? Kaposvár was about 115 miles (185 km) southeast of Mattersdorf and the railroad did not come to Mattersdorf until 1847. So Zelda's move constituted a permanent separation.

Did Zelda agree to wed as the only means of retaining custody of her youngest child? Might she have been suffering from postpartum depression? Or was she so mired in grief over the loss of her first husband and home that she didn't care what happened next? Or, in reality, was Zelda a cold and distant parent who valued financial security over motherhood? Perhaps she or her father calculated that remarriage was only possible if she was not burdened with so many daughters who would eventually require dowries.

Abraham Reiter was a widower with a son, Leopold, and daughter, Katerina, from his first marriage.^{11, 12} If Zelda had been an unfit mother, would Abraham have brought her into his home to care for his children? Was the huge dowry an inducement to overlook any shortcomings? Or was something more lucrative at stake?

A letter written by Abraham to Zelda's father seven months after the wedding reveals that Abraham Reiter was a broker of all manner of victuals and had close business ties to Jakob Pollak. In his letter to Jakob, Abraham discussed the cost of goods and other financial matters:

October 8, 1823

Dear Father-in-law Yaakov!

Today I received your letter, which was sent with G-d's help to Pest.¹³ The letter was received in the holy community of Magendorf. Concerning the *knoferl* (garlic). You wrote it costs 17 ... (forint or other currency unit) for a wholesale package of ten, and so I sold it. I also sold my other merchandise at the same house (business). When you receive this letter, please write me what the prices are for slivovitz (plum brandy) in Ódenburg (Sopron), for 20 *grad schwer* (20% alcohol). I also write you that you should not pay back my debt to Giefing until I come there in person. There seems to be errors in the accounting. As for the mushrooms, please write me how much you want for a wholesale package of ten.

Regards,

Abraham Reiter from Kaposvár¹⁴

Were Abraham Reiter and Jakob Pollak business associates prior to Abraham's marriage with Zelda? Or, was the prospect of a rewarding business relationship the incentive for Abraham to marry Zelda even if she had been deemed mentally or physically unfit. If so, this was a clever way for Jakob to ensure that his fragile daughter would be cared for.

My colleague Rabbi Yitzchok Stroh strongly disagrees with my suppositions and puts forth another possibility:

Zelda was a fit mother, but she was concerned about her own future. She wanted to remarry and did not want to be burdened with children. She willingly placed her children in the care of relatives and friends. At that time, people were accustomed to separation. Sons left to study in yeshiva, sometimes for years on end. Daughters married young and moved elsewhere with visits few and far between. The need for a woman to be married took prece-

dence over the separation.

You cannot disregard the religious mentality of the time, where people accepted the difficulties of life with much more equanimity. They believed that everything is divinely ordained, and they expected to receive their reward only in the future in heaven after their passing.

It was also not unusual for sons-in-law and other family members to become involved in business together.

Below Abraham's letter to Jakob Pollak, in slightly different handwriting, was a seemingly unimportant message from Koppel Reiter. Koppel was likely Abraham's brother and business partner. The text of his note shows that he married a woman with ties to Mattersdorf. Koppel wrote: "Regards to my mother-in-law and regards to my sister-in-law.... Your friend, Koppel Reiter. Don't be angry because of my poorly written letter, it was done in a hurry."¹⁵ Perhaps, it was Koppel's ties to Mattersdorf that led to the marriage of Abraham and Zelda.

Zelda's First Marriage:

An Older Husband and a Stepdaughter Her Own Age

Zelda's first husband, Meyer Wolf Müller, had been a widower about a generation older than herself. He had a daughter, Susanna (Züssel), who was approximately the same age as Zelda. Perhaps the two young women became friends as Susanna later developed a strong attachment to Zelda's children.

Why did Zelda marry a man twice her age? Sometimes young women in Mattersdorf who entered into May-December marriages did so because their families were quite poor and could not afford a dowry. Typically, these poor women wed widowers who needed a replacement wife to manage the household and rear the children.

But Zelda's father was a rich man. In fact, Jakob Pollak was so rich that he served as the *Rosh HaKohol* of Mattersdorf—the head of the Jewish community—from 1826 to 1829. This post rotated among the wealthiest men in town. Much of Jakob's earnings came from several lucrative concessions that he operated in Mattersdorf: salt, liquor, and oil. The salt concession was especially profitable as it earned 700 to 800 gulden a year.¹⁶ Ambitious, young bachelors would have clamored for Zelda's hand in marriage, even if she had been quite ugly and had a nasty disposition.

So, was social advancement Jakob's motivation in arranging a marriage between his daughter and Meyer Wolf Müller, a rich, well-connected widower in his forties? Not so, according to my colleague, Yitzchok Stroh. He pointed out that it would not have been strange to give one's daughter to a Talmudic scholar, even if the groom was quite a bit older than the bride, especially when the pool of suitable men was small.

What Is Known About Meyer Wolf Müller

Zelda's first husband, Meyer Wolf Müller, was a highly educated Jewish man for his time. In a few records where his name appears, he has the title *Morenu*, which reveals that he had studied in a yeshiva and received a Talmudic education. This is a prerequisite for fulfilling the duties of a

rabbi and regarded by some as the equivalent of a doctorate granted by a university. Meyer probably received a thorough secular education as Prague, in the early 19th century, was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment.

Meyer typically showed up in the Hebrew records as Meyer Böhm, but in one place his name was recorded as Meyer son of Wolf Böhm.¹⁷ At least three of his grandsons were given the Hebrew name Meyer Wolf in his memory. So perhaps Meyer used the patronymic Wolf as a middle name. A family tree prepared in the 1940s by a descendant of Meyer Wolf's daughter Susanna noted the following about him: "Geschäft am Hohen Markt Wien; Stammt aus Worms, Rheinland."¹⁸

This meant that Meyer Wolf had a business in the High Market, a large and important marketplace in Vienna, Austria. He must have sold the goods from his textile factory there. If this family tree is correct, then Meyer Wolf or his ancestors came from Worms, a city in what is now Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany.

If Meyer Wolf did come from Worms, he likely received permission to live in Prague based on special merit. A law passed in 1797 allowed Jews to apply for the merit permit if they had voluntarily enlisted in the army, supported themselves exclusively by agriculture, or possessed an exceptional technical skill.¹⁹ Since Meyer Wolf had the capital and technical knowledge to run a textile factory, he surely would have qualified for the technical skill exemption. No records, however, have been found yet to support this supposition. If they did exist, he might appear under the name Meyer Wormser.

Clearly, Meyer Wolf was a wealthy man with good connections. His family was almost certainly part of the Jewish elite. In his milieu, status was based on scholarship and family connections. Wealthy families could afford to educate their sons and once the sons attained the highest levels of education, they could join the ruling rabbinical class or return home to participate in the family businesses. Wealthy families married their daughters to the sons of other elite families or to the occasional outstanding scholar from a poor family. Since Meyer Wolf Müller was wealthy, well educated, and owned a factory, we can assume that he was born into a family of high status. Meyer Wolf's station in life must have been very attractive to Zelda's father and likely to Zelda.

Zelda's Mother Rikila Kohn

Zelda disappeared from the records after her second wedding but incredibly, Yitzchok Stroh found an inheritance document pertaining to Zelda's mother Rikila Kohn among the *beit din* records from Mattersdorf

At the time of the wedding of Rikila and Jakob Pollak in 1786, Rikila's father, Mordechai Kohn of Csorna [Charna], Hungary, took an extra step to preserve Rikila's inheritance. He drafted a *Shtar Chatzi Zachar* as part of the dowry. This document, also known as *half of the male portion*, insured that Rikila would receive a share of Mordechai's estate after his demise.

According to the Torah, daughters inherit from their fa-

thers when there are no sons. If, however, the father has one or more sons, the sons inherit everything. The *Shtar Chatzi Zachar* evolved as a method of providing an inheritance for girls with brothers. It involves the father giving his daughter a *Shtar* (promissory note) declaring that he owes her a significant sum of money.

He attaches two conditions relating to repayment. First, the debt cannot be claimed until immediately before his death. Second, if the sons agree to give the daughter a portion of their inheritance from the father—equivalent to half of the male share—the daughter agrees to cancel the debt. Typically, the debt was far greater than the daughter's half-share. Thus, the sons were incentivized to pay her the inheritance.

Likely, no money was handed over at the time Mordechai drew up the *Shtar Chatzi Zachar* but a symbolic exchange took place. Rikila gave her father a handkerchief or some other object that established his indebtedness.²⁰

Zelda's Daughters

The lives of Zelda's daughters were pieced together using metrical records and additional documents found among the Hebrew records. Of particular interest were disputes relating to their inheritances that were brought before the *beit din*. Two of the orphans' guardians and their stepfather had been unwillingly to relinquish control of the inheritance. Johanna (Hindel) and her husband Abraham Kohn appeared before the rabbinical court after they had been married for nearly five years and had children of their own. They succeeded in getting Johanna's money.²¹

Conclusion

Hebrew and Yiddish records from Mattersdorf's rabbinic court and other sources were instrumental in my understanding of the lives of the women in my family who lived in the last half of the 1700s and first half of the 1800s. They added a breadth and depth to my knowledge that I could find no other place.

Notes

1. Oral History of Gisa Kohn Dollinger (1902–2014), great-granddaughter of Meyer Wolf and Zelda.

2. Zelda's father was Jakob (Yaakov) Pollak son of Yisroel Shapitin. He was also called Jakob Shapitin and Jakob Israel. Zelda's sisters were Schalott Pollak Bauer (b. est. 1800), Gella Pollak Rust Pollak (b. est. 1805), Amalia Pollak Rehberger (b. 1813), and Levia Pollak née Pollak (b. 1817).

3. "Child Custody in Jewish Law: A Conceptual Analysis" by Rabbi Michael J. Broyde (*Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* vol. 36 1999) pp 21–45. Available at broydeblog.net.

4. Moyses Simon [Neufeld] census entry. Age 24. Wife Hana, age 22; brother Salmon age 7; daughter: Schendl, age ½ year. *Conscriptio Judaeorum Nagymarton, 1782*.

5. The widow Gwend census entry. Age 40. Children: Aron Loeb, age 3 and Meriem, age 10. *Conscriptio Judaeorum Nagymarton, 1782*.

6. Like other issues dealing with the custody of orphans under Jewish law, there are conflicting theories about the custody of orphans when both parents are dead.

7. Small New Haus #6 Built between 1815–1816. Purchased by Julianna and Mayer Stein in 1823. *Behauste Güter der Juden in Mattersdorf 1760–1845, Protocol number 458 Grundbücher, Urbare, Konskriptionen und Grundbücher aus der grundherrschaftlichen Periode, Fürstlich Esterházy'sches Archiv Burg Forchtenstein.*

8. Small New Häuser #2 and #5. Built between 1815–1816. Purchased by Jacob Pollak in 1823. *Behauste Güter der Juden in Mattersdorf 1760–1845.*

9. Abraham Reiter birth record. Born: 22 Mar 1787. Parents: Bernath Reiter and Henie Reiter née Neben(?). Parents' residence: Szill (near Kaposvár). IKG Kaposvár, Hungary, Geburtsregister 1771–1783. P. 6, #5 for 1787.

10. Tanayim of Katzin Abraham Reiter of Kaposvár and the widow Zelda daughter of the Katzin Jakob Pollak. Loose documents of beit din of Mattersdorf. CAHJPJ microfilm 8187 images 499 and 501B.

11. Abraham Reiter census entry. 1821 Kaposvár *Conscriptio Judaeorum*. A son, daughter, no wife.

12. Two men named Abraham Reiter were contemporaries in Kaposvár. Each had a son named Leopold and a daughter named Katharina. It is impossible to determine from the children's birth records alone which father was Abraham the son of Ber. The one who married Perl Glaser, fathered Katherina, born Feb 25, 1810 and Leopold, born Oct 6, 1812. The Abraham who married Kat. Ritscher, fathered Leopold, born Feb 17, 1813, and Katarina, born Mar 3, 1819. IKG Kaposvár, Somogy, Hungary, Geburtsregister 1771–1783.

13. Pest, Hungary was a separate community until 1872 when it united with Buda and Óbuda to form the city of Budapest.

14. Letter from Abraham Reiter, Oct 8, 1823, in Pest, to Jakob Pollak of Mattersdorf. Loose documents of beit din of Mattersdorf. CAHJPJ microfilm 8187, image 399. Translated by Claudia Markovits Krempke. [Note: this was an extraordinarily difficult letter to translate as it was written in Old German, Hebrew, and Yiddish,

using Hebrew letters.]

15. Letter from Koppel Reiter, Oct 8, 1823, in Pest, to Jakob Pollak of Mattersdorf. Addendum to previous letter. [Note: this was even more difficult to translate than the previous one because of apparent spelling errors.]

16. Jacob Pollak entry. *Das Goldene Buch* tax ledger of IKG Mattersdorf. Noted that he was in business with Gottlieb Segal.

17. Meyer Wolf Böhm was listed in *Prenumerantn* (prepublication-subscribers) lists with donors from Mattersdorf who subsidized the publication of three different books between 1813 and 1820. Perhaps he was visiting Mattersdorf at the time the funds were solicited as he did not have known Mattersdorf residency rights. He appeared as Meyer the son of Wolf Böhm only in the *Prenumerantn* list of the Work of Mosdos Tevel, Vienna, 1820.

18. Irany, Ernest. Loeb family tree prepared circa 1945 and given to his cousin Simon Loeb. Identifies Suzanne (Züssel) Löb as the daughter of "Müller Geschäft am Hohen Markt Wien (Stammt aust Worms, Rheinland)."

19. Deutsch, Gottlieb. "Familianten Gesetz." Jewish Encyclopedia, 1906.

20. *Shtar Chatzi Zachar* of Mordechai Katz. March 2, 1786. Loose documents of Beit Din of Mattersdorf. CAHJPJ microfilm 8187, images 492 and 494.

21. Katz vs. Böhm inheritance disagreement. Mattersdorf *Beit Din* loose document with the number 54 in the corner. CAHJPJ microfilm 8187, frame 405.

Carole G. Vogel is a writer, researcher, and family history specialist. She has written seven previous articles for AVOTAYNU. Vogel served as editor of the 500-page book We Shall Not Forget: Memories of the Holocaust (Temple Isaiah Lexington, MA) and the Paul Gass Family website. She lives in Branchville, New Jersey.

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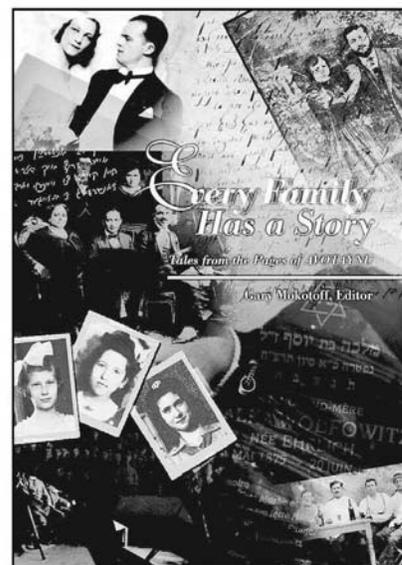
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