

TYPHUS ravaged Russia and eastern Poland from 1915 to 1922, infecting 30 million of the inhabitants and causing deaths estimated at 3 million.

The war had destroyed hygiene. People couldn't bathe or boil their clothes---and many had lice---body lice. Creatures attached themselves to clothing, laid eggs, and multiplied.

The rickettsia, the organism that causes typhus, lives in the lice. It grows in their intestine and is deposited on human skin when the louse defecates. The louse shit itches; people scratch. And the typhus penetrates into peoples' bodies. One to two weeks later the illness starts with non-specific achiness. Then come chills, fever, and a severe unremitting, headache. The sufferer (typically) becomes nauseated, vomits briefly, and is exhausted --- quite weak. It's hard to move.



The fever lasts up to 2 weeks. Some sufferers develop a rash, bronchitis that can lead to pneumonia, and (in severe cases) stupor and delirium. It's especially hard on the infirm and the elderly.

I first heard about the typhus epidemic from Manuel. As he recalled: Misha's mother was the first member of the family to get sick. Manuel had a mild case. Fay had a bad one. Surca got it; then Neil. Shlomo got sick, but despite the fever he kept walking and working. Every day, it seemed, a male nurse from the Russian army checked the houses for typhus victims. If they found them they took them to the town school house, which had been converted into a hospital. They did what they could, which wasn't much. When you went to the school house you usually died. Or so it seemed. As each member of the family got sick they pretended they were sleeping when the nurse came by. So far no one was taken away. The old Russian peasant, Ilka, the man who owned the house where they were all living, who had been so afraid that the coal oil lamp would burn down the house, he got a bad case. He was in a coma on the second day. He died in the school house.



Kaila got sick. She was very ill. She was confused and disoriented. When the nurse from the Russian army came to inspect the house, Kaila couldn't be hidden. it was impossible.

The nurse sent a wagon for her. Shlomo stood there as they carted her away. He was sure she would die. He cried.

The next day Surca went to visit Kaila in the school house. The following day Manuel went. Kaila remained confused and feverish. She didn't know what was going on. But she didn't lapse into a coma. She didn't sleep all the time as the old man had. And she didn't get weaker. On the 4th day

He seemed stronger. Manuel brought her a baked apple. Conditions at the hospital weren't that bad after all. There were people dying, but there was enough water for the sick ones. The nurses did what they could. After a week it was obvious that Kaila was going to make it.

They loaded her into a wagon to send her home. Manuel was at the far end of Torchin at the time, on business. Suddenly he saw a wagon from the hospital. In it was a woman directing the driver, this way; that way. It was his mother. She obviously didn't know where she was going. Manuel ran after the wagon and flagged down the driver. "That's my mother. Follow me and I'll show you where we live."

It took another week before she was clear and a third week before she was again functioning as the head of the household.

Surca: We heard that anyone who went to the hospital died. In fact, we had a next door neighbor who had 2 girls and (the parents) both died and they left the 2 little girls (alive.) Mother got sick. (Chia Kaila) so we didn't tell anybody. Then Rifka, Misha's mother got sick...with Misha. Then I got sick. Then uncle Shia with his wife and children got sick. (Eventually) 12 of us (were ill.)

But the one who was well, it was Neil. And Daddy (Shlomo Moshe) had chills, but he wasn't bad. So these 2 (took care of the rest of us.)

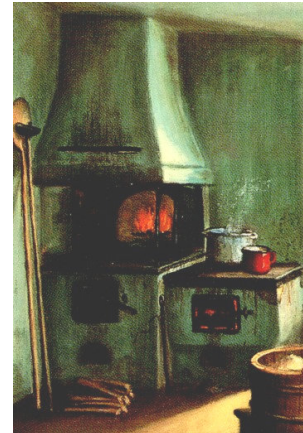
But the old man (Ilka, the man who owned the house we lived in) got sick. on typhoid. (Typhus) (In the past every time that) he came (in) while we were baking we had to hide (what we were doing or) we had to bribe him. (He never wanted us to make the oven. (But) this time (when he got typhus) he came in and said: "Make the oven! Make warm! I'm gonna go and warm up. I got the chills!"

He knew that typhoid came with chills. So when he started to be cold he went up on top of the oven..pakalach they call it. And he screamed he's thirsty. He wants to have sour pickles and cabbage... (Pickle juice...according to aunt Fay.)...for him to eat. He screamed so loud you couldn't help it.

When he ate up that stuff he was so wild. And he wanted to drink. And he had a high temperature; and we saw that this was the end. He got so.. So we called the hospital. He (Ilka) got so wild we couldn't help it. Neil and daddy called the hospital. (They had workers who took) sick people out. So they dragged out 10 peopleall 10 (of us) They sent two men and (they were surprised to find) it was a full house. en the old man came in and said make fire Neil (started the furnace. In the process he caught his own clothes on fire). I don't know what Neil cooked there but his clothes were on fire. So he ran into the room where mother was lying in bed. And he screamed "Mama, I'm on fire!" So mother went down, although she had a temperature. She went down with her quilt and she wrapped him around. And she saved him...with a temperature. So the old man and the whole family (were taken) out of the house (and were taken to) different hospitals. Uncle Usher, that was my mother's brother, with children, and with a wife (he was living with us.) My brother Neil baked apples for an excuse to go and see us. He came to me; in the meantime I got in the habit of holding my head on a side. So he begged me...through the window he said, "You are going to be a cripple. You're never gonna get married if you're not going to straighten up you head."

I had the impression that mother died. So I screamed bloody murder and cried that mother had died..cause she was the first one there sick. My mother's brother was in the same ward where I was. I even screamed to him, "Why don't you cry as if your sister died?"

Neil says (she's alive) "In fact I'm going to see mother." And he took 2 apples and went to see mother.



When he went to see mother she told him that Ilka died. And he had money under the pillow. And they asked: who here is (his) relative. And she said she is. And she got the money.

So Neil says, where's the money? She says, look under the pillow. So Neil looked. He didn't find anything. So he said "I'm going to find Ilka. I'm going to see the old man." he didn't believe her.

He comes there. And they say, "Yes, Ilka died yesterday.

Across the street in a little house was a woman with 3 children. They were very poor and low class. So the man, Yoachim, picked up (and left?) He had a sick baby. He went to the undertaker and he paid him ahead of time. If the baby'll die. You should take it away. The baby died. She was left with 2 small children.

We were across the street. We had to feed them. They got sick with typhoid too

So Neil is very...he doesn't like the dirty things. But he had to clean up from them. They were laying on the floor. He used to take a shovel and shovel out the straw and give them clean straw. He had to take caremother used to cook and whatever...she could give them, milk and water to drink, cause they were sick.

We took care of em. And still we had to call to take 'em away to the hospital. They survived.

After we came out from the hospital mother didn't know her address. She didn't know where...so they dragged her around all day until they found out where she lived.

My father's step mother and step-sister lived near the soldiers. They used to deal with the soldiers, buying bread and selling them something. So after the typhus she brought bread, round bread with butter. The butter was so many black things in it; who would eat the butter? But we were happy we had the rye bread. The bread was full of wheat germs. The flour wasn't sifted. It didn't hurt us. We didn't have any alternative, so naturally we ate it.

There was a woman we knew from Torchin. She had 2 children. Her children got typhus. The woman she lived with closed the house and wouldn't let them (come) in through the door. She had to go through the window. So she wouldn't have to go through the house.

Fay: We had the typhus. There was an epidemic. People were dying like flies. I was in the hospital with Sara. They made the shuls into hospitals. There were refugees coming in, for example from Ausditich. Uncle Shia with his wife was living with us. We were all communing. They were living in our house. He went to visit the lands-lighte. My mother used to tell him(that) she heard it was going around, typhus.. Don't go. You're going to bring it in.

Fays Shia got the typhus first. They used to make fun of him. He was such a patient. Unbelievable. He used to cry all night long. After Shia my mother got sick. She was running a very high temperature. They were changing the bed. My father was holding her. While he was holding her on his lap she urinated and didn't know. She didn't know a thing. So I remember my father crying. He said 'When she's already doing a thing like that she's really sick.' They took her to the hospital.

Fay: Ilka, the landlord, was sick too. He was such a character. When my mother would bake he would take a bucket of water and pour it on the oven to get the fire out so she shouldn't bake. When he got sick he came to us. He was chilling. And he climbed up on the pakelak, on top of the stove. He laid in there on that pakaluk. When mother made the oven he said he was too hot. When she didn't he said he was too cold. He decided he wants pickle juice. And he told Neil he should go to Motocha, his lady friend for the pickle juice.

Neil told him 'you're so sick and you're going to eat pickles and drink pickle juice? It'll kill you.'

Ilka insisted. Neil went to Motacha, and he told her what Ilka wants. And she came and told him not to eat it. But he insisted. And he ate the pickle juice. Afterwards he drank a bucket of water. Unbelievable. Fire. He was so delirious. When they took him to the hospital they had to tie him to the bed.

My mother was in the same hospital with him. She heard what was going on, that he was delirious and they tied him to the bed. When Neil came to visit, mother told him the story, and he didn't believe her. He thought she was delirious. But he baked some apples, and he

said he came to bring Ilka apples. (He wanted to find out if Ilka was still alive. But they told Neil that it was true. Ilka was dead.)

Fay: Misha was sick in bed with his mother, with Rifka. I was sick in bed with my mother. Sara was sick on a bench; there was no place to put somebody. And that Ilka came in and saw...Rifka was a young and pretty woman, and she was in bed; and Ilka said to her 'what is that hazer doing laying in bed. The house isn't swept and she's laying in bed.'



Afterwards he got sick too. He was a character. We used to--burn kerosene lamps. The glass from the kerosene lamps used to get black. And sometimes the black used to go on the ceiling. Ilka said we're going to burn his house down.

Fay: In those days the Kerosene was impure. They used to mix kerosene with lighting fluid. Any spark would catch on fire. Neil was working with that lamp and that lamp caught on fire. I remember fire on the floor. So my mother, sick as she was with the typhus, she took the feather bed, jumped out of bed, and put it on the fire. That's how she stopped the fire from the house.

