

Chagall

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CHAPTER ONE

“My Sad and Joyful Town”

Vitebsk, 1887–1900

Every painter is born somewhere,” Chagall mused as an exile in the United States in the 1940s. “And even though he may later respond to the influences of other atmospheres, a certain essence—a certain ‘aroma’ of his birthplace clings to his work . . . The vital mark these early influences leave is, as it were, on the handwriting of the artist. This is clear to us in the character of the trees and card players of a Cézanne, born in France,—in the curled sinuosities of the horizons and figures of a Van Gogh, born in Holland,—in the almost Arab ornamentation of a Picasso, born in Spain—or in the quattrocento linear feeling of a Modigliani, born in Italy. That is the manner in which I hope I have preserved the influences of my childhood.”

Vitebsk, “my sad and joyful town,” was approaching the zenith of its development as a solid, provincial military outpost of the vast Russian empire when Chagall was born there on 7 July 1887. The baroque green and white Uspensky Cathedral, on the hill crowning the city skyline of thirty bright onion-domed churches and sixty synagogues, and the jumble of wooden houses and wandering Jews depicted in paintings such as *Over Vitebsk* announce a long, mixed cultural heritage. The artist Ilya Repin called Vitebsk “the Russian Toledo” because, like El Greco’s city, its tumbling silhouette was characterized by a mix of Christian and Jewish spires, towers, and domes, dating back to the twelfth-century Church of the Annunciation. Set in a region of blue lakes, pine forests, broad plains, and gentle hills, the picturesque old White Russian city rises high on the banks of the wide Dvina River where two tributaries, the Vitba and the Luchesa, join it.

Life here, during snow-filled six-month winters and short sultry summers, when bathing huts appeared briefly on the riverbanks, had always been tough: Vitebsk was a contested town throughout its history. A fortification on the profitable trading routes between Kiev, Novgorod, Byzantium, and the Baltic Sea since the tenth century, it belonged to Lithuania in the Middle Ages, then to Poland, though it was frequently torched by invading Russians. It was annexed by Russia in the eighteenth century and became the northeastern fringe of the Pale of Settlement, the area—comprising present-day Belarus, Lithuania, parts of Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine—to which Catherine the Great confined all the Jews of her empire.

By 1890 there were five million of them there, concentrated in middle-sized towns like Vitebsk and neighbouring Dvinsk (now Daugavpils) and constituting 40 percent of world Jewry. From the 1860s the new Moscow-Riga and Kiev-St. Petersburg railways, crossing in Vitebsk, brought people streaming into the city from the countryside, and thus for the first time an urban proletariat appeared here. Between 1860 and 1890 Vitebsk's population doubled to 66,000 people: more than half of them were Jews, engaged mostly in the small trading enterprises—dealing in paper, oil, iron, fur, flour, sugar, herring—by which the town thrived. The rest were Russians, White Russians, and Poles, but so vital were the Jews in trade and business that one inhabitant recalled,



Vitebsk with the Dvina River, circa 1900

If I were a stranger and not a Vitebskite, and after having read the signs on stores and the names of tenants and offices, recorded on the lists of tenants in every yard along all the streets, I would have said that Vitebsk was a purely Jewish city, built by Jews, with their initiative, energy, and money. The sense that Vitebsk is a Jewish city is felt especially on Sabbath and Jewish holidays, when all the stores, offices, factories are closed and silent. Even in government offices, such as the Government Bank, the Notary, the Courthouse, Post and Telegraph Offices, and so on.

Yiddish, here as throughout the Pale, was mother tongue to almost all the Jewish population, half of whom could speak nothing else. It set the Jewish culture of cities like Vitebsk apart from the sea of backward, brutalised Slavic villages that encircled them, their peasants still serfs only a generation before Chagall's birth. Yiddish was Chagall's principal language until adolescence, the language of the family home, and its use enshrined a feeling of security and belonging, of participating in an autonomous system of values, religious traditions, and laws, that a Jew in the nineteenth century could find nowhere else.

The Jews who arrived in Vitebsk from smaller settlements in the Pale, therefore, felt quickly at home. Among them in 1886 was a slim, slight girl of twenty, Feiga-Ita Tchernina, eldest daughter of the kosher butcher and slaughterer in the small country town of Lyozno, forty miles to the east. Her mother, Chana, had recently died, and Feiga-Ita was leaving behind a slumbering existence where her father “lay half his life on top of the stove, a quarter in the synagogue, and the rest in the butcher shop,” surrounded by the indolent among his offspring, the ones who had not made it to the city. His famous grandson later portrayed them, affectionately, as a caricature of Russian provincial inertia: Uncle Leiba sitting all day on a bench outside his house while “his daughters browse like red cows”; pale Aunt Mariassaja “lies on the sofa . . . her body elongated, exhausted, her breasts sag”; Uncle Judah “is still on the stove, he seldom goes out”; Uncle Israel “is still sitting in his same place . . . warming himself, eyes closed, in front of the stove”; only Uncle Neuch, with his cart and mare, immortalised in the painting *The Cattle Dealer*, did any work. This was the rural Russia of which the St. Petersburg bureaucrats and intellectuals despaired—“nowhere else in Europe can one find such incapacity for steady, moderate, measured work,” wrote the nineteenth-century historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii—but it was



Chagall, "Vitebsk," 1914, drawing

nonetheless full of sensuous colour and life.

Feiga-Ita came to Vitebsk to marry twenty-three-year-old Khatskel (Yiddish form of Ezekiel, translated into Russian as Zakhar, and abbreviated within the family to Hasha, Chaty, or Chazia) Shagal, a distant cousin whom she had never met; as was customary for Orthodox Jews of the time, it was an arranged marriage. Khatskel had left Lyozno not long before with his parents, David and Basheva, for the burgeoning city; he worked as a labourer at Jachnine's herring warehouse on the banks of the Dvina and lived near the town prison in the newcomers' northern suburb of Peskovatik under the shadow of its seventeenth-century Holy Trinity Church, commonly known as "the Black Trinity." His father, already in his sixties, scraped a living as a small-time teacher of religion to poor local boys. A fragile younger brother, Zussy, stayed behind in Lyozno, apprenticed to a hairdresser; unenterprising and childishly vain, he was the only one of the extended family later to take an interest in his nephew's paintings, though he declined to keep a portrait of himself, judging it insufficiently flattering.

Peskovatik means "in the sands," and the home where Feiga-Ita joined



Peskovatik, the suburb of Vitebsk where Chagall was born, photographed in the 1900s

Khatskel was not so different from the country town she had just left. The roads were unpaved, frozen in the winter and full of muddy puddles in the summer; haphazardly built along them were wooden shacks with small backyards where chickens and goats scratched; cattle wandered on dirt tracks and into houses and shops, giving the area a rural appearance. Feiga-Ita milked goats in their yard, but even the wealthy Rosenfelds, Bella's parents, kept a cow in the courtyard beneath their apartment. along with horses and chickens, and insisted that their servants feed the children fresh milk. When they went to a dacha for the summer, their cow trailed behind the wagons of provisions and bedding at the end of a rope. Even in the affluent part of Vitebsk, the countryside never seemed far away.

Feiga-Ita and Khatskel, however, had no intention of staying in Peskovatik. Their wedding photograph shows a pair who typify the upwardly mobile, provincial-to-urban Jewish class of the time. Feiga-Ita stands neat and steady in tight-fitting black silk with high neck, long cuffs, ruffles, and ribbons; she fixes the camera with a determined, lively gaze and clasps a book, though she was virtually illiterate. She looks sensible and practical; by the time of her wedding, she was already playing mother to her tribe of younger sisters. After her own marriage she would check out their fiancés, travelling to neighbouring towns to inquire into their suitability, entering shops to pick up local gossip, peering through windows to keep informed, a step ahead of the game.

Sitting at her side, broad-shouldered Khatskel in a kaftan-like greatcoat

and peaked cap has the strength, beefiness, and taciturn expression of the focussed young labourer; the gentle melancholy that was part of his character shines through too. Soon he became bent and permanently exhausted, defeated by his hard job and large family; at his wedding, however, his son claimed, “my father had not been a poor young man. The photograph of him



Feiga-Ita and Khatskel Shagal, the artist's parents, on their wedding day, 1886

in his youth and my own observations of our wardrobe proved to me that when he married my mother he had a certain physical and financial authority, for he presented his fiancée . . . with a magnificent shawl. Once married, he gave up turning his wages to his father and supported his own household.”

The splendid lace shawl appears in later photographs, but spirited, hopeful Feiga-Ita soon found that, despite shared aspirations and an unquestioning acceptance of a traditional religious way of life, Khatskel was not someone she could talk to. Feiga-Ita had more ambitious hopes and dreams than he could understand, and an energy that constantly sought new outlets. As a

young mother, her intensity, and her loneliness within the marriage, as well as her naturally warm and kind-hearted nature, all unleashed in her a passion for her first child. Moyshe—always known to his parents as Moshka, though listed by them on a family birth certificate as Movsha Khatskelev—Movsha (Russian form of Moses), son of Khatskel. Born a year after his parents' marriage, Chagall was lavished with unwavering adoration by Feiga-Ita until her death in 1915, and he saw Vitebsk as literally his mother town, his art rooted in his closeness to Feiga-Ita. “If I have made pictures, it is because I remember my mother, her breasts so warmly nourishing and exalting me, and I feel I could swing from the moon,” he recalled when he was seventy-nine. To his son-in-law Franz Meyer, he explained his art thus: “It needs a withinness. An artist is tied to his mother's apron strings, humanly and formally obsessed by her closeness. Form derives not from academic teaching, but from this withinness.” The dreaminess that fuelled his art, he knew, came from Feiga-Ita. “Dreams, I am a dreamer—I inherited my dreaminess from my mother—this is true, and you, my dears, you don't even know what a *baba* I am,” he told his sisters in a letter in 1912, when he was twenty-four. “There is no one else in our family who so wants to know every-

thing as me—I am not praising myself here . . . I am interested in trivial things, don’t judge me for that because I am a man.” The love and identification between him and Feiga-Ita gave him a robustness and basic optimism and made him a survivor in life; it also lent him a vulnerability in his extreme dependence on women. A strikingly beautiful boy with curly hair and wide blue eyes, he remained Feiga-Ita’s favourite of her nine children, and his unrivalled position was one he expected, unconsciously but uncompromisingly, to be replicated in every future relationship. A sister, named Chana after Feiga-Ita’s mother, was born a year after him in 1888, but her arrival did not detract from the closeness of mother and son. In a family with just enough to go around, Feiga-Ita used to slip her first-born extra snippets of food, strengthening him physically as well as emotionally; he lived longer than any of his siblings, only two of whom reached old age.

Like most men who rise from obscurity to fame, Chagall mythologised his childhood. *My Life*, his memoir of his experiences in Russia, written when he was thirty-five and about to leave it forever, dwells at length on his early years in Vitebsk, and though some parts are romanticized and unreliable, many details are corroborated by factual sources, letters, and photographs, and the general tenor chimes with other memoirs of shtetl childhoods of the period. He opens with a drama: “My mother told me I came into the world during a great fire and that the bed in which we were lying was moved from place to place to save us. Perhaps that is why I was always so agitated.” The fire, one of many that swept through the wooden-built sections of Russian towns like Vitebsk, is documented for the day of his birth; the inhabitants usually fled to safety in the river. Chagall attributed his restlessness to these events of his birthday; as a child, he found the smoke and smouldering roofs and the flurry down to the Dvina exciting. The burning wooden houses in his paintings were a vivid recollection—he saw, for example, the conflagration in 1904 of the ancient wooden Ilyinskaya Church close to his home; later they became, as well, a symbol of the destruction of Jewry.

In 1887, however, his birthplace was saved. “That little house near the Peskovatik road had not been touched,” he wrote in 1922. “The place reminds me of the bump on the head of the rabbi in green I painted, or of a potato tossed into a barrel of herring and soaked in pickling brine. Looking at this cottage from the height of my recent ‘grandeur,’ I winced and I asked myself: ‘How could I possibly have been born here? How does one breathe?’ ”

He was, he says, born dead—“I did not want to live”—and was thrown into

a trough of water to be revived; a trough lies at the foot of the bed in several paintings called *Birth*. The story hints at depression, passivity, resignation to fate, all characteristics he shared with his father and that were as fundamental as the instinct for survival and energy-bearing hope that he inherited from Feiga-Ita. A self-absorbed, soft spoken, small child with a slim frame and delicate features, he grew up enveloped in the closed, exclusive atmosphere of Jewish Vitebsk. For his first thirteen years his was the tradition-bound upbringing of Orthodox eastern European Jewry, marked by strong family and community bonds, a modest, entirely religious education, poverty, and suspicion—he used to hide under the bed whenever a policeman passed the window—if the Christian world drew near. Even within the Pale of Settlement Jews did not have full civic rights; official policies were shaped by imperial advisers such as Konstantin Pobedonostsev, procurator of the Holy Synod under Alexander III, who suggested solving “the Jewish problem” by converting a third of the Jews, expelling a third, and killing a third. Jewish access to Russian schools and universities was restricted by quotas; Jews were banned from the civil service and the judiciary and were subject to the looting and violence of periodic pogroms; Raissa Maritain, Chagall’s Parisian Jewish friend who grew up at the same time as he in the southern Pale, then converted with her family to Catholicism, recalled “the mob which passed by, the cross at its head,” explaining that her mother’s “memory of the cross carried aloft during the pogroms delayed her conversion for a long time.” In response eastern European Jewry shaped itself into a vivid, independent community with its own identity and ritual, little touched by secular influence, little tempted by assimilation. The centres of imperial power, St. Petersburg and Moscow, were remote, forbidden, barely relevant; Vitebsk’s Jews looked to Vilna (now Vilnius) as their capital. This “Jerusalem of the East” was the old seat of Jewish learning in the former Lithuanian empire, known in Yiddish as *Litah* (German *Litauen*) and the country to which they felt they belonged.

Vitebsk’s rich Jews, such as Bella’s parents, lived in the oldest part of town, in the shadow of those buildings representing the Christian establishment—the neoclassical governor’s palace where Napoleon had briefly resided on his way to Moscow in 1812, the pink and cream tiers of the city hall. The best addresses in Vitebsk were on two long avenues of mid-nineteenth-century terraces with painted facades, Smolenskaya and Podvinskaya (now Lenin and Tolstoy streets), which met at the banks of the small Vitba River. The mansion of Swiss confectioner Christian Brozi—

which housed the popular patisserie Konditorei Jeanne-Albert and, beneath its ornamental terrace, the jeweller marked “Sh N Rosenfeld”—stood on this corner. This area was always busy with shoppers, travellers, carriages, and after 1898 the first trams; through the winter horse-drawn sleighs waited in a taxi rank opposite the Rosenfelds’ house. On one side of a bridge spanning the Vitba loomed the Alexander Cathedral; on the other, the imposing district court. Here cultural and intellectual life blossomed. By the end of the nineteenth century Vitebsk boasted its own symphony orchestra, which toured to Vilna and Riga, several theatres, and the only art school in the Pale.

The metropolitan hub of interlocking streets and squares, located around where the Vitba joins the majestic Dvina River, was known as the “big side” of town. A large wooden bridge with elaborate balustrades crossed the Dvina, which was dense with ferries and barges bringing logs for the profitable paper factories and shipyards. It led to the more impoverished “small side,” where Chagall grew up and where most of the poorer Jews were clustered in frame cabins or log houses known as *izbas*. Some of the huts lined the riverbank, the water coming up to the doors. Vitebsk was described by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1911 as

an old town, with decaying mansions of the nobility and dirty Jewish quarters, half of its inhabitants being Jews. There are two cathedrals, founded in 1664 and 1777 [no one thought to mention the sixty synagogues] . . . The manufactures are insignificant, and the poorer classes support themselves by gardening, boat-building and the flax trade, while the merchants carry on an active business with Riga in corn, flax, hemp, tobacco, sugar and timber.”

The Western Dvina, which flows 250 miles northwest to the Baltic port of Riga, was the city’s lifeblood. In springtime rafts coursed downstream and sometimes broke up when they hit the stone piles of the bridge, leaving boatmen perched on a single trunk, furiously plying their poles to stop the logs from escaping. In summer people swam and children played in the river—Chagall remembered squirming into the water in embarrassment as the other boys shouted, “See what a little one he has!” In winter the Dvina froze, and an ice rink was set up by the bridge that even fastidiously brought-up girls like Bella were allowed to visit. “For us the bridge was heaven,” she



Vitebsk, 1900s. On the left is the Cafe Jeanne-Albert and the jewellery store marked Sh N Rosenfeld, belonging to Chagall's father-in-law

wrote.

We escaped to it from cramped homes with low ceilings. On the bridge we could see the sky. In the narrow streets it was hidden by houses and steep-roofed churches. But by the bridge the river stretched out flat, and the air was empty between water and sky. A breeze brought the scent of flowers down from the public gardens. The bridge joined the two halves of the town and was full of people during the day. In the streets they walked with deliberate tread. But on the bridge they felt uplifted by wind and water. Coolness rose up between the wooden planks. Everyone wanted to stay there, not to have to come back to earth and the hard pavements.

On the “small side” the commercial heartland of warehouses and stores spanned out from the railway station, about a mile from the old town. Here, Chagall wrote, “houses stand crooked / And a road leads to the graveyard”; nearby was the Ilyinskaya Church and the nineteenth-century Spaso-Preobrazhensky (Transfiguration) Church, whose green domes are one of the most frequently recurring images throughout Chagall's paintings. This church and the small houses constituted the view from the attic of 29, Second Pokrovskaya Street (later renamed Bolshaya-Big-Pokrovskaya), the small wooden house (one story with additional rooms in the roof) where the

Shagals moved with three-year-old Moyshe and little Chana, mother, in 1890. That year Khatskel's father died, and his mother Basheva, then forty-eight, returned to Lyozno to marry Chagall's other grandfather the butcher; merging two households yielded a small amount of extra money by which the next, urbanised generation of Shagals could afford the new home.

Here on Second Pokrovskaya Street the growing family flourished. David, named after the recently dead grandfather, was born in May 1891, and in a musty attic room decorated with blue wallpaper, the two brothers shared a bed, sleeping head to toe. A few days before David's birth Moyshe was bitten by a mad dog, and an uncle took him to the Pasteur Institute in St. Petersburg for treatment against possible rabies. He loved being the centre of attention and dreamed of meeting the tsar on the street. When he came home, the house was full of women decked out in their best clothes; his mother, half naked and flushed, was in bed, and there came from her room the piercing scream of a newborn baby. Again and again he repainted that scene, which must have become commonplace to him: after Chana and David, six more girls were born to the Shagals between 1894 and 1905: Zina (known as Zislya to her parents), Lisa (Leah or Leya in Yiddish), Mania, Roza, Marusia (called Mariaska, or the diminutive Mariasenska, at home), and Rachel, who died as a toddler, according to family legend poisoned because she ate charcoal.

In Pokrovskaya energetic Feiga-Ida set up a grocery shop, the one Chagall so often depicted, with the spelling mistake on the sign; she supplied it “with a whole wagon load of merchandise, without money, on credit,” and thus supplemented the family income by selling herrings, sugar, flour. *Shop in Viteosk* (1914) portrays the mundane interior as a child's treasure box, fish glistening on the scales, boxes shining like jewels: a haven of calm and plenty. In the store next to the house, and at home, Chagall remembered, his mother managed the household, ordering his father about, standing at the door as they left in the morning, then sending each child into the shop to grab a herring by its tail in the evening. It was always herring, usually accompanied by bread, cheese, and the black peasant grain kasha, for supper; Khatskel alone, watched jealously by his children, was served roast meat on the Sabbath. Almost defensively, Chagall reiterates in his memoirs that the family was never hungry, that everywhere he went he had a piece of bread and butter in his hand, but many who knew him later in life questioned whether he ever fully recovered from the desperate relationship with food of the poor child. “Often when he went into the bistros, he would almost auto-



The house on Second Pokrovskaya Street which was the Shagal family home from 1890 to 1921, photographed in the 1970s

matically break a hard-boiled egg on the counter. I had the impression that his childhood, which had been spent in poverty, had not yet stilled his hunger,” recalled the Lithuanian photographer Izis, who met him in the 1940s; one of the first impressions of Virginia Haggard, his companion in those years, was that “Marc always dispatched his food hastily and without undue refinement.”

Chagall was dismissive of Freud, but the memory of a home where he was always nourished and sheltered was crucial to his self-image. For so imaginatively fearful a child, given to stuttering and fainting fits—he later brought them on deliberately to avoid any sort of confrontation—the overwhelming first influence within this milieu was the protective sensuality of his mother: “I am a little boy and Mama is a queen.” As a teenager, he remembered, “I was still so timid that I held tight to my mother’s skirt whenever we left our part of town, as if I were a child and afraid of losing her in the crowd,” while at home,

when I was too frightened, my mother would call me to her. That was the best shelter. No hand towel will be changed into a ram and an old man, and no sepulchral figure will glide across the frozen windowpanes . . . Neither the hanging lamp nor the sofa will frighten me as long as I am in Mama’s bed . . . She is stout, with breasts as plump as pillows. The softness of her body, from age and from bearing children, the sufferings of her maternal life, the sweetness of her workaday dreams, her legs fat and rub-

bery.

In *Mother by the Stove* the housewife putting bread into the oven is transformed into the ruling goddess of the house, her bearing proud and upright, her face caught in a halo of crimson reflections from the flame. In the left-hand corner a tiny bearded man, Chagall's father, leans on a stick; his diminutive presence reinforces her significance. As in Russian icon paintings, the figures' relative size is symbolic. This was how Chagall perceived his parents: his mother monumental, alive, and as warmth-giving as the big old stove by which she stands, his father frail and dependent.

"Was my mother really so very short?" Chagall wondered later.

In our eyes, our mother had a style that was rare, as rare as possible in her workaday surroundings . . . She loved to talk. She fashioned words and presented them so well that her listener would smile in embarrassment. Like a queen, erect, motionless, her pointed coiffure in place, she asked questions through closed lips that scarcely moved . . . With what words, by what means can I show her smiling, seated for hours at a time in front of the door or at the table, waiting for some neighbour or other to whom, in her distress, she may unburden herself . . . Ah, that smile,



Chagall, "Mother and Son," engraving from *My Life*

mine! . . . I wanted to say that my talent lay hidden somewhere in her, that through her everything had been passed on to me, everything except her spirit.

The dominant hues in *Mother by the Stove* are black and white: the solid, classical colours of portraiture. *Portrait of My Father*, painted at the same time, is by contrast a rippling mass of sulphur yellow and shades of deep blue and brown whose undulating surfaces and blurred lines reflect Chagall's ambivalent response to his father. The uneasy, tense figure of Khatskel Shagal looks out warily, a hunted expression in eyes full of alarm. Framed against a window, he is edged into the centre of the picture by a cat and by the tiny figure of his headscarfed mother Basheva: "all there was to that little old woman was a scarf around her head, a little skirt and a wrinkled face . . . in her heart, a love devoted to her few favourite children and to her book of her prayers." Everything looks forlorn, faded, old, yet Chagall portrays his father as a thoughtful, weary, ancient Jew, pondering life and its griefs. Where Feiga-Ida was practical and alert, Khatskel was pious and reflective. He rarely addressed his children, except to quote some religious text, on which he also enlightened his wife: once a year at Yom Kippur she struggled through the synagogue service with the women's prayer book, which Khatskel marked for her "Begin here," "Weep," "Listen to the cantor." Although she would lose the thread of the prayers anyway, "Mama went to temple assured that she would not shed tears uselessly, but only at the proper places." On the other hand Khatskel rose daily at six, summer and winter, to go to the prayer house, returned to prepare the samovar, drank his tea, went to work, came home exhausted, rolled a mountain of cigarettes for the next day, and fell asleep over supper.

"Have you sometimes seen, in Florentine paintings, one of those men whose beard is never trimmed, with eyes at once brown and ash-gray, with the complexion the colour of burnt-ochre and all lines and wrinkles?" Chagall asks in *My Life*. "That is my father." The portrait he painted of him

was to have had the effect of a candle that bursts into flame and goes out at the same moment. Its aroma—that of sleep . . . Must I talk about my father? What is a man worth if he is worth nothing? If he is priceless? My father was not a clerk but, for thirty-two years, simply a labourer. He lifted heavy barrels and my heart used to twist like a Turkish bagel as I watched him lift those

weights and stir the herring with his frozen hands. His huge boss would stand to one side like a stuffed animal. My father’s clothes sometimes shone with herring brine . . . Everything about my father seemed to me enigma and sadness . . . In his greasy, work-soiled clothes . . . he would come home, tall and thin. The evening came in with him.

Chagall wrote this in Moscow in 1922, when proletarian roots were an asset; in fact Khatskel was a member of the Union of Store Managers in Vitebsk from 1905 until 1918 when, following the revolution, he worked in a cooperative. Nevertheless his father was, said Chagall’s son-in-law, “an object lesson in drudgery that Chagall never forgot,” comic butt of a domestic farce that he could not control: the workman who had his weekly Sabbath wash, Feiga-Ida pouring a pitcher of water over his blackened hands and body while he groaned “that nothing was ever in order, that there was no washing soda left”; the parent reduced to scooping up his children’s excrement because, Chagall recalled, “in particular we liked to do . . . at night in the yard. Excuse my vulgarity? Am I coarse? It’s only natural that, in the moonlight, when you’re afraid to go too far—we children couldn’t even budge, our legs simply wouldn’t move. The next morning Father would scold his children for their shameful conduct.” Several of Chagall’s romantic paintings of his hometown, such as *Over Vitebsk*, include the figure of a



Khatskel and
Feiga-Ita Shagal in
the 1900s

defecating child.

Chagall's memories of his parents were coloured and intensified by a nostalgia for a home to which, after he left Russia in 1922, he had no physical access; honouring his parents turned naturally to sentimentalising them. To the world beyond Russian Jewry, he closed rank: "I never quarrelled with my parents. For me parents are sacred. Nothing in the world could have turned me against mine," he told Virginia Haggard; as an old man revisiting Russia in 1973 he ingratiated himself with pronouncements such as "In spirit I was always here . . . Say of me what you will, that I am a great painter or not, but I remained faithful to my parents from Vitebsk." At the other extreme was the reaction of his own daughter Ida, brought up and educated in Paris, who returned to meet her relatives in 1959 and was shocked by the uneducated Shagals. This was not a result of Soviet coarseness; Ida was enchanted by her mother's relations ("serene, intelligent, adorable . . . unexpected wonderful contact"), who were by then no better off than the Shagals. "I spent a lot of time with the families," Ida wrote tersely. "It is difficult to speak about Father's one, except that he is without a doubt a great artist, but that it took also to be a genius to get out from that family."

Nonetheless, according to the memories of the sister and nieces who in the 1990s at last talked of Chagall, after seventy years of state-encouraged silence, "the whole family was very cheerful and musical . . . they joked about each other, sang and played instruments." Mariaska, the last surviving sister, remembered Moyshe especially for his "fibs and fantasies" and his musical gifts. He played the violin, taking evening lessons from an ironmonger who lived on their courtyard. ("I scraped out something. And no matter what, or how, I played, he would always exclaim, beating time with his foot: 'Admirable!' ") He had a fine childish soprano voice and assisted the cantor in the synagogue, though he hated being woken early to go there on holy days. ("Why does one run like that in the gloomy night? I'd have been much better off in my bed.") Throughout his life he loved music; records, especially Mozart, often played in the studio as he worked.

The family remembered Chana, the eldest sister, as "big, confident and with a steady character," reliable as a rock, pragmatic, and sensible; *Portrait of Anyuta* (her Russian name) shows a solid, firm young woman. His sisters called David "a talented person . . . the support and hope of the family . . . He wrote poems that were printed in the Vitebsk local newspaper, played the mandolin marvellously, and sang excellently," teaching them opera arias. Chagall's relationship with his only brother—and thus his



The Shagal family, late 1900s: from left to right, back row: Chagall, Zina, Uncle Neuch, Lisa, Mania; front row: Chana, Marusia, Feiga-Ita, Khatskel, Roza

potential rival in the family—was more ambivalent. His depictions of him are full of empathy, and he would name his only son for him, but he was also critical; in 1912, when David was twenty, he told his sisters that he would dream of helping him “with one condition, that he would live like a human being (his behaviour makes it impossible to show himself to people), it’s impossible to take him out.”

From his sisters, on the other hand, he had no competition. Zina, the most aesthetically sensitive of them, liked to draw, but almost ceaselessly the sisters’ role was to help their mother in her inexhaustible activities; Chagall’s stepdaughter Jean McNeil notes that this was the only occupation he ever expected from young girls. Although he was fond of his sisters, he also found them a nuisance. “My sisters laugh and cry. / They stand together in the door / Look for something in the window / And seek happiness forever,” he wrote in his autobiographical poem “My Old Home”. His favourite was Lisa, born in 1896. “A brilliant, light person, she always glowed,” her family said of her. “She was very pretty until the end of her life,

cheerful, kind and laughed a lot.” Her lightness of being is captured in Chagall’s depictions of her, thoughtful and engrossed in *Lisa with a Mandolin* and *Lisa by the Window*.

Beyond the family home the neighbourhood near the railway station, almost entirely Jewish, was a busy, secure place for a small boy. “Around me come and go, turn and turn, or just trot along, all sorts of Jews, old and young, Javitches and Bejlins. A beggar runs towards his house, a rich man goes home. The *cheder* boy runs home. Papa goes home. In those days there was no cinema. People went home or to the shop.” Like most children from poor families, Moyshe spent much of his time on the streets; he remembered being fascinated by sheds and roofs, beams, courtyards, and the hidden worlds behind them. The inhabitants of Bolshaya and Malaya (Little) Pokrovskaya lived publicly and noisily: a carter swayed drunkenly along the road with his horse and his wife sold vodka illegally; Tanjka, a laundress and a thief, made trouble; a chimney sweep quarrelled loudly with his wife; a man and a dwarf trafficked in horses and stolen pigeons. The boys were always visiting the baker and his wife, the most respectable family on the street, whose lights burned from five o’clock in the morning, and eyeing another attraction at the back of the block: the large barracks of the 41st infantry division and 41st artillery brigade of the Russian army, which had been billeted in Vitebsk since the end of the nineteenth century. Chagall remembered these details: the soldiers in his pictures—*The Soldier Drinks*, *Soldier and Peasant Girl*, *Soldiers*—always have the number 41 inscribed on their shoulder straps.

During the long winters, boys from the age of three or four to thirteen attended *cheder*. When Chagall was three years old an elderly *cheder* teacher appeared at the house: “We hadn’t even sent for him. He came of his own accord, the way the marriage-broker comes or the old man who carries away corpses. ‘One season, two . . .’ he said to my mother.” *Cheder* literally means “room”; for the younger children, the teachers were glorified child-minders who for a small fee took charge of around eight local boys in the main room of their own house, teaching them to read prayers and passages from the Hebrew Bible. It was so boring that teacher and children often fell asleep—Moyshe was bitten by his teacher’s dog because the teacher had retired to bed with his wife at midday. As each child progressed, he moved to a more advanced teacher. Chagall had two barely educated ones before graduating to the capable, modern Rabbi Djatkine, who prepared him for his bar mitzvah and infused him with a love of the Bible. Still, days begun and ended

in the dark during the snowy winters seemed endless, and Chagall could hardly wait to be released back to daydreaming: "my sweet stars; they accompany me to school and wait for me on the street till I return . . . Every night, a lantern in my hand, I went back home."

In the summer Feiga-Ita sent her children back to Lyozno to the home of their double grandparents, Khatskel's mother and her father the butcher, and the ramshackle house that she had recently left seemed to them a paradise. Cowhides and lambskins were hung up to dry like linen. In stables full of doomed beasts, dogs and chickens rustled and clucked behind the slaughterer, waiting for a bit of meat. Mingled with the blood and guts was the undertow of religious exaltation in the prayers said by her flamboyant, lazy father, as he chattered to the animals moments before plunging the knife into them. ("Eh, listen here! Give me your legs. I'll have to tie you up. We need goods, meat, you understand?") Then the freshly roasted stomach, neck, ribs at the table: every smell and taste intoxicated the children. It was one of Chagall's childhood treats to go out in the cart with cattle dealer Uncle Neuch, Feiga-Ita's brother, to the marketplace, where her sisters, Aunts Moussia, Gouttja, and Chaja, flew across the stalls with baskets of berries, pears, and currants.

These summers in the Pale, short, sweet, hot, abundant, left an indelible impression on Russians later in exile. "Like the cold of our continental winter, the heat of summer was extreme," recalled Raissa Maritain after decades living in Paris. "The months of May and June were overflowing with roses and cherries . . . their perfume made one giddy. The summer abounded also in melons and watermelons, in plums and in apricots as sweet as honey . . . it seems to me I have never eaten such good things as we had in Russia." For Chagall, the opportunity offered by a hard urban setting, combined with the easygoing ways of the country, its earthy yet tender acceptance of the interdependence of man and beast, was one of Feiga-Ita's lasting gifts. His work is filled with images of animals: his mother's world, made visionary in the homesick canvases—*I and the Village*, *To Russia*, *Asses and Others*—which he painted after he first left Russia in 1911.

Colouring all of them, and every aspect of Chagall's childhood, in town or country, summer or winter, was the drama and ritual of the Jewish religious calendar, its feasts and fast days, its stories and prayers, its faith in miracles and the supernatural, and the conviction of divine election that went with it. A palpable second reality at the heart of daily life, it gave at once consolation for hardship and an encouragement to submit to fate, the characteristic Jew-



Chagall, "The Butcher," 1910, gouache on brown paper: a portrait of Chagall's Lyozno grandfather

ish resilience and the capacity for suffering. When Chagall wrote in 1944, addressing Vitebsk, that "I didn't have one single picture that didn't breathe with your spirit and reflection," it was this metaphorical, spiritual country of childhood that he meant.

"For my parents, religion was the axle around which their whole existence revolved," Chagall said. "Every holy day brought its own atmosphere," Bella Chagall wrote in her memoir of Vitebsk; each had its own

customs, legends, food. The ten Penitential Days of Awe were full of agitation and nightly prayers; the Day of Atonement, heavy and oppressive, was heralded by the arrival of the dark-clad slaughterer scooping up the roosters and hens to be killed. The New Year, Rosh Hashanah, was “clear and pure, like the air after rain,” following the “sombre nights during which we prayed for forgiveness”; Hanukkah, the children’s winter festival of lights; Purim, promising the arrival of the pale spring sun, when baskets of presents flew from home to home and theatre troupes, the Purim Spieler, danced and acted across the town. At Passover especially Chagall recalled being transported imaginatively through the purple wine in his father’s glass to the exiled Jews’ tents in the burning Arabian desert, then rushing to open the door on the cold Vitebsk street, white stars against a velvet sky, and wondering, “Where is Elijah and his white chariot? Is he still lingering in the courtyard to enter the house in the guise of a sickly old man, a stooped beggar, with a sack on his back and a cane in his hand?” Raissa Maritain similarly remembered waiting for Elijah on a Passover night “heavy with adoration and fear.” “Next year in Jerusalem” is the Passover chorus: in this milieu, the miraculous might wait on any street corner; just a breath would be needed to bring instantly to life the Old Testament characters and the story of the Jewish nation, which blended seamlessly with the children’s daily lives. Thus the exalted, otherworldly names—*wunder-rebbe* (miracle-man), *luft-mensch* (man who lives on air)—given to the semibeggars who made up a substantial minority of the Jewish Pale population; such a character, sack over his back, depicted flying over the roofs in Chagall’s paintings, was an everyday personage as well as an



Chagall, “Lyozno,” 1911, drawing



Chagall, "Purim Players," engraving from *First Encounter*

image of the timeless Wandering Jew.

Between the feast days, Bella recorded, "there stretched out a line of ordinary days—silent, sunless, flat and gray. The rain fell ceaselessly, as if it had forgotten how to stop. The windows seemed to be weeping. Inside the house it was dark even during the day, which ended almost as soon as it began." The festivals and the weekly Sabbath ceremonies pierced this bleak reality, giving to every taste and tale a Proustian intensity of memory, layering the glowing, imaginary city of Jerusalem onto the prosaic dull one of Vitebsk, which in turn was already crystallising in childhood to become Chagall's own city of the mind. Most significantly for his future, these rituals were rich in fantasy, poetry, and music—but almost wholly lacking in visual representation: a culture awaiting its artist.

The emotionally heady nature of the particular Jewish sect, the Hasidim, to which Chagall's and Bella's families belonged, was generations away, culturally, from the enlightenment that had by then been secularising Jewish circles in western Europe for a century. The Hasidic movement, popular with a mass of uneducated eastern European Jews from the eighteenth century onward, advocated song and dance as an expression of devotion, laying an almost mystical emphasis on the oneness of all life, the importance of love for people and animals as a way of joyful, intuitive communion with God. Hasidic ideals of harmony between man and nature underline Chagall's work during every decade. He identified especially with cows and once considered using the image of one on his calling card; fish have symbolic links to his father, the labourer in a herring warehouse; roosters suggest life-giving energy and are also, along with goats, associated with the Day of

Atonement. The references are especially potent in works that are important autobiographical statements. The happiest of all his self-portraits, *The Poet Reclining* (1915), in London's Tate Museum, shows the artist on his honeymoon lying in a field with horse and goat. A farmyard menagerie accompanies the actors and musicians in *Introduction to the Jewish Theatre* (1920), the opening to the series that Chagall considered his definitive depiction of Russian Jewry. *The Flayed Ox* was a version of a self-portrait painted at an anxious time in 1929 and again at a tragic one in 1947.

Hasidism's spiritual current lifted the poor community beyond concerns of mere survival, to a worldview sustaining the defiant vitality and celebratory humanism with which Chagall transformed the cramped dull backstreets of his childhood to a vision of beauty and harmony on canvas. Russians, who knew these places in all their everyday ugliness, were the most astonished. “That this ‘Jewish hole,’ dirty and smelly, with its winding streets, its blind houses and its ugly people, bowed down by poverty, can be thus attired in charm, poetry and beauty in the eyes of the painter—this is what enchants and surprises us at the same time,” wrote the artist and critic Alexandre Benois. Only those inside could feel the strong, steadying influence of this sealed, conservative background. If, before 1900, it tended to produce a people, like Chagall's father, disinclined to question or change, it was also a culture whose rich vein of myth gave nourishment to those rare artistic talents who did break away. Each one—Yiddish storyteller Sholem Aleichem, born in Ukraine in 1859, dramatist S. Ansky, author of *The Dybbuk*, born in Vitebsk in 1863, Isaac Bashevis Singer, born in Poland in 1904, painter Chaim Soutine, born in Lithuania in 1893—took with them both its hallucinatory enchantment and its age-old melancholy, that lament with which Bella concludes the first part of her memoir *Burning Lights*: “How doth the city sit solitary! Shall joy never return to us?”

The grinding, unchanging poverty that pushed the Russian Jewish population to the extremes of fanatical Hasidism on the one hand and the absolutism of Marxism or Zionism on the other, also drove nearly a million Jews to emigrate from the Pale between 1891 and 1910. Resourceful Feiga-Ita, however, propelled the Shagals upwards to become one of Pokrovskaya's respected middle-income families in this period. Her shop was successful; with the profits, she constructed in 1897 a second wooden house in their courtyard, followed in 1902 by a one-story square brick house, eight metres by eight (thirty feet square), four metres (thirteen feet) tall, with three windows facing the street: a sign of increased status. By 1905 the Shagals had a

plot 28 by 21 metres (90 by 70 feet) on which stood the brick house and the four wooden houses, which were let to tenants. Flanked by trees and a small front garden, a wooden gate and wicket door was the entrance to all four. They shared the same street number, as was customary for buildings belonging to the same owner, and one of them, three steps up to the door, was occupied by Feiga-Ita's shop. The family lived in the brick house; here was the kitchen and stove, heart of daily life and open to friends, customers, and relatives from Lyozno and to a passing cast of beggars and itinerant preachers.

From interiors like *Our Dining Room*, *The Samovar*, *Around the Lamp*, and *Sabbath*, we know this room, with its timber-planked floor, heavy wooden furniture, hanging lamp casting its light as a cone on to the table, and the family treasure, a giant wall clock in its case, with heavy pendulum and the exotic inscription "Le Roi à Paris." Apart from the clock, the walls are usually bare. "Among the petty traders and craftsmen that my family knew, we had no idea what it meant to be an artist. In our home town, we never had a single picture, print or reproduction, at most a couple of photographs of members of my family . . . I never had occasion to see, in Vitebsk, such a thing as a drawing," Chagall remembered. Rather, pictures such as *Sabbath*, bathed in a soft yellow haze, convey the ambience of pre-revolutionary small-town Jewish Russia: the lethargic characters, static, resigned, bound together in a cosy laziness and in their shared history, as

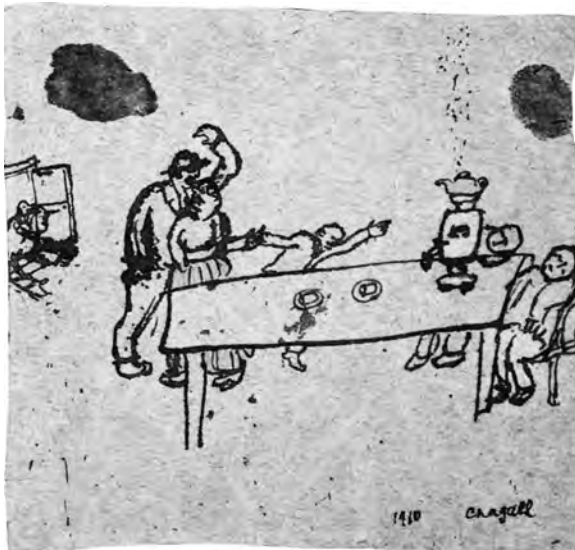


Chagall, "My Parents, Mother's Shop," around 1910, drawing

the clock ticks the passing of time and tradition. One of Chagall's earliest supporters, Russian-Jewish critic Yakob Tugendhold, identified acutely with the milieu conjured by *The Clock*. "This black night, the night of oaths and miracles, peers through the windows," he wrote. "The heavy pendulum counts the centuries-minutes of monotonous life, and tiny cumbersome figures seek something in the uncanny nocturnal void."

The child Chagall emerged only very tentatively from that claustrophobic yet comforting interior, but before his gentler brother and less driven sisters. "An old house with no window / Inside it is dark at night. / I came out first / And stretched out my hand" was his memory in "My Old Home." Asked in the 1960s about the essential influences on his painting, he named the mystique of Hasidim, the will to construct, and the mystique of icons. The first two of these, core ingredients of his parents' world, were immutably in place by the time he finished *cheder* and celebrated his bar mitzvah. His father, wrapped in the tallith, growled "over my boyish thirteen-year-old body, the prayer of the transfer of moral responsibility," and assumed his son would now find work as an apprentice and be off his back. But dreamy Chagall didn't want to grow up:

I was afraid of my majority, afraid of having, in my turn, all the signs of the adult man, even the beard. In those sad, solitary days, those thoughts made me weep . . . Sometimes I would stand and



Chagall, "Samovar at the Table," 1910, drawing

gaze at myself thoughtfully. What is the meaning of my youth? I'm growing up in vain . . . At home, nobody ever asked me what trade or profession I might want to study . . . Besides, I could scarcely imagine, at that time, that I would ever be able to do anything useful in life.

Then his pious, energetic, ambitious, loving mother took matters into her own hands. Without a backward glance, she dragged Chagall across the bridge to the "big side" of town, bribed the high school teacher fifty rubles to flout the quota on Jewish pupils, and launched her first child on the path out of Jewish Vitebsk.