

# FAYGALA

**Yiddish Refugee**



Betty Baker with Irene McKinney, PhD

Based on a true story

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Written by the main character's daughter-in-law.

Clutching her precious *piranee*, the quilt that was supposed to be saved for her wedding day, and wearing the irreplaceable Sabbath shawl that Papa bought for Mama before he fled the country, Faygala is forced to leave for America ahead of the rest of the family. She is leaving behind the young man who has secretly pledged his love for her. Will she ever see him again?

Faygala lived in Russia when the Cossacks periodically ransacked her Jewish village, and the Czar's officers conscripted the men into the army. To avoid all this, many fled. Going with people she barely knew, Faygala feels frightened and alone, worried she may never reach her dear father on the other side of the ocean or see her family ever again.

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دانشگاه تهران  
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(Author, Betty Baker, has moved to Heaven.)

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*Karen A. Van Lieu*



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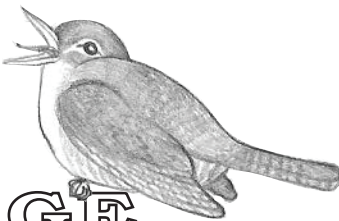
This book is dedicated to Faygala and all Jewish people over the centuries who courageously did what had to be done to survive, to carry on their traditions, and to pass down their faith.

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# THE VILLAGE



**F**aygala peeked through the lattice separating the women from the men in the shul (synagogue). At nearly seventeen, she still loved watching the men recite the blessing over their talliths (prayer shawls).

“Baruch ata ADONAI Elohenu ... (Blessed are you LORD our God ...).” All the men, from age 13 to elderly, were standing in a circle, each looking at the beautiful border of their tallith (prayer shawl) where the blessing is lovingly embroidered by their wife or mother. Faygala watched as they finished reciting the blessing, kissed the ends of the border, then flipped the tallith over their backs. They held them over their heads for a silent moment before placing them on their shoulders. Faygala especially kept her eye on Yitz’chak (Isaac) who was standing beside her older

brother, Feivel. She admired the great reverence with which Yitz'chak (Isaac) handled his tallith and performed this sacred ceremony.

There were fourteen men today. Faygala could remember when the shul (synagogue) hall was full of men and boys. Now it was nearly empty. Still, there were enough to make the ten needed for a minyan. So there would be a Shabbos (Sabbath) service today. If the minyan (ten men) was not complete, no service could be held. Everyone would have to go home.

The concern in her Russian shtetl (village) was how soon the day would come when there would no longer be a minyan. Every year more families left to protect their fathers and sons from being conscripted by the dreaded army. Now there were only two rabbis and one cantor left in the shul (synagogue). Yitz'chak's father, the head rabbi, was still here along with Yitz'chak and his three younger brothers. Rabbi David was still here, but all his sons were gone already to America.

"Ma toh vu ..." Now they were singing about how beautiful Jacob's tents are. Faygala loved this tune. It always brought warmth to her heart. The beat felt like being rocked in Bubbie's (Grandma's) rocking chair.

"Shema Yisrial ADONAI Elohenu ... (Hear O Israel the LORD our God ...)." The cantor's deep voice rang out. The women always stood for the Shema part of the service. Faygala wanted to sing out mightily with all her heart, but she didn't. She sang quietly like a proper Jewish girl, along with all the other proper Jewish women and girls around her. They were supposed to sing quietly enough so the men couldn't hear them. The men's voices usually rang out so strongly that they drowned out the women's

singing, but that was getting harder and harder as the number of men was dwindling faster than the number of women.

"... ADONAI echad. Baruch shem kavod malchuto, le olam vaed (...the LORD is one. Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever more)." The Shema continued. Faygala listened. She thought she could hear Yitz'chak's voice ringing out above the others. She leaned her head and peeked over the lattice. Just then he turned his head and their eyes met. Faygala quickly drew back and pulled her scarf up over her head acting like she was cold. She didn't want Mama or her Bubbies (grandmas) to notice her cheeks turning red.

"Ve ahavta et ADONAI Elolecha ... (And you shall love the LORD your God...)." The cantor's lone, chanting voice now rang out and filled the whole shul with its beauty and reverence. "... u b'kol levevlekha ... (... and with all your heart ...)." Faygala closed her eyes and tried to imagine that it was Papa's strong voice ringing forth instead of Cantor Yishai's (Jesse's). She did this every Shabbos (Sabbath). She didn't want to forget what Papa's voice sounded like. Cantor Yishai's voice was wonderful, but Papa's was far better—to Faygala anyway. "... and your neighbor as yourself."

As everyone sat, Faygala squeezed in between her two Bubbies (grandmas), ready to relax and enjoy their quiet attention on her while the men carried on with their long Torah service. Faygala felt blessed to have two Bubbies. Most of her friends in Naganovitzki Shtetl (village) didn't have any. Actually, one of her Bubbies, Bubbie Etkie, wasn't her real Bubbie. She was the sister of her real Bubbie. She was really Mama's Aunt Etkie, Kuzineh



(cousin) Channah's mother. Mama's mother had passed away long before Faygala was born when Mama was still young.

At family gatherings, Bubbie Etkie would say, "Faygala, (little bird) have another shtickel (piece) of challah (special Shabbos bread), you are too thin."

Bubbie Malkie would say. "Put some kreplach (dumplings) in your chicken soup, you need the strength."

Whenever Bubbie Etkie saw Faygala passing by her house, she would call out, "Faygala, come in. I made some potato latkes. You'll come have a taste, won't you?" Faygala never refused. She loved the pampering she received in that home from Bubbie Etkie and from Kuzineh (Cousin) Channah.

Kuzineh Channah taught Faygala how to fix her hair pretty. She crocheted a lacy collar for Faygala's Shabbos dress and embroidered a fancy pillow case especially for Faygala's bed while teaching her how to crochet and embroider, too.

Kuzineh Channah and Mama were cousins, but they had grown up like sisters. Faygala remembers Kuzineh Channah coming over many times to help Mama with household chores. Sometimes Mama went to their house to help Kuzineh Channah and Bubbie Etkie with shelling peas, snapping beans, husking corn, canning, and quilting. Feivel and Faygala were always required to join in the work while their little brother, Mendeleh, was allowed to run around their chairs playing games with the peapods or corncobs. Feivel soon grew too old for women's work. He then helped Papa and the shtetl men with the animal and field work. After Papa left for America, the men in turn helped Feivel keep the farm going for Mama.

For many years now, there has been no Kuzineh Channah at Bubbie Etkie's house. Faygala could still remember Kuzineh Channah's wedding. What a happy day it was! The bride and groom looked so enraptured standing under the Hupah (wedding canopy). Faygala jumped when the groom, Rabbi David's youngest son, Yankel, broke the wine glass. Then, oh how the men danced and hollered with joy as they carried the groom around high above their heads in his special chair! But everything changed when the laughter gave way to tearful good-by hugs as Kuzineh Channah's new husband took her away in the buggy, leaving for America.

That was so long ago that Faygala couldn't even remember what Kuzineh Channah looked like anymore. Mama often said to Faygala, "Don't worry, Faygala, someday you will go live with my kuzineh Channah in America. Then you will see again what she looks like. I'm sure you will recognize her as soon as you lay your eyes on her."

Faygala glanced over at Mama just now in the shul. She was wearing her special, Shabbos (Sabbath) shawl, reading silently from her prayer book. Faygala's little brother, Mendeleh, was leaning against her arm. Papa bought the shawl for Mama one time when he had to go to the city. That was many years ago before all the trouble began. The shawl still looked as good as new because Mama took special care of it and only wore it to shul.

A couple years after Kuzineh Channah's wedding, the wrenching day came when dear Papa left for America. Faygala didn't like to talk about or even think about that day. It hurt too much. But she did like to think about Papa. She could still hear her Papa's strong voice saying his Hebrew prayers every morning, afternoon, and night.

Sometimes she lay in bed pretending he was telling her another story. She forced herself to remember every word of the ones he had told her over the years, some from the Jewish Scriptures, some from Jewish history, and some that he made up. Many times lately little Mendeleh has been climbing up the ladder to Faygala's bed and begging her to tell him a story. She always began, "Papa once told me this story about...."

Papa's stories were what helped keep Faygala's budding faith alive. Like a tree planted firmly in the ground, the rigid faith of all the Jewish people living in Naganovitzki had deep roots that sustained them in their unwavering observance of the traditions and rituals of Judaism and Yiddishkeit. For centuries, Jews had lived in shtetlach (villages) like Naganovitzki in Russia and Eastern Europe under regimes that imposed harsh restrictions upon them. In 1904, things were only getting worse. Jewish people were not being allowed to own property or do business. They were being denied almost all the rights of citizenship and were kept in degradation, poverty, and fear. Even their women could no longer walk about safely.

Ironically, those in power whose hatred would drive the Jews into their graves were thwarted by those already buried. Stories of ancestors' faithfulness, perseverance, and bravery not only enriched their Jewish culture, but also gave purpose to their way of life. The love and strength of family and faith in God enabled Jews to survive in this hostile land of unbearable oppression.

The more adventurous men and women left the teetering "safety" of the known for what seemed the riskier unknown, emigrating to the "golden land of America." The letters they sent back home spoke glowingly of freedom

and a chance for a better life. Mothers and grandmothers got used to seeing their loved ones leave, not knowing whether they would ever see them again.

Children, however, could not get used to such a thing. Faygala would never get used to having her papa gone. She thought of him every day. She cherished his letters. She watched for the mail wagon every morning, hoping for another one. She always sent a loving letter back, along with Mama's long one. Their envelope was always stuffed thick. Mama spent many a late night writing to Papa. His replies took months to arrive, but every word seemed fresh to Faygala.

The shul service was now coming to a close. The women stood for the priestly blessing. Faygala leaned over the lattice again to gaze at the sea of white as each man pulled their talliths over their heads for this blessing. The fathers of young boys held theirs out like wings and their sons gathered under them to receive the blessing. When Faygala was little, she used to slip down the stairs at this time and run to Papa to huddle under his tallith with Feivel. Papa always winked at her and held out his tallith over her as he chanted the blessing for the congregation. Faygala noticed a couple little girls doing the same right now—finding shelter under their Papas' tallith "wings."

In all her sixteen years, Faygala had never spent a night away from her mother or her two brothers. Living in Russia in her little shtetl was like living on an island in the middle of an ocean of hostility. Even their language was different. They spoke Yiddish. The people outside spoke Russian. Most of the villagers didn't even know Russian.

The adults in the shtetl protected the children in every way possible, even protecting their tender, little ears from

hearing anything from the outside world—the increasing unrest between the Cossacks and the Russian army (the Bolshevik's) or the persecution and pogroms growing ever more intense all around the country. They hushed such conversations when the children came near.

Faygala's older brother, Feivel, kept a watchful eye on his blossoming teenage sister, but her mother still feared for her, "Faygala ziskiet (sweetheart), be careful and don't walk alone anywhere. You are a shaina maidel (such a pretty girl), with your long brown hair and brown eyes." To further insure Faygala's safety, her mother broke the protective silence and began to tell her stories about young Jewish girls who were "misused" by the Cossack soldiers who were bunking in their little town, and she said to be careful not to catch the eye of the noblemen or Russian soldiers, either. She thought this would scare Faygala into being careful. But it didn't work.





## THE RIVER



One unusually warm, early spring day, again Faygala couldn't resist running down to the river behind her house. So, when Mama wasn't looking, she snuck out. If she didn't stay away too long, Mama wouldn't even know. She just had to walk along the riverbank and breathe in the freshness of the breeze wafting across the water. A few wild flowers and new grass leaves were just beginning to peek through the dry, tall grasses still brown from last fall, while noisy blackbirds were laying claim to their territories. She could almost taste the sweet smell of sprouting clover in the yonder fields. She lifted her arms up to the sky and danced along the wet shore. Feeling too warm, she took off her heavy shoes—her only pair of shoes—and

her long brown cotton stockings. She thrilled at the feel of the cool, damp earth to her feet.

Then she sat on a rock ledge and dangled her toes in the rushing river, letting her mind get lost in a daydream remembering the last time, a week ago, she had come down here and had encountered Yitzchak reciting the portion of the Talmud he had learned in yeshiva (school for Jewish studies) that day. She had hoped she would find him here again today. “Oh, he is so handsome. What a tender smile he has, and I do like the way his curly, red beard feels against my cheek.”

They had walked together down the village path past this same spot by the river. It seemed like he was headed to the woods up ahead where Eli’s Naomi had been snatched and defiled and beaten by a Cossack soldier jumping out from behind a tree. Faygala wondered if Yitzchak really intended to walk with her into the dreaded woods, but she decided if he did, she would go with him because she knew he would protect her. But he didn’t. He had stopped before they got to the woods, intent in what he was telling her. They were studying about Pesach (Passover) in the yeshiva.

“You know that Elohim delivered His people from the Egyptians because He heard their cries. So, today, if He hears our cries of prayer to Him, He may deliver us from the Cossacks. I am crying to Him at the morning, noon, and evening prayers at home and in the shul. Sometimes when I am out here alone, I cry to Him as loud as I can because I want Him to hear us! Perhaps He will even send us the Messiah!” As he talked, Yitzchak meandered toward the fence beside the road opposite the river and leaned his

arms on it. Gazing out at the skipping lambs, he went on explaining what else he had learned in the Torah that day.

The sheep were like pets to everyone in the village. Some of them came over to Yitzchak for attention. Faygala absentmindedly stepped up on the bottom fence board so she could listen more closely to what Yitzchak was saying. This brought her face up to his level. He leaned over to pet a ewe just as she rose up. That’s when she felt the thrill of his beard and side curl on her cheek. The strange, new feeling brought a little jab of fear of the unknown with it also. Both of the young people, in their shyness, acted like nothing had happened. Instead they forced their attention to the animals.

They laughed awkwardly together at the playful lambs. They looked the yearling rams over, discussing which ones would be perfect enough to have been a Pesach lamb, if the Temple in Jerusalem were still standing today.

“That one there looks really good!” Faygala pointed to the whitest one with the smoothest wool.

“But look at its one ear. There’s a scab on it. That would be called a ‘blemish.’” Yitzchak then recited David’s beautiful shepherd Psalm to her in Hebrew. She joined him for most of it. Her father had taught it to her long ago—before he left for America. A gray bird landed on a fence post not far from them and began warbling melodically. In response, Yitzchak sang the spring Yiddish song, “Faygala, Faygala” to the bird and to Faygala, dancing the Jewish dance step that fit the lively tune.

Faygala’s heart warmed watching his four, long tzit-tzit (fringes) fly from under his shirt as he twirled. It brought back memories of watching her father dance at weddings,

## **GLOSSARY OF THE YIDDISH WORDS**

### **PRONOUNCIATION GUIDE**

AI or AY as in may (maidel)

EI or EYE as in eye (Feivel)

EIN or INE as in wine (zein, mein)

KH or CH (no English equivalent) a hard “h”  
or soft “k” (Challah or Channah)

ADONAI the Lord

AH ZAY GAIT so it goes

ALEPH-BAYZ alphabet [aleph (a) - bet (b) in Hebrew]

BAR-MITZVAH ceremony celebrating a boy becoming  
a man at age 13

BUBBIE grandmother

CH is pronounced like KH, like a hard, clearing the throat H

CHAHP AH NASH get a little something to eat. (See CH above for pronunciation.)

CHALLAH egg and yeast special Sabbath bread. (See CH above for pronunciation.)

CHANNAH Hannah in Hebrew. (See CH above.)

CHOOMASH the Old Testament. (See CH above.)

COSSACKS special soldiers of the Russian czar who were of foreign origin

DER HAIM the home

ELOHIM God (in Hebrew)

FAYGEL bird, the Yiddish name for the main character (also spelled fagel, faigel, or feygel)

FAYGALA little bird, a term of endearment (also spelled fagela, faigele, faigela, feygele or feygeleh); Go to this book's Olive Press web page to see videos of this word used in Yiddish folk songs: <http://olivepressbooks.net/faygala-yiddish-refugee.html>

GAY GEZUNTEH HAIT go in good health

GEFILTE FISH a type of fish

GESHRIYE a yell

GEVALT term of exclamation

GEMULTICHKEIT friendliness

GLEZELEH a little glass [of]

GOLDA MEDINA the golden dream

GONAVIM thieves

GUT NACHT good night

GUT SUDANK thank "good" (meaning God)

HaSHEM The Name (in Hebrew) (used instead of pronouncing the Holy Name of God)

HUPAH A prayer cloth draped over poles to form a canopy over the bride and groom.

ICH LIEB DIR I love you

KALEH MOID bride

KH is pronounced like a hard, clearing the throat H

KLEINEH little

KOOK look

KOSHER fit to eat according to the Jewish laws of diet

KREPLACH meat filled dumplings

KUCHEN cake

KUZINEH / KUZIN cousin (feminine, masculine)

LANDSMEN, LANDSLEIT people from the homeland

LATKES potato pancakes

LAX lox, pickled, cold-smoked salmon fillets

LEBBEDIKKA VELT lively or wonderful world

LOKSHEN KUGEL noodle pudding

MEIN (MINE) ZISKEIT my sweet one

MEIN SHVESTER my sister

MEIN TAIEREH KIND my dear child

MILCHICK milk

MINYAN quorum of ten men (required to hold a synagogue service)

MISHBOCHAH family

NU CUM SHAIN so come already

NU VOS KEN MIR TAWN so, what can we do

PESACH Jewish holiday of Passover

PIRANEE a comforter usually filled with goose feathers

POGROM Mob attack, condoned by authorities, against persons and property of a religious, racial, or national minority. The term (coming from the Russian term meaning "riot") is usually applied to attacks on Jews in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II (1881), false rumors associating Jews with murder aroused Russian mobs in more than 200 cities and towns to attack Jews and destroy their property. Mob attacks

diminished in the 1890s, but they again became common in 1903–06. Although the government did not organize pogroms, its anti-Semitic policy (1881–1917) and reluctance to stop the attacks led many anti-Semites to believe that their violence was legitimate. Pogroms also occurred in Poland and in Germany during Adolf Hitler's regime. From: <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Pogrom>

PUTTER KUCHEN butter coffee cake  
 ROSH HASHANAH Jewish New Year  
 SHABBOS Sabbath (Shabbat in Hebrew)  
 SHAH, SHAH shhhh, shhhh  
 SHAINA MAIDEL pretty girl  
 SHLOFF GEZUNTAHATE sleep well  
 SHTETL village or little town  
 SHTETLACH villages (plural of shtetl)  
 SHTICKEL little piece  
 SHUL synagogue, Jewish house of prayer  
 STEERAGE section of the ship for people paying the lowest fares  
 TAHKIE surely  
 TAIGLACH little dough, a sweet pastry baked for holidays  
 TALLITH prayer shawl (pronounced "tahllis" in Yiddish, "tahlleet" - spelled tallit - in Hebrew)  
 THE OLD COUNTRY Europe  
 TOKHTER daughter  
 TORAH the first five books of Moses  
 UNTERVESH underwear  
 YESHIVA Hebrew school for studying Torah  
 YESHIVA BOCHAR student in the Hebrew school studying to be a rabbi  
 YIDDISH a language that is a mixture of a few languages, mainly German and Hebrew.

YIDDISHEH Jewish women  
 YIDDISHKEIT Yiddish life  
 YITZ'CHAK Isaac  
 ZAYDEE grandfather  
 ZIE GEZ sweetheart or sweetness  
 ZITZIT fringes attached to prayer shawls and special Jewish under shirts worn by men in obedience to Numbers 15:37-41  
 ZOL DIR GUT BENCHEN God bless you  
 ZOL ZEIN SHTARK be strong