

## GREETINGS FROM A KUTNER IN SOVIET RUSSIA

by Yaakov OSOWSKI

translated from the Yiddish by Murray Citron

### "All I miss is Jerusalem"

*A moving confessional letter from the Kutno Jew Yaakov Osowski, rip, son of Eli-Ber ("Dundik"), written in miniature Russian letters to his three daughters – from the prison cell in Kazan, in the year 1936.*

*His sister-in-law from Moscow sent this letter for the Kutno Yizkor-book. The three daughters of the author of the letter, to whom it was written, are now in Israel. Besides a number of personal matters relating to his arrest and the pleas of Prof. Harold Laski and Maxim Gorki to free him – Yaakov Osowski addresses also the water-problem in Eretz Israel and possibilities and perspectives for Jewish-Arabic relationships. Every line cries out with the longing for Zion, the hope and the belief that he with his children will yet be in Eretz-Israel.*

To my dear daughters Ruth, Rosa, and Esther!

How much we have to bear – you my beloved doves, and me your father, that we are far from each other. We could have been in *Eretz Israel*, in Jerusalem. Whom does it hurt? But in a short time, it will be. I am sure of that. It depends to a large extent on you, my dears.

From the end of January this year I have not received a word from you. From what I see in Ruth's letter (among others, without a date, but in Shoshana's and Esther's letter there is the date 30.6), it appears that Ruth wrote in the early days of July that you have not received a letter from me.

I don't know whether you wonder, or take it as self-evident, that in the last six months I have written to you not less than 15 letters. And let me know how many letters have you written to me directly.

The letter that I gave to send on 23.5 was out of here on the 14.6, under number 1142, with a receipt certificate from the post Number 10 Kazan.

When you receive this letter, you should immediately demand that letter, in accordance with the details: Kazan 10, receipt 1142<sup>1</sup>, from 14.6, from J. Osowski, and the address.

You should sharply demand the letter from the local authority, not thinking about anything.

Before this letter, I relived the "9<sup>th</sup> of Av" of the year 75<sup>2</sup>. You know already what that means. That letter, eight pages, was written in a notebook. But for every line in the book, there were two lines of writing, like in this letter.

There I wrote, how many letters I sent you during the year. Besides that, I wrote there an answer to your question about... you must make every effort to be accepted in the university in the year 37... two years in Jerusalem, two years in London. And after arranging these matters – to visit me here... together with Laski to give "mem-bet"<sup>3</sup> and together with... if by that time I am still not in *Eretz Israel*. That is my plan.

You must prepare yourself for the great scholarly work about the spiritual culture-history of the Jewish people in the era of Christianity. About that era, I have worked out a partial methodology.

Give me your word of honor, that you will do everything possible to reach this sacred goal, that all your life you will keep up this undertaking. Let me know this. You have to know the four-thousand-year history of the Jewish people. Then believe me, you will be happy, no danger will deter you. You will be able to overcome everything, come out victorious; and your enemies – what's coming to them.

You also have to take care that Shoshana<sup>4</sup> gets an education and makes progress in sculpture and in wood-carving. And Esther – in literature and folklore.

A wise man said: happy are they who in their youth have made clear to themselves their goals. Be among

<sup>1</sup> TN: "142" in the original text, but "1142" mentioned above. There is no way to know which is correct, if any.

<sup>2</sup> TN: probably the Hebrew year, so the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, 5675 (July 20, 1915). 9<sup>th</sup> of Av is the day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, the "saddest day in the Hebrew

calendar". No indication of what happened especially in that year 1915.

<sup>3</sup> TN: Hebrew, possibly "*matan b'seter*" (secret charity), a way for Yaakov Osowski to ask for money.

<sup>4</sup> TN: i.e., "Rosa" in Hebrew.

them, my three little birds... Think ahead many years. You don't have to sit now with folded hands.

Your news, that "Hadassah"<sup>5</sup> is ready to leave, is good and right, but it should be done through the university and in Laski's opinion, cleared with Magnus.

You know for sure that the whole time after 4.1.35... after you left, I find myself in the same health situation as before you left...

... you understand it yourself. But with her you must carry on an energetic correspondence. Not only with her, but with her employers, the whole line. There are such institutions also where you are. That is the international Red Cross. Then by the name that your grandfather used... about you. Whom you saw the 26.2.34, who stood higher than all, you yourself, together with Esther you should... energetically and sharply give to Laski to know, asking for his help, which he promised me and you.

You should know, that there is in general no absolute reason for us not to see each other in *Eretz Israel*. You should demand an answer from who can give one, and also answer me. All will be well. But there is no time to lose.

Study diligently, prepare yourself for important scholarly work, don't let your concern about me interfere.

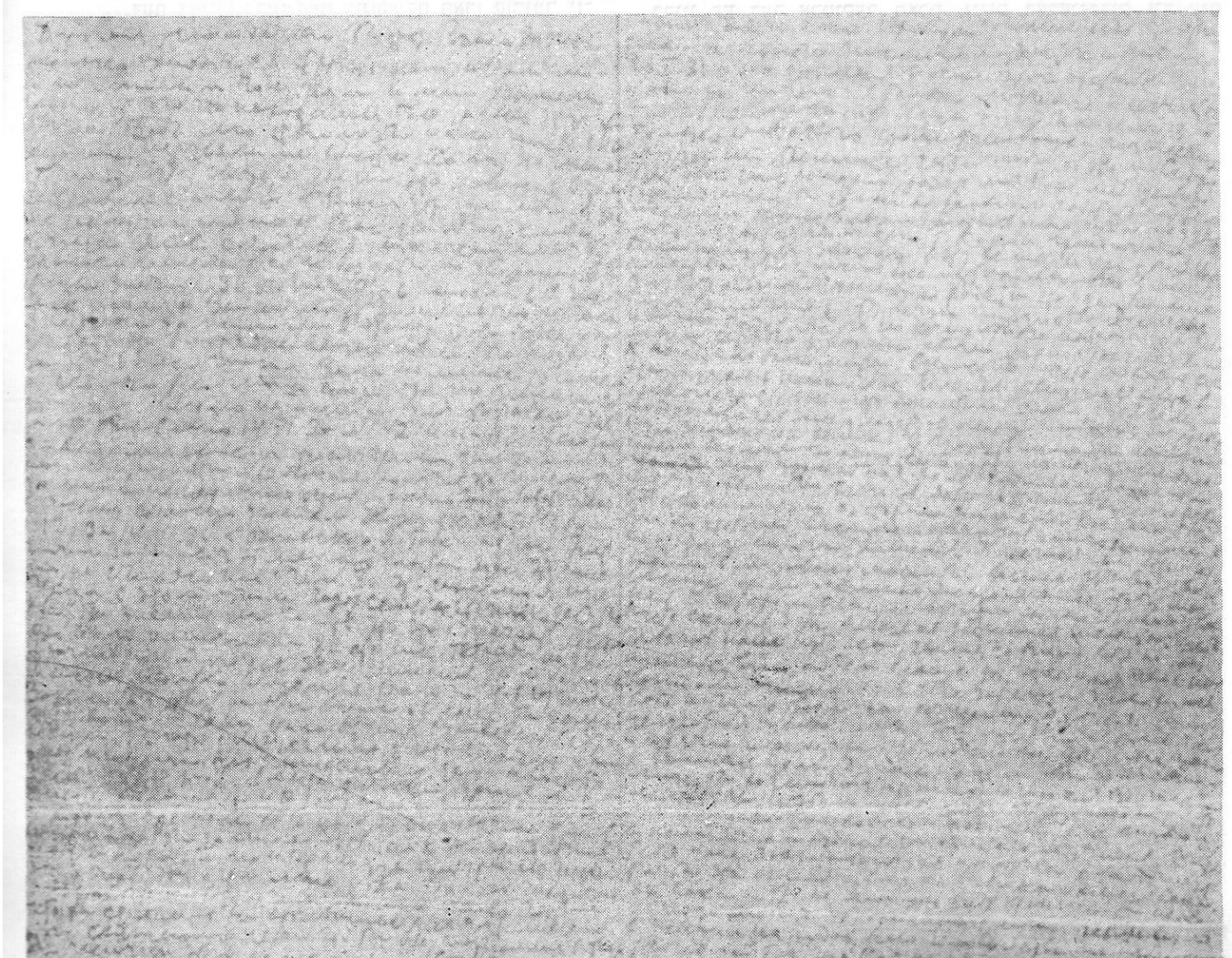
You remember, Ruthy, who can help us in the matter, which I told you then. This must be done now energetically. Long enough waited. A shame that Gorki died, he promised to do everything for me.

You shouldn't worry that you don't often receive letters from me. Better...the truth than lies.

If Aunt Wiera<sup>6</sup> has often received letters, she will send you my letters of 25.6, 3.3 and of 17.7. That is enough. You should know the truth about me.

In the letter of 23.5 there were many incidents from Shoshana's life and Esther's, when they were 2-3 years old, and about Mother. It was written on the anniversary of her death, 25.2. I wrote it over three times, because each time the letter was not sent.

I have written more to you about improvements in the water-management in *Eretz Israel*. The shortage of water can be significantly mitigated by arranging an allotment and a repetitive system for using the water, i.e., by dividing the water-management, so that in each house the use will be double: 1. lavatories 2. bathtubs and water-



Part of a letter from Yaakov Osowski

<sup>5</sup> TN: i.e., "Esther", the Iranian name of "Hadassah" in the "Book of Esther".

<sup>6</sup> TN: "Dvora", "Deborah".

basins. Every use should have its filter, if it is a big house, or a few filters, if it is small and they are near each other.

The water from the lavatories, after going through the filter, should be able to go back to the reservoir, to be used a second time – and so several times. The same with the water from the bathtubs and wash-basins.

There remains drinking water – not a lot.

Shoshana made me think of this in one of her letters: in winter we bathe every week, and summer – when there is water.

I have asked you to send me here literature about water-management in *Eretz Israel* and about other aspects of the management, a large geographic map, up-to-date attractive literature about life in *Eretz Israel* in Hebrew, Arabic, English, syntax, grammar, an anthology and two dictionaries of the Hebrew and Arabic languages. Also, newspapers and journals. Demand firmly, so that all will be handed over to me. A lot depends on you.

In one of your last letters, you were uneasy because you did not know my actual situation. Still, I have written more than once, that I feel all the time like then, before your departure. All the time without interruption. You understand me, Ruth? Don't worry any more about that. Don't believe nonsense. Your father is strong in all respects, he misses only Jerusalem, dear children and scholarly work there, in time it will be.

I have asked you to get and send me catalogues from scholarly institutions about history and literature which have appeared in Vilna, Warsaw, Vienna, Paris, Prague, Berlin, London and New York. I need them very much.

As one sees from Prof. Laski's addition to your letter to me of last summer, he takes a personal interest in our fate as he promised me in Moscow. So, keep in contact with him. Correspond with him and tell me everything.

I consider it important to ask Shoshana to paint again the ballet of Liza, "*The Dance of the Ascent*," and send Laski a present. A complete set-also for me. It would be good with oil-paints or aquarelle, but if that is too hard, then with colored pencil on good paper.

Also, I wish that you keep diaries and write down your doings and thoughts from each day. That is very important in developing character...

Also, that Zayde<sup>7</sup> should keep a diary to record all family and personal happenings about himself, the relatives and me.

You write that you have written a lot of letters and cards, even since 30.1.36, but to me, except for that one, nothing has come. I worked on it a lot, but there were a lot of words and no result. Remember that, my children.

Soon will be your birthday, Ruth my joy, my spiritual heir. You must work for the ideals, which I have not succeeded in realizing – and it will come about. You will make yourself a link in the great immortal chain. And so, you also will be immortal.

I have much deep spiritual happiness that I have been able to enroll you in the eternal, life-giving chain of

our ancient but eternal people, on the flag of whose rising dawn was written to the peoples of the world: Unity! I, your heart and soul! Like a flame that burns to eternity, so also the enchanted words. They inspire in the passage of thousands of years millions of people to a beautiful life on the earth.

In developing the great ideal of universal oneness, our people play an extraordinary role in the past, present and future. It is involved in the highest leadership of the world, by way of finance-capital and also in the highest organized executive of the workers' movement.

The end goal is unity in world standards, in the top administration, that is the magnet to which the best energies of mankind are drawn. Let the petty beasts grind their teeth, let them bark. Our goal is clear: to lead the way, and not to be discouraged. Then a sweeter goal is reached at every phase of the journey.

Well, I have written a little too much, talked too much. I began though about your birthday, 9.8 this year. I kiss strongly, strongly, your forehead, your clear eyes, your lips.

You don't like tragedies, though. You are right.

You don't have to like them, but in the lives of peoples, tragedies are unavoidable, as they are unavoidable in the lives of individuals. Much as we may wish otherwise.

This is the great tragedy of the twentieth century, the tragedy of the German working-class. Clearly, you cannot understand the great depth of the question, you have as yet not enough historical facts, methods and concepts.

You have to gather facts and more facts, at your age that is the most important thing, it is raw material, on which you will work all your life.

I will not deal here with the essence of the great tragedy of the German working-class. Therefore, you have to assemble materials and facts from life, from various levels, and fully systematize them. You should not do this casually, or while doing something else, at lectures, among friends, in the street, train, movie, theatre. In short – in life, for serious people.

For this, you should set up paper files, the large 8x4cm, with a running number on the right, and on the left leave room for a number for the theme and index. Do not ever leave thoughts lying in the mind. The Germans say: "The mind must be worked over like a warehouse." That is right, because the mind is a continuing laboratory.

Now – about the situation in *Eretz-Israel*. Some men of letters approach the question with a levity that enrages. By the way, there is nothing to get upset about, because their goal is clear, and unmasks them.

I am speaking of the reasons for the conflicts in *Eretz-Israel* which break out from time to time and their origin. Those angry tongues, their frivolous utterances, caused me not long ago to write an article about the problem.

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<sup>7</sup> TN: Yaakov's father, Eli Ber "Dundik", i.e., his daughter's grandfather.

One must with great sharpness state the question: Is *Eretz Israel* a subject of dispute between:

1. The Jews there and the Arabs of the whole world?
2. The Jews there and the Arabs there?
3. The Arabs there and the Jews of the whole world?
4. The Jews of the whole world and the Arabs of the whole world?

The question may be solved this way: What place does this territory have in the creative memories of the people, especially of those memories with which the referenced people entered the history of human civilization?

When we look at the past, at the thousand-year development of human culture in *Eretz Israel*, every objective person sees on one side great creative works, of human spiritual cultural value, which have become a beacon of light, guiding star for the peoples of western European civilization.

I see only the one *Tanakh*. That is what every person sees, when he looks to *Eretz Israel*, from the memories which were created by Jews on that soil.

Now let us look at the same land's memories, created there by the Arabs, though not of equal value with *Tanakh*. I don't have in hand any historical documents, although this is a university town, which, incidentally, was once under the control of Arabs, but it seems to me... with the hooves of the riders' horses, which in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries galloped through *Eretz Israel*, Asia Minor, North Africa and Europe, forcing the remaining Jewish peasants there (today's *fellahin*), to take on their religion (taken at that time from *Tanakh*, very similar to the Jewish religion).

From the great heights of human culture, on which stands the Jewish memory-culture (1500 years BCE) there is nothing beside it to see.

Not only that there are no others, even if we go very deep... there we will pass over land abandoned a thousand years ago by Jewish peasants, in the time of Titus and Vespasian – to land which has only now in the twentieth century emerged as dazzling fields, thanks to the Jewish people.

I hold to this scientific formulation of the issue: The only real Arabs are the Bedouins – 60,000 souls, not more; but the *fellahin* – former Jewish peasants, assimilated by force. A cat wept<sup>8</sup>.

We made a mistake. Instead of buying land from the idle *effendis* for always rising prices (thanks to the technical ability and toil of Jewish people) – we should, together with the peasantry of *Eretz Israel*, have requisitioned all the land at a fixed price 25 years ago. Before the beginning of mass immigration to *Eretz Israel*, that would have been absolutely correct.

All the land should have been an *Eretz-Israel* fund for the peasants of all sections who would join in the needed land distribution to support their families. The areas would be smaller, the more Jews became involved in working the land.

As is already shown by the husbandry of the Bedouins and *fellahin*, 25 hectares are needed to feed a working peasant family. But with the intensive cultivation by Jews – 2 hectares will be enough.

What conclusions does this lead to? On the available 11 million dunams (a dunam=0.1 hectare) suitable for cultivation, that is about 40 percent of *Eretz Israel's* area, there live about 100 thousand families. But there could live there up to 500,000 people. Conclusion: It does not involve removing the *fellahin*, even not the Bedouins.

400 thousand Jewish farming families can come into the land with the perspective of reaching 2 million people: clearly, immigration of non-Jews must not be allowed, once the goal is set of creating a Jewish national home on the historic land which belongs only to Jews, and no longer to anyone else.

You can imagine that after 10-20 years, there will be in *Eretz Israel* 3.5 million inhabitants, 70% Jews, even not counting the *fellahin*, who will then come back into the sphere of the culture of their spiritual ancestors, that is, in fact, 90% Jewish population.

Who does it hurt, that the Jews with their labor and the support of the Jewish people will transform their Promised Land (now-from the Arab feudal holders) into a glowing, working nation? What right have the feudal *effendis*, who get (unrightfully!) bizarrely great sums for land not theirs, to bring into *Eretz Israel* from all over the world unemployed Arabs and other riff-raff, with the soul aim: to impede the great culture-work.

Our organizations have worked insufficiently with the *fellahin*, even with the Bedouin there is a field for useful work. There is no barrier between Jews and *fellahin*, the working Arabs of *Eretz Israel*.

Creating a national fund to support the working farmers, in their own work, with the unconditional return of the land to a national fund, instead of compensating the questionable land-occupiers, as I see it, before 25 years of Jewish immigration to *Eretz Israel*, will be absolutely just, even to the adherents of the sacredness of private ownership.

With the *fellahin* it is easy to discuss this important question. Also, about regulating immigration and parceling out the land-shares. These two matters must be fundamental to work among the *fellahin*. They will agree, because it is in their own interest. These two matters thought through and explained to the working *fellahin*, success will follow soon.

We have to get going already. They will soon be convinced that there is no sense in listening to those who see in *Eretz Israel* a reason for angry quarrels, for putting spokes in each other's wheels. There will be a speedy disappointment for the hangers-on of nasty conspiracies.

It is necessary to be able to capture the minds of peaceful *fellahin*, who are surely not with the troublemakers, at all events, not deeply, with the extreme movement. Among those the point is that foreign elements

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<sup>8</sup> in the original Russian of the letter, "Кошка наплакалась"

are working, from the lands neighboring *Eretz Israel*, North Africa, Arabia, Syria. Because there, things are bad.

Dear Ruth, I wish very much that you should be versed in this matter, and that you bring it out openly in the press.

Now we will turn to another question: the situation in Poland. There is again an agitation against Jews. I had this thought: we need to create objective conditions that will make Jews resistant to such agitations... At this time among Jews there are no peasants, workers of the land. We have to buy from the government a million hectares of land, even not cultivated – and make it usable... and settle on it 200 thousand Jewish families as tenants, in a cooperative, with the land remaining in the possession of the national fund.

This way the Jewish population would be able to live an independent life. The workers on the land work for industry and trade, and the other way round.

This is how we would be able to feel in a time of vicious agitation. Money for the purchase will be provided by the organizations that support this goal. We might even for this write a special loan.

In Poland the needed land will be found... The matter must be quickly addressed. First of all, by determining in what framework, how much land, why it was abandoned until now, in whose possession it has been, its characteristics and possibilities.

Carrying out this idea does no harm to the development of *Eretz-Israel*. The slogan, "Jews on the land," should be raised everywhere Jews live in large numbers, even in the United States...

I hold that the task of the Jewish Congress is to regulate this process. It is necessary to know the cooperativeness of the Jewish populations in various countries. With a planned intervention, to avoid dominance of one profession over another.

An educated Jew can have income, thanks to his professional application, hard work, skill and knowledge.

Ruth! Send me all materials from the meeting of the Jewish World-Congress that took place in August this year in Switzerland.

Enough! If this letter arrives by 9.8, I will be happy. May Shoshana and Esther kiss you for me on your birthday. You will be 18 years old.

Greetings to Zayde, Uncle, and friends.

My dear Shoshana,

Your writings have filled me with indescribable pride. On your birthday I sent you a telegram: I greeted Shoshana and Esther on their May-days of birth, with paternal love, Yaakov. But it seems you have not received it, though "important people" gave me their word of honor, spoken and written, that the telegram was sent. There are bad people. Not to let us celebrate the birthday. My Rose, these are the people from whom there is no rest, like flies they settle on my back (it is very hot here). But I catch and kill them. There are not a lot in my cell.

I have much pleasure in your pictures, hung on the wall in a frame of paper, like in an album. Above hangs a relief, on the right, a man with a flute... on the left, the Temple... below to the left, in colors, the *Daughters of Zion by the Waters of Babylon*. Your photograph. You look very small. When the sun-beam falls on that spot on the wall, I love to look at you how beautifully you smile.

... *The Daughters of Zion by the Waters of Babylon*. It goes: "May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget you! May my right-hand wither, if I forget you Jerusalem."<sup>9</sup>

That vow was made in those dark days. May the vow be our song until the moment, when we see each other in Jerusalem, on the hills of Zion. When there will be an end of our sorrows...

Ruth should buy the Songs of Rabbi Yehuda ben Halevi, it is due from me as a present on her birthday, in 1936. It is not my fault.

Let me know the name of the uncle who arrived in *Eretz-Israel*: Moshe or Shlomo.

Dried leaves from the Caucasus, sadly I cannot send. When we are together, I will explain why.

About the Arabs. Ruth should explain the problem, as it appears.

There was a solar eclipse here. How about by you?

I am glad you are learning languages. That will be useful to you. Also, mathematics, physics and natural history.

I kiss you, my delight – Your Father.

Now my little Esther.

A greeting from father Yaakov on your birthday, though late by 59 days. Not my fault, but... better not to mention them, not to smear the paper with their names.

I feel well, but I miss you... if I were with you on the hills of Jerusalem. I am in Kazan, not by my good will. Ruth will explain it all to you clearly. Write often. Buy yourself a diary, write in it all your experiences and thoughts.

I think you will be able to read my writing. It is not hard, you just have to get used to it, it's not so impossible.

Write how you passed your holidays in comparison with 34 and 35 in Moscow.

I long for you, for Jerusalem, for scholarly work. I hope there will come an end to all this, that we will see each other. It depends on you, especially on Ruth, she understands what the circumstances are. Write me often.

I kiss you, your big eyes, Your Father Yaakov.

Dear Ruth,

I am reading your letter. It's missing the date. Learn to put a date. Don't be so absent-minded. Learn this from Shoshana and Esther. Let me know who smeared a few important words on the first pages of your letter. Something in brackets.

I have written 10 letters with receipts... and 12 for which I don't have receipts. You have to demand all the

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<sup>9</sup> TN: Psalms 137.

letters. You understand why I can't do it here. I will not give out more receipts. I gave some out – and they disappeared.

In the request to the post office or the Ministry, you have to give all the details of the receipts, when sent out, the number, from who, etc.



Misha Osowski

What is with my letter to Dr. Klausner? How is it going with the English correspondence that you began to study last winter? Did you follow it up at all? Will you enroll in university in year 1937? What plans have you overall? Do you want to become a scholarly worker? In what subject? I have already written to you with my suggestions for you.

"If there is no answer, the taste for writing is lost" – your words. But is that really true, especially under these conditions?

I have not travelled anywhere, being in one and the same place, till I come to you. I have no more place to travel.

It's necessary to fight through for an answer. You should know, it doesn't work for me. How you should struggle for this, I have already written to you.

How many letters have you written since 30.1.36, were they received? Persist till you get an answer from the Post-Ministry, the N.K.V.D., unconditionally to deliver my letters to me<sup>10</sup> and yours to me. Your hands after all are free, not tied like mine. When there is love, everything can be got through, and you love me, without any doubt.

I finished for now. Be well. Do not be uneasy about me, but work energetically, with persistence, according to plan, with regard to my coming to *Eretz Israel*.

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<sup>10</sup> TN: [*sic*], the writer probably meant to say "my letters to you, and yours to me"