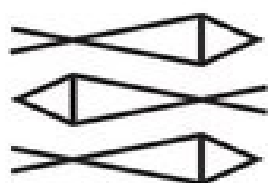


# MORE STORIES FROM MY FATHER'S COURT

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER



**MORE STORIES  
FROM MY  
FATHER'S COURT**



**ISAAC BASHEVIS  
SINGER**



**TRANSLATED FROM THE YIDDISH BY  
CURT LEVIANT**

**FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX  
NEW YORK**

---

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[CHAIM THE LOCKSMITH](#)

[THE \*SHOCHET'S\* WIFE](#)

[A GUEST IN THE \*SHTIBL\*](#)

[A CHUNK OF DARKNESS](#)

[A RABBI NOT LIKE MY FATHER](#)

[SOUNDS THAT INTERFERE WITH STUDYING](#)

[QUESTION OR ADVICE?](#)

[BACK FROM ABROAD](#)

[SHE SURELY WILL BE ASHAMED](#)

[HE WANTS FORGIVENESS FROM HER](#)

[A HASIDIC REBBE ON THE STREET](#)

[THE TINSMITH AND THE HOUSEMAID](#)

[WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF SUCH A LIFE?](#)

[A LAWSUIT AND A DIVORCE](#)

[NICE JEWS, BUT ...](#)

[THE GIFT](#)

[FREIDELE](#)

[REB ZANVELE](#)

[THE BRIDE](#)

[HAD HE BEEN A KOHEN](#)

[ONE GROOM AND TWO BRIDES](#)

[AN UNUSUAL WEDDING](#)

[REB LAYZER GRAVITZER](#)

[REB YEKL SAFIR](#)

[FATHER BECOMES AN "ANARCHIST"](#)

[MY FATHER'S FRIEND](#)

[A FORGED IOU](#)

[BOOKS BY ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER](#)

[ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER - MORE STORIES FROM MY FATHER'S COURT](#)

[Notes](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

---

# CHAIM THE LOCKSMITH

Although everyone called him Chaim the locksmith, he was actually what we here in America call a plumber. He repaired water pipes, especially clogged toilet lines, a frequent problem in our street.

Chaim was a man of middling height, strong and broad-shouldered, with a face brown as bronze and a beard to match. His clothes seemed to be dusted with rust. Although he was still young, his face had the lines and wrinkles of a laboring man who does not spare himself. Summer and winter he wore a short jacket and high boots. He always carried pipes, hammers, files, pliers, and odd pieces of iron. Even his voice had a metallic twang. On Sabbath, Chaim the locksmith prayed in our apartment and ate the Third Sabbath Meal with us. Sometimes, while drinking a tumbler of brandy, he would shake my hand. His hand was hard as iron.

Aside from fixing toilets, Chaim was summoned wherever there was trouble: a fire, a collapsed ceiling, a stuck door, a broken oven. He was the only one who didn't mind getting smeared with ash and soot. He burdened himself with other onerous tasks as well. In addition to being part of the group that prayed in our apartment, Chaim belonged to the Sleepover Volunteers, whose members would spend nights with the sick. After a hard day's work, Chaim was sent to care for people suffering from typhus or delirium who needed the help of a strong man. God had blessed Chaim with strength, and with it he served God. When people begged Chaim not to exhaust himself, he would shrug his shoulders and reply, "If you're given broad shoulders, you must bear the burden."

Chaim the locksmith had a few daughters; his youngest child was a boy about nine or ten years older than I, named Zanvel. Chaim's love for his only son was boundless. I never heard him speak of anything but the boy: Zanvel can already read syllables, Zanvel has just started the Five Books of Moses, Zanvel has begun studying Gemara. Chaim had already decided that Zanvel must be a scholar and become a rabbi. Whenever Chaim visited us he would say, "My Zanvele will be a rabbi."

"God willing," Father replied.

"I just want to live to see one thing—my Zanvele deciding rabbinic questions."

This wasn't merely a wish; it was the only hope on which Chaim the locksmith's efforts were focused. He sent Zanvel to study with the best teachers; early on, he dressed him in Hasidic clothing. Chaim paid a young Hasid to watch over him, study with him, and discuss Torah and Hasidic rebbe with him. Zanvel displayed a love of learning; yet with his fair skin, blue eyes, and blond sidecurls, he resembled his mother, not his father. With his thin, high-pitched voice, it was hard to believe that he was Chaim's son.

Chaim brought Zanvel to Father for an oral examination each Sabbath. Mother would offer him fruit, and as Zanvel sat with us, wearing a cap and a belted satin gaberdine, Father would discuss Hasidic matters with him. A bit farther away sat the locksmith, his face shining with an otherworldly joy. His bronzed face seemed to melt with pleasure, and the eyes beneath his bushy brows were filled with light. Perhaps such was the happiness of the Jews at Mount Sinai when God revealed Himself amid fire.

When Chaim's wife complained that he paid scant attention to his daughters, he would defend himself by saying, Don't I love the girls? He loved them more than his own life. But after all, girls cannot study Torah. They run around in the courtyard and are interested only in clothing, trifles, and

nonsense. How could Chaim compare the joy the girls gave him with that of Zanvel? Zanvel sat over Talmud and his little voice echoed throughout the courtyard. In the study house respectable Jews came and discussed a bit of Gemara with him. One hundred years from now Zanvel would recite the Kaddish after Chaim's death. And what's more, Zanvel was weak and gentle, a silken lad. The girls resembled him, Chaim.

Indeed, it was true. The girls had brown faces, thick braids, high chests. They sang plaintive songs about the *Titanic* and about various love affairs. On Sabbaths they cracked pumpkin seeds at the gate of the apartment house and secretly went to the movies. So how could they be compared to little Zanvel?

Just yesterday Zanvel was a cheder lad—and now he was already on the threshold of young adulthood. He studied Torah with my father and attended Talmud lectures given by some head of yeshiva. He was awarded a nickel-plated watch for his mastery of fifty pages of Talmud. This was the time when yeshiva students strayed from the straight and narrow path, reading newspapers and perusing forbidden secular books. In our house we feared for Zanvel. Everyone knew that if Zanvel stumbled, the heart of that strong Jew, Chaim the locksmith, would burst like an overfilled balloon. Chaim would have been able to withstand any blow, except a tragedy involving Zanvel.

But, thank God, Zanvel did not go down the crooked path. He craved studying, swayed during prayers, and in time also went to see a Hasidic rebbe. One day, Chaim the locksmith came to us and declared, "My Zanvel is in Gur ... at the rebbe's court."

And he humbly bent his head as if silently wondering, Why am I worthy of such joy? Do I deserve it? It's unbelievable ... incredible!

When the First World War began and Zanvel had to report to the draft board, it was a catastrophe for Chaim the locksmith. If Zanvel was sent to the barracks and to the front, all his plans would be ruined. Chaim wandered around distraught, his face no longer brown but black as a chimney sweep's. Some suggested that Zanvel should injure himself just enough to make him unfit for military service. But Chaim couldn't bear the idea that Zanvel would somehow be disfigured. In his mind Zanvel was like a Temple sacrifice which had to be absolutely without blemish.

After a while Chaim the locksmith decided to place Zanvel in hiding instead. He found a garret where Zanvel sat and studied for days on end. He did not set foot on the street, lest he be asked for identity papers. Chaim the locksmith himself watched out for an inspector who might enter the courtyard. Chaim was careful, his wife was careful, his daughters were careful. The entire courtyard was on the alert. In the meantime, Zanvel sat surrounded by books and studied. He drank tea, swayed and hummed some melody, and ate the food his mother brought him.

Then Warsaw was beset by inflation and Chaim the locksmith had little work. The poor people of the neighborhood could no longer afford to have their toilets fixed. But Chaim's meager income provided soups and grits and fresh little rolls for his little Zanvel. For under no circumstances should a young man sitting in a prisonlike setting and studying Torah suffer any want.

When the Germans entered Warsaw, Zanvel no longer had to hide from the gentile authorities. He was free to come and go as he pleased, and Chaim the locksmith made a banquet. By now Zanvel had a little blond beard; he had straightened up, developed a long neck, sunken cheeks, and a pointy Adam's apple, which bobbed up and down his throat. He already spoke with a rabbinic intonation. Many pious Jews and religious functionaries gathered at the banquet—which ruined Chaim the locksmith. He had no income of his own, and he had to sell, pawn, and deprive himself and his daughters of their last bit of food. At this banquet Zanvel delivered a quibbling, hair-splitting discourse and debated some recondite Talmudic points with the scholars present. Chaim the locksmith laughed and cried.

Chaim began to look bad. First of all, he didn't have enough to eat. Second, his daughters, who had started down a slippery slope, caused him anguish. And finally, the fear that something might happen

to Zanvel finished him off. Chaim coughed and his back bent over as if under a heavy burden. He was urged to see a doctor, to get some fresh air in the countryside. But Chaim the locksmith just laughed.

“What else should I do? Eat marzipan candy?”

A match was soon arranged for Zanvel; the bride-to-be was a rabbi’s daughter. The bride’s family was usually responsible for the dowry, but when a rabbi agrees to a match with a locksmith, he wants to be paid. Chaim had no money but promised a dowry, so when the Germans began building a railroad nearby and he heard they needed locksmiths, mechanics, and metal workers, Chaim the locksmith went off to work for the Germans.

His wife came to us crying that Chaim was killing himself. He labored outside in the freezing cold in snowstorms and downpours. Workers were dropping like flies. Chaim was doing the work of three men. When he managed to come home for a day, his appearance frightened his family. He was no longer brown or black—but yellow. White hairs threaded his beard. His voice was hoarse and he coughed like a consumptive.

My father warned Chaim that it is forbidden to sacrifice oneself for the sake of some dowry or prestigious lineage, and that one’s life and well-being take precedence over everything else. Father took a volume of the *Code of Law* from a bookshelf and showed Chaim that when a pregnant woman is about to give birth, everyone is permitted to violate the Sabbath for her, even though one person would suffice. Such is the value that the Torah places on a human life. But Chaim the locksmith answered, “Rabbi, the devil won’t take me.”

Zanvel became engaged, and the party cost plenty of German marks. Once Zanvel married, Chaim again spent a fortune. Then came the good news: Zanvel had been offered a rabbinic position in a small shtetl.

That would be the last time Chaim visited our apartment. He came in, positioned himself in the doorway, and began to sing like someone in a Purim costume: “Mazel tov! Zanvel is a rabbi!” He called out, and then began to cry. He seized Father’s hand and kissed it.

“Zanvel may be a rabbi, but you’re killing yourself,” Mother said ominously.

Chaim gave out a sickly laugh. “How can it hurt? My Zanvel is a rabbi.” Chaim attempted a little dance, but his feet were swollen and he managed only one small hop before he had to sit down.

After this, Chaim the locksmith took to his bed and was prepared to die. The man had overworked himself, taxed his strength beyond measure. To those who paid him a sick call he declared, “I just barely managed to raise him ... now I’m ready ...”

The son came to visit his father, and the courtyard grew black with people. Zanvel had long sidecurls and wore a long black rabbinic coat, a silk jacket, shoes and socks. As Zanvel sat down beside his father, Chaim the locksmith gave him the smile of a mortally ill man and asked, “Zanvel, you’ll say Kaddish for me?”

“Father, you’ll get well.”

“Why should I get well? I’ve accomplished all that I wanted to do.” And then Chaim the locksmith cracked a locksmith joke: “What more can I do? Fix a few more toilets?”

Chaim the locksmith died and was given a big funeral. The son eulogized his father at the gravesite. Following the wagon were rabbis, synagogue trustees, respectable Jews. But my father was angry with Chaim. He maintained that one should not sacrifice himself even for the sake of Torah.

“A low-class man remains a low-class man,” Father said bitterly. For days on end he walked about upset. Then one morning he remarked, “I think I saw Chaim the locksmith. He was shining like the sun.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“He told me where he lives in the Garden of Eden.”

“Where?”

Father whispered the secret into Mother's ear. Mother turned white. It was hard to believe that Chaim the locksmith could achieve such heights. But on the other hand, he had given his life for the sake of the Torah. Hadn't Rabbi Akiva done the same?

---

## THE SHOCHET'S WIFE

Husband and wife came—separately—into our apartment and at once began bad-mouthing each other. She was young but wore an old-fashioned woman's cap and had an old face, teary eyes, and a reddish nose. She blew her nose into her handkerchief and complained to my mother.

"He's a sadist, a murderer. He's not a human being but a killer."

"What does he do to you?"

"He sucks my blood."

"For example?"

"I can't describe it. He sucks his fill of me like a leech. He's only good to me when he wants me."

The young woman whispered something into Mother's ear. Mother nodded, a sign that such is a woman's lot in life.

"Rebbetzin, he sucks the life out of me and for no good reason. I want to run away. But where would I run to? When parents give their daughter away, they no longer want to see her again. We had a goy in the house who used to say, 'When you throw out garbage, you don't want it back.'"

"A person isn't garbage," Mother said resolutely.

"When you have five daughters you want to send them away and hear good news from them—from far off. My mother is a fine woman, but she can also be so cutting that you feel it in your gut. He is my mistress of my own household."

"You're right. One mustn't rush into such things," Mother agreed. "Sometimes a person behaves terribly, then suddenly becomes good. Men don't articulate what troubles them. They hold everything in."

"He comes here to see you. What does he say?" the woman asked.

"He doesn't say anything bad, God forbid."

"Still, what does he say?"

"He complains about other people—not about you."

"That's here. But at home I'm the sacrificial chick. It's my fault they didn't appoint him a license to slaughter in the city *shochet*. He walks around with the slaughtering knife in hand and sometimes I get the feeling he wants to slaughter me, God forbid."

Mother shuddered. "Pardon me, but you're talking nonsense."

"I'm afraid of him. All he does is sharpen his knives and test them on his fingernail. He's no saint, Rebbetzin. He trims his beard."

Mother's face paled. "What are you talking about?"

"How else would he get that rounded little beard?" the woman informed on him. "He cuts it. He cuts it. He eats before morning prayers, too."

Mother began adjusting her wig. "I don't want to hear any more."

"Rebbetzin, he came to me during my unclean days."

Mother threw an angry glance at me. "Why are you standing here? Go back to your books. Don't hang around the house all day like an old granny."

I went down to the courtyard and pondered: What are "unclean days"? And what's the meaning of "he came to me"? Since they live together, he's always with her anyway. Grownups have such bizarre



secrets.

A couple of days later, Wolf the slaughterer came to our apartment. He was a man of average height, rather chubby, with a rounded beard, red cheeks, and bulging, baggy eyes. His glance was harsh and cold, like that of a dead fish. He rolled his *r*'s, and words came out of his mouth and thick lips like little stones.

"Things are no good. They're bad. Awful. First the precinct captain comes and then the cop. And each one's palm has to be greased. If not, I can't work. If you slaughter without a permit, you get three months in jail. The goose dealers know this and they make a fool of me. They pay me half the fee they offer the licensed city slaughterers. They're roughnecks who have no respect for anyone. The worst riffraff in Warsaw! They fiddle away a few hours and pocket fifty rubles a week while I slave wearily into the night and barely cover my expenses. I find it hard to buy clothes. Working in the cellar is ruining my eyes. And to top it off, my wife is a spendthrift. All she does is buy buy buy and throw money around. People assume that slaughterers roll in money, but I'm still a debtor."

Father listened while perusing a holy book. He had no patience for that piddling *shochet* or his stories. Nevertheless, when a Jew comes in, he can't be thrown out, God forbid.

Mother also sat at the table. "A woman has a better feel for what's needed in a house than a man," she said. "It's best when a man doesn't interfere with the running of a household."

"If I didn't she'd spend our last penny. Normal women shop when they need something. But she buys just like that. It's a kind of madness. We have enough meat in the house. A *shochet* never lacks for meat. I get chickens, geese, ducks, even a turkey for Pesach. Why do we need beef if we can eat chicken every day? But still she runs to the butcher shop every single day and buys a piece of beef kishka, and who knows what else! If only she'd eat it. But she just sniffs it and puts it aside, which is bearable during the winter; but meat spoils in summer and starts to smell ... and that causes the worst illnesses."

I too listened, and concluded that both sides were right. But I didn't understand why he comes to home during her unclean days, I nearly asked, but I kept silent.

For a while no one spoke. The wick in the lamp sucked the kerosene. Then Wolf the *shochet* said, "I've been advised to go to America." He pronounced "America" with a hard rolled *r*.

"To America, of all places?"

"Slaughterers make a fortune over there."

"In America one cannot be a Jew," said Father.

"They're Jews, they're Jews," Wolf the *shochet* replied. "A *shochet* there is also a *mohel*, a profession that makes one rich. I once knew a little *shochet*, a perfect shlimazel, a clumsy oaf. He once slaughtered a rooster, and even though its throat was slit, it ran around and crowed. It even leaned over and ate."

The colors in Mother's face changed. "Don't tell us such stories!"

"But it's the truth. The shlimazel didn't make the incision in the proper place. He couldn't work as a slaughterer after that, so he went off to America. In New York he became a rich man. There the *shochet* doesn't even wear a beard."

"They shave off their beards?" Father cried out.

"They say it's done with some kind of powder. We got a photograph of him and he's standing there with a naked face, looking like a dandy from Marshalkovska Street. I couldn't recognize him at all. He also divorced his wife and married a New York girl."

"And what happened to the first wife?" Mother asked.

"Who knows?"

My tongue itched. I wanted to call out, You cut your beard, too! But I restrained myself with all my might.

Then Father said, “What does all this come down to? We don’t live forever and ultimately we have to give an accounting. People don’t live forever in America either.”

“No, but as long as one lives, one really lives!” Wolf the *shochet* maintained. “A *shochet* there like a municipal scribe here. He puts in his couple of hours and then is free to do what he wants. The *shochetim* there wear modern clothes like Frenchmen or Germans, and take strolls in the park with the wives. And when they slaughter they wear white aprons.”

“But who inspects their slaughtering knives?”

“Who needs inspections? The *shochet* himself knows the law. And if he doesn’t know it, then too bad. In America a *shochet* does not study *Tevuos Shor*. He just looks through a little rule book and studies the *Yoreh De’ah* and the *Be’er Hetev*. And it goes without saying that he doesn’t consult the *Pri Megadim*<sup>1</sup> either. The main thing over there is to do everything quickly. The goyim kill the animals with a machine ...”

“Enough!”

The *shochet* left. A couple of days later his wife returned. “Rebbetzin, I can’t take it anymore.”

She didn’t yell and didn’t cry but hissed like a goose, spat like a snake. She put a finger to her throat signaling how high the water had risen.

“What is it now?” Mother asked.

“Rebbetzin, he wants to go to America. What should I do? How can I go there? Either he’s crazy—may it happen to my enemies!—or he’s a heretic. There’s a dybbuk in him, no doubt about it, an evil spirit. What should I do? To whom should I go? Warsaw is such a big city.”

“Does he want to go alone?”

“You think I’m going to go to America with him? Warsaw isn’t *trayf* enough? I need American Jews there work on the Sabbath, woe unto us! People walk upside down there, head on the ground, feet in the air. Everyone talks English and only the devil understands them. I’m not going to America.”

“And he really wants to go?”

“Rebbetzin, if he says he’ll go, he’ll go. Every other day another crazy notion takes hold of him. Now he wants to buy a gramophone, where music comes out of a huge trumpet. I tell him, Where in the world did you ever hear that a *shochet* should have something like that? That’s more appropriate for beardless musicians. But it’s like talking to the wall. He wants to give in to conversion. Rebbetzin, the truth is—he wants a new wife!”

The *shochet*’s wife began to sob and blow her nose into her handkerchief with a harsh, gratifying sound. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Does he want a divorce?” Mother asked.

“Why shouldn’t he? He’s got a hankering for a young one. He wants a loose girl, a bareheaded piece who doesn’t keep Yiddishkeit. In America a *shochet*’s wife walks around with uncovered, messy hair and they go to the theater together ... Who knows if they have a ritual bath over there? It’s a topsy-turvy world over there, and that’s where he wants to run off to and leave me here a deserted wife ... So tell me what should I do?”

“Let him give you money.”

“He says he doesn’t have any money. And if he does, I don’t know where he keeps it. He cries he’s in debt. How much do we need? We’re only two. He slaughters all day long. He makes a living, he does. He puts money away, but if I buy half a pound of meat because chickens are coming out of my nose, he starts raving and ranting. Rebbetzin, it’s not right to say so, but I don’t want to eat the food that he’s slaughtered. He’s corrupt. I want glatt kosher meat under the strictest supervision. My grandfather, may he rest in peace, fasted every Monday and Thursday. When he died they put a Talmud folio on his stretcher. My grandmother, may she rest in peace, was a saintly, upstanding woman. In our house, three days before Pesach they kashered the stove till it glowed. We didn’t even

eat knaydls until the last day of the holiday. In America he'll become completely wild. If he trims his beard here, what will he do there?"

---

"This is not a good situation," Mother said.

"Should I divorce him?"

"It's certainly better than remaining an *agunah*, a deserted wife."

The *shochet's* wife left. We heard her crying on the stairwell. I went out into the courtyard, and of their own accord my feet led me to the dark cellar where Wolf was slaughtering. At first I couldn't see a thing, but soon my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. The cellar was full of blood and feathers and stacked cages filled with live fowl. Wolf stood working next to a washtub brimming with blood. He seized a chicken forcefully and, it seemed to me, with anger. He turned its head back, flicked out a little feather, made a cut, and threw the chicken to a girl in a bloody jacket who plucked feathers. She had a big bosom, thick hands, a broad neck, red cheeks, and eyes as black as cherries. Sitting on a kind of shoemaker's bench, she plucked with a murderous fury while the bird was still quivering and thrashing about.

I watched open-mouthed. A moment ago the bird had been alive and a minute later all its feathers were gone. The other birds stuck their heads out of the cages, looked around, clucked, and closed their red lids. How could God see all this and remain silent? I asked myself. Why did He need such a world? Why did He create all this? And who would repay all these little chickens for their suffering? I was angry at Wolf the *shochet* for committing these murders. I recalled that he came to his wife during her unclean days and felt nauseous.

A couple of months later Wolf divorced his wife and gave her several hundred rubles. Even before he left for America, he began wearing Western dress in Warsaw, parading around the courtyard in a short jacket, long trousers, and polished boots. From the vest covering his fat paunch dangled the chain of a pocket watch. Word had spread that Wolf was having a love affair with the feather plucker and planned on taking her to America. My mother went to the window and gazed down at the transformed Wolf the *shochet*, who had abandoned all shame. She wanted Father to come to the window, too, but he said, "What for? It's a waste of time."

Father brought the holy book he was studying closer to him, as if to hide his face from the world and from its lusts and temptations.

A year passed. The *shochet* went off to America. His wife moved out of our courtyard. Then one day she sent regards through a neighbor of ours who told us that the *shochet's* ex-wife had married a crude and common young butcher. She no longer wore her old-fashioned cap but had donned a curled marriage wig. She stood by the butcher block in a white apron like a born butcher's wife. My mother listened to our neighbor in silence. A sadness radiated from her pale eyes.

"*Nu*, that's how human beings are," she observed.

---

## A GUEST IN THE *SHTIBL*

One afternoon a gigantic, broad-shouldered man with a ruddy face, blond beard, and wild eyes entered the *shtibl*, the small Hasidic prayer room, for the Mincha service. His garb was neither long nor short. He wore a fur cape and a hooded caftan that looked as though it had been made in the Middle Ages. His boots had broad uppers into which he had tucked his baggy trousers. He removed a tiny siddur from his pocket and began reciting the Order of Sacrifices.

He prayed with great devotion, but the words he uttered were hard and heavy as stones. People watched him and shrugged. “Who is that?” they asked.

After prayers the worshippers greeted him with “*Sholom aleichem*” and asked where he was from.

“Oh, from far away.”

“From where?”

“Russia.”

“Which town?”

He named one the Warsaw Hasidim had never heard of.

“And what’s your name?”

“Avraham.”

The way he pronounced “Avraham” made them realize he wasn’t a Jew like other Jews. After several exchanges they discovered that Avraham was a convert. He was a peasant from a remote Russian province who had come to live on this Jewish street in Warsaw, where he was now a tinsmith.

When asked why he had become a Jew, he cried out, “Because the Jews have the truth!”

The Jews were amazed. They were even more amazed that he had come to pray in a Hasidic *shtibl* rather than a regular *shul*, but everyone was welcoming and friendly to him. When he was called to the Torah for an *aliyah*—summoned as “Reb Avraham ben Avraham”—the convert touched the Torah with the *tzitzis* of his tallis, kissed it, and recited the blessing in a deep bass voice that seemed to come from a barrel or a tomb. The younger boys giggled and pinched one another. The Torah reader just managed to contain his laughter by swaying and frowning. Yes, here before us was a Jew, a pious Jew—in the shape and form of a goy.

Before long the convert began causing trouble. Hasidim habitually talk during prayers, but when the convert heard someone chatting, he turned red and then pale with anger and yelled: “*Nu—shh!*”

And put a finger to his lips.

During the Silent Devotion he stood immersed in prayer for a long time. The prayer leader had no patience to wait for him to conclude and began the repetition of the Silent Devotion. This caused the convert to miss the Kedusha, which angered him.

“You’re rushing through the prayers,” he complained. “You’re forgetting that you’re speaking to God.”

The convert had apparently studied the holy texts and knew the laws, for he asked, “Do you count money so quickly, too? One has to pray like one counts money.”

The Hasidim conceded that the convert was right, but Hasidim are still not Misnagdim.<sup>2</sup> They would apologize to the convert and admit that he was right, but the next day the scene repeated itself. The convert yelled, pounded the table with his heavy fist, and shouted that the Messiah wasn’t coming.

because the Jews were sinning.

But the boys had even more problems with him. They all talked during prayers, ran around, pinched one another, and snickered. The convert raised the roof. What annoyed him most was that the youngsters did not say “Blessed be He and blessed be His name” and “Amen” at the proper places. His own resonant “Blessed be He and blessed be His name” and “Amen” shook the walls. His goyish pie awakened in the boys and even in the grownups an irresistible desire to laugh. Even the chazzan himself had to laugh into his fist in the middle of his prayers.

On Yom Kippur the convert did something wild: instead of wearing socks, he stood barefoot. His feet were gigantic and his unusually wide big toes were topped by misshapen toenails. A mere glance at those feet and one couldn't help laughing. On Yom Kippur night, during the cantor's Kol Nidrei, the entire congregation was in a paroxysm of laughter. They beat their chests during the “For our sin” prayer and chuckled into their High Holiday prayer books.

The convert stood with a tallis wrapped over his white linen robe. When he pounded his chest, it echoed throughout the sanctuary, as did his pitiful weeping. His form stood out from all the other tallises and linen robes. He wore a gilded yarmulke that made him look not like a Jew but like one of the saints the gentiles paint on church walls. The Hasidim concluded that they would have to rid themselves of this Ivan—but how? Can Jews drive away a goy who has taken upon himself the yoke of Yiddishkeit? Wasn't he a tzaddik, a saintly man?

After the Evening Service the convert did not go home. Instead, he spent the night in the *shtibl*. All night long he recited psalms. The next morning, before the Torah was taken out of the Ark, the convert made a scene. The trustee began auctioning off the *aliyahs* to the Torah. Hasidim outbid one another. The trustee chanted, “Six gulden going once, six gulden going twice, six gulden ... going ... going ... six gulden and ten ...” As soon as the trustee had called out the last words, the convert screamed at the top of his lungs, “What's going on here? Money, money, money!”

He stamped his bare feet, waved his fists, and shouted, “Gulden, gulden, gulden ... It's Yom Kippur! You boors! ... You're sinning! It's a desecration of God's name!”

“Peasant!” someone screeched.

“A goy remains a goy,” a youngster called out.

“You're a goy yourself,” the convert replied. “Yom Kippur is a holy day. The holiest day of the year. God forgives our sins and you're doing business, business ... just like they did in the Holy Temple long ago ... That's why it was destroyed ... That's why the Messiah isn't coming!”

And the convert broke into tears—a hoarse, manly weeping that sent a shudder through everyone. The congregants fell silent.

Then the trustee called out, “We must support our *shtibl* ... We need coal for the winter. We have to pay rent.”

“On Yom Kippur one is forbidden to do business in the presence of the Torah,” the convert replied.

“You don't have to teach us how to be Jews.”

“It's forbidden,” he said.

After a while the Hasidic *shtibl* got rid of the convert and he went to pray in a study house. But he still caused problems on the street. He preached morality to the prostitutes who stood by the gates. He went to the square where the thieves hung out and delivered a sermon half in Yiddish, half in Russian, showing them where in the Bible the phrase “Do not steal” appeared in the Ten Commandments. Even at that time there were homes on the street where women cooked on the Sabbath, and the convert went there to rebuke them, predicting catastrophes, epidemics, even pogroms. It wasn't long before the children were tagging after him and teasing him with “Ivan, Ivan, there you go. Ivan, Ivan, stub your toe!”

But his greatest outrage was reserved for the young girls who wore short-sleeved, low-cut dresses

The convert ran after them, called them wantons and whores; they were sinning, he shouted, and causing others to sin.

---

On the street there was a teahouse where boys and girls would gather on the Sabbath to crack pumpkin seeds, flirt, and dance. The proprietor went about with her hair uncovered and would occasionally pour cold water into the urn or surreptitiously push the iron poker into the fire. The convert, seeing what was going on, appointed himself guardian of Sabbath observance. The thieves and hooligans who frequented the place cursed the convert and told him he'd wake up one day with a knife in his back. The girls laughed at him and escorted him out of the teahouse with catcalls.

The convert complained to Father, rebuking him for not tending to the street. Father justified himself before the convert as if he were one of his own, telling him how little attention today's generation paid to ethical pronouncements. Father hinted to the convert that he should rather practice and learn to be a Jew, and not try to improve others, for it was wasted effort. But the convert pointed out to Father the verse in the Pentateuch where one is commanded to rebuke one's fellow man.

Father agreed, but showed him a law stating that if one knew for certain that one's moralizing would not be efficacious, and that the next fellow was sinning wantonly and willfully, then one should no longer preach to him. "Everything has its limit," Father declared.

"Because of them the Messiah won't come and we'll remain in exile forever."

"Forever? God forbid!"

"They're inviting a new destruction."

The convert refused to be consoled. The sinning on the street caused him endless anguish. His pale eyes shone with a non-Jewish bitterness.

One Sabbath people witnessed another bizarre scene: the convert was being led away, flanked by two police officers. Because it was forbidden in Russia to convert to Judaism, the convert had committed a crime against the regime. Apparently someone had informed on him to the authorities. Or perhaps he had committed another offense. The police closed his workshop, hung a lock on the door, and sealed it.

Some Jews suggested that they should make inquiries and find a lawyer for the convert, but no one had any money or time for such endeavors. After a while the lock on his door was removed and the soda-water shop opened up. The convert seemed to have vanished. Only now did the people on the street begin to understand what had happened. A goy had sacrificed his life for Yiddishkeit and Jews had mocked him. He was locked up somewhere and no one was making any effort to free him. Some said that the convert had been sent to Siberia. The cheder lads concluded that he had been either hanged or burned at the stake and that his soul had expired with the words "Hear O Israel." People on the street felt guilty.

They thought that they would never see the convert again. But not long after the Germans occupied Warsaw during World War I, a youth named Chaim told the following story:

Walking along Długa Street one day he felt hungry. He saw a shop with Hebrew lettering. A young man stood in the doorway and asked Chaim, "You're hungry, eh? Then come in."

Chaim entered. He was served a bowl of grits and a heel of a bread. Other young men sat at a long table. After the meal a bareheaded Jew with the beard of a teacher and the gold-rimmed glasses of a rich man entered and began preaching: The true Messiah had already come and his name was Jesus of Nazareth. This Jew then talked about the little lamb, the paschal sacrifice, and Isaiah's prophecy that a virgin would become pregnant and give birth to a son. He explained the difficult verse in Psalms 2:12 by saying that it meant: kiss God's son.

Chaim then realized that he had fallen into a den of missionaries but he was afraid to abandon his meal and flee. Suddenly the convert appeared. It seemed that he lived there among them.

Yes, Jews had driven him away and he had gone over to the missionaries. "I'm a Jew. A Jew!" the

convert asserted. “But the Messiah is already here. You’re waiting in vain. Jesus is the Messiah .  
Jesus of Nazareth!”

---

When this story was repeated back in the *shtibl*, the Jews there declared, “That’s the problem with  
goyim. They don’t have the patience to wait.”

---

## A CHUNK OF DARKNESS

The door opened and an old woman with a cane entered. She was not white but black: she had a black disheveled marriage wig; a dark, wrinkled face; black eyes; a little black beard on the tip of her prominent double chin—and she wore a black shawl and a black dress so long it seemed to sweep the floor after her. Old age is usually associated with repose and quietude, but the old age of this woman was as dark as a witch's. She was full of beardlike tufts of hair and warts.

But, in fact, she spoke about Jewish matters. She was old, she said. She had saved a little money which she would not use up during her lifetime. Since she was childless, she wanted to hire a fine man who in a hundred years would say Kaddish in her memory. She proposed that my father should do this and she was prepared to advance him one hundred rubles. The rest would be paid after her funeral.

We needed the money, but my father declined. He said that nobody knows whose tomorrow it will be. How could he take money from her? No one has a contract with the Master of the Universe. He sensed that Father had other reservations. He did not want to derive income from somebody else's death, even if it was an old woman's. The whole matter was distasteful to him.

But the old woman did not relent. Who could help her if not the rabbi, she exclaimed, banging her cane on the floor. Father considered who should assume this responsibility and quickly found the right person. In the Hasidic *shtetl* there was a small man with a little gray beard, a florid face, and young eyes. Although he was no longer young, he still had a lively gait. He often drank, spun stories, and joked around. It was clear that he was healthy, thank God, and had many years left to live. He had been a small-time merchant, but now his son-in-law, a wealthy fruit wholesaler, supported him. Father selected for this man. When Father informed him of the old woman's request, the man immediately agreed. Rubbing his reddish hands, he said, "Why not? Kaddish is Kaddish."

The old woman glared at him darkly. Her black eyes seemed to drill into him, probing his innermost secrets. After a moment she called out, "I also want him to lead the prayer service in my memory."

"Why not? I'll lead the service."

"An entire year!" the old woman blurted out angrily.

"Certainly, all year long."

"And on the anniversary of my death I want a memorial candle lit and I want you to study Mishnah."

"I study Mishnah anyway ..."

"I want a contract and a handshake."

Here Father finally intervened: "We can have a signed agreement, but a handshake is not necessary. When a Jew makes a promise he keeps his word, God willing."

"You, Rabbi, would keep your promise, but I don't trust him!" the woman said with a vigor that belied her age.

"If you don't trust him, then it's no good," Father said. "In such a matter one must trust the other person to keep his word."

"Rabbi, you I'll trust."

The gray man stood all the while with an expression that said, Whichever way it goes, I can manage without her ... He wore a cotton-lined gray gaberdine, a little plush hat, a red scarf around his neck.



and a pair of leather boots that looked indestructible. His red cheeks, lined with little veins, bore witness that he enjoyed his drink and was full of life's juices. He took out a little snuffbox, poured a bit of snuff onto the palm of his hand, and then drew it deeply into his hairy nostrils. He did not even sneeze. We cheder boys used to say that not sneezing is a sure sign the snuff has gone straight to your brain ...

Eventually they drew up a contract and the man signed it. When he suggested that they seal the deal with a glass of brandy, the old woman sent me down to buy a bottle and some egg biscuits. The man poured himself a large drink and the woman took a glass herself. Father did not drink. The man, the Kaddish sayer, raised another large glass and called out, "Now that you have somebody to say Kaddish after you, may you live to be one hundred and twenty!"

The old woman shook her head. "What's the good of my life?"

She had been prepared to give my father one hundred rubles in advance, but gave only twenty-five to the old man, promising the balance after her death. The old man acquiesced to everything and then left.

The woman stayed; she went into the kitchen and insinuated to my mother that she wasn't satisfied with this deal. She had no trust in this person. My mother heard her out and said, "The best thing is to say Kaddish for oneself."

"How, my dear, can one say Kaddish for oneself?"

"One does deeds of charity. One prays. One observes Yiddishkeit. One does not speak ill of other people. All of this is better than the best Kaddish."

The old woman pondered this, then left.

A couple of months passed. Suddenly the door opened and the old woman limped in, black as a crow. Even her nose resembled a crow's beak.

"Rebbetzin, I've been hoodwinked."

"What happened?"

"The shmendrick's getting married, of all things!"

Apparently the old man, her Kaddish sayer, was preparing to marry a hunk of tripe who sold rotten apples in the marketplace.

At first Mother was surprised; then she asked, "What's the harm in that? Since he promised to say Kaddish, he'll say it."

"His wife won't let him."

"Why wouldn't she let him?"

"Because she's a bitch."

The woman stubbornly insisted that we send for her Kaddish sayer. I didn't have to run too far, for all of this took place in our courtyard. The man was sitting in the *shtibl* telling stories. He came right away. As soon as he saw the old woman, his eyes twinkled.

"What does she want now?"

The old woman maintained that since he was getting married she regretted the entire deal.

"Regret is not businesslike," the old man responded.

The old woman wanted her twenty-five rubles back, but the man said he had already spent them. He impatiently shuffled his thick-soled leather boots, then yelled, "What a shlimazel!"

It was not an easy lawsuit. The man denied nothing. He had already eaten up the money. He had made no agreement with this old woman that he was not allowed to marry. There was no room for compromise here because the man was unwilling to return even a broken kopeck. Father said that the man's marriage was no obstacle to his saying Kaddish. How is one thing connected to the other? But the old woman was angry. Her muttering and mumbling portended no good. She glowered darkly at the man. It seemed to me she wanted to give him the evil eye and was casting a spell over him.

destroy him.

“I’ll have to hire another man,” she called out.

“Why another? I’ll say Kaddish for you.”

“I don’t want your Kaddish.”

“Then no is no.”

“That money of mine will make him miserable,” the old woman predicted gloomily.

The old man got married. A couple of weeks after the wedding he came to the *shtibl*. His red cheeks had yellowed. He was hunched over. His boots now seemed much too big for him.

The men in the *shtibl* joked with him: “Well, how’s our young man doing?”

The man spit on the ground. “No good.”

“What’s up?”

“A witch, everything rotten you can imagine.”

“What does she want?”

“Who knows? She torments me. She doesn’t let me sleep at night with her yapping. She wakes up the neighbors. People come knocking on the door.”

“So what does she want?”

“I’ll be darned if I know. She talks like a madwoman, may it not happen to us!”

“So what will you do? Go back to your daughter?”

“My daughter won’t let me in.”

“What’s the matter?”

“She’s angry that I married.”

“So what will happen?”

“It’s not a good situation.”

The man had quarreled with his daughter and son-in-law, and married a half-crazy market woman. His little gray beard had turned entirely white.

He stopped telling stories. He sat in the *shtibl* and mournfully chanted psalms, as if for a dangerously ill person. On several occasions he did not return home to sleep. The shamesh would find him in the morning stretched out on a bench with a no-longer-usable tallis under his head.

After a while people heard that he had divorced the market woman but that his daughter still refused to let him enter her house. He had exchanged her mother for a vulgar market harridan—and for that his daughter could not forgive him. The old man began making efforts to be admitted to the old-age home but there was told he was too young. Moreover, one also had to bring a dowry like—forgive the comparison—a nun who wants to enter a cloister.

Then the old woman with the little black beard reappeared. She began to cook grits for him, darn his socks, and launder his shirts and his long johns. She became his protector. This woman, for whom he was supposed to say Kaddish, had started to act like his wife.

It didn’t take long for the inevitable to occur. The old woman came to us and announced that she was prepared to marry this man who should have said Kaddish for her and was surely twenty years his junior.

As she spoke she pounded the floor with her cane. Her little beard shook. The warts on her face bobbed quickly. It isn’t hard for a woman to be alone, she maintained. Why does she need a man? She cooks some food in a little pot, does a bit of laundry, sweeps her apartment, and everything is the way it ought to be. When she gets an occasional bellyache at night, she heats up a pot lid and places it on her stomach. But a man is like an abandoned child. He can’t cook, he can’t do laundry, he can’t clean up. If one doesn’t tend to him, he neglects himself completely. Since he would say Kaddish for her anyway, he might as well become her husband. She had an apartment and a bit of money. Surely he wouldn’t starve. “The couple of years I have left to me, let’s live them out decently,” she added.

Mother listened to her and was silent. The old man came also. He wasn't overly anxious for the match, but he said, "Do I have a choice? My daughter doesn't want me, so somebody has to take pity on me ... and I no longer have the strength to sleep on a hard bench."

He married—but apparently did not strike gold. Once again he sat in the *shtibl* and mournfully chanted psalms.

The youngsters began questioning him. They wanted to know if he had dallied with the witch, but the old man snapped, "I'm not obliged to give you any reports!"

"How old is she?"

"I didn't count her years."

"Does she have a bundle?"

"Rascals! Back to your books!" the old man shouted.

One winter evening, between the Afternoon and Evening Services, the old man complained that he had a bad cold. He went home but did not return for prayers the next morning. The following morning he didn't come to the *shtibl* either. The Jews there began saying that they ought to pay him a sick call. But it was already too late—the Kaddish sayer had died.

At the funeral a quarrel broke out between the widow and the old man's daughter. After the shivrit period, the old woman came to Father requesting that a new Kaddish sayer be found for her. Another thing: since her husband had left no son and since his son-in-law was a roughneck, a boor, a scoundrel, she was prepared to pay a few extra rubles for someone to say Kaddish for him.

The old woman stood in the kitchen, black as coal, with a distorted face, a drooping mouth—a chunk of darkness. She exuded a demonic power. My mother usually welcomed people amicably, but she displayed a repugnance toward this old murderer. Father said that he knew of no other Kaddish sayers and hinted that she leave him alone. But she did not leave right away. Her gaze radiated a fierce stubbornness, the eerie self-confidence of those who have lived too long and no longer have any fear of the Angel of Death. I was still a little boy at the time, but I clearly sensed that the old woman had done some secretive manner in her Kaddish sayer. Like a spider she had enmeshed him in her web and destroyed him.

---

## A RABBI NOT LIKE MY FATHER

From time to time a certain rabbi would come to visit my father. He looked nothing like Father: tall, broad, and stout, with a pitch-black beard and black, burning eyes, he was also better dressed. He wore a fur coat with tails during the winter—and a wide silken topcoat in summer. He always had a new hat and was never without a parasol. He also smoked cigars. He brought into our house the prestige of a successful rabbi for whom everything was going well.

But things were not going as well as they appeared. He had once been a rabbi in a rather large city but for some reason he had been relieved of his rabbinic duties. Now he lived in Warsaw and was for all intents and purposes no more than a small-time rabbi like my father. But the rich man's bearing stayed with him nevertheless. He wore chamois half-boots with rubber soles. He smoked his cigars through an amber cigar holder. His parasol had a silver handle. And his hands were thickly grown with hair, which by itself was a sign of wealth.

How different he was from my father! He came in softly, slowly removed his galoshes (which had brass monograms), put his umbrella in a corner, and the kitchen was soon filled with the smell of his cigar. He cast a sidelong glance at my mother. In the study he sat down warily, as if the chair were not sturdy enough. Father welcomed him warmly, as he did everyone, and asked Mother to bring in tea and biscuits. The rabbi took off his hat, under which sat a high yarmulke.

“How are you doing?” Father asked.

Those were about the only words that Father managed to utter during the entire visit. The rabbi began talking and continued for several hours. He spoke only of himself and his greatness. He neither praised himself openly nor spoke ill of others, but all his remarks had only one meaning: that he, the rabbi, was the greatest scholar of their generation and that all the other rabbis were either total or half-ignoramuses who didn't understand what they were studying and merely skimmed the surface issues. The rabbi spoke only about his books, his new interpretations, his accomplishments. His sharp eyes emitted the contempt and mockery of someone who knows everything better than everyone else but feels that the world begrudges him his success and refuses to acknowledge it out of envy.

I stood behind Father's chair and listened. Sometimes Father tried to say something, but the rabbi wouldn't let him speak. He made a hand motion that seemed to say: What do you know? What could you possibly have to say about such matters? It's enough of an honor for you that I come here and speak to you.

The rabbi did other things that surely must have irked Father. When referring to a certain passage in the Talmud, he would translate every single word, as though my father were just a little cheder lad. My father had by then written several scholarly commentaries and had already been a rabbi in a city. There was surely no need to translate anything for him. Often, this conceited rabbi translated passages from the Talmud for my father which even I, a little boy, understood. I blushed with embarrassment. I thought that Father would stand up and tell him to go to the devil, but I saw no sign on my father's face that he took offense. He listened to that man's exegesis with curiosity, as though he, my father, were a simple man for whom everything had to be spelled out. It actually seemed that Father took particular delight from the way the other man was translating everything into Yiddish.

Once, after the rabbi cited a Talmudic passage and immediately began to explain it, Father

interrupted: "I'm afraid you've made a mistake."

The rabbi turned red, then paled. "I made a mistake?"

Father quickly began justifying himself. "Well, we ought to look at the text. Sometimes one can make a mistake." And Father quoted the Biblical verse: "Who can understand errors? ... Everyone can make a mistake."

I thought that the rabbi would go to the bookcase, take out a Talmud folio, and look up the passage—but he did not do this and changed the topic instead. Evidently it wasn't appropriate for him to admit that my father could have caught him erring. He continued to sit there, speaking about himself while smoking his cigar. Every once in a while Mother brought in more tea and lemon.

It was very awkward when women entered the study to ask a question about *kashrus* during his visit. The housewife had come in to see Father, of course, but it was the other rabbi, the guest, who immediately took up the question. He turned to the woman, asking how big the soup pot was and how much milk had fallen into it. In another instance, when there was some doubt about a chicken, I waited for Father to cut open the navel where the woman had found a nail, or to inspect the gut which were pockmarked. When Father had completed this "unsavory task," the rabbi took over and rendered his decision. I saw this as an act of great impudence, and it annoyed me, the little boy, terribly. I hoped that Father would say, I am the rabbi on this street, not you. But once again Father revealed not the slightest sign that he was annoyed. On the contrary, he amicably nodded his head at everything the rabbi said. When the woman left and bade them goodbye, only Father answered. Evidently it was beneath the rabbi's dignity to respond to an ordinary housewife.

Later, I looked up the mistake my father had caught. I showed Father that it was he who was right, not the rabbi. Father said, "Even the greatest people can make mistakes."

"Father, is he really such a genius?" I asked.

"He's a great scholar."

"Aren't there greater scholars?"

"Can Torah scholarship be measured? Everyone understands the Torah according to his ability. Sometimes one encounters a problem which a great scholar cannot answer while a simple Jew can. Everyone has a share in the Torah."

One time the rabbi came and seemed to be terribly angry. He had written a letter of approbation for a scholarly treatise and the author had not given him, the rabbi, the title that he thought he deserved. The author had called him "the *gaon*," that is, the genius, but had omitted the word "famous." On another letter of approbation the term "famous" had indeed been included. The rabbi maintained that all this concerned him as much as last year's snow. That little nothing of a scholar couldn't make him famous or not famous, the rabbi told Father. But it was the impudence, he said, that infuriated him. The rabbi made muck and mire of that scholar. He called him a boor, a thickhead, an ass, a donkey, a fool, a moron, an ox, and other similar names. He continued complaining: "He is as fit to be an author as I am to be a woodchopper. He should be an aleph-beys teacher, not a scholar. He's a simpleton, a common lout, a zero. Of people like him it is said: That which is wisdom isn't his writing and that which is his writing isn't wisdom. In short, he has taken everything from others. There isn't a thing in his book that's his own original work. The trouble is that he can't even properly steal from others. For that, one has to have a head on one's shoulders, but he has a clump of cabbage, not a head. And even that head of cabbage is all stem ..."

Father was silent. His face was red. I later looked up that letter of approbation which this same rabbi had given to that scholar. He had written: "In his work the author uproots mountains. He is a library full of books. He has descended into the very depths of the Talmud and has come up with a pearl." This flowery language did not at all jibe with his abusive language. He was enraged that the author had not called him "famous."

That day the rabbi spoke longer than usual. Even I could see that this rabbi was capable of murder for that shortened honorific he had been given. Everything in him stormed and seethed. He smoked one cigar after another and the apartment filled with noxious wisps of smoke. He vented his rage on Father. Now not only did he explain each Talmud passage he mentioned but he even began explaining Biblical verses. Father sat there shrunken. It was absolutely impossible to respond, because the rabbi spewed such a thick barrage of words one couldn't even insert a "but." After the rabbi left, Father once went to the Hasidic *shtibl*. It seemed to me he wanted to clear his head in the street a bit.

Another time the rabbi came to visit us after Father had published his own book, one with a letter of approbation from that same rabbi. When Father showed him the book, the rabbi glanced quickly at the honorific title that Father had given him, then at once began speaking about his own affairs. He did not congratulate Father, nor did he even attempt to cut open the pages and look into the book, which was customary on such occasions. His eyes brimmed with scorn and contempt. It seemed that the rabbi took the fact of Father's publishing a book as an insult. And another thing: in the period between the rabbi's visits, Father had spent some time in Bilgoray with his father-in-law, my grandfather. The rabbi knew quite well that Father had undertaken a journey, but he didn't even ask about it. For him Father was merely a pair of ears. It sufficed him that Father should hear what he, the world-famous genius, had to say ...

Mother declared that she wouldn't let the rabbi cross our threshold anymore, but Father implored her not to do such a thing, God forbid.

"He has his flaws, but he's a great scholar," Father said.

Then my mother uttered something I had never heard her say before: "Yes, he's great. He grates on one's nerves."

In time, the rabbi stopped visiting us. I grew up somewhat. Once, a scholar praised my father's book, telling me that Father "interprets what he sees." For him, the plain meaning of the text was more important than overly subtle hair-splitting. He compared Father to the early commentators. I then asked the scholar if he knew that rabbi who would come to visit us, and if he indeed was such a genius.

The scholar replied, "Disjointed blather ... lots of hot air ... In his quibbling analyses he tries to bring East and West together. Can you bring two walls together? Futile attempts ... he doesn't even come up to your father's ankles."

---

## SOUNDS THAT INTERFERE WITH STUDYING

A few doors from us there was an apartment whose tenants were dissolute. It wasn't a house of prostitution, God forbid, but the people who lived there were decidedly low-class. The man probably dealt in stolen goods; in Warsaw lingo he was called a fence. He may have had another profession which wasn't too kosher either. His wife went about bareheaded. In my parents' view, everything about that apartment was loud and brazen. The walls were colored rose and red. They had a gramophone that squeaked out all kinds of theater songs from early in the morning until late at night. They had a cage with canaries and a parrot. And as if that wasn't enough, they also kept a dog.

The man's wife was chubby, with big breasts, a short neck, and a round face. She didn't speak; she sang. Her Yiddish was a kind of Warsaw slang; she added letters to words and changed prefixes. She also spoke Polish. She had a baby girl whom she took out on walks in a stroller. We considered all these things gentile ways.

In that apartment they were still asleep at 10 a.m., for they went to bed at three in the morning. Aside from breakfast, lunch, and supper, they also took a second supper at midnight. Their gentile maid would go down late at night to bring them crackly fresh rolls, salami, turkey breast, liver, roasted meat, goose, or a platter of cold cuts, all of which they dipped into mustard and washed down with beer. Sometimes they would eat hot sausages. And during this meal the men—the owner of the apartment and his guests—spoke loudly and shouted. The women's laughter could be heard in the entire courtyard.

Every manner of evil was imputed to them. The man shaved his beard. He didn't even attend synagogue on Sabbath. The woman did not go to the ritual bath. They had a balcony next to ours and on it they did all kinds of forbidden things. Men kissed women. They used uncouth expressions. My mother once saw the mistress of the house kissing her dog. "How low can people sink?" Mother asked. "That's what happens when people turn away from the Jewish path."

Once, they threw a party and invited the police. Father immediately removed his rabbinic hat and put on a velvet one with a high crown, for he did not have a permit to be a rabbi. He was afraid that while they were celebrating, the police might decide to inspect his apartment. The thought that Jews were sitting at one table with peasants, eating and drinking and having a good time, struck him as wild. How could one enjoy one's food when a peasant was sitting opposite you? How could the grandchildren of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be fraternizing with the enemies of Israel?

Father said, "Alas, it's all because of this dark and bitter exile that we're in. It's high time for the Messiah to come. It's time, high time!"

Mother also walked about the house upset. We heard men shouting, women laughing, and after a while the gramophone played a march and we could hear them dancing. Men and women were dancing together, and all of this was happening no more than a door or two away.

One day I saw some policemen going up to that apartment. I thought that our neighbors were having another party, but it was something entirely different. The owner of the apartment had been arrested. I saw him coming down, a tall man with a long face and a long neck, wearing a shirt without a collar. Strangely, a pair of brand-new boots bound by a string was hanging from his shoulders. The new boots fascinated me more than the fact of his arrest. One boot dangled over his chest, the other over his

back. Was he going to stay in jail for years? Did he know in advance that he would be imprisoned? And if so, why didn't he run away?

His wife followed him, as did many others. Once outside, the policemen and our neighbor boarded the droshky and off they went—to prison, no doubt.

For a couple of days the apartment was quiet. Not a sound came from the gramophone, the dog, the parrot, or the canaries. A weird silence emanated from the rooms from which the owner had been taken. Father insinuated that perhaps now those people would repent, for if they were already being punished in this world, what had they gained? But he was mistaken.

Soon the gramophone was heard once again playing the same merry little tunes and ditties as before. Once again we heard the dog and the birds. And if that was not enough, a rumor circulated in the courtyard that the woman had taken a lover. A man began visiting. He wasn't as tall as the apartment owner, but he was broad-shouldered. He had a wide nose, a thick mustache, and the eyes of a libertine. He wore a Polish jacket and a pair of baggy riding breeches. His boots had such narrow uppers it was hard to imagine how a man's foot could slip into them. He always came with presents in hand: all kinds of small packages tied with colored ribbons and held with little wooden handles.

Mother came into Father's study and said, "These things are unheard of even among respectable gentiles ... an adulterous woman!"

"I don't want to hear about it! Enough!" Father replied.

"It's like getting slapped in the face when I look at them!"

"So don't look! What's there to look at?"

"Perhaps you should summon her to your courtroom."

Father sighed. First of all, he knew that anything he said would do no good; second, he didn't want to hear the voice of such a wanton. He said, "She would defile the apartment."

"One must warn someone before imposing punishment!" Mother answered, quoting the Talmud.

Father placed his handkerchief on the Talmud he was studying. "Who should summon her?"

"Mama, I'll go."

Father cast an angry glance at me. "I don't want you to have anything to do with such people."

But there was no one else to go. Furthermore, if a stranger went, the woman would surely pay him no heed. I heard Mother telling Father, "What does he know? He doesn't know a thing ..."

"Well then, all right."

They told me to summon the woman, and I went off at once. I was a bit afraid of the dog, but my curiosity to see this dissolute apartment was greater than my fear. As soon as I knocked on the door, I heard the dog barking. Then I saw the mistress of the house. She wore an unbuttoned, lace-decorated housecoat and a pair of wide bloomers also adorned with lace. I could see her breasts, too. She stood next to me, a hunk of evil impulse, Rehab the prostitute, a Biblical harlot, a half-naked piece of raffraff. All kinds of unkosher smells emanated from her. The entire woman was one chunk of *trayfness*. My nose was subjected to such awful smells I couldn't even speak.

"Papa is summoning you!" I barely managed to say.

"And who's your papa?"

"The rabbi."

"What does the rabbi need me for?"

And she began to laugh, displaying a set of broad teeth. Here and there a piece of gold glinted. Her lover came into the room; he wore no jacket but had on a gold, polka-dotted little vest. The parrot began screeching. The dog began barking again.

The man asked, "What does the little jerk want?"

"I'm being summoned to the rabbi."

"Tell his father to go fly a kite," the man responded, slamming the door in my face.



---

sample content of More Stories from My Father's Court

- [Locos: A Comedy of Gestures for free](#)
- [Fauna and Family online](#)
- [Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987 pdf](#)
- [download online The Good Cook's Book of Oil and Vinegar: One of the World's Most Delicious Pairings, with more than 150 recipes](#)
  
- <http://omarnajmi.com/library/Locos--A-Comedy-of-Gestures.pdf>
- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/Fauna-and-Family.pdf>
- <http://studystategically.com/freebooks/Dinosaurs-Before-Dark--Magic-Tree-House--Book-1-.pdf>
- <http://omarnajmi.com/library/Full-Moon-Rising--Riley-Jensen--Guardian--Book-1-.pdf>