

## Szaje'le Kromotowski

“A city which does not have ten idlers”, says the Talmud [sic Mishnah], “is not a city”<sup>1</sup>. In Częstochowa, it was said that a city which did not have a jokester like Szaje'le Kromotowski was not a city. People called Szaje'le Kromotowski “Szyje'le”<sup>2</sup>.

He was a dealer in scrap iron in the square at ul. Garibaldiego. From him, one got soured taps, broken water pipes, old, burnt samovars and bent and broken iron articles. In addition to his trade, he had another occupation, which consisted of making jokes at all times - even in the most tragic circumstances, when a person lay on their deathbed.

Once, he had a quarrel with a hunchback. What did Szyje'le do? He wrote letters to all the hunchbacks in town, asking them to come to the Town Hall square (between the Second and Third Aleje) at eight o'clock in the evening. A few minutes before eight, there was a scramble of all the hunchbacks to the Town Hall square. When one hunchback asked another, “Why are you running after me?”, the other replied angrily, “What do you mean? I've got a special invitation to an important meeting at eight o'clock this evening!” Szaje'le with his group of wags stood on the other side, rolling with laughter.

The hunchbacks hung about the square for a couple of hours. Some looked at the others in a displeased manner and others got angry or fought among themselves - and to the day of Szaje'le's death, they never knew that this had been his “bit of work”.

Szyje'le would come to the marketplace to the ladies selling fruit and tell them different jokes. Each vendor wanted him as a client and invited him to buy. In this manner, he would taste fruit everywhere and buy nowhere, under the excuse that they were not quite to his liking. He had tasted the fruits for so long, that everyone already knew him. As a result, he moved along to the fruit shops, where he did the same.

One Saturday, Szyje'le was crossing the bridge between the First and Second Aleje, when he saw a heavy freight lorry with a trailer in tow driving up. He raised his hand, as a signal for the lorry to come to a halt. The driver quickly sprung out of the vehicle, thinking that something had happened. Szyje'le met him with a question, “How late is it now?” The driver became infuriated and cursed Szyje'le, but he made nothing of it and answered, “Who would know the exact time, then, if not a driver?”

Szyje'le owed a large sum to the tax office, as a result of which the bailiff affected a requisition of all the furniture in his house. One day, before the auction, his wife said to him, “How is this to end? Surely, it's a shame for us to let this auction go through.” Szyje'le replied, “I'm your husband - trust me! Tomorrow morning, you are to disappear - don't be at home!” Szyje'le [then] went off to a shop and bought a new chamber pot, a few sausages and a bottle of beer.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: “What is deemed a large town? Any in which are ten unoccupied men. If there are fewer than this, it is a village.” (Mishnah, Megilah Ch.1, mishnah 3)]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: This is rather odd and quite unlikely, as the names Szaja (Isaiah) and Szyja (Joshua) are obviously two distinct names. The author uses both names alternatively throughout the forthcoming narrative, and we have rendered the name each time as it appears in the original.]

The following morning, on the day of the auction, his wife went away. Szyje'le locked the door, poured the beer into the chamber pot and put the sausages in as well. He placed a wet towel on his head and lay down in bed.

The sequestering officer arrived with his companions. When the sequestering officer and the auction people entered the house, Szyje'le sprang out of bed and sat down on the chamber pot. After sitting on the pot for a couple of minutes, he got up from it, picked out the sausages, began eating them and drank the beer - which looked like urine. The sequestering officer, upon witnessing these goings-on, determined that Szyje'le was mad, which he wrote down in the protocol and left. In this way, Szyje'le wormed his way out of the auction.

Various tales were told of Szyje'le, which drove everyone to uncontrollable laughter [even] in the most complicated situations.