

Abram Litman

The Great Secret ...

(in memory of my father, Majer-Jojne Litman, peace be upon him)

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In my boyhood years, I was a frequent visitor to the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor Szapiro, or, as *Chassidim* called him, Reb Awigdor'l. This was due to the fact that my father Reb Majer-Jojne was the *Rebbe's* "second hand" - the holy man's personal attendant. He would take me along for *shalesydes* **, where I sang *zmires* at the *Rebbe's tisch*. The first time the *Rebbe* heard me sing, he said to my father, "Reb Majer-Jojne, your Avreml has a sweet little voice - let him grace our *Shabbes* tables".



Reb Majer-Jojne Litman

The *Rebbe* himself would "bribe" me with a bit of sponge-cake, with an *Eier kichl* [egg biscuit] and sometimes with a little glass of sweet raisin-wine.

In this manner, I became like a household member at the *Rebbe's* court. My childish heart pulled me to play with my friends from the *Talmud Torah* of *Machzikei Ha'Das*, where I studied, but my father always wanted to have me at his side.

Although, in the *Rebbe's* court, several children hung about - two girls and two boys - with *them* I could only frolic on *Simchas Torah* during the *hakufes* [dancing with the Torah scroll]. All year round, the *Rebbe's* children were shielded from socialising with anyone or dedicating themselves to anything other than learning "*yiddishkeit*" [viz., to be a Jew].

Simchas Torah, however, was an exception. At the *hakufes*, boys and girls intermingled. We marched with the banners together with the *Chassidim*. We sang, shoved, laughed [and] danced around the Torah scrolls. At the *hakufes*, I even danced with the *Rebbe's* little daughter, Pere'le, who during the rest of the year was afraid to even look at a boy.

Once, at the *Rebbe's* court, in my childhood, a tremendous event took place. One of the *Rebbe's* sons, Jossele, called me to one side and murmured a secret in my ear. "Avreml, I want to see you this evening in the attic." I asked him why precisely in the attic, to which he replied, "No one must know about it, it's a secret. Hush! Tell no one and come alone, on tiptoe".

I left the *Rebbe's* court flushed with a "secret in my belly". I was not to tell anyone. Jossele wished to see me in a place where devils and ghosts danced about openly and freely - in the attic. Who knows what the secret could be?

I experienced much anxiety that day and my little heart beat very strongly. My mother noticed that I was not eating anything [and] was going around worried and agitated.

"What's with you, Abram?" Mother cried. "Has maybe a *dybbuk* [evil spirit] entered you, Heaven forbid?"

** [TN: From Heb. "sholosh seudos," or "three meals"; the third and last Sabbath meal, which starts nearing sundown. *Chassidim* believe that while the meal continues (even into the night), the day's holiness is prolonged. It is held at the prayer-hall in public, and the *Chassidim* sit at the *Rebbe's tisch*, or table, at which *zmires* (traditional *Shabbes* songs) are sung.]

“No, Mum”, I answered tremblingly, “I’ve a ‘secret in my belly’, just a secret.”

Mother wept, sighed and wiped her tears with her apron.

“When Dad returns from *ma’ariv* [evening prayer service]”, Mother sobbed, “we’ll immediately go over to *Rebbe* Awigdor’l, so that he should do something to cast out the *dybbuk* or the ‘secret in the belly’, as you call it.”

“Mum, don’t cry! I’m not hurting anywhere!”, I pleaded fearfully. “I won’t wait till Dad comes home from *ma’ariv* - I’ll run over to the *Rebbe* myself, before it turns too dark”.

“Oh, my little lad,” mother wrung her hands, “you are so clever and you think like a grown up. Do run over to the *Rebbe* to pray *ma’ariv* and may God send you a full recovery - Oh, God!”

Running thus to the *Rebbe*, on the way I encountered *Chassidim* trudging in the deep snow, hurrying to catch a *ma’ariv* with the *Rebbe*. But instead of entering the *Rebbe*’s study-hall, I climbed, swift as an arrow, up to the attic to meet with Jossele.

It was pitch-dark. My feet at once stumbled on rags and broken glass. The broken bottles made a din. Fear seized me - *the demons and evil spirits had caught me! They would not let me out of there alive!*

Suddenly, I heard someone next to me. A warm, human hand touched my face. In the pitch-black darkness, a human voice whispered, “Is that you, Avreml? Don’t be afraid, it’s me, Jossele! Yes, the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor’s son. You’ve come exactly on time. Before *ma’ariv* starts, I’ll reveal to you the ‘great secret’/ Hush! Let no one know about this. I must go down to the study-hall soon.”

We sat down on something hard. Jossele felt about in the pockets of his silken robe and produced, from one pocket, a wax candle and a *zapałka* (match) and, from the other, a notebook. He lit the candle, made sure it was really me and not somebody else, and began speaking hurriedly, “Avreml, you’re a typesetter - you’re learning a sacred trade - to put the letters together and spread light among people. I’ve written a story. I think I’ve contributed something with my creation. Maybe you could do something, so that my work should be redeemed and be published in the bright world. I shall forever thank you for this”.

“But Jossele”, I stammered, “what is the secret you need to tell me? After all, I came on my tiptoes to hear this secret”.

“Here is the secret, Avreml - take this “*kajet*” (notebook), read my story and, if a newspaper or a journal prints it, bring me the printed piece to the study-hall. No living person may learn of it - only we two will know this secret. It is a great secret.”

We both scrambled down from the attic [and] rushed into the study-hall where the congregation was already praying *ma’ariv* with gusto.

When I returned home from praying *ma’ariv* with the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor’l, Mother put me on her lap and looked into my eyes. She kissed my eyes and spat three times.

“How are you, my child?”, Mother inquired searchingly. “Do you want to eat something?”

“Mum,” I sang out laughingly and cheerfully, “I’m as hungry as a wolf, I want to eat everything!”

"The *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor' I is truly a *tzadik*, who shows miracles! He is the righteous man of the generation!", my mother cried out, raising her hands to heaven. "The child went to him with a 'secret in the belly' and came home fresh and healthy."

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I read Jossele's first story with bated breath. Later, I sent it to a daily Jewish newspaper in Warsaw, which printed it on the spot and the editor wrote to me [saying] that the author Jossele possessed talent and that more great things were to be expected of him.