

Lea Szwarc

By the Open Window...

(to the eternal memory of my husband Chaim-Leib)



The early morning began almost with a scramble. Everything was like in a hospital - injecting the insulin and bringing breakfast to the bedside, where we had a little table at which we ate. That early morning, a dense, grey fog hung outside, veiling the city of Seattle all around. Chaim-Leib was in a good mood and, after breakfast, he got up from bed to do a little work and sat down at his writing desk. Writing was his life!

"Lea, it's nine o'clock - it's already time to open the shop", Chaim-Leib said to me. "Fine, I'm going", I answered him.

At about twelve noon, I return from the shop. I run up to see how he is doing. I have brought him lunch. There is a sweet aroma of food in the room. Chaim-Leib looks as if he has just been sprayed. He has, it turns out, taken a bath. He is clean-shaven and dressed as if for a holiday. The poet in him always wished to look good.

I lay the tray with the food upon the little table. He embraces me [and] gives me a kiss - with his hand, he indicates his writing desk. "You see, Lea, what I've already accomplished these few hours?"

I look on the desk, and see written pages. Yes, he has written. It seems that, besides poetry, he has also worked on the shop's books, because he says to me, "Lea, you won't need to hire an accountant! I'll do everything already myself - before I travel away from here. Don't bring me any tea today - I'll make myself something warm to drink on the electric cooker."

I go down to the lower rooms on the first floor. The sun has lifted the grey-white fog. [It is] a bright, sunny day. The sky is clear and blue. The mountain tops, white with snow, rise in a tall circle all around and are mirrored in the blue lakes. And here I am, again, in his room. Chaim-Leib stands by the open window and takes in the sun's warm rays. Chaim-Leib now looks into the endlessness of the distant horizon. I ask myself, "What is he thinking now, Chaim-Leib?" He has written more than one poem after standing like this, in silence with only himself - and his poems number in the hundreds.

I have brought him his evening meal. Chaim-Leib is very pleased with the first day of work. The writing desk is already fully in order. "I'm calm, Lea, and happy", he says to me. "I'll carry everything out as I've planned it. Don't worry, Lea - you'll see!"

Chaim-Leib speaks with so much assuredness, that it is hard to believe the words of the doctor, who told me secretly to prepare for a "shock". It could happen any minute. But when I look at Chaim-Leib, there is no sign of the doctor's warning. Gazing upon him, I had completely forgotten the doctor's dark promise. He, himself, with his appearance, with his strong will to live, to overcome everything standing in his way - gave me hope and faith!

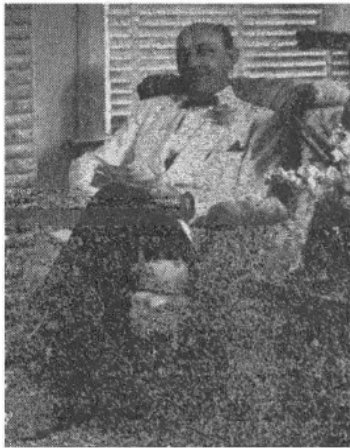
"Send Bertha up to me. She'll type up all the *Pesach* orders on the typewriter and I'll have accomplished an important job."

Bertha is Chaim-Leib's eldest daughter, who used to help him in the shop. In the evening, Bertha returned to the shop. She had finished everything and had sent the orders out in the post.

"How is Papa?", I ask her. "Is he already in the bedroom?"

"Oh no, he's working at his desk – but he looks very lively and cheerful", Bertha replied.

One hour later, I closed the shop, and I hurried home. Something drove me, that evening, to get home as quickly as possible, as if my heart was telling me - despite Bertha's cheery words - to be by Chaim-Leib as soon as possible



Chaim-Leib Szwarc

Upon entering the bedroom, I found Chaim-Leib in bed in great agony. The tragedy was happening, exactly as the doctor had forewarned. Chaim-Leib writhed in pain and anguish. Only just now, he was feeling comfortable and sprightly and he had suddenly collapsed on the bed.

"Should I call the doctor, Chaim-Leib?" He shakes his head, indicating No! With his hand, he motions to a chair for me to sit down.

Chaim-Leib had never wished anyone to be beside him when he was suffering - when the knife lay upon his neck. I sat helplessly, not knowing what to do. Thoughts flew through my mind. I recalled the little story he had told his two-year-old grandson Steve. The child had sat enthralled, gazing with his amber-brown eyes at Grandfather and at the *Shabbes* candles, while he - Chaim-Leib talked, telling about his own childhood years.

As the minutes stretch on, I see Chaim-Leib is calming down and feels a bit better. He lies peacefully and quietly. I am crushed and drained, and I pray in my heart: "*Oh, God! Grant him, Chaim-Leib, a peaceful night!*" Maybe, [just] maybe - after a night's sleep, he will start feeling better again.

I fell asleep and awoke at dawn to see the bed empty. I found him in his library room. He was sitting in the armchair, without strength, feeble and groaning deeply. *No!* God had not listened to my prayer. He had another attack, the last one already - from which he would already never recover.

I called the doctor. The ambulance is sent out at once. I sit by Chaim-Leib and wipe the sweat off his forehead. He says to me quietly, "*Lea, I am dying...*", and he falls into my arms.

The ambulance took him away before I was able to get dressed. Minutes later, in the grey dawn, the telephone rang with the sombre tidings that Chaim-Leib had died.

Chaim-Leib, Chaim-Leib! For me, you have not died! I shall always see you lost in thought, by the open window.