

Chonon Kiel

“Tzimmes”

A

It was during one of those hard, winter frosts, the likes of which were not remembered for a long time. The snow lay on the streets and in the courtyards. Long icicles hung down from the low roofs and gutters. *Cheder* boys, all bundled and wrapped up in furs, attempted to slide on the slippery ice along the [street] gutter, but they soon ran home with frozen noses. The wind simply pecked pieces of one's flesh off. At night, it was worse. The windows were encased in ice and, outside, a *zawierucha* [storm] roared and howled, bashing and storming the shutters, nearly tearing the house down. On such nights, one pitied even the dog that was let out into the street.

The following day, first thing in the morning, my mother went to the baker-woman to buy bread. As soon as she entered the *piekarnia* [bakery], *Ciocia* [Auntie] Mindla came over with the sorrowful news, “What do you say, Rywka Rajzla darling, to this story? Just imagine - poor “Tzimmes” has frozen [to death]!”

“Oh! Oh, woe!”

“Ye-es, yes!”

Ciocia Mindla was pleased that she had been lucky enough to be the first one to tell her the news in all its smallest details.

“Is it a wonder, then? To lay naked and barefoot in the street on such a night! Had a *stróż* [watchman] at least let him inside the gate – Ooh, God almighty!”

“Oh, woe is me!”, my mother could not forgive herself, as if she were also to blame for the misfortune.

“How do you know “Tzimmes” has really been frozen?”, asked Little Jankele's wife, who wished to know a bit more accurately what had occurred.

“Just ask the baker-woman, she'll tell you.”

The baker-woman had, in fact, seen *Krajndla*, “Tzimmes”'s sister, whom her uncle *Granek*, an old widower, had married out of pity. *Krajndla* had run about on ul. *Warszawska* at daybreak, with swollen eyes, wailing in a sing-song manner, “Oh, woe is me! [He was] such a dear brother, such a laughing brother!”

Everyone [then] already understood that the calamity had happened - “Tzimmes” had frozen to death. But a couple of days later, once the cold spell had snapped, “Tzimmes” reappeared quite casually, somewhere near the bridge. He trudged along as always, with a pair of big, torn shoes from which his toes protruded. As corpulent as he was, he was draped all in rags and was girded with a piece of twine. His blackened, bare knees peeped out from his frayed *nogewice* [leggings]. His long coat, which was patched with all kinds of colours, had only one sleeve. And, although he was wrapped in rags, he could not cover up his bare, hairy chest. On his head, he carried a tattered tangle from which tufts hung down. He was standing, as usual, with his great, fat belly, [looking]

confused, shivering with cold and chattering his teeth. His face was red, with thick blue lips. His eyes seemed to look inwards, into his own muddled world. All of a sudden, as if he had just remembered something, he began laughing, talking to himself and singing in his deep, half-wild voice, and continued trudging along in the snow, through the streets and alleys.

“Just look at that – he’s still alive! Just look at his dark force! The strength he has is beyond our understanding!”

“Is this the first time he’s wriggled free from death, then? Such frosts are child’s play for ‘Tzimmes’!”

“He’ll outlive us all yet!” - Jews marvelled cheerfully at “Tzimmes”, who had the hardened hide of an animal. His reddish-black skin was like armour. And, as many times as the frost, his perpetual natural enemy, had contended with him - “Tzimmes” always emerged the victor. “Tzimmes” was in no fear of hunger at all – there were always merciful Jews to be found, pious women, who earned themselves a good deed by occasionally throwing him a chunk of bread [or] some cold dish.

He did not beg - “Tzimmes” was no beggar. If they gave him, he ate - if not, he did not. [As for] sleeping, he slept in Prozer’s building, in some stable. He [also] had other dwellings - places to lie down in various attics and cellars - if only he arrived before the *stróż* closed the gate.

There were Jews who washed him for *Pesach* [and] gave him some shirt [or] patched-up trousers. With him, however, they did not last long.

For entire days and nights he rambled quietly about in the streets. He did not hurt a fly. He avoided everybody and was afraid of even a child, if only they left him in peace. Befuddled inside his deranged world, as if he did not see anyone around him, he would suddenly burst out laughing and, with his deep voice, cheerfully start singing: “A fool had a hat, [together] with a *Maciejówka*^{*1}...”

“Tzimmes’” hearing was extraordinary and he had the capability of singing over the most difficult compositions, as if he had been possessed by some musical *dybbuk*. He whistled magnificently. He would remain standing transfixed by a window from which the music of a radio or a wedding emerged and, later in the summer nights, these [melodies] poured forth from him in song.

“Tzimmes” spoke in the third person - “*They hit ‘Tzimmes’!*”, he would complain and immediately go into a fit of laughter, [as loud] as from an empty barrel^{*2}.

I once saw him running in the streets, yelling rebelliously. He ran frenzied, as if hurrying somewhere to cause great damage. “We’ll go to *Prezes Szmul Goldsztajn*, we will! Why don’t they let him into the hospital? We’ll smash the *gmina’s* windows, we will! What’s what? What is it you’re thinking, what?” and, running without looking at anyone, he switched suddenly to Polish: “*On by był mądry chłopak jakby go dały do szpitala, jasna cholera!*”^{*3} ‘Tzimmes’ wants to eat! Give him a pair of trousers, give him a bride, ha, ha, ha!” – he had actually started laughing. But nobody took his screaming to heart. “Tzimmes” would not smash any windows. “Tzimmes” ran along ul. Mostowa into the Old Market and made his way to the butchers’ street. There, he sat down composedly on the *podcienie* [walkways] under the chestnut trees by the *kościół* [church]. Now, he once more sat peacefully, lost in his secret, demented world.

^{*1} [TN: *Kepi-like cap popular in late 19th and early 20th century Poland.*]

^{*2} [TN: *As the Yiddish proverb says: “An empty barrel makes the most noise.”*]

^{*3} [TN: *“He’d have been a clever boy if they’d taken him to the hospital, damn it!”*]

But he was not always left in peace. Sometimes, little *łobuzy* [rascals] threw stones at him [or that] a drunken rogue stumbled out from Żubrowski's pub and, upon seeing "Tzimmes", punched him in the stomach. "Tzimmes" ran off wailing wildly, writhing in great pain, but soon fell silent again. He did not hear people calling "*Tzimmes, Tzimmes!*" after him - he only laughed, laughed as if into an empty barrel.

* * *

"Tzimmes", also, formed part of our colourful, Jewish life in Częstochowa. The lumbering, peaceful oaf covered in rags, left in the public space to be spited or pitied, dragging himself about homeless in the winter storms and rainy nights, has in my eyes grown into a sort of gloomy shadow of our sorrowful, homeless and insecure life in Poland.

"Tzimmes" lived to see the Nazi murderers. Yet it was not at their hands that he perished. He rambled about in the "Big Ghetto", albeit by then already completely superfluous. In that hard winter, naked, with his whole heart, he willingly put himself into the hands of his perpetual natural enemy. "Tzimmes" truly did freeze, for the last, last time.