

[Dr Benjamin Orenstein]

## The Letter-Carrier

(Specially written for Gitte'le Ickowicz<sup>1</sup>)

Our street's mailman is low of stature and portly, with a red nose to top it off. Having been delivering letters to the residents of our street already for years and years, they consequently take an interest in this mailman - and particularly in this cherry nose.

Why is it, then, that his nose is rosy? I would like to know that myself - so let us, therefore, listen to what the people recount. People say that, in the summer, his nose is scorched by the blazing and gleaming sun, But what about wintertime? So, they say it turns crimson from the cold and frost. Other residents of our street waive this away, stating his fondness for a glassful of whiskey or brandy as being the cause for his perpetually, red nose.

The residents of our street were keenly eager to learn whether this was the truth. As soon as he set out in the morning, they followed him and ascertained that he was, in fact, indulging in proper shots of whiskey, whereupon he would take the satchel with the huge packs of letters, hang them on his arms and walk and walk. Well, I say "walk", [but] the residents of our street say his gait is [more] like a tchiriboks [?<sup>2</sup>] dance. Our street's mailman has proper bundles to carry - thousands and thousands of letters from all over the globe, newspapers, journals, books and all kinds of bills.

As soon as my father comes home from the workshop, and even before he finishes eating, he starts reading the letters. He first sorts them all separately - invitations, family letters, bills and letters for the *Landmannschaft*, of which he is the Vice-President. But this is not all. What about the letters with ticket booklets to sell? What about the letters with cards for various campaigns? And what about the letters with announcements, proclamations and manifests? Were I to enumerate all the kinds of letters our street's short, pudgy mailman, with the crimson nose brings, I would never finish.

One Sunday, I was [out] walking with my father and we met the postal courier. He does not carry any letters on Sundays, but custom compels him to walk down the [entire] street every day. As soon as he saw my father, he called out, "*Bonjour monsieur le vice-président!*"<sup>3</sup> Did you receive the pack of letters yesterday? Oh dear!" [To which] I exclaimed, "How does he know you're the Vice-President?" Father said, "He knows from the letters." Now I understood why the mailman had a red nose - not just from the hot, gleaming sun, not just from the cold and frost, not just from whiskey - but also from his getting a whiff of all the troubles in the letters.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: This short story is not only dedicated to Gitte'le Ickowicz, the daughter of Berl Ickowicz (later to become Chairman of the Częstochower Landmannschaft in Montreal), but actually written in her name. She recited it at the anniversary banquet held on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1958, as stated in the forthcoming chapter "Ida Maze" (pp.306-309). As it emerges from this story, Berl Ickowicz was Vice-President of the Częstochower Landmannschaft of Paris in the three years during which the family lived there after the War, when Gitte'le was a little girl.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: טשייריבאקס in the Yiddish original; we have as yet not been able to find any mention of a dance by this name or its correct spelling.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Fr., Hello Mr Vice-President!]

The letters to the *Landsmannschaft*, which my father, the Vice-President, received were so sorrowful and tragic, that my father very often wept while reading them. It is, therefore, my impression that in the world there are more troubles, suffering and pain than contentedness, happiness and joy. Is it a trivial matter that each letter was a life's tragedy?

There was a letter which contained two photographs of what one individual looked like some short time previously - healthy and strong - and now his leg had been amputated and he was emaciated, debilitated and spent. There was another letter, also with two photos, of how one was lying in hospital, with whole machines and apparatuses by the bed and a tube up his nose. He could no longer eat anything and they had to feed him through this tube. My father needed to know about all these calamities - what could one do? After all, the people in troubles and in dearth had to somehow be helped.

I told my father, "Ring a few rich people from among your *landsleit*, who are wealthy and have houses, factories and large businesses, so that they should give money and send it off at once, even before the meeting of your Executive takes place."

My father shook his head and said, "No. Do you not know, my child, that the rich people do not wish to give one cent and that they are deaf and dumb to the suffering of others?"

"If so", I asked Father, "then from where does your *Landsmannschaft* take so much money to send to these suffering *landsleit*?"

My father told me, "This is actually a good and appropriate question. We gather for a meeting and, after reading out such a letter, each one gives a few dollars. The givers themselves are labourers in workshops, who toil to make a living themselves, and that is why they have an understanding for those whose lives are even tougher, for those whom Fate has punished."

I then asked, "If everyone gives at a meeting, then don't the rich people also give?"

Father, once more, shook his head, "No. The rich people do not attend the meetings, and we cannot find them at all. In winter, they are in Florida. In summer, they are in the Laurentian [Mountains<sup>4</sup>] and, when they actually are here in town and one rings them, as soon as they hear we are calling from the *Société*, they immediately reply that he is not at home or at the office, and will not be for the next coming weeks. So, what can we achieve with them?"

"If so," I thought, "then there really is nothing right in the world."

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Near Montreal, Canada.]