

Ester Rozental (Sznajderman)

The Miracle

After my mother became a wage-earner, her little lad Awrum-Szlojmele was left at home unsupervised every Tuesday and Friday. (These were the two market days in Częstochowa.)

The infant would wander about Pusch's huge courtyard, yearning for his mother. On one market day, just before *Pesach*, he grew weary of the loneliness and set out to find his mother.

Although she was quite a distance from him, he knew the way. Awrum-Szlojmele had more than once made this walk to the *Nowy Rynek* [New Market], with his little hand clasped in his mother's warm hand. He knew that one needed, first, to walk along ulica Warszawska until one reached the post-office, from which one reached the corner – and, from there, his mother was not far. There was the *Nowy Rynek*, where his mother stood at our stall, selling glassware.



A market day at the Nowy Rynek, on the grounds of Częstochowa's St. Zygmunt Church Square

So then, there he was, at the central marketplace. But instead of turning right, he strayed up to St. Zygmunt's Church. Awrum-Szlojmele then forgot all about looking for his mother. As if in a dream, he wandered about among the unharnessed horses and wagons which stood in front of the church courtyard. The wagons were loaded with fowl, vegetables, calves and fruit. People came and went, and there was a bit of a stir around him.

A young peasant-woman noticed the blond, Jewish infant with the white shirt. She stared at his little, upturned, Slavic nose. His little eyes reminded her of the blue rye flowers in a field of grain. "Ah! Most holy Mother of God!" an idea runs through her mind.

"You Yourself have sent me this great trial. We must save this little soul from unclean, Jewish hands!" Crossing herself piously, she then cried out, "*Jesus-Mary! Jesus-Mary!*"

Two shiny, red lollipops were enough for my little brother to let himself be taken onto a wagon, where he remained, sitting quietly, next to the smiling peasant-woman.

Awrum-Szlojmele sat contently licking the lollipops.

The old peasant, who had meanwhile arrived, poured tasty oats into the feedbags, thinking, "Let my horses not stop along the way" and he quickly harnessed the horses to the wagon. The old man was happy. He was taking home a great find - in one or two years, a pious, little, Christian shepherd would grow up to tend his sheep and cattle.

Our cousin Gittele Szczekacz chanced by there, as she was looking among the farmers' wagons for a cheap sack of potatoes for *Pesach*.

Suddenly, she sees her little cousin - her auntie Dwojrele's little fellow, Awrum-Szlojmele - sitting in a happy, young, peasant-woman's lap, licking sweets. She animatedly stated who the child is and attempted to take him down from the wagon. But the peasant-woman begins screaming, with the old farmer helping her, "This is my grandson! Away from here!" he shouts, threatening with his fists. In a minute he will be off.

"My auntie's little boy!" Gittele screams ever louder. "Give up that child!" A hubbub ensues, Christians and Jews. The atmosphere becomes charged, the tumult is great. Hateful insults against the *Żydzi* begin to be heard.

The newly-baked "mother" stuffs the child with one sweet after another. Awrum-Szlojmele sucks away and looks on with interest.

The yells become increasingly louder - "Poles! To the rescue! A Catholic soul is in danger! *Żydzi* want to steal a little Christian boy!"

And suspicious characters let themselves loose about the Jewish stalls, wishing to stuff their pockets with Jewish goods.

Mothers seize hold of their children and run home. Jews begin to close their shops. Stallholders scrape together what little property and goods they have and hide them.

The braver Jews surround the wagon - they will not allow it to move from there. A few resolute individuals cling tightly to the wagon's side-rails.

The despairing Gittele hits upon an idea. She runs into the church and complains to the priest there, begging him to assist, "Holy father! Please help! He really is a Jewish child!"

He does not refuse her, but he does not hurry. He says he will come out soon, but he doesn't. Each moment seems like a year. The clamour steadily intensifies. At the other side of the marketplace, a Jew woman already screams, "Help! They're robbing the little merchandise I've got!" There, in a corner, a cluster of Christians is fighting with Jews. "*A curse on the Żydzi! Poles, come to the rescue!*" A true brouhaha ensues.

Who knows how the upheaval will end? But then the priest arrives and the Jews breathe more freely. The Gentiles bare their heads. Both sides warmly appeal to his sanctity.

The cleric looks at the child. "Why must you squabble?" he says to the public. "Let us seek signs as to whether this is a child of the Jews or not."

A sepulchral silence falls throughout the marketplace. The tension grows. All eyes are turned to the "Holy Father"!

He takes the infant in his arms, pulls down his little trousers and inspects him. The crowd holds its breath. And then the priest holds the child up high, for all to see.

"See, dearest Christian brothers", he turns with a smile to his congregation. "This child is circumcised. He does not belong to our Holy Creed" - and he hands him over to ecstatic Gittele.

When my mother arrived running, scared to death and breathless, she found her child already safe in the arms of the joyous Gittele.

Awrum-Szlojmele then noticed his mother for the first time and exclaimed: "Mameszi!" [Mummy!]

"Szlojm'I, my child!" cried Mother, pressing her little rescued fellow to her heart, her face awash with tears.

In the *Shabbes* prayers at the Częstochowa study-halls and *shtieblech*, thanks were given to God for the two-fold miracle - a child was saved from Conversion and a pogrom in the city had been averted.