

Ester Rozental (Sznajderman)

## In Pusch's Courtyard (Memories)

My father changed our living quarters often, not because they were not to his liking, heaven forbid! Quite the opposite - they were fine rooms, only too expensive for him. He was always looking for cheaper lodgings and affordable accommodation was hard to come by. They were usually in out-of-the-way streets and, thus, we "wandered". From ul. Ogrodowa, we moved to ul. Krakowska and, from there, to Garncarska. In this manner, we were constantly further and further from the city centre, until we found ourselves living on the property of the German "Herr Pusch", at ul. Warszawska 33, not far from the Three Crosses and the city's checkpoint.

"Why have you dragged us to this far-flung place?", Mother bemoaned. But Father contended that this specific apartment had, literally, a thousand good points.

"Here," he reassured us, "the rent is much lower, the courtyard is large and the air is just like at a summer house. On ulica Garncarska one could really suffocate with the tightness."

True, this was actually a half-Gentile courtyard. Already, by the first week, the neighbour Malinowski's little scoundrels hurled a sharp rock at our poor little fellow, three-year-old Avrum-Szlojmele, hitting him right in his bright little face, [saying], "That little blond Jew is not to cross over to our Polish side! *Swój do swego!*" - which means "each one to his own corner".

Avrum-Szlojmele wept for a long time, not so much from the pain, as from the vexation of having been so brutally driven away from the little Gentile girl, with the blue eyes, who, incidentally, resembled him so much.

For weeks we had to treat the wound on his reddened, tender, little cheek, which already had much matter [granulation tissue?], and left a distinct scar on his little face for life - a reminder of Avrum-Szlojmele's first attempt at friendship with a Polish child.

Our German landlord did not approve of such *contretemps*. So he sought a solution, which he found.

He rented the right section of his large building exclusively to Poles and the left, only to Jews. He stuck to this principle with German precision.

But this was not all. The "territory" of his large courtyard had a dividing line - the right side for Poles and the left for Jews.

This was no abstract, theoretical boundary, but a very concrete, practical one. He dug a narrow ditch along the entire length of his unpaved courtyard which, as it happens, would fill up when it rained, becoming a gutter. This gutter constituted the neutral strip, which belonged to no one and which neither side could cross.

When letting rooms to a new tenant, *Herr Pusch* would inform him of this unwritten law. He would also take him to see the gutter and give him to understand that transgressing this unwritten rule could lead to undesirable deeds on part of the tenants on the other side of the line. The established Jewish neighbours would also warn the newcomers, "Have a care, guard your children".

But children are children after all, and they do not obey their parents. They knew nothing of these intricacies and would cross from one side to the other. The two and three-year-olds lived peacefully side-by-side and wished to play together precisely as equals.

But the four and five-year-old urchins already understood more about borders. They would rough them up and cruelly force them back to their own "territory" yelling, "Out of here, Jewish bastard!"

The older children seldom left their own side. But this did not prevent the Polish scamps from pelting the Jewish half of the building, quite often, with a hail of stones which, many times, even ended in blood. At this point, the Jewish and Gentile mothers would come running up and, with a curse on their lips, would quickly grab hold of their children and take them inside the house. The perpetrators would run away [and] the "war" would be stopped, but not for long - it would be resumed shortly afterwards. This time, two new companies of sworn enemies would be doing battle, for revenge needed to be taken for the victims.

Nowhere did you see as many bandaged heads, feet and hands as had the children of our courtyard!

The Jewish comrades abided by the "law". They almost never crossed over. The reason they were not the first [to start], was not because they were, heaven forbid, pathetic little cowards, but because they simply had no time. Besides their constant preparedness for battle, in case they were attacked, they were occupied with matters of importance. Are there not enough amusements in the world?

Since both sides were in a "perpetual state of war", they were always in readiness and had the "necessary stores of ammunition". Large stockpiles of stones of all sizes lay at the ready - large, medium and small.

Even the older children and the parents guarded these caches of projectiles.

The warfare in our courtyard was not only waged with the hands. Each stone thrown was accompanied with a fitting epithet. These insults were always appropriate to each [individual] situation - they will never grow old!

Below, we set forth [some] of these fine epithets, only translated into Yiddish [and now into English]: "Hey, Jewish scoundrel!", "Little Jew with sidelocks!", "Jewish beast!", "Jewish mug [i.e., face]!", "Hey! Woe, oh Moishe!", "Red Rivke!". But the most "popular" exclamation was - "Beilis<sup>1</sup> - go to Palestine!"

The most common abuse-word at the time was "Palestine".

Our left flank also possessed an arsenal of derogatory expressions. They did not usually target the opposition's racial feelings - "Pig!", "Churl!", "Idiot!", "Daft numbskull!"

But the older children already knew how to hurt the enemy's national pride, and would shout at the tops of their voices, "Pranaitis<sup>2</sup>!", "Helena!", "Macoch<sup>3</sup>!", "Żebraczka!" ["Beggar"?]. The Right Flank would feel particularly insulted by this and would retaliate with a reinvigorated onslaught.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Menachem Mendel Beilis was a Russian Jew accused of ritual murder in Kiev in a notorious 1913 trial, known as the "Beilis affair".]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Justinas Pranaitis, a cleric and Professor of Hebrew Language, rose to fame when he was called as an expert witness to testify to the Talmudic hatred of Christians at the Beilis trial.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: The following is from a translator's note in *Tshenstokhover Yidn*, p.4: "Damazy Macoch was a monk in Czenstochow's [sic] Pauline Convent. He killed his cousin and confessed to the murder, which took place after the monk, his cousin and his cousin's wife had committed a robbery at Jasna Gora, desecrating the robe and diamond encrusted crown of the "Black Madonna" and stealing and selling the jewels.]

From time to time, a “Great Champion”, whose sole purpose in life is to vanquish the enemy, arises on either side.

Malinowski’s jewel, Wacek, no longer goes to school. He helps his father to slaughter pigs in their sties. Wacek saunters about the courtyard from quite early in the morning to late in the evening, his pockets stuffed with stones. He is always ready to attack. But Wacek is a coward - he never launches an assault before his “comrades” arrive.

Our company harboured a murderous hatred for him and would aim their stones at him in particular. When one found its mark, his outcries were heard once. He would run to complain to his father, who was a bruiser. But when Wacek’s father arrived, he would find an already empty yard.

The enemy also had other military strategies against the Left Side. Occasionally, someone would unlock a Jewish coop in the night and drive out the hens.

During the days of *Sukkos*, the “atmosphere of war” in our courtyard heated up. The enemy camp was then prepared to perpetrate the ugliest acts.

Already, on the morning after *Yom Kippur*, our German landlord saw it necessary to go pay his tenants on the right side of the border a visit and warn them that “the sheds” would soon be approaching and to not disturb the “Israelites”. “Speak with your children about this”, he appealed to their conscience, with his permanent smile.

He went through these same motions every year. But his efforts were in vain, as he knew better than anyone else.

Someone would quietly part the thatching on the roof to one side and slip into the *sukkah* during the night. The lock on the door of *sukkah* would remain hanging intact, as if nothing had happened. But the colourful paper chains, lanterns and Stars of David would lay in tatters, scattered on the ground and on the table of the locked *sukkah*.

Our neighbour, Mendel the painter, once forgot to take down the sheets draped on the walls of his *sukkah*. In the morning he found them on the ground, torn to shreds.

Everyone knew “they” had done it, but we could not catch anyone in the act and were thus unable to take anyone to task over it.

One rainy night, the tapestry which so splendidly decorated our upstairs neighbour’s *sukkah* was stolen.

There was no option but to take down even the smallest decoration every night and to see, each evening, the *sukkos* stand impoverished and unadorned. But this, too, was to no avail. The pious and circumspect Kalisz *chassid*, whose modest little *sukkah* was built directly on the threshold of his small dwelling, one morning found a large dead mouse covered with thatching on the table, which the antisemitic scum had thrown in during the night.

His fragile wife, who could barely keep soul and body together, lay the entire holiday sick in bed from the anguish. Her humiliated husband, with their little children, ate their meals during the remaining days of the festival at Mendel the painter’s *sukkah*. Although there were enough places at the table for both families, the Kalisz *chassid*, with his five pale, frightened little boys<sup>4</sup>, would wait

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: His wife and daughters would have stayed at home for meals, as women are exempt from sitting in the *sukkah*.]

patiently until Mendel Painter had finished his meal and left the *sukkah*. We all understood the reason. The noble and proud woman did not wish anyone to see, God forbid, what food she gave her husband and sons to take into the *sukkah*. The Kalisz *Chassidim* family was the noblest and most religious, but the poorest family in our courtyard.

Henech Kolin, the flour merchant, was our neighbour further down the courtyard. He lived right up against the city's checkpoint. One night, they set his *sukkah* on fire and he and his family were only saved by a miracle. After this, we set up a night watch in our half to guard the *sukkos*. Each night a different neighbour stood on guard.

(All this was once. Now there is no longer any border across Pusch's estate. Everything is in "their" hands - "they" have been relieved of the Jews!)