

18



Josef's first meeting with American Jews and with his *landsleit* [Yid., fellow townspeople] and friends was in Chicago. Here, he also met with the friend of his youth, Mojsze Cieszyński.

Josef was welcomed in Chicago in a very friendly manner. Other Jewish refugees, with whom Josef arrived, were shown the same friendliness. They were looked upon with great amazement. Every refugee was truly regarded as a living miracle. Tearing oneself out of the claws of the Nazi murderers really was a miracle from Heaven. Among those who came to meet the refugees was Dr B. Ajsurowicz, the old, well-known Bundist activist, whom Josef had known so well back on the other side of the ocean.

During the first days, as Josef tread the streets of the city of Chicago, he felt both joy and grief - joy that he was treading the soil of America, the land of the free, and grief, when he thought about the friends and loved ones he had left behind in Poland. Who knew what awaited all of them there? Who knew what the Nazi murderers were preparing to do with them and all the Jews in Poland?

Eventually, Josef arrived in New York - the global city which he had once dreamt to visit, as a delegate of the organised workforce in Warta, but which, due to some hindrance, had not come about at the time.

Now, Josef had come here as a refugee. He had no family or relatives in America, but he knew that he had numerous comrades and friends, and even intimate friends here - only he had not exchanged any correspondence with them for many years.

New York made no extraordinary impression on Josef - not even the skyscrapers. The greatest wonder for him was the greenery - the beautiful parks and the tall trees, which were still covered in green leaves, although it was already late autumn. He had always imagined America as one big factory, and he ended up seeing grass - truly green grass - and trees, and hearing the twittering of the birds.

Josef arrived in New York City on a beautiful, sunny day in November 1940. He was among the first Jewish refugees whom the Jewish Labour Committee had rescued from Europe. They had truly suffered torments and gone through a great deal on the long journey via Russia and Japan, but at least they had made it safe and sound. In his heart, Josef was also glad he had managed to save Miriam. She had a brother in New York. "Also, good", Josef thought - he had at least some relative, by way of Miriam. He felt as if her kinsman was also his own relative. Thanks to Miriam, he felt less alone in the alien New York.

Those, who encountered him and Miriam, wished to know at least some scrap of information about their own relatives in Poland. Had they seen so-and-so? [What about] this other? Was he alive or, Heaven forbid, had he perished? Who had been saved, and who was still there?

Among those coming to meet him, Josef was on the lookout for Mirl, his once close female friend. He looked everywhere but, to his great dismay, he did not see Mirl. Instead of Mirl, the one who came was actually her husband, Symcha. Symcha greeted Josef coldly. [He only] gave him a *shulem alaichem*¹, and spoke as little as possible. They both looked at each other wordlessly. Josef sensed that Symcha was not too enthusiastic about his arrival. Under his nose, Symcha mumbled that Mirl was busy with the child, therefore she had been unable to come meet him. Josef felt that this was just an excuse. Symcha had probably made it so that Mirl should not be able to come meet him.

The refugees moved into various homes, which the Jewish Labour Committee provided for them. Josef and Miriam were given two separate rooms in the same hotel, somewhere in Manhattan. They registered themselves as man and wife, but lived separately.

The Jewish Labour Committee aided Josef in the same manner in which it aided all the refugees, who were given a place of refuge in America. Later, Josef lived in the home of one of the refugees, who had a family, and thanks to whom he had received a five-room apartment. This dwelling was not far from the beautiful Hudson River. Miriam, on her part, obtained lodgings with another member of the refugee group somewhere in the Bronx.

In those first days, when Josef and Miriam were still at the hotel with all the refugees, Mirl came to his door.

On this occasion, the doorbell rang for a long time. Josef, with a pounding heart, ran to open the door. Mirl was standing [there] frightened, and regarded him with wounded eyes. They fell into each other's arms and kissed one another. Mirl had changed much over the last couple of years. She had become older and fuller in the face. She was the same Mirl - and [yet] not the same. In her eyes were worry and sorrow. Josef already understood everything. She was far from being happy. In a vexed manner, she told him that Symcha had already contrived and planned that she should not be able to see Josef upon his arrival in New York. There was [only] one bit of joy in her heart at this time - her child Lajbe'le². Oh, Josef had to come see this child!

Josef derived no great pleasure, when Symcha once came and took Josef to his home for an evening meal. Josef could not bear Symcha's coldness, constant silence and continuous, nervous cigarette smoking. Josef was particularly shocked by Symcha's disdain of everything and everyone.

In the meantime, Wiktor and Stefa - who were officially inscribed in Josef's passport as his "children" - also arrived in New York. It is strange, how this big New York scattered everyone. Everyone was living in a different area of the city. They only met occasionally. Josef saw Miriam more frequently than the "children".

¹ [TN: Heb., "Peace be upon you"; traditional Jewish greeting.]

² [TN: Based on the facts in "Czenstochover Yidn", to the effect that "Mirl" was in fact Chaja Waga-Rothman, "Mirl's" husband "Symcha" was in reality Mr Benjamin Rothman (b.1896, Ciechanów, Poland; d.1973, New York, USA), and their son "Lajbe'le" was Lajzer, or Lawrence, Rothman, all of whom are mentioned in "Czenstochover Yidn".]

Upon meeting a new, well-known, Bundist and activist in the Jewish Labour Committee of their own, the members would often ask Josef, "So, how do you like America?". Having no response, Josef would shrug his shoulders. Without waiting for his answer, the comrades would tell him, "Well, Josef, you'll live it up³ here - you'll be alright⁴!".

This gave Josef a stab in the heart. "I have *not* come here to *live it up*", was Josef's response to their consolations - *I am only staying temporarily*.

By no means could Josef come to terms with the idea that he would already remain a local evermore - he never stopped thinking of "there". The word "there" never left his mind.

Indeed, who knew what was happening with the Jews under Hitler, may his name be obliterated, in Poland? With all his heart and with all his being, Josef cast himself into the work of doing something for the unfortunate Jews, who were languishing in Poland.

* * *

In those days, Comrade Artur [Szmul-Mordechaj] Zygielbojm arrived in New York. The man had risked his life, tearing his way through various dangers and borders. He went to Germany, stood face-to-face with the Nazi murders, and still made it safely to America. Zygielbojm brought greetings from the live, tortured Jews in Warsaw.

Josef well understood Comrade Artur Zygielbojm's claims that Jews, here, were not doing enough and that they needed to live differently. Besides sending money, people here needed to voluntarily live on bread and water, and simply make the same sacrifices as those there, in half-destroyed Poland. In particular, the local loyal Bundists needed to do this. How else, then? What does the Bund mean, if not making sacrifices, and serving the idea of redemption [of the Jewish working class] with one's own life?

It pained Josef when he saw how hatred and civil war, left and right, were reigning here amongst Jewish workers, instead of international solidarity.

Weeks and months race by. Josef sees how the majority of his comrades, the newly-arrived refugees, gradually settle down, enter workshops, earn a living and "live it up" - they come to be "alright". They do miss home and write letters. The news, which arrives is ever worse. Nevertheless, people are meanwhile living their lives. What can they do? They send money and console themselves - maybe a miracle will happen and the Nazis will finally be defeated after all!

Josef, however, took the bad news arriving from Poland differently. No! He could not remain indifferent. Josef went about and thought, "The Communists are indifferent to the war with Hitler, may his name be obliterated. Why? Because Soviet Russia has an agreement with Nazi Germany. 'Nazism has suddenly become appealing', as [Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav]

³ [TN: The expression used in the Yiddish original is "machen a leben" (make a life), which is used as "live it up" or "have a blast" is in English.]

⁴ [TN: In English in the original (אַלֶּרײַט), to show that even his friends already spoke in a manner alien to the author by introducing English words into their conversations in Yiddish.]

Molotov says literally, without any shame⁵. The aid of the American Jews is, by far, also insufficient. What is left to do? We need to approach all Jews, without differentiation - religious and unreligious.”

“Let us redouble the aid!”, Josef called in his mind, as it were, to those nearest to him - the *landsleit* of his hometown. “Let us stir up the *da’as ha’kuhol*”⁶, let us shout in the streets! Let us not rest!”.

Josef comes to work in a workshop. After all, he needs a means of sustenance. But immediately after work, he devotes every bit of his free time to the Jews in Poland - to the comrades left behind in that hell. He also does not forsake Rywka. He frequently ponders how to aid her materially. He manages, through the Red Cross, to correspond with Rywka. He receives letters. Rywka understands everything.

It has been one long, complicated chain of events. He was forced to inscribe Miriam as his wife in order to be able to save her, Wiktor and Stefa. Otherwise, the Soviet authorities would never have let her out of the “paradise” there. He will do everything to bring Rywka to America. He will “divorce” Miriam - this must be done for appearance’s sake. After all, he arrived here with her as his wife. Later, he hopes, Rywka will be a good “step-mother” to the “children”, Wiktor and Stefa. Perhaps, in this manner, she will also be able to come here.

Rywka understands everything. She writes to Josef that she finds herself in a small town somewhere in France, living with a French Christian family.

Meanwhile, in New York, Miriam has very frequent meetings with Josef. Together, they visit Mirl and, for long hours, they sit discussing the predicaments which life may still bring. Since Josef has started receiving letters from Rywka, Miriam has become downcast and cross. She had hoped differently. He, Josef, came here with her as her husband, and she had hoped to stay with him. But now it seems Josef has different plans. He has, in fact, remained loyal to his real wife and is actually making preparations to bring her here.

This pained Miriam. She was disappointed, although she did not say this out in words, because her pride did not allow her. In the end, she agreed to be legally “divorced” from Josef, bringing in an alleged claim that he, Josef, had been unfaithful to her. Her brother Nuchem served as witness. He, Miriam’s brother, had found Josef with another woman in his house. Miriam stood in the courtroom and enacted the role of an unhappy wife, whom her husband had betrayed. She was granted a divorce, and they were both free people now. The friendship between Josef and Miriam continued to be maintained. Already after the divorce, Miriam was [still] secretly hoping Josef would sometime be her soulmate.



⁵ [TN: Ref. to Molotov’s comment to journalists upon signing the non-aggression pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany, to the effect that “Fascism is a matter of taste”. (Various sources)]

⁶ [TN: Heb., “opinion of the (Jewish) community” (דעת הקהל).]