

## 7



That was the time of the renaissance of Yiddish literature. To counteract the existing [assimilationist], Polish-Hebrew Lira [Society], the Jewish Literary Society was founded in Warta. During this period, vigorous struggles for Yiddish took place.

In that year, Josef also gave his first lecture on the Yiddish language. Josef even remembers that he finished the lecture with a quote from [Sz.] L. Kawa, in which the “*Toychaichu*<sup>1</sup>” is poured upon all those, who are ashamed of Yiddish. As a response to Josef’s lecture, there came a second lecture by Leon Kopiński, who defended Hebrew as the national language of the Jews.

It was then that the poet and actor Mark Schweid and the actress Miriam Izraels, the wife of the Jewish sculptor [Szymon-Ber (Bernard)] Kratka, came down to the city of Warta. Their arrival in Warta was a great celebration for the youth. Josef participated in several one-act plays by I.L. Peretz, which Schweid and Izraels directed.

Josef truly looked upon Miriam Izraels as upon a biblical figure. The way she dressed and her entire appearance reminded one of the ancient biblical characters. Miriam spent a few months in town. Josef recalls when she was to arrive from Warsaw for the second time. His heart was burning with love for her, but he told no one about this, including Miriam herself. Josef waited for her at the train [station] with a bouquet of flowers but, to his great dismay, Miriam Izraels did not arrive that day. However, he hid the flowers and, only on the following day, took them to Miriam at Aron Perc’s house, where she was staying.

It was very warm and interesting to spend time in Miriam’s company. She wonderfully interpreted songs, playing a small [wooden] box with metal plates. Miriam danced rhythmically to the sounds of the music. During the same period, when she was putting on Yiddish one-acts, the *Lira* also invited her to perform Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Hanusia*<sup>2</sup> in Polish, [with Koźmiński as her partner].

If truth be told, at the time, Josef was extremely vexed with Miriam for performing theatre in Polish. And, above all, because she was giving, more than to himself, all her attention to her Polish partner. As a souvenir of Miriam, Josef was left with two photographs. In one of them, her gentle, pure Jewish features are seen in profile, wearing a hat with a large feather and, in the other, she is sitting in a sports outfit, with Koźmiński, the Polish amateur actor, standing in front of her and reciting. Josef kept these photographs in his archive until the last days of his being in Poland.

---

<sup>1</sup> [TN: Heb., lit. “Admonition” (תוכחה), ref. to all the curses written in Leviticus 26:16-39 and Deuteronomy 28:16-68; to “pour the Toychaichu” on someone is to heap all the curses in the world upon them.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: The original German title is “Hanneles Himmelfahrt”, or “The Assumption of Hannale”.]

In the years after the First World War, Josef met Miriam (as Tucia Arciszewska), by chance, on a tram in Warsaw. They spoke to each other in Polish. He already saw, before him, a different Miriam Izraels - no longer the one he had once adored so in his heart.

\* \* \*

In those days, when the Reaction had begun to loosen its restraints, Comrade Berl Gutman arrived in the city of Warta as an emissary of the SS Party's Central Committee. The group of SS [members] was called together, and they met at a hairdressing establishment<sup>3</sup>. The envoy informed them regarding the convention of the Territorialist Organisation, which was to be held in Vienna, and about the conference of the SS Party, which would be held during the same opportunity. Three volunteered to travel to the conference as guests - Josef, his brother Zalman and Pinie [Pinchas] Kalka.

The activists Dr Józef Kruk, Majer Fajnrajch and Icek Gurski – Josef's fellow townsmen – were already in Vienna at the time. They were among the organisers of that Vienna conference.

Sometime later, after Josef's return from Vienna, gendarmes and policemen raided Josef's house in the middle of the night and conducted a search. Nothing fishy was found. A few books from the library were seized in the raid, but no one was arrested. No one knew whom they had been after with this search - whether himself or his brother Zalman. Later, when Josef was summoned to the gendarmerie for questioning, he realised that the raid had been in connection with the Vienna conference.

Josef's brother, Zalman, needed to present himself for the *prizyv* [conscription]. At the time, he was working for Dr Wolberg in the paint factory, and his earnings were not bad. The problem arose as to how to rescue him from the hands of the Gentiles<sup>4</sup> - as, should Zalman be forced to go to the army, the household would lose its main income provider. Therefore, Zalman gave himself a bit of a maiming<sup>5</sup>, but was conscripted despite his mutilation. It was only sometime later that a "*macher*" from Lublin had him released, and an "angel" went to serve in his place (an "angel" meant sending someone away to the military instead of the person who had been conscripted).

Once Zalman came home from the military service, the livelihood problem was resolved. But soon Josef also had to present himself for the *prizyv*.

Up until the *prizyv*, Josef worked in a pharmaceutical warehouse as an assistant bookkeeper. His boss and his wife were assimilated Jews. His boss himself, Maurycy Neufeld, was [also] a radical man himself, and had even been banished abroad once, due to his political convictions. He lived as an exile in Germany and conducted his business from there. In 1905, he took part in the great demonstration, when Tsar Nikolai [II] issued the "Constitution". At the

---

<sup>3</sup> [TN: According to the author's memoirs in "Czenstochover Yidn", this was the barbershop of Wolf Pakuła, Mendel Kowal's son.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: A Jewish recruit in the Tsar's army would not have been permitted to keep the Jewish religious laws – such as *kashrus* or *Shabbes* – and would have thus been forced to adopt the ways of the Gentiles. Such people later found it almost impossible to return to Jewish society.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: In order to evade conscription to the Tsar's army, many Jewish youths employed tactics such as sleep deprivation, starving themselves or self-inflicted wounds, which in some cases reportedly included the chopping off digits.]

demonstration, he wore a *paroiches*<sup>6</sup> from Napoleon's times, embroidered with a Polish eagle<sup>7</sup>. It was for this very demeanour that he was punished.

His daughter Wanda, a renowned pianist, was wed to a Czech named Kopecki - a professor of music. The two of them occasionally gave concerts for philanthropic causes. In her younger years, Wanda had belonged to the Bund, and her parents' house had been the meeting place for various socialist gatherings.

Maurycy Neufeld lived out his last years in solitude. All his sons and daughters, except for his daughter Wanda, had tragically perished. In his old age, he was left only with his daughter Wanda, because her husband - the Czech - had abandoned her a couple of years after the marriage.

Communal life in town was dead. The youth was [out] dancing. Josef experienced many disappointments at the time. He was lacking someone close with whom to share his experiences [and] the thoughts of disappointment during the years of the Reaction.

During this period, Josef became acquainted with a girl named Hela. At the time, Josef thought that, in this girl, he had finally found that closest of persons, and the friendship he had needed so much. Hela was an intelligent girl. She would always go about with a book under her arm. She was her parents' pampered daughter. She had a dainty and delicate face. Her permanent, gracious smile, her delicacy, and her proficiency in [world] literature attracted Josef. He fell in love with her. Josef acquainted her with the Yiddish literature, of which she did not have much of an idea. He often read to her from the works of Yiddish writers. Even though the match with Josef did not suit her parents, due to his insufficient source of income, Josef and Hela wrote *Tnuyim*<sup>8</sup>. There could be no talk yet of getting married, because Josef was not free of the *prizyv* yet.

In 1913, Josef reported for the *prizyv* and was accepted by the military medical examiners, who sent him to Piotrków for [further] assessment on the part of the *gubernia*. There, he was also accepted as "*godyen*" [годен], meaning fit for military service. Josef felt strongly disinclined to serve Phonya<sup>9</sup>, and sought all kinds of ways to get out of it. In the meantime, the gendarmerie came one night and arrested Josef. Once more, he was interrogated in connection with his journey to Vienna for the SS convention. After the interrogation, Josef remained in jail.

For the first couple of days, Josef sat all alone in a cell in prison. Later, they put an arrestee in his cell - a Pole by the name of Jan. Jan wore chains on his feet, to prevent him from escaping. This Jan was a Gentile with a long moustache and a pair of burly arms. But he had mild eyes, and was goodness itself. Josef found out why Jan was bound in chains - this was [because] Jan

---

<sup>6</sup> [TN: Ornamental screen or curtain covering the Holy Ark in which a synagogue's Torah scrolls are kept.]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: A photograph of this flag-turned-synagogue-curtain with the white Polish eagle may be seen at the beginning of *Sefer Częstochowa*, on col. 37.]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: Heb., lit. "conditions" (תנאים), viz. the conditions of betrothal which are signed by the bride and groom to be upon their engagement to be wed. The term "*tnuyim*" in Yiddish is synonymous with "engagement" in English.]

<sup>9</sup> [TN: Derogative term for a typical Russian derived from the name Aphonasy; this slur was very popular in Yiddish, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.]

had killed his neighbour, the Pole Wojciech, because the latter had been too friendly with Jan's wife.

Well, Jan was a drunkard. One time, when Jan was drunk, he actually caught them in an extremely inappropriate situation, and he put Wojciech away. Now, they were certainly going to hang him. After the story which Jan told Josef, it became ominously silent in the cell, and Josef sat dejected, listening to the pounding of his heart. Jan continued smiling, resigned. He was obviously pleased that he had settled the score with that scum, Wojciech. Jan would pace about in the cell, and the clanking of the chains on his feet unnerved Josef. From the fear of being in the same cell as a murderer, Josef was unable to sleep at night. Dark thoughts came to his mind. But he gradually became friendlier with Jan, and he became a good brother to him. When Jan was brought a "*wotowka*"<sup>10</sup> for the non-Jewish holiday, which contained all sorts of good things to eat, Josef was compelled to eat together with Jan, for Jan would have felt offended had Josef not eaten.

From day to day, Jan became more talkative and heartier. Sitting in jail became easier. This Jan had a world of tales to tell, and thus the time flew by in the murky prison cell, where the little window was covered with a wooden shutter. The sun never reached this little jail window, which looked out to the garden of the Town Hall.

Josef's betrothed, Hela, would come every day to the prison and bring him food. However, Josef was not permitted to see her. Josef would sit then by the little window and express his yearning for Hela and the freedom outside by singing sad Yiddish folksongs. He would convey his requests with words and melodies.

From Josef's singing, Hela would already understand what he wished to say to her. She would stand behind the little window and hear Josef's voice, although she did not see his face. Tears streamed from her eyes. Josef instinctively sensed Hela's closeness, and it became easier on his heart.

Josef sat in prison for four weeks, [until] they notified him that the trial against him would be cancelled, and he would be sent, with a special convoy, to military service in Piotrków, to the "*zborny punkt*" [rallying point].

On his last day sitting in jail, Jan heartily bade him farewell. Josef comforted him to the effect that his trial would go well and he would surely be set free. Jan thanked Josef for his comforting words and wished him happiness, and urged him to beat out of his mind his mad and senseless preoccupation with overthrowing the Tsar. "Better worry about yourself, Josef", he told him, and kissed him warmly.

When Josef was taken away with the special convoy to Piotrków, Hela travelled along with him.

---

<sup>10</sup> [TN: Most likely diminutive form of the Polish "*wotowina*", which means "beef"; from the context, this was obviously a sort of Christmas hamper.]

Nevertheless, Josef was able to extricate himself from there. In this, he was aided by the military tailor from Warta, Baum, who was living in Piotrków at the time. Josef then put himself in contact with the “*macher*”, a Jew named Berl Blum, a Chassidic Jew from Lublin, who had earlier freed Josef’s brother, Zalman. Firstly, the “*macher*” made efforts to remove, from Josef’s military file, the appended paper stating that he was a political suspect. The “*macher*” came from Lublin to Piotrków [explicitly] for this purpose. After that, Josef received the required papers.

With the prepared papers, Josef travelled to Winnica [Vinnytsia, Ukraine], where the “*macher*” awaited him at a hotel and took the papers from him. Berl Blum told Josef to travel to Lublin, until he let him know that he had been freed. A [so-called] “angel” went to serve in Josef’s place<sup>11</sup>. Josef never did discover his name. He only saw this “angel” once, in a corridor of the hotel in Winnica. Later, soldiers of his acquaintance, who had served [in the army], told Josef that they had served along with one certain Josef Szalit, who was an utter invalid and a terribly bad soldier, and had been immediately released from the *pułk* [regiment]...

\* \* \*

Throughout the duration of his “angel’s” military service, Josef was forced to hide out in an unfamiliar city. He stayed in Warsaw for a little time, but he could not remain there long - too many acquaintances from Warta were showing up there. Josef was [also] at the “*macher*’s” house in Lublin a couple of times, until he once got the idea to visit his great-uncle, whom he had never met until then, but of whom he had often heard things said at home. This great-uncle was also named Duwid, like Josef’s father. The great-uncle had once been one of the soldiers of [Tsar] Nikolai [II], and he had been married in Russia. As a result, he was estranged from the family and never came to visit them. He had settled in Augustów, where he became a *felczer* [barber-surgeon].

Josef arrived in Augustów on a cold winter night. He asked for the *felczer* Duwid Szalit. He was shown where the *felczer* lived. Josef saw, in front of him, a tall, broad-boned man with a combed beard and who looked like a Russian general. In the *shtetl*, he was known as the “*Powiatowy Starszy Felczer*” [Pol., Senior County Medic]. When Josef told him who he was, he put his arms around him, embraced him and kissed him, as the first of his family, of whom he had seen no one for many years. The old man was so happy, that he sobbed like a small child.

Josef told his great-uncle about his father’s premature death, the children who had been left behind and the family’s unhappy situation. The uncle would sit for entire days and recount tales from the years when he was Nikolai’s soldier. The uncle also deplored his loneliness to Josef. His wife had died not long before. Their two daughters were already married; one of whom was in America and the other lived in Charków [Kharkiv, Ukraine]. He had a [good] livelihood, thank God. The peasants in the villages saw him as a full-fledged doctor, and the Jews also strongly approved of him. In his uncle’s words, Josef sensed a tone of yearning for

---

<sup>11</sup> [TN: According to the author’s memoirs in “Czenstochover Yidn”, he had to pay the “*macher*” 1000 roubles for this service. When this happened, in 1913, 1,000 roubles were roughly equivalent to 500 contemporary US dollars, which was quite a hefty sum in the day. At around the period, in 1907, one could purchase slightly over 761 grams of gold for 1,000 roubles (source: <https://www.quora.com/How-much-would-have-been-1-000-Russian-ruble-in-US-dollars-in-1907>).]

a family life. Josef thought of his perpetually weeping mother, the widow. What would ultimately happen with her? Was he perhaps the emissary? Maybe his mother would no longer be a widow. The uncle had the same name [as his father]... Yes - was this perhaps *bashert* [Yid., meant to be]?

Before travelling away, Josef bashfully made the uncle hear [his idea]. The uncle listened to Josef's halting speech with joy. He was prepared to come to Warta as soon as they let him know, and that was how it remained. As soon as Josef had talked things through with his mother, he would send the uncle a telegram, and he would come immediately.

On that day, Josef received a telegram that he needed to come at once to Winnica - his military service had already ended. In Winnica, Josef received his release papers. Like a true "Phonya", Josef [had his hair cut but] left the moustache, donned a pair of boots and military clothing and travelled into Warta. All Josef's friends and acquaintances looked upon him as a true soldier. They looked him up and down, and one of them ruefully exclaimed, "'See what a few weeks of serving *Phonya* can make of a man! Yes, the barracks leave a stamp on one's face!"

Josef came home freed from the army and did not stop thinking of Uncle Duwid. He called together his sisters and brothers, Aunt Hinda, and his father's brother, Uncle Szulim. They talked it over, and all of them agreed that it was a good thing. They let Uncle Duwid know that he should come. And a couple of days later, he arrived. [Josef's] mother was wed for a second time. However, she never called her second husband by his name, only "Uncle". And when she spoke to him, she addressed herself to him in the [respectful] third person - "Let Uncle go", "Let Uncle take something to eat", and so forth.

With the uncle, [Josef's] mother travelled to Augustów. At home, it became a little sad. Josef, his brother Zalman and sister Cirla held together. They maintained the household with all their strengths. For a while, it seemed that life would be peaceful - but then the First World War broke out, and the face of everything all around changed.