

2



Early one winter morning, when Josef arrived in *cheder*, his *Rebbe*¹, [Reb] Fajwel-Awigdor, greeted him with an expansive “*Git morgen!*” [Good morning²], and gave him a *mazel tov*. Josef did not understand what this meant, and he thought the Rebbe was making fun of him - but the *Rebbe* and the *Rebbetzin* announced to Josef, with a serious mien, that his father had won the grand prize in the lottery. Josef did not wish to believe it, but they assured him that it was true - because the cobbler, who lived in the cellar of the same building, had also won with that same ticket, which had been shared among a group of neighbours.

Immediately, Josef got up and, at full speed, raced home to deliver the good news to his parents. Upon coming home, he found his mother fixing [the fire in] the cooker in the kitchen, and his father preparing to go down to the tavern (they lived above the tavern, on the first storey).

His father heard Josef out and said the following words to him, “Go, my son, back to *cheder*. Were it true, that I won the grand prize in the lottery, they would already have let me know about it, and besides - I do not have any ticket. I play for half a rouble or something on Szyja-Lajzer’s ticket. He came to see me last night and said nothing about that. I’m sure that we only won the *stawka* (stake) [viz. investment] back - and people rush to say ‘the grand prize!’”

Josef woefully cast down head and returned to the *cheder*, with a heart embittered towards the *Rebbe* for having deceived him. But the *Rebbe*, once more, assured Josef that he had not been making a joke and that people knew better. If they said so, then it must be true. He actually suspected that perhaps Josef’s father did not wish to admit that he had won the grand prize, so as not to tear people’s eyes out [with envy].

After a few hours of study, Josef went back home with his friend Lajzer [Berkowicz] to catch something to eat. As he neared the house, he noticed that the tavern was closed. Josef immediately understood that something had happened, and what came to mind was that what they had said was probably true - that his father had, in fact, won the grand prize.

At home, he found his mother teary-eyed and father busy, as if he was preparing for something. To his inquiry as to whether the news which he had brought in the morning was true, his mother’s weeping became louder, and his father came up to him and, with moist, teary eyes, embraced Josef and gave him a kiss on the head, saying, “It’s true! You were the first to deliver the happy news!”, whereupon Josef himself also broke out in a high wailing. He wept both for joy and for his chagrin at not having been believed earlier. “I knew from the start that the *Rebbe* would not fool me!”, Josef cried out in tears.

¹ [TN: The term “Rebbe” is used in Yiddish in ref. to both a teacher in *cheder* and a Chassidic master; the Rebbe’s wife is called a “Rebbetzin”, as follows.]

² [TN: In those times, the social consensus was that the pupil greeted the teacher, and not vice-versa.]

That was the first and probably only kiss his father ever gave him, even though his father was very fond of him and always delighted in him - especially when he danced the "Cossack" on *Simchas Torah* at the *shtiebel*. It seems that Jews once expressed their love for [their] children differently, and did not approve much of giving [them] kisses.

That day, Josef already did not return to *cheder*. He only raced back to tell the *Rebbe* that it was true - that they were partners in the grand prize, and that his father had an entire rouble's stake in the ticket. Once more, the *Rebbe* wished him *mazel tov*, and told him to bring liquor and *lekach* [honey cake] to *cheder* on the following day.

Their house was seething like a boiler. People came, murmured secretively, and talked out loud, constantly wishing *mazel tov*. The door stood open, people came in and out. After the tumult with the *mazel tovs*, the argument regarding the size of the share in the prize ensued. It took quite a few days before an agreement was reached as to how much his father's share came to. Josef remembers that his father took him along to Szyja-Lajzer, the main partner in the win. His father's share came to over 3,000 roubles, but Szyja-Lajzer did not wish to give his partner Duwid more than 2,800 roubles. Josef recalls that, at that "meeting", he gave a "speech" (his first one), proving that his father was entitled to a much larger sum. Josef protested against this wrong, which they wished to perpetrate upon his father. His words helped, because his father actually received another 100 roubles. Afterwards, Szyja-Lajzer told his partner Reb Duwid that he was only giving the additional hundred roubles on account of his son Josef, but that, for God's sake, the other partners should not become aware of it.

[The lives of] dozens of Jews in town were set upright by the grand prize. All of them were partners in that same ticket. That was the largest ever prize of the Braunschweig [Brunswick] Lottery to be received [in Częstochowa]. The ticket's number has even remained in Josef's memory - 52935.

The prize brought great joy and hopes to Josef's home. His father paid debts and was thinking about putting away dowries and making good matches for his daughters.

The custom in the household, regarding the children's education, also changed a little. The elder brother Zalman, who had hitherto studied at Złotnik's, now made it to [Redko's] *progimnazjum*. Josef looked to his friend Lajzer [Berkowicz], and joined the *народная училище* (public school).

During the few weeks that Josef attended this school - in the *wstępne* (preliminary class) - he had to endure many torments from his friends at the Chassidic *shtiebel*. Every *Shabbes*, when Josef came with his father to the prayer service, the group of boys remonstrated with him to the effect that he had become a "Goy" [Gentile]. Josef was forced to take off his short coat and cap with the shiny visor³ and, again, donned his long caftan and, once more, began to study at Fajwel-Awigdor's with great diligence.

³ [TN: This was the public-school uniform at the time.]

Every *Shabbes* morning, he would study a page of the Talmud by himself, with a sing-song chant, and would read through the weekly Torah section⁴, and his parents were delighted and took pride in him - "Josse'le, *keinehure*⁵, is growing into a [decent] man!"



⁴ [TN: The custom among religious Jews is to read, during the course of each week, the Torah section that is to be read at the synagogue during the Saturday morning prayer service; each verse is read twice in the original Hebrew and once in the Aramaic translation by Onkelos.]

⁵ [TN: Yid., from the Heb., "no evil eye"; expression traditionally used when praising someone.]