

Figures from the Town

We shall [now] call to mind a few of the *shtetl's* characters, whose figures spring up before our eyes, truly begging not to be forgotten.

The Rabbi Reb Symcha'le

The Rabbi Reb Symcha'le was kind and friendly man. He never quarrelled with the *kehilla* representatives, nor did he get involved in the disputes between the *Gerer* and *Aleksander Chassidim*. He endeavoured to receive everyone in a welcoming manner and preserved [the community's] internal peace, even at the price of capitulating [to others] and [waiving] honours.

Everyone respected him - even the secular and *Shomrim*¹ youth. Only once did I see him lose his temper, become furious and scowl. It was on the *Rosh Hashana* holiday of 1937 when, at the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* cell, we were holding a traditional annual gathering, standing motionless, singing the [Zionist] National Anthem. Reb Symcha'le appeared with a whole entourage of *Aleksander Chassidim* (they had turned him against us), marched in briskly with the whole delegation and began to reprimand us vociferously. The *Chassidim* accompanied him with their shouts, "*Shkutzim!* Heretics! Boys and girls together...*ptooye*"² on you!" He spat three times and left.

This was the talk of the town and even the Warsaw newspapers wrote about this strange "visit" in 1937!

Reb Henech Wajsbard

My uncle, Reb Chanoch (Henech) Wajsbard, was a Jew proficient in Torah [and] an enlightened man. Around the clock, he sat reading thick books. He also read Zionist works and argued days and nights with me over Zionism, Messianism, the Land of Israel, etc. etc.

He ate "*kest*"³ for many years, while his wife Mania saw to their livelihood. She was a tall, dexterous woman with a sharp tongue, who "ruled" with a strong hand not only over her family, but also over the whole street. As it was difficult to provide for a large family, all of them engaged in various trades simultaneously - stitching, making cardboard boxes [and] commerce, [such as] selling sweet goods - saccharine, which was most strictly prohibited by the authorities!

I recall one time, when a Polish policeman entered the house and caught the entire family engaged in packing saccharine. In a flash, with extraordinary presence of mind, the wife Mania smashed the petrol lamp on the ceiling. Darkness enveloped the room and in this darkness - which only lasted a few seconds - she managed to get rid of the merchandise and the constable was forced to leave for lack of material evidence.

¹ [TN: Members of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*.]

² [TN: "*Tjou*" in the original, as used in Russian.]

³ [TN: A Jewish practice whereby the bride's parents hosted and supported the bride and groom for several years while the groom pursued Torah study. (Definition by YIVO).]

Mojsze "Boom!"



Mojsze "Boom!"

That is what people called him in the *shtetl* - Mojsze "Boom!". Where this name came from, nobody knew. But everyone knew him - old folks, women and children. He was the *shtetl* clown or the village idiot. Wherever something was happening in town, he just had to be present! Celebrations, weddings, tragedies, quarrels, fights, fisticuffs – from all these, he escaped by the skin of his teeth. In his presence, everyone was clever - and they all displayed their wisdom at his expense.

He performed all manner of odd jobs - he pumped water, hauled loads, carried children on his back to *cheder* and school in the winter, kindled cookers - invariably smiling his sarcastic smile, mingled with profound sadness. [He was] a symbol of eternal suffering - without a home and without a family, forever wandering around the streets, markets, study-halls and cemeteries. He went about like a shadow in the *shtetl* –hungry and rejoicing with his lot⁴. May his memory, too, be blessed!

Coachmen⁵ (*Ba'alay-agules*)

The town's *ba'alay-agules* enjoyed a special status. They were merry folk, bursting with vitality and health, powerfully built, always wearing heavy boots⁶ whether in the winter or summer and they walked about uprightly in the *shtetl* all days of the week. The brougham drivers⁷ constituted a class of their own. They were the "blue blood" amongst the simpler coachmen, who transported just goods and not people. The former would sit up in their driver's box, looking down upon the miscellaneous travellers and treating them according to their status and the property they owned in town. When anything happened in town - be it a celebration, a tragedy, important news or any saucy story and idle gossip - they were the first to know of it and they passed it on from mouth to ear - with additions of their own, as always. And thus the rumour would spread from cart to cart, from alleyway to street and then go back again - and once the news had reached the entirety of the *shtetl*, the first ones could no longer recognise them.

The horses also differed in their character, in accordance to the customs of their *ba'alay-agules*. The horses of the brougham drivers were leaner, more well-behaved and lighter. They stood together listening to conversations, with an expression of affinity towards their masters, whilst the horses of the simple carts were heavier and clumsier. The weight of the harnesses and blinkers, the tone of

⁴ [TN: Ref. to *Uves (Avot)*, Ch.4, *mishna 1*: "Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot," meaning that one may possess relatively very little, and yet feel extremely wealthy – and vice versa. The behaviour depicted here is typical of one who would traditionally be considered a "hidden tzadik," or a "Lamed-vvnik."]

⁵ [TN: בעלי עגלות in the original, lit. "cart owners"; which is pronounced "Ba'alei agalot" in Israeli Hebrew. Even in Yiddish, for time immemorial, the Jews used this Hebrew term for the word "coachmen" instead of a Germanic or local term, but they said it in one word, and pronounced it "ba'alay-agules," according to the Ashkenazi rite – thus the parenthesis with the Yiddish pronunciation in the Hebrew original.]

⁶ [TN: Boots were considered a status symbol (this is true to this day among certain Polish Chassidic groups), and one who wore them needlessly in the summertime was considered a show-off, wherefore those who had a reason to wear them all year round were admired.]

⁷ [TN: All the tradesmen mentioned here were self-employed, and owned their own vehicles, which they also drove.]

language employed, the shape of the whip and the [manner of] flogging - all were reflected in each individual *ba'alagule's* dynamism and character.

And thus they maintained "transportation" in the *shtetl* all year round - in summer and in winter, in frost and in snow. They took people and cargo to the railway station in Myszków, six kilometres away. Every Monday and Thursday, they would get up in the middle of the night, to travel to the neighbouring markets with tailors, hatters, cobblers and all types of haberdashers and such.

They were hired for journeys to weddings in the vicinity - and *lehavdil*⁸ - for funeral processions from Myszków to Żarki. They travelled to different *yuhrzeits*⁹, to fetch timber from Złoty Potok, fruit from Jaworznik, coal from Dąbrowy¹⁰, [to take] grains to Będzi, and [they] even [fetched] *hoshanos*¹¹ and roofing material for *sukkos*¹² etc., etc.

This was a unique [professional] union which, despite never having been organised, still guarded the professional interests of their "class". Nonetheless, more than once, quarrels broke out amongst them - over a passenger who had been "pulled" from one cab to another or over a hauling job someone had "snatched" from another's hands for a lower price. But it always ended in reconciliation, by the drinking a glass of liquor and a warm handshake.

Indeed, they were a simple, kind-hearted and easy-going folk. *Woe over those who are gone and are no longer found* [Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 111a].

A. Ajzenberg

⁸ [TN: Heb, lit. "to separate"; Jewish expression roughly meaning "different though they may otherwise be," used when mentioning two unequal or contrasting subjects in the same sentence, such as the holy and the profane, or the living and the dead.]

⁹ [TN: Death anniversaries of righteous people, ancestors, etc., on which a pilgrimage is made to the tomb, followed by a feast.]

¹⁰ [TN: Although there are various Polish localities thus named, none are near Żarki; perhaps allusion to Dąbrowno (13 km from Żarki).]

¹¹ [TN: Little willow branches used by religious Jews to beat the ground with on Hoshana Rabbah, the seventh day of Sukkos.]

¹² [TN: Sukkos, the ritual huts built for the festival of the same name, are required by Halacha to be specifically temporary, and are therefore roofed with the foliage of trees or bushes instead of permanent materials.]