

## A Look Back

A sacred stillness lies over the *shtetl*. Old men and women of the valley<sup>1</sup> sit on [benches on] the pavements by their houses, chatting among themselves in an animated and carefree manner. The *Shabbesdike*<sup>2</sup> atmosphere makes them forget all the weekday worries. Maybe, for the thousandth time, they recount the same old stories and events which transpired many years ago.

They tell each other wonderful tales about lords, who tormented<sup>3</sup> their Jewish leaseholders and, with the aid of the holy *tzadik* [righteous man], the leaseholder was redeemed and the lord met with a black end.

They tell of the bygone Russian Tsars under whom one served 25 years in the military and of the children who were seized for the army. Had Reb Awigdor *Krakower* not been one such soldier with Phonya<sup>4</sup>? He had served 25 years, travelled around all the rivers and seas and seen the world for himself.

Thus they delight in the tales and enjoy the *Shabbes* which, for Jews such as these, has been so dear and sacred since all times and generations.

The sun is already setting. Its last rays cling to the tall spire of the church, which stands in the market square. The market square, itself, is inhabited by Jews through and through. Among others in the market is also the house of Josze<sup>5</sup> Rotsztajn. This building houses the Szybel Library and the Zionist Organisation. From this same house, the song of the Zionist youth is carried. In the *Shabbes* twilight, this song of yearning mingles with dusk, which slips in unnoticed with a cool freshness.

A little further off, from another street, a different singing is heard. This is the song of the younger ones, the smaller fellows - the cheerful, carefree lads of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*. The songs "*Techezakna*" [Strengthened Be (the Hands)] and "*Hine Ma Tov Umah Na'im*" [Behold How Good and How Pleasing] ring out. A lively Hora dance is taking place there. The whole *shtetl* is singing in the *Shabbes* twilight.

From all directions, one hears Chassidic melodies from the *shtieblech*, where Jews are sitting at the *Third Meal*. They sing wistful, melancholy tunes, in keeping with the mood of the departing *Shabbes*. The singing draws on endlessly - they wish to prolong the *Shabbes* as long as possible<sup>6</sup>. After all, this is the only carefree day in the entire week. On *Shabbes*, one does not need to pay back vouchers. On *Shabbes*, one does not need to borrow any *gmiles-chessed*<sup>7</sup>. On *Shabbes*, one has no fear of the repossession man. In a nutshell - "[When] *Shabbes* came, repose came"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Although this article is written in Yiddish, this particular word - "valley"— appears in Hebrew: "emek". If this is, in fact, the term the author originally used, it may be explained by the statement made above on p.18, that the name of Zarki is derived from the Polish word for valley - "dziura". It is much more likely, however, that this is a misprint of the word "amcho" or "the common people".]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Adj., pertaining to *Shabbes*.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: There are many such Chasidic stories in which the leaseholder is unable to find the money to pay his yearly lease, wherefore he is imprisoned by the lord in a dungeon or made a slave.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: Nickname for a typical Russian, from the names Aphonasy or Agaphon, which were very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: Most likely short for Josef, like Joszek.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: According to Halacha, as long as one is having the Third Meal, it is still considered *Shabbes* – even if night has already fallen.]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: Money which is loaned between friends as a favour, without paying interest.]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: See Rashi on Talmud Bavli, Megilah 9a: "What was the world lacking? Repose. [When] *Shabbes* came, repose came".]



*The Keren Kayemeth bazaar*

## **The Selichos Days**

A dark, silent night envelops the *shtetl*. In those times, there was still no electric lighting in the *shtetl*. At midnight, movement begins. The dim rays of tallow candles flicker in the windows of the Jewish homes. Doors creak. People slink out from all the little streets - men, women and young boys are going to *Selichos*. They light their way in the thick darkness with lanterns.

The houses of worship fill up with people. The sorrowful *Selichos* chant is carried across the *shtetl* and, far into the dark night, flow the tones of the prayer "*Remember the covenant of Abraham and the binding of Isaac!*"

## **Yom Kippur Eve**

The *shtetl* takes on a completely different appearance. Jews prepare themselves for the Day of Judgement! Today, everything looks unlike on any other day of the year. A bluish mist, laden with secrets, lays low on the ground. A mild breeze blows, spreading the sweet smell of the ripe fruits. The sun rises out from the fog and sends its warm rays down to the ground.

Jews are more in a hurry today than on any other day. The faces are solemn and the gazes are gentle and filled with love and forgiveness<sup>9</sup>.

At lunchtime, all the shops are shuttered. The last meal - the "*seuda mafsekes*"<sup>10</sup> - is consumed in haste. Fathers place [both] their hands on the heads of their [male<sup>11</sup>] children and give them the

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<sup>9</sup> [TN: According to Halacha, although Yom Kippur cleanses one who repents for sins committed against God, in order to atone for transgressions committed against others, one is required to be forgiven by the injured party. The custom is therefore to ask everyone's forgiveness on the Eve of Yom Kippur.]

<sup>10</sup> [TN: Lit. "the meal which separates", viz. the last meal which separates the weekday from Yom Kippur.]

<sup>11</sup> [TN: Another version of this blessing is given to the girls.]

blessing, “*May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe [etc.]*”. The houses gleam with cleanness and whiteness.

The streets are soon filled with Jews rushing to *Kol Nidrei*. Jews are wearing *kittels* [white robes], black silken caftans, white socks and slippers<sup>12</sup>, carrying the prayer-shawl and prayer-book under their arm and, in this manner, they proceed quickly to the synagogues and *shtieblech*.

The houses of worship are full. Even those who are non-believers the rest of the year, also come to *Kol Nidrei*. The streets are deserted. And, even though 2,000 Christians also live in the town, not a single person is to be seen outside.

On the following day, *Yom Kippur*, the picture in the street is the same - silent and empty. The heat inside the houses of prayer is great. There, hundreds of *Yom Kippur* tallow candles are burning, stuck in sand in wooden crates. The tightly-packed mass of humanity breathes with difficulty. People pray and beseech, thumping [themselves<sup>13</sup>] for sins which they very often did not commit. They torment themselves by fasting and forget the world with its mundaneness. After all, today is *Yom Kippur* - the great Day of Judgement.

Whoever has not seen a *Yom Kippur* such as this in a Jewish *shtetl* cannot imagine how deep and great was the faith of these same Jews. Shedding all trappings of worldliness, they raised themselves to the highest levels of purity and sanctity. When one recalls how dozens of people fell into a swoon and yet did not discontinue their fast, one must admit that only Jews were capable of such devotion to their beliefs.

### **Three Generations: Elchunon, Szlomke and Motl Fromer<sup>14</sup>**

On [one] *Yom Kippur* evening during *Kol Nidrei*, when the entire *shtetl* was congregated in the synagogues and study-halls, shouts were suddenly heard, “*Gevald<sup>15</sup>, Yidn – it’s burning!*”

Fires in the *shtetl* were amongst the greatest of plagues. The tiny little wooden houses, which grew one into the other and were covered with roofing felt, blazed like straw. In such cases, hundreds of families were left without a roof over their heads.

This time, the fire broke out in the women’s [section of the] Synagogue. Panic ensued - everyone ran in a frenzy. Only one man did not think about himself. This was Elchunon Fromer. What are his life, his home and his family worth - if the Synagogue is burning and there are Torah scrolls there? One must save them.

Dense, black smoke was bursting from the Synagogue, but this cast no fear upon Elchunon Fromer. He entered the blazing Synagogue and fought his way through the asphyxiating smoke to the Holy Ark. With his heart racing, he snatched out the Torah scrolls, clasped them to his torso and looked for the way to the door. But it was no longer plumes of smoke which enveloped Elchunon with the Torah scrolls - but an inferno of fiery flames. He never did find the way out. He was burnt together with his dear, sacred Torah scrolls. He perished sanctifying God’s name.

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<sup>12</sup> [TN: Based on the biblical precept of “ye shall afflict your souls” (Leviticus 16:29), which is said of *Yom Kippur*, Halacha forbids wearing leather shoes on this day, as it is considered a luxury.]

<sup>13</sup> [TN: During “*Al Cheyt*” (For the Sin), the confessional prayer recited ten times during *Yom Kippur*, the congregant reads an alphabetical list of sins – whether he committed them or not – thumping his fist over his heart for each transgression mentioned.]

<sup>14</sup> [TN: These individuals appear in the records as Elkon (d.1870), Mosiek Szlomo (1833-1914), and Mordka Hersz (1873-1941).]

<sup>15</sup> [TN: Lit. “Violence, Jews”; “*gevald*” is used as a cry for help in an emergency, as well as an expression of wonder, surprise or alarm.]

## Szломke Fromer, His Son

The town of Żarki lies not far from the German border. Jews in the *shtetl* need to make a living. Part of the population engages in smuggling goods in from Germany. The Russian customs officials - the "*smorczykes*"[?] - carry out frequent searches on suspicious Jews. They are not always able to find the goods, as the Jews have very good hiding-places for the contraband. And, even when they sometimes do find something, [a bribe] is given into the hand, with which the matter is settled on the spot.

It happened once that a fire broke out in town. By the time the firefighters arrived, the whole *shtetl* was already in flames. The Jews hauled their household possessions and merchandise down to the *rzeka* - a stream that flowed through the *shtetl* - because that was the safest place against fire.

Suddenly, a chief Russian customs official came up, riding a horse [and] escorted by his aides. He ordered the "*smorczykes*" to conduct a search of the things by the *rzeka*. When Szломke Fromer found out about this, he immediately came running up, approached the leader and said, "I request that you discontinue this search. When the town is in such trouble, you have no right to carry out searches." "And who are *you*?", inquired the chief. "I am a citizen of this town and I shall not allow searches to be made!" The chief pulled his sword out of its scabbard, but Szломke immediately snatched the sword out of his hand and broke it. He was arrested at once and sent away to Warsaw.

As he was being led through the Warsaw streets in chains, he shouted, "*Yidn*, I am the son of Elchunon and Rywczka - save me!" Jews in Warsaw knew who Rywczka and Elchunon Fromer were. They did everything and freed Szломke.

Szломke Fromer died at a ripe old age in 1914, at the beginning of the First World War.

## Motl Fromer – Elchunon’s Grandson

Motl Fromer was one of the *shtetl*'s finest burghers. He possessed neither his father Szломke's audacity nor his grandfather Elchunon's temperament. This was a Jew with *hadras punim*<sup>16</sup>, who inspired respect. He was a quiet and modest man, who was unable to utter a single loud word. This same Jew was chosen by the Nazi Mayor of Żarki, Kowalik, as his victim.

One time, Motl Fromer was summoned to Mayor Kowalik's office. Upon his arrival, he found two shady characters there. Motl Fromer was an iron merchant and Kowalik had summoned him so that he should turn his hidden iron over to him. Kowalik, however, knew perfectly well that Fromer had no ironware. When Motl told him this, Kowalik ordered the two fellows to busy themselves with the *Żyd*. The two started beating the hapless man until he bled and, only once he had fallen unconscious, did they let go of him. He was unable to go home by himself. The *Judenrat* led him home sick and battered. With this deed, Kowalik wished to hit at the whole Jewish population and to cast fear within them.

Motl Fromer died in Żarki in 1941, during the typhus epidemic.

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<sup>16</sup> [TN: Lit. "Glory of the face"; term used in Judaism to describe a man of noble features with a glorious beard.]

## A Short Summary

[Żarki was] a small *shtetl* with [just] 3,000 Jewish souls and, yet, it bubbled with energy in every field of cultural and social life. In this same little *shtetl*, organisations from all factions in the Jewish street existed - such as the General Zionist Organisation, *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*, *Mizrachi*, *Ha'Chalutz Ha'Merkazi*, *Poalei Zion* Right and Left, a small Bundist Organisation, a Maccabi sports club, a drama circle at the Zionist Organisation [and] two banks - one was the Joint's Cooperative Bank [Bank Spółdzielczy], which had its central [offices] in Warsaw, on ul. Chmarske [sic Rymarska] 6, and the other was the Credit Bank, which was semi-private. There were also various societies - ones for Torah study, visiting the sick, marrying off poor brides, charitable loans and the *Chevra Kadisha*.

On every holiday, the societies would meet and hold a party. On these occasions, the new administrations and *gaboim* [wardens/treasurers] were elected.

The *shtetl* lived socially and culturally to the fullest. It continued the moral traditions of its rich six-hundred-year-old past and experienced the common joys and suffering - until the brutal hands of the Nazi murderer came and tore everything out by its roots, thus putting an end to the six-hundred-year-old Jewish community in Żarki.

**Jakow Fiszer**