

## My Shtetl (Episodes)

How far away you are, my *shtetl* - and yet so close.

How much water has already flowed since I left you? How many seas of tears have been poured over the course of time and yet you are so fresh in my memory?

Sometimes, I see you like a distant dream, like a dusty old picture - and yet so clear - my home, every little street, every little house [and] every name and surname. Here is the wide marketplace, further on is the Synagogue. And over there - the wood, the factory [and] the river which flows, dragging along stones, sands [and] brushwood.



*The Market Square in Żarki*

Here, I see people striding to and fro across the marketplace. They talk loudly about everything and everybody. This one is celebrating a joyous occasion, that one is in mourning. This one is getting married, that one has been left widowed.

And little children run about in the street with their sidelocks and tasselled garments out in the open<sup>1</sup>. The sun is shining - *a mechaye!*<sup>2</sup>. The birds are chirping [and] the trees are blooming. Who can compare himself with these children?

Gentiles stand and look with envy and hatred. Their gazes say, "Here is a Polish town - turned so Jewish. Jews live, do business, make money and they greet each other in such a friendly manner: 'Good morning, Reb Mojsze-Symcha!' - '*Szulem alaichem*'<sup>3</sup>, Reb Pinches-Szlojme!' - '*Alaichem ha'szulem, Naftuli!*'"

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: This shows how at home the Jews felt in Żarki, because in many communities people hid their sidelocks under their caps and their tassels under their outer garments for fear of antisemitism.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Heb. lit. "(something that) revives"; although the word is a Hebrew one, the expression is used only in Yiddish, and is akin to the English "What a treat!"]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Heb. (as pronounced by Polish Jews) "Peace (be) unto you"; traditional Jewish greeting akin to the Arabic "Salaam aleikum," to which one replies "Alaichem ha'szulem" or "Unto you (be) the peace."]

## **Shabbes**

[There is] absolute silence and calm. The shops are closed. Everyone now sits at home with the whole family. On the table are all delicacies and *zmires*<sup>4</sup> are loudly sung - "*Kol mekadaish...*"<sup>5</sup>. Light shines all around the white tablecloths. Outside, golden sand<sup>6</sup> is spread out and children go about dressed up in new garments.

On Friday evening [after the meal], everyone goes out for a stroll - young and old, *Chassidim* and working folk. People promenade throughout the *shtetl*, to its length and to its breadth. The youth sing [both traditional] Chassidic songs and [new] Zionist ones.

All week long, one is occupied, chased and harrowed. Be it someone at the workshop or at the shop; be it someone in the countryside or in the surrounding towns of Myszków, Częstochowa, Zawiercie, [and] Będzin, Jews deal in anything possible - shoes and coats, butter and meat, fruit and fish, [and] grains and leather - everything is merchandise!

Thus pass by days and years, weekdays and *Shabbosim*, holidays and regular days. All things run their course and we start once more from scratch.

Summer and winter, autumn and spring. God, being our father, would not forsake his children. Sometimes for better and sometimes for worse - one has somehow managed

## **A Romance in the *Shtetl*...**

We go for a walk along the forest paths. It is a hot day, which makes one thirsty. We stop at every well and spring. In the water, we see our reflection - our eyes have an embarrassed look. The dense trees are filled with shadows. The branches sway in the wind, cooling our heated faces. The forest is large, the world is broad - and dreams of seas and shorelines are awakened.

One feels no inclination to return to the narrow, empty *shtetl*, to once again see the faces one has known for so long.

We walk hand in hand, inhaling ever fresher and more plentiful air!

Night falls. We scramble [back] home silently, surreptitiously, by way of side-streets - so as to not be noticed by neighbours with long tongues [or] by our parents. Thus go by days of pacing and hoping. We have six more days to wait until Saturday.

And every day, [I] pass by her house and from a distance look up at her window, in case she should show herself. Thus days and weeks go by. Older brothers and sisters have, for some time, already been waiting for an engagement, for a wedding. Matchmakers run. The *klezmers* are counting the

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Heb. "tunes"; traditional Shabbes songs taken from the liturgy, which are sung at the Shabbes table throughout the Jewish Diaspora.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: "Whoever sanctifies (the seventh day)"; the first song sung on Friday night following the Kiddush ceremony.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: See above, p.18: "...it was the custom to sprinkle yellow sand in honour of Shabbes on the floors of the houses which did not have wooden flooring."]

days and the girls - the years. And here, the younger girls and boys are introducing completely new customs - no matchmakers, no engagements [and] no parents [involved].

A new world, a new youth - alien and coarse, with no shame and no manners. A strange love - a free one!

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“A fire!”

“It’s burning!”

“Where? Who? At whose house?”

Nobody knows. Everyone is running and shouting. There is pandemonium in the *shtetl*.

A crimson sky lights up the little streets. Clouds of smoke rise high [into the air]. Sparks fly, spreading far [and wide].

Half asleep, [the people] set loose throughout the streets. Men, women and children clamour and run. Outside, one can already see chests, baskets [and] crates. People are packing. They haul clothes, bedding, pots, cupboards and beds out from the houses.

Loud noises are heard from a distance, “*Bim-bom, bim-bom!*” Firefighters’ sirens deafen the streets. Horses and carts are commandeered from the coachmen and men are mobilised to the pumps. Jews stand and draw water, some with buckets and others with hosepipes. Water is poured on walls and roofs.

“Who made a *Boiray Meoiray Hu'aish?*”<sup>7</sup> – that is the only question. It does not occur to anyone that the fire broke out by accident. It must be someone who needs to abscond or who is expecting insurance.

And the Jews stand and “bless” that person, who was prepared to bring destruction to the entire *shtetl*. The peril of fires looms over the *shtetl* especially in summer, at harvest time, when the sun is shining and the grain is drying in the field.

Fires break out every Monday and Thursday<sup>8</sup> and the Jewish houses are miraculously saved, barring those little houses which can barely stand upright on their own - [they] fall down under any wind and are burnt down by any spark.

**Abram Ajzenberg**

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<sup>7</sup> [TN: Pron. “*Bore Meorei Ha'esh*” in Sephardic Heb., “(He Who) Creates the Lights of Fire”; blessing made at the close of Shabbes or Yom Kippur, preferably on a torch of fire or a candle with multiple wicks, instead of a single candle. The use here is euphemistic, meaning to say “Who started this big fire on purpose?”]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: Traditional Jewish expression meaning “every other day”, derived from the religious practice of reading from the Torah scroll during the morning service of Mondays and Thursdays.]

