

Żarki-Myszków (A type of dialogue)

Even as children, we already viewed Myszków as a natural continuation of Żarki, as it were. They were like “best mates”, who could never be separated and it was as if the one could not exist without the other. Żarki, without Myszków, was like a head without feet and Myszków, without Żarki, was like feet without a head.

Between them, these two communities developed a wide variety of commercial connections, family ties, business relations, [joint] public matters, *kehilla* affairs, interchanges of cantors [and other] religious functionaries, a joint *mikvah* - and even death bound them together for all eternity. When their time came, the residents of Myszków were obliged to find their eternal repose at the Żarki *Kehilla's* graveyard. And, more than once, fights and quarrels broke out over all these connections - even amongst the children from the two *shtetls*.

We, the children, loved our town Żarki. Nevertheless, Myszków had a very strong pull on us - especially its railway station. There, we saw a new, interesting and mysterious world. From there, a wide window was opened to the greater world - for it was, from there, that one could set off towards distant realms and see everything that there was to be seen. Whereas Żarki [was] completely isolated - without a train [and] without new faces. We, children and youths, walked seven kilometres on foot every Saturday to Myszków, where we spent many hours hanging about in the bustling railway station. We watched the express trains, as they passed through in a flash, and we loved the locomotive's whistle which pierced the air. We could [also] see the train's attendants in their fine uniforms. We went to look at the many factories, whose tall chimneys rose skywards, giving Myszków the appearance of a bustling metropolis in miniature. As evening fell, we returned home filled with impressions, taking shape in our heads, and with dreams of imaginary journeys to all the ends of the world. We envied the children of Myszków, for whom all this came easily, without any effort on their part.

Many years ago, I heard a conversation on this very topic at my grandfather's house, between my uncle and a Jew from Myszków, who had come to visit us. It was a very lively discussion and an extremely loud one. Both Jews became inflamed, arguing over which led the youth astray more - Myszków or Żarki? Who knows how the matter would have ended, had Grandmother not entered with a tray of *latkes*, which brought the dispute to an end. The two sides were reconciled over a glass of sweet tea.

We, the children, had stood around, enjoying my uncle's overwhelming arguments. Most of the listeners were, obviously, “patriots” of Żarki. A small section of the older children stood beside Myszków.

My uncle said, “What? Is Myszków suddenly important now? Who are *you*, compared to us? There are several thousands of us - and you're just a handful. We've have synagogues, institutions, companies, parties - and *you*? No town and no village - just few houses bunched up. You have no place to live and you have no place to die. You even have to bring your dead to Żarki for a Jewish burial”.

The *Myszkówer* retorted, “Without Myszków, you would just be one, big zero! It is only thanks to us that you exist at all. What would you be without us? A dark and pathetic provincial town without lighting, without a main road, without a railway station - in some far-flung location, disconnected

and isolated from any living settlement. You cannot even travel anywhere without passing through us!”

My uncle replied, “And what do we want a railway station for? All it does is make noise and startle [people] - billows of smoke and [screeching] whistles all day and night. It doesn’t let you sleep and it suffocates you all. We, on the other hand, live in the pure and invigorating air. Our forests give off a pleasant smell, whereas *you*, with all due respect...”

The Jew from Myszków came back at him, “Without us, nobody would come to you. Without the coal they bring you through us, you’d freeze. Without the goods that reach you through us, you’d die every day for lack of livelihood. Who would ever come to you from far away at all? [Who would ever travel] such a long way in your lousy carts, to a town that sucks the blood of the convalescents coming to rest there? You skin them for every single item - you feed them nauseating stuff and charge them good money for it! What? Do you think we don’t know that, eh?”

My uncle said, “Here we go again - you’re [all] perfect *tzadikim*! I’m not joking. We know you, the *lamed-vuvnikes*¹ that you are! Honest, God-fearing Jews - merchants as sly as gypsies, barkeepers and profiteers! Generous people - should anyone attempt to drink a glass of hot [tea] in your tavern, he’ll at once pay an extravagant price for bitter, lukewarm water with a little saccharine! God protect us from all such things!

The *Myszkówer* retorted crossly, “Will you look at him! A Jew opens his sacred mouth and delivers such a rebuke! Your *Żarki* restaurants have a reputation throughout the region - they water the liquor down and mix *kwass*² in with the beer! And as for the cleaning, may God shield us from it – *tfou! Tfou!* You can come learn cleaning from us! Come and see our streets, the courtyards and the houses - there’s cleanliness everywhere and not like the town “*Lishtina*”³, with its mountain of rubbish, which Bialik describes in his song”.

“Well, well - then why do you come to our *mikvah*, if it’s not clean? And why do you come to pray in our synagogues - with us, the apostates, eh? On the contrary, why don’t you try and keep away from us? Then we’ll see who can manage fine on their own.”

“*We* come to *you*? You’re the ones who come to Myszków every Monday and Thursday [viz. continuously], because it’s too crowded for you here. Otherwise, why do all the boys and girls come to us in Myszków to learn, to see, to wander about in the streets and at the railway station and to visit our cinema⁴?”

“You’ve always been miscreants. You take in all sorts of *shkutzim* and then pass them on to us. All your youth is completely rotten to the core. You yearn for the cinema and what is it they show there? Just frivolous things - men and women, Heaven preserve us, kissing on a sheet - and the crowd applaud! Who ever heard such a thing? Enemies of their own people! They found a livelihood for themselves - a cinema! – to squeeze money from Jews and they pull our children to this impure establishment, to boot – *tfou! Tfou!*”

¹ [TN: Each generation’s Lamed-Vav (36 in gematria) most righteous men.]

² [TN: Aka “kvass”; beverage usually made from rye bread which is much cheaper than beer to produce, and contains practically no alcohol.]

³ [TN: Aramaicised form of Leszczyn, or Lishtin in Yiddish – a small town near Zhitomir, Ukraine, where Chaim Nachman Bialik studied in a yeshiva as an adolescent.]

⁴ [TN: The term used in the Hebrew original (ראינו) implies the films were silent.]

My uncle spat three times and the shouting rose and rose, until Grandmother's *latkes* once more broke the dispute up.

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