

LECH LECHO

Back in Baranovich, the night before his departure, Talia had made a special present of herself. He can still smell her if he closes his eyes. After the performance they had all gone to uncle Saveiker's tavern for a drink, but he and Talia had stayed behind in her dressing room, laughing silently in complicit anticipation.

-Vos hostu, Talie'le? Bistu troierik?

He loved addressing her in Yiddish in their intimacy. Her Yiddish was rudimentary, but when the chance to premiere Yacov Gordin's Mirele Efros arose, the budding theatre company was short one female to play the role of Scheindele. With about seventy long lines to memorize and deliver skilfully it was Talia's love for Chaim that triumphed over modesty and fear when she accepted to play the role. The Yiddish 'r' was particularly difficult to master, not to speak of the impish intonation and cadence of a language she understood only poorly.

- Are you sad? he repeated in their customary Russian.

No, she said, kissing him lightly on the lips. But she was lying. And so was he.

Uncle Saveiker's true name was Noiach Epstein. He would never forget to stuff his pockets with candy to give to children; hence his nickname Neike Saveiker, roughly Noah the sugar dispenser. Among the family he was known as Uncle Saveiker, even to his own children. His paternal uncle was Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, author of the famous treatise Aruch Hashulchan, a best-seller, first among Lithuanian and Bielo-Russian Jews and then world-wide. By the time Noiach was born, however, a new spirit of reform had invaded the Jewish community and infected even a member of such an egregious family. As a teenager, Noiach donned ordinary clothes and left home for good. He didn't go too far, though, settling in Baranovich as Hebrew tutor to the local Jewish bourgeoisie. It is thus that he met, loved, married and mourned Chava, all in the space of eight years. He never remarried and his eyes would moisten at the very mention of her name. He was now a father of five. Unable to keep making his living as a tutor, with a considerable amount of money borrowed from his in-laws, he opened an akhsanie, not far from the railway station. An akhsanie was a mixture of a hotel, a literary club and a café and restaurant. Cultural distances aside, it can be compared to a saloon in the American Far West. Some guests lived there permanently, paying a monthly fee for room and board. Others were travelers who needed to stay overnight in Station Baranovich while waiting for a train transfer in the Warsaw-Moscow line. Most Jews would not go as far as Moscow, but there was no other way to get from Warsaw to Pinsk or Vilna. The most illustrious guest to ever have stayed in the akhsanie was none other than Scholem Aleichem, who wrote a story entitled precisely Stantsie Baranovich.

Meier Finkelman was appropriately known as Meier der Dreier. He was the town's gossip-in-chief and fulfilled the important role of bearer of news, good and bad. He was the unofficial gofer of various Jewish organizations, including the proto-Zionist Hovevei Zion, the Bund and the Jewish Colonization Agency. The Hovevei Zion local chapter saw as its mission to promote immigration of young people to the Land of Israel, while the Bund was a Socialist and anti-Zionist organization that proposed a program of secular autonomy within a multicultural national context in the countries that already had a significant Jewish population. Most Jews, however, just wanted to get out from the humiliating conditions of the Pale of Settlement within the Russian Empire and most did not particularly dream of becoming subjects of the Turkish Pasha either. What they wanted was America, North, if possible. But South? Enter Baron Maurice de Hirsch. In the early 1890s he founded and richly endowed the JCA, a non-profit and non-ideological philanthropic society whose main aim was to allow Jews to settle in various countries, including Argentina and Canada, and establish agricultural colonies with an initial funding from the society. Needless to say, a visit from Meier der Dreier in his capacity as herald of the JCA was a truly welcome event, a simcha.

-Nu? said Shloime anxiously. Shloime was the oldest of the Epstein brothers. He was the intellectual of the family, der Denker, the thinker, while Chaim was the artistic one, the one with the charisma, the chick magnet. A tradition in the family had been, for generations, to name the first-born male either Noiach or Shloime if, kein ayin hore, the grandfather had already joined his ancestors. This was both an honour and a burden, as Shloime well knew. Shloime was punctilious about everything, a perfectionist, as the name implies: Shleime der shleimesdiker. His writing was calligraphic and he never made a spelling error, either in Yiddish, Hebrew or Russian. His command of literary Russian, enhanced by his assiduous readings of Tolstoj and Dostojevskii, was truly impressive. He had graduated from the Gymnasium with honours just two years earlier and had wanted to study Medicine. Alas, the policy of numerus clausus, strictly enforced throughout the empire, had excluded him twice from the competition. Never mind. His readings of Cicero and Seneca, if the Tanach and Pirkei Avos were not enough, had taught him how to confront adversity with stoicism.

-Nu? said Shloime when, sitting in the rocking chair at the porch of the akhsanie with a book in hand, he saw Meier. As Meier approached, slowly and deliberately, Shloime had seen with great anticipation that his beret had the dashik pointing to the side. Meier was not without a sense of humour and, in his multitasking pursuits, had established the custom that the visor of his beret would point forwards if he were working on behalf of the Hovevei Zion, backwards if for the Bund (an obvious slight) and sideways if for the JCA. This trick had earned him a second nickname: Meier Strogoff. The humour of this sobriquet escaped poor Meier.

-Vos leienstu, Shloime? What are you reading?

-Since when are you interested in literature? Just give me the news!

-No, no. I want to know what it is that you are reading in this fine summer morning.

-Alright, alright. I got a copy, just printed in Vilna, of Steinberg's Leshoin Eiver. That's what I'm reading.

-Leshoin Eiver, huh? I may be an ignorant, but isn't that a Hebrew grammar?

-Yes, Meier, a Hebrew grammar.

-Well, my friend. If I were in your shoes I would put that book away and start studying some Spanish grammar!

Meier's eyes were smiling almost maliciously. For once, he thought, he had outwitted the genius. It was in this way that Shloime came to know that his application at the JCA had been accepted. He put Steinberg's grammar back in the appropriate spot of the akhsanie's dining room cum library and went upstairs to his room to figure out how to break the news to the family.

-Chaikl, I need to talk to you. It's important.

-What is it, Shloime? I have to be at the general rehearsal in fifteen minutes.

-Alai lehoidia ... The two older brothers had established the custom of speaking in Hebrew whenever important matters were discussed. They pronounced it in the traditional Ashkenazi way, advocated by Eastern Jews and argued scientifically, in vain, as it turned out, by experts like Steinberg. It was used even later by poets such as Bialik, whose glorious rhymes and rhythms depended heavily on the sounds and, perhaps more importantly, the placement of the stress in many words.

-Please, speak Yiddish this time, interrupted Chaim. He noticed a certain uncharacteristic hesitation in Shloime's voice and didn't want the solemnity of the language to stand in the way.

-Chaikl, I didn't tell you and I hope you will forgive me, but I applied on our behalf at the JCA.

-You should have told me. There are no secrets between us. At any rate, we know how hopeless these applications are. Thank you for letting me know, anyway. Is there anything else?

-In fact, yes. Today I received a visit from Strogoff.

-You mean Meier? So?

-The application was approved. We are going to Argentina.

Of all the emotions aroused by this unexpected news, hope, fear, happiness, guilt, only one was urgent enough to elicit any spoken words.

-Vei, Talia ...

Shloime had bigger problems. How do you tell your father, your beloved Tate, that in a matter of days his life will be changed forever? That Shloime, Chaikl, Mendl and Berl are going away to a land you cannot even identify on a map, to a place of no return? That he will stay alone with Frida, the only daughter, barely a teenager, to remind him of his past and present loss? Lech lecho ... mibeis ovicho, get thee out ... from thy father's house, is that forever the Jewish categorical imperative?

The news of the JCA could hardly be kept secret, since Meier was not a discreet man when sober, let alone after a few drinks, which he is always happy to accept. The Epsteins of Baranovich are not religious, but they do keep the Sabbath. Frida has lit the candles and said the blessing and Berl has just blessed upon the wine. With everyone silent, Noiach attempts to start a speech.

-Taiere kinder, he says, My dear children. But his voice fails him and nothing else needs to be said. He then goes to Shloime, places his big right hand over his oldest son's head and pronounces the millenary benediction. "Yevorechecho Adoinoi veyishmerecho". And then to Chaikl: "Yoeir Adoinoi fonov eilecho vichuneko". And to Mendl: "Yiso Adoinoi fonov eilecho", and with his hand on Berl's head: "veyoseim lecho sholoim".