

Chaim the Customer Peddler

by Y. Y. Zevin

Translated by Dan Setzer

Chapters 25-30

25. A cantor comes for an audition

It is already summertime here in Blotetown. The mosquitoes are starting to move in little by little. Even though we are getting some very hot days. In my garden we are starting to see tomatoes and green cucumbers. G-d knows where they are coming from. I would have never believed that anything would come up decently there. The couple of radishes that grew there are long gone. And I was sure that it was all over with the garden. But G-d is good. He has sent us frequent rain and that refreshes the plants, the sun does the rest of the work, and things sprout and grow. The Earth has a power within it!

In our congregation Temple Jacob we are deeply involved the the question about a cantor for the High Holidays. Also in the Club, to which all of Blotetown belongs, everyone is talking about it. Everyone is agreed that we should not spare any expense and get a real cantor, because a good cantor is a good advertisement for the place, and a beautiful voice at morning prayers can help spark a real estate boom. All the people in New York should know that in Blotetown a great cantor prayed and and made a great success. The Honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick, who is the biggest builder by us in Blotetown and has a lot of real estate there, is also very interested in the question. We have already had auditions for a few cantors, but they were not outstanding. One was really outstanding, but the Alderman found out that he wasn't a citizen and said "no." And when the Alderman says "no" – its "no." We want that we should give a citizen a show. That is patriotic.

I will tell you the truth, that to me it seems a little odd, not a smooth story. That they should let the Alderman mix in with Jewish affairs. I don't understand, what a *goy* has to do with a Jewish shul? But I am afraid to say such a thing in Blotetown. It is an old custom by Jews to call "prominent Christians" to lay corner stones, to housewarmings at shuls. To a circumcision celebration, to a redemption of the firstborn ceremony, to a bar mitzvah and to religious celebrations. One takes pride that the gentile has come "to honor Jewishdom." Soon we will come to the point where we share the Reading of the Torah on the Sabbath with "prominent Christians." One will honor a city mayor with Tuesday's prayers, a chief of police with Friday's prayers, or a borough president with the *mafter* reading of the Torah. It may have already happened.

However, by us in Blotetown, as I have already told you before, Jewishdom and real estate go hand in hand. Whenever anyone makes a Jewish ceremony, a shul housewarming, or a Torah Conclusion, they invite "prominent Christians," and also reporters from English newspapers. And in the morning there is a notice in the "Blotetown Weekly Review" and in the Blotetown columns in the New York papers the the Honorable So-and-so gave a speech by the Jews in Blotetown, and that is an advertisement, I mean a honor, both for Jews and for Christians. It helps in real estate and it helps in politics.

I will now tell you how it went with the audition for the cantor that we had last Sunday in our little town. The audition was not held in the shul, rather in the house of our President Mr. Piter Pupikovitz. To the audition came heads of households in Blotetown, and also several prominent Christians, among them: The Honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick, the plumber McNally, and the watchman from Blotetown. No women had been invited to the audition. The only woman who was at the audition was Mrs. Pupikovitz, who was wearing about six pounds of jewelery. It was a very hot day and when the cantor took out his tuning fork and his music sheets to get ready for his audition, Mr. Pupikovitz turned toward his wife and said to the assembled guests:

“Ladies and gentleman! It is too warm in the house. Let's take our chairs and sit in the empty lot that I bought last month next to my house. I got it as a bargain, already I have been offered a thousand dollar profit. Come to the empty lot, it is more of a breeze there.”

The empty lot where we carried our chairs and sat, wasn't really empty, it was littered with pieces of paper, bones, little feathers, mounds of clay, mud, wood chips, rags, burned out coals and ash. By us in Blotetown empty lots are a great convenience: we throw everything in them – even dead cats. Friday all of our housewives come to the empty lots and dump the picked-over Sabbath chicken carcasses. It comes from there a stink to the high heavens. As long as the empty lots are in *goyishe* hands, it is a diaspora. The *goyim* make a big fuss over the empty lots. They plant little saplings all over, with flowers, different types of myrtle, and they plant grass, then they give the lots a shave so that the grass will grow thicker. When the lots come into our hands, we give them freedom, equality and brotherhood. The signs with the English ukases that no one should walk on the grass, are torn down. The myrtle saplings get stripped and made into brooms, and whomever wants to can walk on the grass, bring ashes, cinders, rags, and anything else they want to throw out of the house. Even the Christians clean out their houses and throw the filth into our lots.

So, we have all seated ourselves in one of these empty lots. The cantor took his music sheets in his hand, placed it in his hand to his throat, in the manner of cantors and belted out:

Ha Melech!

“Holy gee!” called out McNally the plumber, “He is a corker!”

“What does it mean?” asked the Honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick.

“Ha melech, dat meens de king, de tsar,” explained President Pupikovitz.

“To hell with the tsar!” yelled the Alderman in anger, “Why do you want to cheer the tsar? This is the United States. Cheer the President!”

“**Ha President!**” – The cantor sang out with the same voice he used to sing “Ha Melech.”

Here the Reverend Doctor mixed in and explained to the Honorable Alderman that “Ha Melech” does not refer to a king, but to the “King of Kings,” the Almighty.

Sheftelson, the peaceful Socialist, who is my tenant and a member of our congregation, mixed in at this point and said that it would be better to refer to the Almighty as President rather than King. Our times are more democratic and the democratic spirit must have certainly penetrated into Heaven by now.

But Mr. Sheftelson was overruled. The Honorable Alderman is against reforms and took the Reverend Doctor's side. They would stick with the old term, with “Ha Melech.”

“Sing it again,” the Honorable Alderman said to the cantor.

“Ha Melech!!!”

This time the cantor sang the phrase out so loud that his beard fell off and only hung by a string.

We were all shocked and stood there amazed. Tell me, indeed, have you ever seen or heard of a beard falling off of a man's face a just hanging by a string? The prominent Christians, that is, the Alderman, the plumber and the watchman, laughed heartily. "He has got false whiskers" they said to each other. But the cantor wasn't flustered. He reattached the beard to his face, and began singing "Kol Nidre."

"This is great!" said the watchman.

"It sounds like Italian opera," said Alderman Fitzpatrick.

We all agreed that the cantor is 'All right.'

During this time a big crowd had gathered around the empty lot were we were sitting. The mosquitoes were also arriving because next to President Pupikovitz' house, as I have mentioned before, is a big puddle. Mr. Kaban, the rich Jew from New York, who recently moved into Blotetown and fought with our congregation over the Torah Conclusion celebration, drove up in his automobile. He stopped not far from the rest of us and was listening to the audition also. The smell of his automobile drove the mosquitoes toward the gathered crowd.. Afterwards, Mr. Pupikovitz ordered beer and schnapps and marinated herring. The Honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick also tried a little piece of herring. Then he asked when Yom Kipur would take place and we told him.

"I will come to your temple with my wife," the Honorable Alderman said, "Please hold two tickets for me."

"Hooray!" We all cried out.

"Who is all right?" asked President Pupikovitz.

"Alderman Fitzpatrick!" we all yelled. That is to say they all yelled and I followed, because I was ashamed not to be part of the crowd.

26. The Lady's Auxiliary has an affair

Our Lady's Auxiliary from our Temple Jacob recently had a big “affair.”

Every congregation has a lady's auxiliary, but a lady's auxiliary like ours is an exception. In our lady's auxiliary you will find the aristocracy of Blotetown. You should see for yourself what sort of dresses, what sort of diamonds come together at a meeting. And a meeting by us is not just a meeting, but it is always associated with a whist party, an entertainment, a reception or some other affair.

The main purpose of our auxiliary is – charity. But since in Blotetown there are, thanks be to the Almighty, no poor people, our ladies have very little to do. Therefore, they don't worry too much that their affairs earn very little money, and often the expenses are greater than the income. Once, they put on a strawberry festival in the middle of winter, with the goal of funding a Yiddish Sunday school. The strawberries were extra expensive. Imagine: strawberries at Hanukkah time! It worked out to about 20 cents per strawberry. The decorations, the cakes and the other refreshments also cost a considerable sum. What was left in the end was a pure profit of a dollar with 75 cents. That was the first time one of our affairs ever made a profit. The ladies were so excited by the result that they decided to make a noble use of the dollar with 75 cents profit: They made a collection on the spot, added 25 dollars and bought a pen for our worthy President's wife, Mrs. Pupikovitz, as a symbol of their recognition of her great contributions to our congregation and to the auxiliary.

Evil tongues whispered that the whole strawberry party was a stunt by Mrs. Pupikovitz so that she could show off to all of Blotetown's ladies the lavalier that her husband bought for her at Tiffany's. The diamonds, people said, were worth 2,000 dollars.

A short time after the Strawberry party it became known that there actually was not a profit. The mistake came when they realized that they neglected to count the 12 dollar invoice from the florist for the flowers. That is to say, the affair showed a loss of 10 dollars with 25 cents.

The ladies of the auxiliary worried for a long time that they could not find a poor person in need of rescue. There are a lot of real estate brokers by us, but they are just tramps and beggars. They don't need donations. So our ladies have to make charity affairs to raise money, but there is nothing to do with the money.

Not long after this there came to the Lady's Auxiliary a great salvation. A year earlier a young couple moved in to a place next to the cemetery. It happened that the young man lost his job a couple of weeks before his wife gave birth to a child. As soon as the Lady's Auxiliary heard about it they quickly began to send heralds from house to house: G-d has helped us and sent to us a poor person in Blotetown. The ladies called a meeting and decided that they would make of the birth an 'affair,' a sort of benefit for the impoverished parents.

A committee, consisting of Mrs. Pupikovitz, Mrs. Kaban, my yidene, Mrs. Tsipe Yenta, and Mrs. Gogelech, went through the town collecting money. They soon had a considerable sum, a lot more than the strawberry party, or a whist party could bring in. They had tickets printed up for a raffle for the honor of being the godfather and for being the friend of the family who presents the child. Mr. Pupikovitz bought all of the tickets. He chose to be godfather and as friends of the family, he chose my Benele and his own daughter, Miss Nelly Pupikovitz.

The bris took place in the afternoon with a small group in attendance. An additional reception was held in the evening, to which all of the ladies came done up as though for a ball.

Mrs. Gogelech was dressed in a black satin gown which was a bit worn. The bodice was made with yellow satin and it was trimmed in black beads. She wore yellow shoes which were a little too small for her. Jewellery she had without limit: a lavalier, and medallion on a heavy chain, 14 strings of pearls, bracelets and 28 rings on her fingers. She had to hold her fingers straight and couldn't bend her hands. In her hair she had a comb with diamonds, and also a lot of feathers.

Mrs. Pupikovitz wore a purple silk dress. The bodice was made from a white lace, the sleeves were puffed in such a way that her neck was hardly visible. She wore white shoes. The jewellery she had was worth three thousand dollars.

Mrs. Kaban came in a red dress, covered in flowers. But by her the dress was a little too open, you understand. Everyone said so. By Jews that is not good. Beyond that she was so soaked in perfume that whomever came near her got a catarrh in the nose and started sneezing. She was wearing jewellery worth five thousand dollars.

My yidene came in a new dress. The dress was white silk with green and yellow horizontal bands. Just like my yidene is short and wide. With these horizontal stripes she looked even shorter and wider. With her jewellery she had nothing to be ashamed of. I had her wearing my entire stock.

The one thing that really surprised me was that Mrs. Pupikovitz came with blond hair on her head. I am almost certain that the last time I saw her she had black hair. When I asked my yidene about that she made fun of me: "Ai, you are such a greener!" she said. "Don't you know that blond hair is now the best style? Mrs. Kaban is also going to go blond."

Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick came in his red automobile. He came in for a few minutes left a package of diapers for the baby then left because right now he is very busy.

Afterwards, Mr. Pupikovitz advised that we should give a report about the bris to the Yiddish newspapers, so that all of America should know what our revered sisters from the Lady's Auxiliary have done, and that it should be a good example for others.

Mr. Shaprinski, the secretary from our congregation, took out his fountain pen with some sheets of paper from his pocket. He sat down to write the report. He is a very smart man and writes very quickly. He can write in one hour what it would take me a week to write. And after he wrote, he read it to us in this manner:

Noble Women of Blotetown

"The noble women of Blotetown have given a good example to the entire world. The Lady's Auxiliary of Congregation Temple Jacob, to which they belong, has long been known for the good deeds which the worthy sisters of the organization have done.

This week the noble ladies from our Auxiliary Temple Jacob once again demonstrated what noble hearts they have, namely: When Mr. and Mrs. Baranovitch's son was born and they were in a difficult situation, the ladies of our Auxiliary got together and held the bris at their own expense. The best servers: The worthy President Mrs. Pupikovitz and the worthy Treasurer Mrs. Kaban."

“And where am I?” Mrs. Gogelech yelled out, “Why do they get the best thanks? Did I work any less?”

“Add Mrs. Gogelech,” Mr. Pupikovitch ordered.

Among the other women you could hear murmuring. One could see that we were on the brink of a revolution.

“Add in Mrs. Fusbenkel,” my yidene called out, “She prepared almost all of the food. She deserves that her name should be mentioned in the paper.”

“We should all have as good a year as we deserve!” Held forth Mrs. Shaprinski, the Secretary's wife, “And what about your name? As I live, you have put in the work, and I have too. On my honor, I would not be ashamed, if my name was in the newspaper together with Chaim the customer peddler's wife.”

“Bravo! Hurray for our sister Mrs. Shaprinski!” Yelled all the other members of the Auxiliary. “Everybody has put in the same amount of work, and all deserve the same credit.”

“Take my name off the list,” Mrs. Kaban said, “Also for me an honor! To be in the Yiddish newspaper! I don't want it.”

“Take my name off also,” Called out Mrs. Gogelech.

“My name too! My name too! I don't need it!” You could hear from all sides.

“So, we don't need any report at all,” Mr. Pupikovitz decided. The Secretary tore the report into little pieces and threw them under the table.

I collected the little shreds of paper and put them back together for you, the reader, so that you could see the noble work of our noble ladies of the Auxiliary.

27. He loses his atonements

About three months ago my yidene made it known that she wanted a chicken coop, that is, a hen house. There are a lot of housewives in Blotetown who keep their own hens, and have fresh eggs every day. Nu, she wanted the same thing. The coop cost me a whole fortune – something around twenty dollars. Afterwards we bought three hens and they became tenants in the coop. In the morning we found the three tenants dead. The suspicion in the three murders fell on the neighbor's dog. But since we did not have a good eyewitness, the dog remains free. We bought more hens and kept a sharp eye on them. A full month went by and early every morning we went to see if the hens had laid any eggs. We got nothing. We went to the grocery man to get some advice, to the butcher, and even by the iceman and by the milkman had we also asked. Each one gave us different advice. One advised us, we should feed the hens peeled potatoes, another said we should give the chickens salted water to drink, a third told us to let them fast for a couple of days, a fourth suggested that if we wanted eggs, we should go and buy them at the grocery store. We tried everything they said, even the last suggestion, but we got no satisfaction. Then my youngest son, Benele, called down (my rascal son, you already know him) and said:

“Papa, you have forgotten to buy a rooster!”

We all laughed, and indeed it was laughable. Such a simple thing never occurred to us. Benele is only around nine years old. But an American *boychik*, a smart one!

Nu, we bought a rooster. And you should see this rooster – a true gentleman, a cavalier. As soon as he arrived he enjoyed himself with the ladies, and became with them a real big shot. The ladies, that is, the hens, took to him in a very friendly manner, like a long-awaited guest. It was a joy to watch the rooster walk among the hens and puff himself up like a great hero, and then suddenly sing out: “Ku-ku-ru-ku – hu-u” ... All of the chickens in the world have one language. “Ku-ku-ru-ku” is by them sort of like the Esperanto that people write about so much in the newspapers. It could be that Mr. Esperanto took the idea of a universal language from the chickens. The rooster sang out and the hens joined in the choir “Kvow-kvow,” which in chicken-talk must mean: “Bravo, well done!” My Benele amused himself by interrupting the rooster in the middle of his crowing. But I snatched his ear and made him promise to stop it.

When it finally happened that we got our first egg, we carefully put it away in the icebox and decided to use it for the Sabbath challah.

The rooster is a white one and we reserved him for the eve of Yom Kippur. We bought more wives for him and he was living like a Turkish sultan, not knowing that the 'children of Adam,' as it says in the prayerbook, awaited him.

In the house he acted like he was privileged. He jumped up on the tables and often did damage: broke lamps, glasses, knocked platters off, plates, and no sooner would we chase him out that he would come back in.

In addition to that, I started to suffer persecution from the neighbors. His crowing was disturbing their sleep. Also that of the dog, who belongs to a Christian, and when he heard the crowing he would howl all night. That didn't bother him, because a dog that belongs to a Christian is a huge big shot. All of the Jews from the neighborhood threw the dog sugar cubes and tiptoed up to him with their hearts

pounding with fear, and were happy if the dog let them pet him. It was considered a great honor that the dog accepted the cube of sugar and didn't bite their hand. Whomever could brag that the dog gave them a sniff or a lick became renowned all over Blotetown just as though they had taken the city of Port Arthur in battle. But an innocent Jewish rooster is – an atonement he will become – an incidental item, a calamity in the world. Respectable people will not tolerate his crowing, his clucking, his squawking, his proud strutting, his virtues or his faults. I won't draw out the story any longer, and simply say that McNally's dog, that is to say, my neighbor's dog, hated my rooster with his whole being, and when the dog lay stretched out on the ground next to my house with his chin on his paws and the eyes half shut as though they were dreaming, I could see in those eyes signs of murder, and these signs were directed to my hen house.

I took comfort that soon it would be the eve of Yom Kippur and my rooster and my hens would have a kosher death, and would climb the 'staircase' straight to heaven.

However, during the night of the Fast of Tzom Gedaliah something terrible happened. A pogrom, a regular blood bath! In the middle of the night I heard a great ruckus in my yard. A dog howled and the howl was mixed with the flapping of wings and a “kvow-kvow” which was full of sadness and despair, and which in Esperanto-speak must have meant: “Gewalt, Lord of All the World, save us!” I looked outside: My hen house was open, my hens were laying stretched out with their heads down. And the rooster was still floundering and gasping. He fell like a hero for his life and for the honor of his family!

McNally's dog was standing there filling his eyes with the death throes of the rooster.

And that was the end of my chickens! They atoned before they could live long enough to be an atonement.

28. An emissary comes to Blotetown

A guest has come to Blotetown. It is a emissary of an organization that helps orphans in the west. He has come to give a lecture along with stereo optical pictures showing how the orphan's home will be run. By us we have already organized a committee with Mr. Pupikovitz as chairman, and they have already organized an evening at the Blotetown clubhouse. The Honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick has agreed to hold a talk. McNally and also Mr. Callahan have consented to be among the vice-presidents for the evening. Everyone paid in what they wanted to and were seated wherever there was a place.

In Blotetown there is no theater, and so when a speaker comes, an emissary, a delegation and gives us a chance to get out of the house for a little while and spend an evening socially, we are happy to do so. But with the stereo optical presentation something of an accident happened. We heard it said later that the boy who travels with the emissary mixed up the glass slides by mistake and they did not display in the proper order.

The emissary, a Jew with a short beard, like mine, and very short-sighted, had, so it seems, not realized that the slides had been mixed up and climbed up on the stage with his face to the audience and began his lecture.

It was dark in the meeting hall and on the white bed sheet there was a view that showed several nice cows.

“That, ladies and gentlemen,” the emissary explained, “Is a meeting of the Executive Committee of our Lady's Auxiliary. They are the most noble women on G-d's earth. Consider the goodness, the honesty to be seen in their faces, and you will understand the noble ideas that fill their hearts and minds.”

This view was quickly replaced by another that showed several women, young and middle-aged, sitting around a table as though they were in conference.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen,” explained the emissary, still standing with his face to the audience, “are cattle from our own farm, who give us fresh milk every day for our orphans. Our cows are a wonder to all of the farmers near us. Two cows have won prizes at the county fair. We have been offered a lot of money for them, but we do not want to sell them.”

The third slide showed a huge, fat ox.

“I have the honor of making this presentation: This is our Superintendent.”

A number of us were already smiling, but there were many who had not yet figured out what was going on. They were sitting there with their mouths open in astonishment.

Then on the bed sheet there was an image of a gentleman with full cheeks and a thick neck.

“And that,” the emissary explained, “Is an ox from our own farm. The photo was taken of him just before he was sent to the slaughterhouse in order to supply our orphans with fresh meat.”

Now on the bed sheet appeared a picture of a large chicken coop.

“That is our new building which includes all of the modern improvements,” said the emissary, “This building this the result of several years' work and a source of pride for all Jews everywhere.”

“And that is the large stall for our livestock,” While on the bed sheet appeared a beautiful, large house.

“Our school!” He called out when on the bed sheet a picture of a stall came up. “There we follow the latest methods and instructional systems.”

“Our children amuse themselves,” the emissary said, but on the bed sheet there was nothing to see. It stayed blank.

At that point the emissary realized that something was wrong.

“Vot iss de matter?” He yelled to the boy who was sitting by the lantern fixing the glass plates.

“Just a minute,” the boy said, “I have to fix something.”

The next instant a shadow appeared that looked like the silhouette of a goat chewing a cud and working his tongue.

The whole audience exploded in laughter.

I looked and saw that my Benele had slipped over to the lantern and was working his hands. He had only recently learned to make several figures with his hands and make shadows on the wall from a lamp or light, and animate them with his fingers. The goat grew horns and lowered his head. I sprung from my seat and angrily seized my little scamp by the ear, and drug him home.

“Tell me, you little do-nothing,” I asked him when we got home, “What should I do with you? What sort of a punishment should you get?”

Benele lowered his head and was silent for a while. Afterwards, he asked:

“A big punishment, or a little one?”

“A big one,” I answered.

Benele thought for a moment then said:

“Give me ten cents and tell me I can't spend it for a whole week.”

How do you like this little do-nothing? He is growing into a businessman!

29. Shul elections and a Torah celebration

Around the Sukkot holidays we had our election of officers for our congregation Temple Jacob.

We all knew in advance that Mr. Pupikovitz would be reelected President, and that Mr. Bulke would be reelected Vice-president, and all the other officers would be reelected along with Mr. Shaprinski as Secretary. Yet, on Sukkot Sabbath evening when the meeting took place we all arrived on time. Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick also came, because wherever an election takes place he is there like an in-law.

The Protocol Secretary read a report from our worthy brother President, detailing the good work that the officers of the congregation did in the past year; and the noble work of the Lady's Auxiliary who in the past year had donated a Torah scroll. He extended thanks to the members of the congregation and to Reverend Doctor Hotzmach, our spiritual 'guide,' who leads us down the righteous path of civilization, humanism, Americanization ---

“And real estate speculation!” Pointed out Alderman Fitzpatrick.

Everyone applauded. I don't know which they were applauding for, the President's report or the joke from the Alderman.

All of the officers were reelected. It was easy to see that all of the office-holders were confident to be reelected, because each one came with a prepared speech. The first to speak was President Pupikovitz. He stumbled through it a bit. But Reverend Doctor Hotzmach, who was seated on the platform, quietly whispered to him what to say next. It was not a secret to any of us, that all of the speeches Mr. Pupikovitz made, were taught to him by Reverend Doctor Hotzmach. The problem is that Mr. Pupikovitz does not have a strong memory, and he gets himself confused. So, for example, by this meeting toward the end he said:

“It is by me an honor and a pleasure, no, excuse me, I meant to say that it is by me a pleasure and an honor to take on the position of President because you have so favored me ----- (here he coughed) I mean, with this you have demonstrated your sorrow [*trauer*] in me, excuse me, I meant to say your confidence [*zutrauen*]. I have been in America a long time, and when I have to speak in the Jewish language is difficult for me, you know. I tank yu very mutz far yur kind attenshun.”

The Vice-president, Mr. Bulke then got up to speak. He spoke fluently.

“Worthy brothers!,” He began, “This is the happiest moment in my life. This day will forever remain in my memory.” –

“That is my speech!” Interrupted, Mr. Burik, the First Trustee of our congregation.

The Vice-president, Mr. Bulke, stopped in the middle of his talk, trembling like a leaf and looking up at the ceiling.

“Order! Order!” Screamed President Pupikovitz, and clapped his hands together.

“That is my speech!” Screamed the First Trustee, Mr. Burik – “He stole my speech. He has no right to

give that speech!”

“Order! Order! Let him speak!” Screamed President Pupikovitz.

“I will not let him give that speech!” Screamed the First Trustee, “I spent my own money on Professor Zelikovitz's book for Yiddish Speakers, and I memorized an entire speech from it, and this beggar came into my house and stole the book, and memorized the same speech! Blood will flow. I will have him arrested, the thief!”

The Vice-president, Mr. Bulke turned red as a beet, and the First Trustee, Mr. Burik became white as a bread roll. [In Yiddish: bulke = bread roll; burik=beet] The brothers of the congregation began to whisper among themselves. Many of them laughed, quietly to themselves, naturally. President Pupikovitz also smiled and explained to the Alderman what was going on. The Alderman went over to the First Trustee, slapped him on the back and said:

“Go ahead, Burik! Stand on your rights!”

The Vice-president then came down from the platform, and the First Trustee gave the same speech from beginning to end.

But all of these troubles were forgotten when it came the happy day of the Torah Celebration. In our congregation there was a regular illumination. All of the ladies came dressed as for a ball. One thing hit me right in the eyes, and that is, that Mr. Kaban was right when he said that “In Blotetown there were women without end.” It is true. Young ladies by us are without limit and without reckoning. A Jew who moves to Blotetown with grown daughters has no hope of getting them married off. It is a dead town for young girls, a cemetery, and they will sit here until their pigtailed turn gray. Very often someone will sponsor a ball, and every woman who has a grown daughter in the house and G-d in her heart sends her daughter to the ball. But other than the young girls, no one comes. The boys seek their pleasures and company in New York. After supper they take a tram and soon the boys are there where there are bright lights, where it is dry, where they have theaters, a club, and they can amuse themselves. Our daughters stay here alone. The boys get married and settle in Harlem, in the Bronx, in Brownsville and the young girls stay here with us in Blotetown.

So, when you see someone who has a house in Blotetown, you will know that buried in the house is not only his money, but also his daughters. He can not sell his house nor can he marry off his daughters – no buyers and no husbands. And therefore it is no wonder that whenever there is a celebration in Blotetown there come young girls without number, and if someone spots a boy they say over him the “Prayer of Renewal.”

The Honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick came with Mrs. Fitzpatrick. The Torah procession made its way around to him like everyone else. When it came to the “Uzer Dalim,” he asked what it was. “Help the poor,” explained Reverend Doctor Hotzmach. “Cut it out,” answered the Alderman, “In Blotetown there are no poor!”

Tim McNally the plumber, Tim O'brian the watchman for all Blotetown together with his assistant and Jenny Mulligan the saloonkeeper who wanted to be a lover of Israel, had also come to the celebration and guzzled everything in the world.

It was a festive holiday!

30. He makes a party in honor of Betsy's birthday

A while back on the Sabbath, my yidene said to me:

“Chaim! Do you realize that next Wednesday, G-d willing, is Betsy's birthday?”

“How old will she be?” I asked.

“Twenty-two,” my yidene answered me.

“She was twenty-three last year,” I said.

“You foolish Jew, you!” objected my yidene, “What has our daughter done that she deserves such a foolish father? Where is it heard of that a such a young lady, pretty and clever, should sit until 24-years old and not have a husband? What had she done wrong, that her father should force her to move into such somber mud, may G-d not punish me for saying so? Listen, Chaim, let me be the Papa, and I will run the whole affair. We will make a party for our daughter's birthday. She will be twenty-two years old next Wednesday. You hear? Twenty-two – not a day more!”

“So be it, twenty-two,” I said, “You have convinced me.”

We began to talk about the party: What to prepare, who to invite, and also whether we should order ice cream to have with supper or not. (The last time we did this it was swell.) We soon had to make a list of the guests we wanted to invite. Aunt Reyzl with her daughter and son-in-law is not three*; Mr. and Mrs. Tsirilson, is not five; R. Thomas Barkely Chaprinski, the young man engaged to our second daughter, Flossie, is not six; Mendel Bak, is not seven; Mr. Gudliski with his wife is not nine. They are all New Yorkers. From Blotetown we invited two young men with their parents, something of a distant relation, makes already not thirteen. (We had our eye on the young men – one had already visited Betsy once.) From Blotetown itself we invited fifteen people. In the end it came out to a total of 28 guests.

My youngest boy, Benele, I sent to the drug store and had him bring back 28 post cards, and Betsy herself wrote out the 28 invitations.

Don't think it is easy writing out 28 invitations. The job took her until well into the night to complete.

(*) When making a list like this it was considered bad luck to name each person and, thus, identify their whereabouts at a specific time. An evil spirit or demon might overhear and show up to do mischief. So, to counter this you would say that the person would not be there.

Sunday is when the real preparations began. My yidene began to marinate the herring. By her, without marinated herring you don't have a party. The president likes to eat them. Nu, when you marinate herring, you also have to bake cookies, because herring without cookies is like a walking-stick without a walk. And my yidene makes such cookies, they could take the place of all your American crackers and biscuits. She makes them daily – and even every day it is a blessing, and to eat them, a devotion. Anyway, what else should I recount for you? The amount of food she prepared was enough for a wedding. My yidene is just like other wives: With the husband and the children they get what they get, but with guests she would rip her own skin off and give it to them. When a guest comes, she shows off her complete mastery of the home: The house is quickly cleaned up, the windows washed, we see a new tablecloth appear, napkins, a knife and fork for each person, and something to eat also. And that's just the incidental details.

Monday and Tuesday were consumed in cooking up various jellies, compotes, and snack foods. Wednesday itself is when the real work took place – roasting several chickens. With today's high prices the whole story is costing around 35 dollars, because of the schnapps, wine, beer and seltzer which have to be added in. But we have figured that it is all worth it. First off, because our daughter will receive presents that should be equal to the money we are spending, and secondly – perhaps; the Almighty might show mercy. There will be a couple of young men, and something may come of it.

When it got to be around six o'clock, we were all in the house dressed up for a party. In the invitations we had written, that the supper would take place at seven, but really we figured it wouldn't start until eight. I memorized a short speech to give before the guests. I wrote it myself on a little piece of paper, and learned it from start to end. Every time I was alone for a moment, I rehearsed the speech so that I wouldn't forget it.

“Why are you sitting there, Chaim?” My yidene said to me, “Go to the station and wait for the New Yorker and Brownsville guests. It is dark outside, and it will be hard for them to find the house.”

I went out into the street. It was muddy and dark. The station is not far from my house, but in the block between us and the station the mud is the worst in Blotetown. Everything is mud! It is like pitch, sticky pitch. When you put a foot down in it, you can't pull it out, it catches you and down you go and come back up covered in mud. One time I went through this mud in rubber boots, when I got home I found mud in my pockets. That will give you an idea how deep the mud was.

I stood at the station and watched every train that arrived. Not one of my invited guests! How long I stood there, I don't know. Later my Benele came by and said:

“Papa! Mama sent me to find out where you were. No one has come yet. It's already half past seven. Mama wants you to come right back to the house. Papa, you hear?”

I came back home and found my wife saddened.

“Chaim,” she said to me, “There is something wrong.”

“What could be wrong?” I asked, “When you invite people to come at seven, they never arrive until eight or nine.”

“But Aunt Rezl?” she said, “We asked her to come earlier.”

“Nu, she is a little behind schedule,” I comforted my yidene, “You know, when people are leaving New York at this time of day there are crowds, especially around the Brooklyn Bridge.”

“There is something wrong, Chaim,” she repeated, “My heart is telling me that nobody is coming tonight.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked, “A yidene, if she doesn't have a reason to eat her heart out, she thinks up who knows what. They will come, they will come – They won't give up their portions.”

“But, see Chaim,” my yidene complained again, “Why in this whole time have no presents arrived for our daughter? The fashion is that when you invite people to a birthday party, they send presents.”

“Nu, perhaps they will bring the presents with them.”

“Papa, it is almost eight o'clock. Our clock is a little slow,” said Betsy.

For a long time we sat there saddened without saying a word. Then the clock began to strike bim, bom, bom, bom – up to eight.

“It is already twenty minutes past eight,” Betsy noted, “The clock is slow.”

I went over to the mantle piece to fix the clock.

“You found a time to tinker with the clock!” Yelled my yidene in anger.

I pretended not to hear. I knew that you are not supposed to turn a clock back. I was turning the hands forward. Let the clock strike the half-hour after eight, then nine, the half-hour after nine, then ten. Bim, bom, bom, bom, bom, bom – that took up a full five minutes to get back around to eight. I let the clock strike eight times, then set the minute hand to twenty-five minutes after eight.

“Oy, my head is splitting from the clock,” called out my yidene.

She went back into the kitchen to check on something. The children were in the parlor. I stayed in the dining room reading a Yiddish newspaper.

In the middle of reading the paper I heard the doorbell ring. I got up. The children ran out from the parlor. Everyone ran to the door.

There was Mr. Shaprinski, the Secretary from our congregation.

“Thank G-d,” my yidene called out, “One is already here. Now, perhaps, the others will come. How late is it by your watch?”

“It is a quarter past nine,” Mr. Shaprinski called back, taking out his silver pocket watch, “But what is going on at your house? Who are you waiting for? What kind of a feast are you having? I see so many plates on the table! What is going on tonight, maybe an engagement party?”

“Mr. Shaprinski! What is wrong with you?” We both said at the same time, my yidene and I, “You didn't receive our invitation? Today is our Betsy's birthday. We are having a party!”

"I didn't receive any invitation." said Mr. Shaprinski, and with it winked his eye in a devilish manner, "Perhaps you didn't want to invite me, only just now that I happened by you are saying that I am invited, he-he-he!"

"What are you saying, Mr. Shaprinski?" my yidene countered, and she grabbed him by the lapels. – We should both live in good health if my husband didn't, with his own hand, send you a post card. Chaim, when did you put the postcards in the mail?"

"Friday," I said, "No, let me remember exactly – Sabbath, no, not Sabbath – It couldn't have been the Sabbath, perhaps Sunday –"

At that point I was struck speechless. My head I felt as though it was hit with a hammer. In my eyes everything went dark, and I felt as though my legs would not hold me up. I collapsed into a chair.

"What is wrong?" asked Mr. Shaprinski, "Are you not well?"

In that instant everything became clear to me, clear as crystal: I forgot to mail the invitations! After my daughter had written out all the invitations, I took them and put them in the box on the table, with the idea to put them in the letter box the next day. But the next day I forgot about them like you forget about the dead.

This was bad. There was only one glimmer of hope: Possibly, possibly this was only a bad dream. But there stood my yidene looking at me with such eyes. Oy, such eyes, that spoke to me saying: "You hoodlum, you have murdered me!"

The eyes continued to stare at me making me go all hot and cold, then suddenly I heard my yidene's voice:

"Hoodlum, you murderer of your own daughter! Now I understand everything – You didn't send the invitations!"

"I – have – not – sent," I could barely stammer the words, "I – for – got. Forgive me Tsipe Yenta – children – forgive your old father."

"Look, he's crying!" called out Mr. Shaprinski, and looked at me askance, "Feh! Like a woman! A man shouldn't cry. Only women cry. That's their job."

"Oy, I should be the one crying and complaining about such a trouble, such a misfortune."

I don't have to tell you that I what my yidene said.

"So, why are you getting so upset?" Mr. Shaprinski comforted us, "You have the party a week from now. No one will know. Meantime let's have a bite, and make a little party right now."

We took his advice and all sat down at the table. You can imagine that there was enough to eat. Only Mr. Shaprinski ate, because a Secretary of a congregation or any Jewish organization, is always hungry. From the troubles, I just drank. The alcohol made me more lively, it made me a new man. Mr. Shaprinski pushed one glass after another to me, and as it felt good on my heart, I slapped my hand down on the table and started giving the speech that I had prepared for the party:

“Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen! Today is the happiest day in my life. Today is the birthday of my dear and loved daughter, Betsy, she should live long. I am happy that you have all come here to take part in our great joy, and the joy of my wife and children. It makes me happy to see you all sitting around the table. I thank you all for the wonderful presents you have brought my daughter and for your good wishes. G-d willing, we will experience parties like this for your children and your children's children.”

“Bravo!” Yelled Mr. Shaprinski.

“Go to sleep!” My yidene called out, “Go sleep it off a bit.”

I followed what she suggested, and when I woke up in the morning I couldn't find my shoes and socks. I searched for them for quite a while, until I noticed them on my feet. That night I had fallen asleep before I had time to take them off.