

Translator's Notes:

Mendele's autobiographical novel underwent many *gilgulim* (transmigrations) during and after his lifetime. The copy at the UCLA Library, for example, omits the original introductory essay. The digitized version provided by the National Yiddish Book Center is of an edition "for youth," published in Warsaw, 1936, in which Hebrew/Aramaic words are transliterated into Yiddish — a style copied in most textbooks of Secular Yiddish schools worldwide and enforced in the USSR. The following translation is from a text that appears in the *Slutsk yizker* (Memorial) Book (<http://www.yizkor.nypl.org/index.php?id=2152>).

Section B, below, may be considered either as an accurate portrayal of a rich man's atypical generosity or, more likely, a satirical sketch contrasting ideal portrayals of the wealthy with a far greater reality — not only in Mendele's days.

The entire novel still awaits an English translation.

Mendele Moykher Sforim/Excerpts from "Shloyme Reb Khayim's"

A

In the Slutsk Yeshiva

...Shloymele, whose good fortune brought him days and nights of places to eat and sleep, also in time achieved charm and grace in the eyes of all the *yeshiva*¹ boys. Even the senior students there were won over and allowed him into the group. "Khart,"² a scamp who delighted in throwing wet rags around, letting out farts, a unique fellow, became Shloyme's companion—studying with him as a comrade, it was called. "Khart," as it turned out, was by nature a gem, a golden character with warm, deeply internalized feelings of compassion, of love that often burst forth in pearly, trembling tears in his eyes and a quietly-sorrowful sigh on his lips—quite a fine little fellow but, alas, poor, lonely. Shloymele's great good fortunes, eating and drinking in companionship, did not aid his studies. He was led astray from the learning that he had wanted and needed to achieve. In truth, such fortunes were more ill than good, to be wished on all one's enemies; yet "days,"³ even when eaten in the kitchen, exiled under an angry cook, were still better than *pas bimelekh*,⁴ bread and salt; thin, watery *krupnik*, groat-soup, better than *mayim b'mshure*, water in small measure; sleeping on a warm "*lezhanke*" [warming-oven cot] much better than

¹ Schools for advanced studies in Bible, Talmud and rabbinic commentaries. Graduates could obtain rabbinic ordination or certification for other religious roles. Students were traditionally though minimally supported by local communities.

² Possibly, an engraver.

³ "Eating days," as described herein, involved *yeshiva* students taking supper at a different home each evening. Rarely did the student have seven homes on which to rely.

⁴ Here and below, Mendele uses the Hebrew or Aramaic word/phrase from, respectively, the Bible or Talmud, or the Russian term, then provides the Yiddish translation. When he fails to do so, the translator has provided the meaning in brackets.

le'al ha'erets tishn, sleeping on the bare earth, and sometimes suffering that thing that a sated, sinning person desires—all of this is better than the bitter life of one who hungers, who suffers need.

As for Shloymele's life in Slutsk—which lasted about two years including an interruption mid-way—it is worth pausing just a bit on certain aspects...

Shloymele remembers those wintery evenings in the *yeshiva*. The sun, after its mournful, short pass, would set on an array of the colorfully-playing, thickly outstretched clouds. Its last rays penetrate inside the *yeshiva* through its thick, frosted windows, and flutter on the opposite wall with all the impressed reflections of the semi- and somehow variously frost-embellished, decorated panes. Outdoors the cold rages, smolders. Indoors it is cold—dim. The scattered boys have just started to re-gather, each of them rubbing his hands, saying “Ah, ah.” The warming-oven is alight. Two boys—among those who'd remained: one of them luckless, lacking a “day,” and the other who had one, had brought along a few potatoes for supper—they kneel at the open door [of the oven] facing the fire, each paying attention to his sinful bowl where a single goat rages angrily, up and down, drumming: *tyokh, tyokh, tyokh!* The fire crackles, illuminating their faces and of those around them. A brightly-burning log sticks out of the oven, sending out flaming tongues, erupting haughtily near the door with gleaming embers, blaring out, at the end, “pip-pip-fff,” like the long blast of the *shoyfer* [shofar]⁵ It grows warm, the crowd is happy. They pass time with stories, with sayings, with jests. The boys who have bowls take to eating—“Arise, Jews, in a momentous hour!” The ‘priests’ go off to eat ‘the offering’—to slurp their goat-soup!...And the boys slurp, working diligently, accompanying every spoonful from the bowl to their mouths with a song of their lips, giving the onlookers wolfish appetites. Those scratch themselves; they lick their lips in great desire. On Wednesdays, Sholymele sits here, too, in the midst of them, eating ‘the offering’ of the little bread loaf that Yente the market-wife would give him that day. He eats it very seriously, piously, in a sort of “*leshem yikhud*” [cabbalistic invocation of deity's name], being as careful as a ritual guard that not a single crumb fall, heaven forbid.

That little loaf is truly dear, it must be treated like “an offering baked on a griddle,” like a pancake fried in butter, dearer than the best “day,” considering with what flaming love for God and his Torah the loaf was given. A pair of doves, the [Temple] sacrifice of a poor man, is considered by God equal to the fat bull of Bashan—the last possession of a poor man, alas!

...The first evil hour befell Shloymele on his “day” at a well-to-do householder's, there in the kitchen where he entered, as was the habit of a *yeshiva*-boy come to eat supper.

In a corner of the kitchen a grease candle sputtered. A woman with a red, twisted nose, with fat lips, a wide mouth, missing two front teeth, puttered around the stove, humming, murmuring angrily, for no special reason,

⁵ Ceremonial ram's horn.

avoiding looking at Shloymele's corner, as if he weren't there. Shloymele sits as though on needles, his soul expiring as he waits. The kitchen door squeaks, opens constantly. Any moment, he thinks, the redemption, the supper, will arrive—but nothing; the servants go to and fro. He sits and is almost consumed by his waiting. It is late, time to go to his rest in the place where he spends the night. They're awaiting him with yesterday's still-not-completed stories, and also with newly-fresh ones. He is noticeable by his *yeshiva*-boy movements—rising up once in a while, a scratch, a sigh, a cough, a sniff of the nose—and she: nothing! She keeps on murmuring as though she were arguing with someone, wishing Pharaoh's plagues upon his head. Just then, as though sprung from the earth, there appeared before Shloymele's eyes a bright-colored picture of his life, past and present. And right in the midst of that he heard simultaneously a woman's voice, sounding like the cook's, calling and saying: "Go, little boy, go wash up. Little boy!" Shloymele washes his hands in his tears, raising his hands angrily, resentfully with "raise your hands," not, God forbid, against God, but against his dark fate and the woman with the red nose.

He manages a bite of bread, a sip of groat-soup, says the blessing, cutting it short, says goodnight to the four walls and leaves quickly, muddled, not kissing the *mezuze*,⁶ extremely upset, sad, unhappy with himself or anyone; oh-and-woe—he thinks angrily in his thoughts—to him, to his luck, to what he has experienced! A ward, a *yeshiva*-boy, "eating days," unfortunately...Oh-and-woe to his standing with his fellow-*yeshiva* boys, poor lads. Oh-and-woe to his privilege of going from door to door with the rabbi, poor-gathering alms in the little sack, as well as to the privilege of wandering about, sleeping on the warm *lezhanke*...great gifts...prospects—great prospects...

B

Reb Yoyne [Jonah]

...Among all its wonders, the wealthy Slutsker, *reb* Yoyne, rightly occupies a handsome spot.

See him all at once: his house, his activities; regard him and imagine him! A single-story wooden house with a small porch a few steps high at the entrance, and a row of medium-high windows, glass eyes lining both sides, looking out on a large, fenced-in yard. And by that name, "*reb* Yoyne's yard," his home is known in the town. At one side of the yard there stands a tall, very attractive synagogue; that is, a house of study. A large crowd prays there—both family members and other Jews. There, too, both young and old sit and study day and night. Thus it was during his lifetime and later, in his son's time—a quorum of learned Jews, aged and young men, would be paid wages to study constantly.

⁶ Lit., doorpost. A case containing parchment on which are written verses from Deuteronomy, affixed to doorways.

Wages were also paid to a *yeshiva*-head to teach a portion of the Talmud with commentaries to the learned audience there, every morning after prayers.

Friday evenings the yard takes on a sort of new appearance: a holiday-like face, a pillar-of-fire of many burning candles in the synagogue, in the house, streaming through the windows and illuminating, spreading across the yard in every little corner. It feels as though, somehow, the good angels—servants of Him Above, sent from heaven by the Holy-One-blesséd-be-He—hover above there, awaiting the rich man and his children at their departure from the synagogue, to accompany them home. There in the house, in a bright, large salon, displayed before the residents and for scores of guests, poor people, affluent Jews, are *shabes* [Sabbath]-laden tables with everything wonderful—with blessing-candles in trios, in seven-branched silver candelabras, on expensively veneered credenzas. Wine sparkles, pearly in hand-cut, big-bellied, long-necked flagons, reflecting rainbow-colors into crystal *kidush*⁷ cups. At each diner's place, the snow-white tablecloth is set with a pair of newly-baked rolls, looking like new-born chicks. Seeing all this it seems to one that a new soul is born, the *neshome yiseyre* [second soul of the Sabbath]. One feels that here is the Sabbath, here comes the beloved bride, now we go to greet her, having welcomed her in the synagogue with *boyi b'sholem* [Come in Peace], singing *lekho dodi* [Come, Belovéd], loudly, passionately.

In such a manner did the rich man serve God and His Torah. However, as a resident and as a Jew, a son of his people, he also served the town and All Israel. He had partners in this. Certainly, a large share came from him. Nevertheless, he did not allow his general charity to displace specifics, like those among us who limit themselves to making the blessing over wine, and so forth. That is, his charity for the mass did not exclude needy individuals. Each of them individually obtained coins from him: wandering paupers of all sorts; beggars of this and that type, carrying alms-sacks; those lacking alms-sacks: fire-victims, abandoned wives, ne'er-do-wells with rabbinic notes and without them—no matter, everyone received his farthing. To say nothing of local folk: the town's unknown poor; quiet, "secret recipients," that is, who received food and drink hospitably, in the manner of our father Abraham.

There is the picture, dear Jews, an old-fashioned picture! A rarity, these days... Look at this, if you will: there, in the yard, directly across from the rich man's house—you see it?—a significant structure, long, windowless, with a pair of large, wide-open gates, like someone belted, sleeves rolled up, arms akimbo, hands outstretched, taking something from inside and handing it over to a pushing crowd outside, men, women loaded with packages, candles and bottles; this is—do you hear, dear Jews?—this is a storehouse of foodstuffs and other needful things from which the rich man's "person" in charge of this, distributes goods every Thursday to certain poor folk for their Sabbath. And those pitifully, badly fallen into poverty, ashamed to put out their hands, are sent aid to their homes in secret and honorably.

⁷ Cups reserved to hold wine used in making the blessing (*kidish*) over wine.

Keep looking, Jews, a bit farther!

At a side of the yard, a separate wing occupies a large area. Its chimneys emit pillars of smoke; servants, women, girls in white aprons, their heads covered in clean white cloths, rush about very busily, carrying pots, tableware, back and forth. A tall man, strong—look at him—a large-boned fellow, stands at the door. He issues commands and admits people who come and go one after the other—just listen to what an old-time rich man can do: establishing a kitchen for cooking and baking to feed, every day, hungry people, along with lonely prayer-house habitués, impoverished, weakened, alas! Yes, this is Slutsk's rich man's open kitchen for the poor and hungry! Not expecting, God forbid, honors for himself, nor any reward; not even thinking that someday a portrait will be drawn of him—this very portrait!

And that one doing the commanding over there—he is the neighbor's husband, of that woman who lives in the second room in the house of the *minyem* [prayer-quorum]. Her husband, unable to tear himself from the kitchen as so much work there constantly depends on him, is able to come home only once a week for a few hours, bringing all sorts of good things. His basket overflows with good, tasty things, toward which, the more he tastes of them, Shloyme's heart and eyes are drawn ever more strongly. And the Evil Spirit, the guardian, sits mostly hidden here in the basket among the goodies, encouraging Shloyme to be where a houseful of people are praying, keeping him from studying for the time being...

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