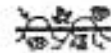




INTRODUCTION TO

## The Little Man



*Dos Kleyne Mentsbele*, subtitled "The Biography of Yitskhok-Avrom, the Strong-Arm Man," was the first work in Yiddish published by Mendele. Here translated as *The Little Man* (rather than, literally, as "the little person"), it is generally considered the work which marks the beginning of the modern period in Yiddish literature.

The first work by Sholem Yankef Abramovitsh to appear under the pen-name Mendele Moykher-Sforim, it was originally published in 1864 as a short story of several dozen pages in the Yiddish supplement to the Hebrew newspaper *Hameylits*. Mendele points out in *Notes For My Biography* (see page 31) that "this tale made a great impression on the Jewish public." A second printing was issued in Odessa in 1865, and a third in Vilna in 1866. A fourth completely revised and expanded edition was published in Vilna in 1879. This new version increased the number of pages by more than three-and-a-half times. A final revision was made by Mendele in 1907 for an edition of his complete works, published in Odessa. Aside from stylistic and grammatical changes, the 1907 version differs from the 1879 version in that it changes the sequence of some of the chapters and also omits the first introductory chapter of the 1879 version.

Gerald Stillman, one of the editors of this volume and the translator of *The Little Man*,\* used the 1879 edition, as published by the Hebrew Publishing Co., New York, in Volume I of *The Complete Works of Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 1910: "I have also compared it to the 1907 text as published by YKUF Publishers, New York, in Volume I of *The Selected Works of Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 1946. In a few scattered instances, where the sentence structure is clearer in the 1907 text, I have used some phrases or words from the latter."

\*Published originally in 1956 by Thomas Yoseloff under the title *The Parasite*.

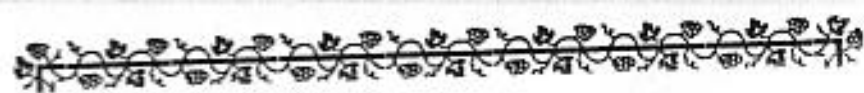
According to Mendele's friend, J.L. Binshtok, the figure of Gutman in the novel is modeled after Avrom-Ber Gottlober. The figure of Yitskhok-Avrom is modeled, according to Sholem Aleykhem, after a powerful man who "at that time cracked the whip in Glupsk (Berdichev) over the congregation of Israel."

A picaresque novel, it is a bitter attack on "toadies," or influence peddlers, who live off the people (milking the rich and squeezing the poor) without really contributing anything in return. As Gerald Stillman cogently observes in the introduction to the original edition of this translation (1956), since the protagonist learns that "the quickest and surest road to comfort and security lies in swindle and deceit, this very idea is in itself a profound condemnation of society."

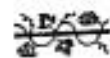
Writing under the influence of the *haskole* (the Jewish enlightenment of Eastern Europe), Mendele not only attacks toadies and influence peddlers, but also the Jewish "establishment," as well as the cramped Jewish way of life of the time, especially its educational system and its cultural level. *The Little Man* displays Mendele's acid, bitterly satiric tone, as well as his desire to reform the life of his people.

By "condescending" to employ Yiddish as a serious literary medium, Mendele elevated both himself and it. He risked ridicule from his contemporary *maskilim* (adherents of the *haskole*) who looked down on Yiddish as a "jargon," not worthy of serious cultural effort (see "Notes For My Biography"). But Mendele demonstrated that Yiddish could be employed as a powerful literary medium by using the ordinary language of the people with grace, beauty, style, and authenticity—something which had never really been done before. No wonder Sholem Aleykhem's designation of him as the "zeyde" (grandfather) of modern Yiddish (and Hebrew) literature became so quickly and widely adopted.

In reading *The Little Man*, we not only read Mendele's first Yiddish novel, and not only the work that begins a new phase in the development of the literature in that language, but we also see reflected in it the life and state of mind of a large segment of the Jewish people at that time and place, as well as the then temper of the *haskole*. We also touch the heart, mind, and soul of a man—of Sholem Yankef Abramovitsh, called, affectionately, Mendele by his people, a great Yiddish writer, the "zeyde," who speaks to us magically across the chasm of time.



## The Little Man



Translated by Gerald Stillman

### CHAPTER 1

The first question that one Jew asks another, even a total stranger, as soon as they have met and shaken hands, is: "And what is your name?"

It occurs to neither of them that his response might be as follows:

"Tell me, brother, why is it so important for you to know my name? Are we going to discuss the betrothal of our children? I'm called by the name that I was given and let me be!"

But the question "And what is your name?" is a natural one. It is as much a habit as

feeling the material of someone's new coat and inquiring:  
"How much is it a yard?"

or asking for a cigarette when an acquaintance opens his  
cigarette case; or sticking your fingers into someone's snuff box  
and taking a whiff;

or dunking a greasy kerchief into another's bottle of liniment  
and giving yourself a rubdown;

or walking over to two people engaged in a conversation and  
listening in for a while;

or asking someone for no good reason how his business is  
going and then weighing him down with advice although he  
does not need it.

Such acts and many others are to be expected, since they are part of the order of things for all eternity. To protest against them would make a man seem raving mad and perverse.

Jews are fairly well convinced that, immediately upon getting one's foot in the door in the world to come, the Angel's first question will be: "And what is your name, brother?"

Even the Angel who wrestled with Jacob did not violate the eternal order of things and soon asked Jacob how he was called. A similar act on the part of a human being who is only of flesh and

blood is therefore a foregone conclusion. I know very well that this, my first venture into Yiddish literature, will be greeted with the eternal question: "And what is your name, uncle?"

Mendele is my name! Thus, ladies and gentlemen, was I named after my great-grandfather on my mother's side, Reb Mendele Moscover, blessed be his memory. In his time, he was known as Moscover because he had once traveled to Moscow to purchase some wares. As a result of this journey, he had, in his little corner of the world, a respected name and much honor. He was considered a shrewd man, well versed in the whys and wherefores of the world. When any need arose, or if a petition was to be submitted to the government, he was always consulted first, but that is not my point.

I am, however, not yet properly introduced. After this initial question, Jews become curious in earnest. They bombard one with all sorts of questions, such as

Where are you from?  
Are you married?  
Any children?  
What business are you in?  
Where are you going?

and many others which have been accepted by the dispersed children of Israel as mandatory if the questioner is to be considered worldly wise and not a backward bench warmer. Sheer benevolence dictates that these questions be answered, just as one answers "A good year to you!" upon being greeted with a "Good *Shabbes*" or a "Good Holiday." Having no desire to go against the customs of the world, I stand ready to answer these questions as briefly and clearly as possible.

I was born in Tsvuatshits,\* in the province of Teterivke, which is famous for its excellent cattle and even more for the deprecating grunt with which its inhabitants greet every remark. Tsvuatshits is known for this grunt throughout the world. In my passport, I am described as being fifty-two years old, but I wouldn't swear to my exact age. My father and mother, may they rest in peace, strongly

\* Mendele, like Gogol, avails himself of the humorous device of playing upon place names. *Tsvua*, in Hebrew, means "hyena" or "hypocrite." The English equivalent of *Tsvuatshits* can be taken as "Hyenaville." *Teterivke*: in Russian, means "grouse"—a bird resembling a pheasant. *Teterivke* could be taken as "Grouseville."

disputed the calculation of my age. They both agreed that I was born at the lighting of the first candle during the Great Fire, but, according to my father's reckoning, this took place when the Great Frost descended upon our region and when my great-grandfather, blessed be his memory, was carried off. My mother, however, insisted that this happened approximately two years after the first Great Fright in our town, may we be protected from a similar occurrence today! As proof of this, she offered the fact that it was then that our red cow calved and she made *milkbike* jam-tarts for half the town, over which everyone licked their fingers, and to this day many an old man can still recall their taste!

My specifications in the passport read as follows :

Height—medium  
Hair and eyebrows—gray  
Eyes—brown  
Nose and mouth—ordinary  
A gray beard  
An unmarked face  
No distinguishing features.

But this is completely meaningless. I am merely a person like most other people and neither a tomcat nor an ass, God forbid. The question arises then, if the passport did not describe one's features, one would still be a human being, for who ever heard of giving a passport to an ass? To which we make answer as follows: "It is not wise to ask questions."

The whole idea is—here is a description of my features, and there, you still do not know how I look. . . . And, in truth, suppose you knew that my forehead is high and wrinkled, that my nostrils are large and rather coarse, that when I part my lips I appear to be smiling very acidly. Believe me, even before we were married, my wife was not interested in such petty details.

She was told: "Congratulations, bride, you have a groom!"

Enough! Whose concern is it what kind of a nose he has or what kind of face? Whose business is it and why should it bother anybody? Anyway, ladies and gentlemen, now you know that I am married. It stands to reason that I have children, and plenty of them at that, may the evil eye not harm them, for who has ever heard of a Jew who is married and does not have a minimum of half a dozen little ones? Especially a poor Jew.

My business is selling books: *Kbumoshim*, prayerbooks for

festivals, penitential prayerbooks, ordinary prayerbooks, and all sorts of religious works. I also have storybooks, including a few of the more modern novels. In my time, I have had many different jobs. Soon after leaving the room and board of my in-laws, I became a money changer, a spice dealer, an innkeeper, a grain dealer, a peddler, and a *melamed*. I went from one type of trade to another, as most Jews do, and remained a pauper. As the old saying has it: *You'll work all day for a wisp of hay*. Finally I took to selling books, and for a number of years, blessed be His name, I have done fairly well. Aside from books, I also carry prayershaws, venerable-looking *tsitses*, *shoyfers*, *mezuzes*, wolves' teeth, amulets, shiny patent-leather shoes for children, skullcaps, and sometimes brass and copper wares.

Exactly how brass and copper wares fit in with religious books, I am not quite certain myself, but it has been a custom of ours for years and years, since a Yiddish author must sometimes also be a matchmaker, just as a Polish janitor in a small *shul* must have a liquor concession on the side, or a tax collector will sometimes be a cook and butler at an affair given by the social elite, or a rabbinical assistant must have some confidential business deals afoot, or a rich idler must have his finger in the tax-farming pie. . . . But that is not my point. For years I have been on the road. I travel all over Poland and visit all its little towns and villages. I am as well known there, blessed be His name, as a counterfeit kopeck.

Usually you will find me at my wagon near the synagogue. My horse is there with me, facing the wagon and eating some oats (if there are any to be had) from a cloth which has one end tied to the trestle of the wagon and the other end to the yoke. Jewish children quietly steal behind and gleefully tear the hairs from his poor tail, and he, the *sblimazi*, stands there calmly, as if he were not bothered at all. Sometimes he drops his lower lip, at which time he seems to engage in a toothy laugh just like, forgive the comparison, a human being.

When there is nothing to eat, which happens on occasion, he stands thoughtfully with perked ears, looking at my display of books, and one could swear that with his horse sense he knows quite well what is written there, possibly better than many a. . . . But that, too, is beside the point.

I believe that I am now absolved of all introductory obligations. I have answered all the questions and it is high time to proceed with our story. Anyway, I am only human, and if I have left

anything out, believe me, upon my word of honor, that, just as soon as I remember, I will certainly include it in one of my narrations, which I plan, with God's help, to publish one after another. Furthermore, if there are any who are so impatient that they must immediately know the entire root of my being in complete detail, let them take the trouble to write to me and they will soon receive a clear answer. My address is:

Mendele Yudelovitch Moykher-Sforim  
Tsvuatshits, Teterivke

They do not have to bother adding the title "Reb Jew." The postal officials will be able to tell without that. . . .

Wait a minute, ladies and gentlemen—I completely forgot the most important thing! It is a good thing that I caught myself in time. It is the custom of our Yiddish writers, as is well known, either to mention directly the names of their modest wives in their books, or, by means of clever symbols, to praise their virtue and piety. Therefore, you will all probably want to know my wife's name and you will certainly be justified.

Ladies and gentlemen, her name is Yente!



## CHAPTER 2

And now that we have become acquainted, ladies and gentlemen, try to imagine me, Mendele Moykher-Sforim, standing near my wagon somewhere along the road, deeply absorbed in thought, and apparently rooted to the ground. It is autumn. You will possibly think that my wagon is stuck in the mud and that I am considering the best way to extricate it? No! This is the year 5615, which will be especially noted in the almanac for its miraculously dry and beautiful autumn.

The weather was quite summery, warm, clear. The cattle grazed in the fields from which the dense young grain was shooting forth. The trees were garbed in yellow-green garments, somewhat faded, shredded, and moth-eaten. Yet it was plain that they had no intention of stripping completely bare in order to sleep their usual winter sleep. Long white gossamers floated through the air, a sure sign of good weather, although the almanac had, may I be pardoned for saying so, guessed wrong and had, as usual, told a big lie. But this is beside the point.

You will possibly think that I was standing near my wagon because I was lost? Wrong again! I knew very well that a little further, at the fork in the road, the road on the right leads to Glupsk\* and the road on the left leads to another town. The problem was: which road to take—to the left or to the right?

I had to go to Glupsk in order to transact some business there—I wanted to unload some wares and waxen *Khanike* candles. On the other hand, I also wanted to go to the fair in the other town. Therefore, I stood undecided, going neither here nor there, as if chained to the spot.

I happened to glance at my horse. He was calm and unperturbed, scratching his neck against his harness. In general, he seemed very pleased at not being in motion. I stared as though expecting the sought-for advice from him. Then it occurred to me to leave the entire matter to his discretion.

Don't laugh, ladies and gentlemen! When in doubt, even wise people fall back on strange solutions. Tell me please, what is the

\* A play on the Russian word *glup*, "stupid" or "foolish." Glupsk can therefore be interpreted as "Foolstown."

point, for example, in slapping oneself on the forehead or a die? Of what value is it to flip a coin or to use any other device? A fool can be very useful in such circumstances, him and take his advice. It happens quite frequently in this world of ours that wise men allow themselves to be led by fools. I know of many fools who play an important role with some businessmen highly respectable people, too. But this is beside the point.

Climbing into the wagon, I flicked the reins and then dropped them, letting the horse lead the way. He chose the road on the right toward Glupsk. Well, lead me, lead me, horse o' mine. Maybe you're right. If you prefer Glupsk, let it be Glupsk!

Tuesday morning, having said my prayers, I arrived in Glupsk and, as usual, drove right up to the synagogue. Before I had chance to catch my breath, I was surrounded. Old men and young men alike began to investigate the contents of my wagon, pecking into books, tapping my brass wares, examining the amulets and the wolves' teeth, asking me questions and asking each other questions, as is the custom among Jews. A gang of youngsters, the boys from the *Talmud-Toyre*, greeted their old friend, my horse and were soon merrily plucking the hairs from his tail.

In the courtyard of the synagogue, I noticed groups of people arguing. They were talking, laughing, worrying, shaking their heads. Soon several little groups merged into one. Commotion activity, noise, talking with hands and feet. Then the large group exploded, like a soap bubble, into a number of smaller ones. Apparently something had happened. Where there's smoke there's fire.

I was very curious to know what was going on; after all, I'm also a Jew. My soul is, as the saying goes, not made of dough. One should know about everything that goes on in the world. One can never tell when this knowledge will be useful. There is many a Jew who earns his daily bread by poking his nose into every pot and sniffing; wherever there are two partners, he barges in to make third and demands his share. Being united is a Jewish trait.

I listened to the conversation of a group which had just formed near me.

"Lord Almighty, blessed be Your justice! He was still a young man. I would say about forty. Such a man, such a man!"

"What are you so upset about, Reb Avremtshe, that you can't console your poor self? Pish, a great event! What was so wonderful about the man?"

"For you, Yosl, nothing is a great event and no man is ever wonderful. Reb Avremtshe is right. Such a man, such a rich man! It's a pity. As I am a Jew, it's a pity!"

"How d'ye do! Here's a new Mr. Pity! Leybtshe supports Reb Avremtshe with his booming bass and, like a good Jew, expresses his pity. Tell me, Leybtshe, what was it that you said a while ago?"

"What I said a while ago? P? What *did* I say, Yosl? Really, what did . . . ?"

"Certainly!, certainly! You yourself, with your kosher little mouth! Didn't you say: 'Is he also a human being, this Itsik-Avrem! the Strong-arm Man? He was, he may pardon me or not, a ruffian, a leech, a swindler, a liar, a brute and, to top it off, a lecher?'"

"Who? Me? Yos! What? Well . . . good day! I really have no time."

"A good day and a good year! Come with me Reb Avremtshe. We'll go to the synagogue and have a drink. The caretaker has some good brandy today."

"You don't think that a little brandy would do any harm, do you, Yosele? Upon my life, you did a clever thing by getting rid of that liar. Let's not fool ourselves! What was that man anyway? He was, may he rest in peace, an ignoramus, a busybody, a swindler, a leech. It's all right, he left plenty of money—other people's money!"

"That's why I like you, Reb Avremtshe. Because you always like to tell the truth. . . ."

I unharnessed my horse, turning him around so that he faced the wagon, in order to feed him some oats. Then I got to work and began unloading the wagon. I had hardly put things in a semblance of order, stringing up on both sides of the wagon rings of amulets, satin skullcaps, a few sets of *tsitses*, a prayershawl or two, when the caretaker of the *Beys Din* came running toward me and shot out all in one breath:

"*Oy, g'vald*, Reb Mendele! *Sbolem aleykhem*, Reb Mendele. The Rabbi, may he live long, cordially requests your honor to come to him quickly. Quickly, Reb Mendele!" The fact that the Rabbi had so soon become aware of my presence did not surprise me particularly. Glupsk, you see, is a Jewish town, and Jews become aware of things speedily. Let someone even so much as make a remark and it will immediately become known ten streets away.

\* *Itsik-Avreml* is the diminutive form for *Itsikob-Avrom*. Diminutives in Yiddish are used either endearingly or sarcastically, depending upon the context.

As a matter of fact, the remark will be garnished and served all on a little platter. It's really much more effective telegraph. What surprised me was the fact that the Rabbi came to see me. And why did he send the caretaker of the *Beys Din* after me in such a hurry? It occurred to me that a lawsuit must be involved. Yes, yes, there must be a little worm gnawing here somewhere. My heart skipped a beat. For where can you find a businessman who does not have some ugly little secret which, when found out, will allow others to prod their noses into his affairs?

In my mind, I quickly began to review all my business dealings. The first to appear before my mind's eye was my daughter's father-in-law. Maybe it is he who is stirring up the pot. Maybe he wants to force me to pay him the rest of the dowry and settle the whole affair. This father-in-law of my daughter's is a simple soul. He believes that whatever is written in a marriage contract must be fulfilled, and that whatever one has undertaken to pay must really be paid in full. He doesn't understand, the fool, that all that is mere talk and is written in black and white only for the sake of politeness. One must talk out of both sides of one's mouth so as to create a stir in the world, a custom which our fathers and their fathers before them developed.

Or maybe, I thought, God forbid, it is that book dealer with whom I did some trading last summer. I gave him *Shevures* prayerbooks, amulets, wolves' teeth, current novels, and sundry and varied trash. He gave me brass wares, books of religious questions and answers, prayer books for the guiltless, prayer books for festivals, and various other kinds of books. The point is that he may have reconsidered the whole transaction, felt that he had been cheated, and now wished, on the basis of an unfair price, to squeeze some more out of me! May the good Lord protect and defend a man from having any dealings with the book sellers of this area. One can get ulcers from their claims and demands! But that is beside the point.

Whatever the story, my heart grew heavy. Willy-nilly, I must go. I decided that I might as well take along some wares, small items, a brand new *Tebine* to which the Rabbi's wife might take a fancy, which certainly would not do me any harm. I was annoyed with my horse. Why had he chosen the road to Glupsk? I only let him smell the oats. I insulted him with a few scathing remarks, left him and my wagon in the hands of the caretaker, and stalked away in

anger. Let his friends, the boys of Glupsk, pull the hairs from his tail to their hearts' content! Serves him right! It was his choice. If it makes him happy, then I am happy and it is none of my affair.

No sooner had I stepped inside the Rabbi's door when he came to greet me.

"Oy, Reb Mendele! Oy, *sholem aleykhem*, Reb Mendele! Only the Lord Himself could have brought you here just when we need you, when we really need you, dear and hearty Reb Mendele. This is truly divine intervention, a veritable miracle. You did a wonderfully clever thing to come to Glupsk just at this time, Reb Mendele!"

"This wonderfully clever thing was done not by me, Mendele, but my horse." I laughed to myself and in my heart I apologized to the *shtimazl*. Obviously, I was not summoned for a lawsuit. Why was I wanted then?

Another person might easily believe that he was eagerly awaited because of his wagon full of wares. But since I am no numskull, nor was I born yesterday, I knew better. You see, I have found this to be a rule: it is deceit that makes the world go around. One who needs to buy a particular item plays crafty, acts as if the item were absolutely useless to him, so that he might pick it up for a song. Thus, for example, a customer wants to buy a prayerbook for festivals. Does he look at it? No! First he looks at a penitential prayerbook, then at some *tsitses*, then at some other wares. In the meanwhile, he picks up the prayerbook for festivals, as if in passing, lays it down with a shrug and a little smile, and says: "If you wanted only a few kopecks for it, I might buy it."

Believe me, the whole world is one big trading post. Some look for bargains. Some want to cut the other fellow's price. Some are waiting for others to lose something so they might find it. Still others look out for themselves first, and then, after the good Lord has helped them to snatch bargains by hook or crook, so many that they almost choke on them, they are genuinely interested in helping—themselves.

I could tell from the Rabbi's face that he was not interested in buying anything from me. If he were, he would not have made it so obvious that he was eagerly awaiting me. It is true that the Rabbi is a kosher, upright individual, so help me, but when one lives among wolves, one must howl like a wolf.

The Rabbi, long may he live, took me by the arm and led me into his private room. Within, apparently absorbed in thought, were seated the officers of the synagogue and many of the wealthy

businessmen of the town. Well, wealthy businessmen always seem to be thinking and worrying, and they look at you with such a frowning glance that your mother's milk curdles in your veins. One feels compelled to leave and never to have to look upon them again. I really can't understand it: if one has money, why so much thinking, so much worrying, such serious faces? It seems to me that lofty thoughts are not particularly necessary in order to count coins. It seems to me, too, that one may have money in his coffers and yet look a person straight in the eye. Anyway . . . but that is beside the point.

"Gentlemen," the Rabbi addressed the rich men and the synagogue officials, "I have troubled you to come here because of an important matter. However, since, as if by a miracle, Reb Mendele arrived in our community today, I decided to have you wait a while longer so that I could ask him to favor us with his presence which is indispensable in this matter. Please forgive me a hundred times over. Now that we are all assembled here, I should like to tell you of a wondrous matter."

I was completely baffled by the proceedings and wondered what all this would lead to. But then I decided not to be so impatient; soon I would be a few minutes older, and have my curiosity satisfied. The Rabbi drew a thick packet of papers from his breast pocket and spoke.

"Look, gentlemen! These papers were sent to me at daybreak today by the new widow, Itskhok-Avrom's wife. Before his death, he requested that, as soon as his soul departed, the papers should be delivered to me. Bear witness, please, gentlemen—my name is written at the top of the first page. I shall not be mysterious about it, but I shall read the papers to you without delay. Be seated, Reb Mendele! Kindly place your wares on the shelf, and sit down here."

It became very quiet in the room. Not a sound could be heard. All present opened their eyes wide and, with bated breath, waited to hear what the Rabbi would read.

As if Satan had had a hand in it, the stool upon which the Rabbi had asked me to sit had a broken leg. No sooner had I seated myself, when I tumbled over and created a slight commotion.

### CHAPTER 3

When I had seated myself properly, the Rabbi, may he live long, stroked his beard several times with all five fingers and, with a movement of his shoulders, began to read aloud the contents of the papers:

▲▲ These papers of mine contain my entire autobiography and the will which I have drawn up. I beg of you, Rabbi, to fulfill all my requests contained herein to the smallest detail. Forgive me a hundred times over for troubling your honor with such a long narration. When you reach the end, you will see that this is not, God forbid, meaningless prattle but that, on the contrary, this narrative of my life may be of great value. I really was compelled to write it.

I was born of poor parents in the town of Beziudeff.\* I do not remember my father, for he died while I was still in diapers. Upon his death, his estate consisted of a sickly wife with quite a number of little ones, myself included as an additional treasure. And that was all!

I can recall childhood events from the time I was five or six years old. So far as I can remember, I was not considered especially bright in my youth. All my actions and remarks were greeted with much laughter. I was certainly never petted or spoiled. I was never kissed, never caressed, never embraced as were other children. When I cried, I was never soothed with pancakes, candies, or toys. Instead, I got a few slaps or a beating.

The words *mercy* or *pity* were never mentioned in my presence. I never heard anyone say about me :

"What a pity! The poor thing hasn't eaten." "What a pity! His poor little face is all swollen."

"Shameful! The poor child hasn't slept."

"Mercy on us! He's frozen! He walks around naked and barefoot."

"What a pity! The poor child doesn't have an ounce of flesh on his bones."

\* A play on the Russian word *liudy* meaning "people" or "human beings." *Beziudeff* signifies a town devoid of human beings, i.e., devoid of people with human traits.

The only comments I ever heard were:

"Look at that mug, that ugly snoot of his, those feet as red as beets!"

"Look at that glutton! The spittle is already dribbling from his mouth!"

"Look at that devilish creature. He's up to his little tricks again—trembling, shivering, and gnashing his teeth. . . ."

A poor man's child is always an unwanted thing in this world. He is always in someone's way. While still in the womb, death is quietly wished upon him. At birth, he is greeted like the plague. Before he has ever seen the light of day, he has made bitter enemies. Once he arrives, he grows somehow or other, incapable of awakening a feeling of pity or mercy in the breasts of even his own parents—unless he becomes deathly sick. Only then do the deep-seated parental feelings come forth and they pour out their grief at the bedside of their poor child, the dear and innocent creature, who has led such a desolate and dreary life, never having had an hour of peace and love. Then do they see their life in the sharpest colors and their hearts weep tears of blood. When a frozen heart melts, it can release a devastating flood. I have experienced this myself of late—it boils, it seethes, it erupts with terrible force! That is why poor parents lament their children much more vehemently and movingly than do the rich.

I grew like a wild horse on the steppe, crude, savage, with all the ugly habits of a wild street urchin. One of my habits was to watch someone's teeth while he talked or to stare into his eyes. My mother beat me within an inch of my life for this a number of times.

Once I was sick in bed and Mother was good to me. Somehow I began to look into her eyes. She allowed me to do so in order not to irritate me. I couldn't control myself and asked:

"Mama! Who is the little man in your eyes?"

Mother smiled and answered:

"My little fool! The little man is the soul. The little man cannot be seen in the eyes of any other creature, in the eyes of neither animals nor cattle. He can be seen only in Jewish eyes."

Mother's answer made a great impression upon me and awakened many fresh, vibrant thoughts. When a mother says something, she must know what she is talking about. After all, she is a

mother and big, maybe ten times bigger than I. Her finger is thicker than my arm. I accepted her words as proven, confirmed fact and believed in them with all my heart.

From then on, my imaginative powers were busy with the little man. Really, isn't it a surprising, a curious thing? Even in my sleep, I could not forget the little man. I dreamed that I played with him, that I leaped into other people's eyes just as he did. In short, his image was my constant companion.

I developed a great desire to be a little man myself. Can you imagine—the little man is a soul! In size no bigger than a flea, and yet in him is concentrated the gist, the very kernel of life! The thought of how I could touch or feel the little man occupied my mind constantly.

Once I had a bright idea. While Mother was bending over in order to remove a pot from the stove, I ran up behind her like one obsessed—to this very day, I hardly understand the workings of my mind at the time—and, placing myself in God's hands, I struck her in the nape of the neck with my fist, so that the little man would be forced to leap out of her eyes, even for a moment! You can well imagine the blows I received for this act. All that day I went hungry because Mother had broken the pot of porridge with her forehead.

I was rewarded even more richly on another occasion. A thought, tinged with heresy, had entered my mind concerning my mother's words. I wanted to find out for myself whether a cow had a little man in her eyes or not. I took a walk down the street one day until I came upon a cow, and, while I was busy looking into her eyes, she gored me with her horns, mauling me very badly. The mark has remained on my left cheek to this very day. These misfortunes by no means forced the idea of a little man out of my mind. On the contrary, the idea became more firmly entrenched than ever.

I studied in the *Talmud-Toyre*. Everyone knows what a *Talmud-Toyre* is, so that it is really unnecessary to describe it. It is a grave in which poor Jewish children are buried, where their minds are mutilated and where they are removed from all contact with the world in which they live. It is a factory that manufactures good-for-nothings, ne'er-do-wells, and spineless, unfortunate creatures. It is a vast pit, an abyss, an unclean hovel standing on wobbly supports, even as are our *Talmud-Toyres* here—a shame and a disgrace for other people to see.

At the age of eight, I was studying the *Khumesb* and its associated commentaries, including those of Rashi, no small feat for a boy of my age who was not as yet very fluent in the Hebrew language itself. Apparently a person can be a scholar and a big fool; one has nothing to do with the other.

Mother used to call me *sblimazl*, and, in truth, she was quite right. In the *Talmud-Toyre*, I was more of a *sblimazl* than any other child. The *rebbe*, who by no means deserved the title Rabbi, was enchanted by one subject—beatings, possibly even more so than by a bit of brandy. For no apparent reason, he simply enjoyed torturing the depressed and persecuted little children, who received flayings aplenty without his attentions and who were so thin that their souls barely managed to remain united with their bodies. But he broke the already broken bones; he pinched and tore at the small bodies, and the best portion of his blows came my way.

Once, he became so annoyed with me and beat me so mercilessly that I barely escaped with my life and had to stop attending the *Talmud-Toyre*. This is what happened.

The *rebbe* had been explaining to me that passage in the book of Genesis which reads: *And Lamech said unto his wives...*

"Lamech was blind. Tubal-cain was leading him, and when he saw his grandfather Cain at a distance, he thought it was a wild beast." (The *rebbe* said "fox" in order to make it clearer). "He told the blind Lamech to aim at the fox. He did so and killed him. And when Lamech found out that he had slain Cain, he began to beat his palms together in sorrow and, in doing so, beat his son Tubal-cain to death. Because of this, his wives would not stay with him. He appealed for a feconciliation.

"*Vayomar Lamech*—and Lamech said, *l'nosbitu*—unto his wives: '*Adab v'Zillab*—Adah and Zillah, *sb'man koblee*—hear my voice, *nosbee Lamech*—ye wives of Lamech! . . .'"

One fine day, a clean-shaven German\* suddenly arrived at the *Talmud-Toyre*. I believe he had come from St. Petersburg. Together with him came all the tax collectors in order to audition the children. To my great misfortune, the German chose me to translate a passage from the *Khumesb*—none other than the one beginning with the phrase *Vayomar Lamech l'nosbitu!*

\* Any clean-shaven, beardless person was known as a "German" to the Jews and also to the Russian peasantry as a whole.

Since when was I accustomed to talking to grown-ups, especially to a German, a shaven one? I quivered and quaked like a fish out of water. There was a roaring in my ears and a beating in my heart. My hair stood on end and my blood ran cold. I felt that I would be unable to repeat such a long story as the one about Lamech. And here were these men standing over me, urging me on with one voice.

"Speak! Speak!"

What could I do? I had to speak. Completely breathless, I began to deliver a confused, stuttering explanation.

"*Vayomar*—a fox, *Lamech*—a blind man, *Inosbitv*—his wives left him, *Tubal-cain*—leading him, *Adab v'Zillab*—and he killed him. . . ."

The German was petrified. Beside himself with anger, he called the *rebbe* and said to him harshly:

"Hah! What is this I hear? Is that how you teach your pupils? Shame and dishonor!"

The *rebbe* scratched himself, picked his nose, and babbled:

"Good sir! The boy became frightened. He's really a good boy, upon my word."

Whereupon the German turned to me.

"Fear not, my child. Nothing will happen to you. Tell me, what is the meaning of the word *vayomar*?"

I no longer knew what was happening to me. With my eyes staring blankly like those of a statue, I shot out:

"A fox! . . . No, I mean, *vayomar*, he appealed to his wives. . . ."

The poor *rebbe* looked as if he had been dragged through a keyhole. He was fit to be buried alive. He submitted to all the abuse that was heaped upon him and had a miserable day. My turn came later, when he vented his spleen upon me. From that time on, he would pick on me and beat me until I could no longer bear it. I became very weak and had to stop attending the *Talmud-Toyre*.