

**DA ALT GESHIKHEM**

**(THE OLD STORIES)**

**DAVID SELCER**

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## In Memory of Lester Selcer

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## Table of Contents

Preface	iv
Prologue	1
One	5
Two	10
Three	17
Four	26
Five	38
Six	46
Seven	58
Eight	66
Nine	75
Ten	83
Eleven	89
Twelve	96
Thirteen	105
Fourteen	113
Fifteen	123
Sixteen	132
Seventeen	143
Eighteen	151
Nineteen	158
Twenty	170
Twenty-One	177
Twenty-Two	183
Twenty-Three	192
Twenty-Four	199
Twenty-Five	208
Twenty-Six	213
Twenty-Seven	219
Twenty-Eight	228
Epilogue	233

## Preface

Forced migrations are a salient feature of the present century, as they were in the last century. Only the reasons, the countries of origin, and the countries where sanctuary is sought are different. Treatment of downtrodden immigrants when forced to migrate has been the same for over 125 years for the most part. Blocked passage, refusal of entry, the separation of children from parents, legal barriers, low paying jobs, or interment in displaced persons camps have occurred everywhere, including the United States, regardless of who the immigrants are or where they come from.

In the first third of the 20th Century millions of Jews entered the United States from Russia fleeing pogroms and other injustices, Chinese people and other East Asians entered as laborers, and millions of Italians and Slavs entered from central and southeastern Europe looking for better lives. In the middle of the 20th Century thousands of Jews fled Europe for Palestine before Israel came into being. Now, in the first third of the Twenty-First Century, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, and Central Americans have crossed the borders illegally into the United States.

*The Old Stories* is about an immigrant and about forced immigration. It falls into the category of historical fiction. Yet all its main characters lived, in fact, under the same names they carry in the book, although some were later anglicized at the hands of immigration officers and others. The circumstances and surroundings the book's characters find themselves in really happened, and they are all

## David Selcer

historically correct, although experienced in many cases by people other than the book's characters.

The protagonist of *The Old Stories*, Chaim Zeltzer ha'Levi, a/k/a Hyman Zeltzer, comes to Canada from the Ukraine during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, via an unconventional route--through Siberia and across the Pacific Ocean. He has deserted the Russian Navy at Vladivostok during the first great wave of immigration out of the Russian Empire before Soviet Communism.

When he finally reaches the United States, he chooses to aid Jews participating in the last years of the second and greatest wave of immigration to Palestine, known as "Aliyah Bet." They are from Eastern Europe (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Rumania and Russia). World War Two has just ended and the people Zeltzer is saving are from the concentration camps.

"Palestine" in this book means the part of British Mandatory Palestine that became the State of Israel on May 15, 1948. "Palestinian" means a Jew who lived in that area.

"Aliyah Bet" was a clandestine movement that brought Jews from Europe to Palestine by sea from 1934 to 1948. The British called it illegal immigration and tried to prevent it. During the three year period from the defeat of the Nazis in 1945 and the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, North American Jews, with the help of the Haganah which was the Jewish underground organization, purchased war surplus Coast Guard and other ships, as well as out-dated commercial vessels to transport holocaust survivors to Palestine. There were twelve of these ships, and they were all purchased secretly and manned almost completely by North American Jews with Palestinian officers.

The Tradewinds, later named the Hatikvah, was one of these vessels. In *The Old Stories*, Hyman Zeltzer sails on this vessel. It was an actual ship, a Coast Guard cutter, which embarked passengers on two successive nights at beaches in Italy, that was captured at sea and taken to Haifa

## The Old Stories

on May 17, 1947. It carried 1,414 Jewish immigrants, plus crew members, all of whom were interned in Cyprus DP (displaced persons) camps.

The actual North American members of Hatikvah's crew were: Hy Braverman, Hal Galili (Fineberg), Sam Gordon, Murray S. Greenfield, Harold Katz, Paul Kaye (kaminetzky), Bernie Levy, Josh Lewis, Hugh McDonald, Al Nemoff, Mike Perlstein, Adrian Phillips, Arnie Reuben, Gerald Rubenstein, P. Rubin, Leo Slefstein, Manny (Wingy) Weinseine, Marvin Weiss and Saul Yellin.

The actual names of certain people appearing in this book are as follows:

Captain William C. Ash, an American professional mariner, born in Poland, who served as a key "Aliyah Bet" volunteer, instrumental in buying and equipping "Aliyah Bet" vessels in the United States, and in recruiting and training their crews:

Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary who was a vocal opponent of "Aliyah Bet" and Jewish immigration to Palestine; and,

Ze'ev (Danny) Schind, the Palestinian director of "Aliyah Bet" activities in the United States who went to New York in 1946 and organized the buying and equipping of vessels and recruiting of crews.

Many of the historical facts contained in *The Old Stories* may be found in Hochstein, Jos. M. and Greenfield, Murray S., *The Jews' Secret Fleet*. Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem & New York, 1987: especially those concerning the raising of the fleet; the sailing of the Hatikvah, and the battle of the Hatikvah, its crew and passengers against British destroyers. Other sources were Stone, I.F., *Underground to Palestine*. Boni & Gaer, New York, 1946, especially his descriptions of the passengers of the Wedgewood and Haganah, which were the first American manned ships; and, Orbach, Michael, *The Hatikvah sailed on: Paul Kaye hero of Aliyah Bet tells his story*, The Jewish

## David Selcer

Star, New York, April 2010, a journalists interview concerning the feelings of a Hatikvah crew member upon first seeing Holocaust survivors boarding his ship, and upon the blowing up of the British prison transport ship Empire Lifeguard.

Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian terms used but not explained in this book are:

bissel --Yiddish for little

bulvan--Yiddish for bull

bris or brit--Hebrew for circumcision and sign of covenant with God

chassid--Yiddish for ultra-orthodox Jew; also means happy one

cheder--Hebrew for class or Hebrew school

chutzpah--Yiddish for outrageous nerve

gonif--Yiddish for thief

goyim--Yiddish for the "other" or non-Jews

idti izdes--Russian for come here

mitzvah--Yiddish for good deed

kugel--Yiddish for Jewish noodle dish

kvas--Russian for drink of fermented wheat flavored with raisins

moreh--Hebrew for teacher

mensch--Yiddish for gentleman or human being

schul--Yiddish for synagogue

shidkh--Yiddish for matchmaker

shiddokh--Yiddish for the match

rogelachen--Yiddish for small rolled fruit or cheese cakes.

traifeneh smutz--Yiddish for prohibited dirt

yarmelka--Yiddish for skullcap

Zohar, Mishnah & Tenach—All Jewish holy books written in Hebrew, the latter being the Jewish Bible

# Prologue

*“The worm in the radish doesn't think there is anything sweeter.”*

—Sholem Aleichem

At a table in a classroom sits a disheveled boy bending over a book, leaning on his elbows beneath sunken shoulders, his skinny chest heaving rhythmically, his *yarmulke* askew. It's yet another boring day in the *cheder*. Again his eyes have glazed over, fighting off sleep, as he attempts to attack the Hebrew letters spread before him on the page, like old bones. The dream that comes is always the same.

After all, how much is there to dream about in Russia at the end of the Nineteenth Century when you're nine years old? A river bank dotted with pear trees. Rowboats plying the waters of the Ingulets River near its junction with the Dnieper. A rare family picnic on the grassy shore, away from the city with all its noise, its smoke and the clanking of horse-carts in the streets all day long. He dreams of bread and jam with butter, herring and smoked fish with horse radish, cucumbers, pies, kugel and watermelon, spread across a tablecloth on dark green grass, and plenty of kvas to drink. His seven sisters are running gaily along the river's edge, and there are no young scholars with halitosis sitting around spouting interpretations of the Talmud, and making him look stupid from his lack of knowledge; no “intellectuals” ignoring him, who do not know him, and are not like him. They are all back at the *cheder*, engrossed in study.



## David Selcer

At 17, Chaim ben Eliezer HaLevi, otherwise known as Chaim Zelitzer, would cross the Pacific Ocean on his own to live in North America and have his name changed to Hyman Zeltzer. The young scholars, on the other hand would perish for the most part. And at 55, he would cross the Atlantic Ocean with volunteers, many of whom were half his age, to rescue their remnant. But on that day in class, he was just a gangly nine-year-old boy, bored by his study of the ancient prophets and tired from his early morning's work in his uncle's metal shop before dawn.

Warmth from the sun streams down on him through the stained glass window above in the Great Choral Synagogue of Kherson, as his face is about to drop into the spine of his book. "Chaim," yells the *moreh*, twisting him by the ear! "Again? Again you're sleeping? You're the worst student in the class. How can you ever have any hope to emulate a righteous person if you don't even know what a righteous person is. To learn what is a righteous person, you must study, not sleep."

Chaim hated to study, not to read, but to study. His favorite books were Sholem Aleichem's stories about the Jewish Holidays, not the boring tales of the prophets in the *Tenakh* and the *Mishnah*. Yet he did aspire to becoming a righteous person, or a *Tzadik* as they were sometimes called. His understanding of that phrase was that a righteous person was one who did the right thing, who followed the laws in the Torah, who gave to charity and who was just in his ways toward others, to the point where his merit surpassed his iniquity. Unfortunately, his teachers and the other students in his class held a divergent, more complicated, more studied metaphysical view.

To them, a *Tzadik* is one who has completely sublimated his natural "animal" or "vital" soul inclinations into holiness, so that he experiences only love and awe of God, without material temptations. A *Tzadik* serves as a "vehicle" to God and has no ego or self-

## The Old Stories

consciousness. A person cannot attain such a level. Rather it is granted from on High, and to be emulated, although one will fail inevitably from time to time. This, they have gleaned from hours of comparing Maimonides' definition of a Tzadik, based on the Babylonian Talmud, to those of the Hasidic rabbis and the Kabbalah, based on the Zohar and the Jerusalem Talmud, and then memorizing it all.

Chaim didn't care about the derision heaped on him by his teacher. Because at home he received the acceptance of his father and his uncle for being a skilled apprentice metal worker who, at a younger age than most, was given great responsibility. He liked learning a practical skill. In the world outside the *cheder*, he liked dealing with adults and pleasing customers. He liked being treated as a man, while others his age spent time at the *cheder* learning otherworldly and spiritual things by rote instead of doing real work.

By thirteen he barely made it through his *bar mitzvah*, as his parents sat in the synagogue praying for his success in the chanting his *Torah* portion. Afterwards, he learned that the adulation of the Jewish community was turning away from him and toward his fellow students. They were either going on to the *Yeshiva* to become rabbis, sofrim, and cantors, or becoming members of the Enlightenment or, *haskalah*, which was the Jewish intellectual movement of Central and Eastern Europe leading to the secularization of Judaism, more cultural assimilation and to Zionism. Either path left Chaim out, which confused, even saddened him.

To make things worse, his older brother, his only brother, had received one of those gifts from on High, as if it were that which Chaim's fellow *cheder* students espoused as needed to make a *Tzadik*. His brother Shmuel had received a beautiful god given voice, and it was quickly making him one of the most famous cantors in the Ukrainian province of Russia, as well as the pride of his family. Shmuel was a true spiritual leader. And Chaim was supposed to be happy about it.

## **David Selcer**

“Don’t worry his father told him. You will earn your accomplishments in life, not receive them as a gifts from on High. They will come from inside you. And I will get you to America, one way or another, where they will be appreciated. I promise this to you. And you will make everyone around you proud.”

# ONE

*“No matter how bad things get, you got to go on living, even if it kills you.”*

-- **Sholem Aleichem**

## **January 1974**

At 87, Hyman Zeltzer was a robust, barrel-chested man with a wispy shock of white hair flapping across his bald head in the breeze – a big bear of a Russian. He had a kind, infectious uncontrollable laugh – almost always too loud, but lately, more often than not, deteriorating into a dry coughing spell. A simple man, he mostly did what he was told, having learned early in life that following his personal urges too often brought danger to him, whereas following the rules and showing respect like a hat-in-hand peasant were the safest ways to go.

At least, as his son, that’s the way I saw him. What others saw was apparently different.

He was as loyal to his wife as a German Shepherd is to its master, always doing what she wanted, when she wanted, and how she wanted it done. He took all his cues for living life the American way from her. It was his wife, Anne, who made a family for him in the United States. It was she who helped him with his English and helped him set up a business so he would not have to labor for a living solely with his hands. It was she who brought him to Cleveland, Ohio where he thrived. She was also the impetus for his moving to Miami to retire, and then moving back to Cleveland to be with extended family

## David Selcer

She was the brains of the family and he was the brawn. This he knew. As in so many other migrant Jewish homes of the time, as I saw things, Ma ran Pa's life.

According to the eulogy the Rabbi gave for him at his funeral, there was another Hyman Zeltzer, one that few knew, one that grew to adulthood in the latter days of the Russian Empire, a Hyman Zeltzer I never saw or met, with half his heart in the old traditions of his youth, and the other half aspiring toward the new ways of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The other Hyman Zeltzer never hesitated to defend himself, his family or his friends. When the defense of his family or a friend was at stake, he let nothing stop him – not finances, not the everyday conventions of the moment, not rules, regulations, traditions or the law, not even soldiers or the police. He also would try anything once, no matter how daunting the task. “It wasn't *chutzpah* on his part,” said the Rabbi. “It was bravery.”

He was carelessly, almost recklessly, brave and would stubbornly follow his own heedless ideas concerning the protection of his family and others, no matter the consequences to his own well-being. When uncontrolled, he might act rashly, making spur of the moment decisions to help those in need without regard to the greater consequences or circumstances at large.

As an example, my father borrowed money with no means to repay it in order to get my brother, Ben, a violin and send him to music school. He could have rented the instrument more cheaply and waited to see if Ben showed a proclivity toward music. Some might have thought this very sacrificing or loving on his part; others, that it was foolish or stupid.

“Many took his disregard of the subtler aspects of dangerous situations for courage,” said the Rabbi. *Or, was it that he simply had no appreciation for the jeopardy into which he was placing himself*, I wondered. He was confusing, so confusing that I often took him to be acting out

## The Old Stories

of a lack of intelligence. For instance, after he and his wife retired to Miami where his seven-year-old grandson (my son) visited them, a large scorpion waddled out from under the bed, scaring the boy. Dad stomped on it bare foot, heedless of the insect's ability to poison.

On the other hand, one could say he often stubbornly placed the needs of others ahead of his own to the point where even good logic wouldn't stop him once he'd made up his mind to help another person. For instance, though he'd grown to love Florida after retiring there, when my brother Ben, who lived in Cleveland, began getting sick from a chronic debilitating illness in 1961, my father gave up Florida, sold his house, went back to work, and returned to Cleveland where his wife and he could be of help to Ben and his family. But Pa was by no means a rich enough man just to give up his home in Florida and do this.

Now I ask you, in all good conscience. What would you have done in that situation if you were a 74-year-old man? Well, Pa would listen to no argument against moving back, no argument about finances. No argument about his own needs. And no argument about how much he loved Florida. Often in similar situations where intellect, exigency or education might have given others pause, his stubborn single mindedness kept him moving toward his decisions.

By the time he turned 87, as I saw it, nothing had changed his bullheadedness, or as others saw it, his heedlessness of his own needs. Then came his final sacrifice for another person.

Thirteen years after returning to Cleveland, fate separated him from his wife when she was admitted to The Cleveland Clinic with painful kidney stones. At the same time, he languished at University Hospitals with an oversized bleeding prostate. But he simply wasn't about to let their health conditions separate them. Who knew what they could be doing to his wife over there at that "other" hospital. And he wouldn't be there to stop them. Nobody would.

## David Selcer

Removing his IV and disconnecting his heart monitor, he got out of his hospital bed, dressed and exited University Hospitals in a driving rain, taking the Euclid Avenue bus a few miles west toward the Cleveland Clinic. There, he checked himself in and asked to be placed in the same room with his wife, where he knew he could watch over her.

“Mr. Zeltzer! Mr. Zeltzer!” the University Hospitals nurses yelled after him. “You can’t do this! Where are you going?”

All, to no avail. I thought his actions on this occasion were positively stupid. But Pa always had his reasons. Not always right, but never in doubt. That was Pa.

University Hospitals' Law Department called me at home, as his health custodian with power of attorney, shortly after he left. "It's all about the liability," the hospital's representative insisted. “University Hospitals can no longer be responsible for Hyman Zeltzer’s well-being.” And the representative was right.

Pa’s wife’s kidney stones passed. But three-and-a-half weeks later, Hyman Zeltzer was dead of bilateral pneumococcal pneumonia. Until then, nobody, except his wife, even knew the year he was born. Indeed, for sixty-seven years, nobody except his wife, bothered to remember his birthday when it rolled around.

At his funeral his year of birth was indicated as 1889, but nobody knew the exact date because when he was born, Russia was still using the Julian calendar, not the Gregorian calendar, and the Julian calendar was approximately thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar, depending on the year. Nor did most people know where he was born. I always thought it was Russia, but it wasn’t.

It was Kherson Oblast in the Ukraine, not far from Odessa, a fact that came out in his eulogy. I didn’t know his father’s name was Eliezer Ha Levi or that his mother’s name was Deborah. In truth, I knew very little about my father, because frankly, as a first generation American, I was more

## The Old Stories

interested in hiding him from everyone in my life than finding out anything about him. I wanted to go to college, to become a business man; or maybe even a professional, an accountant. I wanted to speak English and to be spoken to in English, not Russian, not Yiddish and not Hebrew. I wanted a life of Horatio Alger for myself, not the life of the son of an immigrant Jew.

So I didn't know that my father was born at home in Kherson during the reign of Czar Alexander III, or that on the day he was born, that city of about 90,000 inhabitants, was graced with another *pogrom*. Outside the house of his birth, the Cossacks were tearing up floorboards from Jewish porches, chasing after women and destroying livestock. Somebody had murdered Czar Alexander II recently, and the Jews were going to pay for it. It wasn't the first *pogrom*, in that part of the Ukraine, and it wouldn't be the last. A myriad of things constantly triggered Jew hate.



## TWO

*“When you die, others who think they know you, will concoct things about you... Better pick up a pen and write it yourself, for you know yourself best.”*

**Sholem Aleichem**

My father didn't have a birth certificate because of the pogrom going on at his birth. Things were very bad then—so bad that his family had to hold his *Bris* secretly. God forbid the Cossacks should find out a Jewish boy was being circumcised in the neighborhood! Circumcision, the sign of the covenant Jews supposedly had with God, was a symbol in the minds of gentiles of the Jews' supposed “chosen people” status, and it enraged the Russian Orthodox priests, who labelled it a pagan blood ritual.

The thought that somehow “the chosen people,” had their own *brit* with God, was also enough to infuriate the Cossacks and others too. Others who sanctimoniously went about proclaiming that anyone who failed to accept Christ as God could not go to Heaven. If the Cossacks discovered a *Bris* going on, it would trigger certain hell for everyone attending, not symbolic hell, but the actual demonstrative destruction of their property and their peace of mind—in short, a palpable demonstration of Russian anti-Semitism in the old fashioned way. So Hyman's father just forgot about getting him a birth certificate because of all the turmoil of the pogrom occurring at the time of his birth. At his *Bris*, Hyman was named Chaim ben Eliezer Ha Levi, and everyone felt that was good enough for the family, the community, and for God. The addition of a Russian birth

certificate was superfluous.

Hyman Zeltzer died leaving behind my very sick mother, my brother, Ben, myself, and our families. It was only then that I began finding out who and what he really was. Indeed, there was a third Hyman Zeltzer of whom only I alone would come to know, and only posthumously.

On the day of his funeral, the previously unknown details of his life began seeping out in the eulogy that was delivered for him. Ma must have spent hours with the rabbi meticulously filling him in on these things. *Apparently she actually loved Hyman*, which was something I really never bothered to think about before. A mother and a father are just there, as far as a child is concerned, like a house, a school or a car. That there should be any love between them, let alone romantic love, is inconceivable. They are just *there*, like the front door, the windows in the house and the front lawn. Appreciation for what they really were, or for what they had together, doesn't come until many years later, if at all.

My father's funeral was totally enervating to me. It literally weakened my knees and made me just want to go to bed. The Cantor chanted the Hebrew prayer—"Ale Moleh Rachamim"—something about Hyman Zeltzer's soul finding solace under the wings of God. It didn't make any sense to me, not even symbolic sense. After the funeral, sitting at the dining room table in Ma's house in University Heights with all the mirrors covered, I mindlessly watched people slowly mounting the steps to the porch, washing their hands in silver bowls and using the white towels provided at the open front door to dry their hands. They were rinsing Pa's death away, so they could come in and pay their respects. Symbolism! Why were they washing their hands? What good would that do?

My brother, our wives, Ma and my children were all there, sitting on the low stools that had been provided for the mourners. Why *low* stools? Tradition! But I preferred to sit

## David Selcer

at the table, separated from the remnants of my family's long gone orthodox Jewish tradition, and tortured with after-the-fact thoughts. *How could I not have known anything about my father before? Why did the hearse not take his remains to the Beth Emet cemetery for interment in Cleveland?*

Instead, his body was whisked away to the airport, and from there, flown to Israel for burial in some cemetery on some kibbutz of which I'd never heard. *Why*, I wondered? That in itself was solid evidence that I knew very little about my father.

"Don't play with it, Jody," I told my brother's daughter, who was monkeying with the tall red memorial candle atop the fire-place mantel. "You'll start a fire." She was trying to blow it out. Hmh—*wonder if that would bring some sort of curse or something down on us*, I thought to myself?

*Paganism! That's a very paganist way of thinking. More importantly, why did it always have to fall to me to discipline my brother's kids?* The answer to that was more understandable. It was because Ben and his wife were sensitive people—too sensitive, too liberal too easy-going and free with their children about everything. They were artists! Bohemians! I felt it was somehow my duty to teach their kids how to live in the real world, like regular human beings.

*When will the women serve us*, I keep thinking? We Jews sit *shiva*, (our wake) after a funeral, and the custom is for everyone to come into the house and mill around while the immediate family sits and eats. *Why?* Nobody else eats anything until the family has finished eating. The food is always served by women in the kitchen who are friends of the family, not relatives, but friends. *Why?* Frankly, I prefer Irish wakes. They're much more fun, and they accomplish the same thing—closure!

*Finally! The rabbi arrives and gives the blessing over the bread.* As we eat, my mind keeps wandering back to the eulogy he'd delivered. "Chaim was the eighth child in a

## The Old Stories

family of nine siblings, the youngest of only two boys.” It’s all news to me. Nobody had ever told me about his family.

“He never learned to read any letters but Hebrew letters, which were the alphabetic characters in which the language of Yiddish is written. He understood Hebrew, but with these letters, he could read Yiddish well. Yiddish, in his day was the language of eleven million out of the eighteen million Jews in the world. It was mostly made up of colloquial middle German words with some Hebrew terms interspersed, and it was written in Hebrew characters.

“Chaim could easily make himself understood in Russian,” the eulogy went on, “although he never had any formal Russian education, and the only Russian words he could read were the necessary ones—‘stop, go, bathroom, yes, no, open, closed, left, right, exit, silence.’ Thus, he never read any of the great Russian literature. Tolstoy, Nabokov, Turgenev, and Chekov all escaped him. The full length and breadth of his formal education was circumscribed by what he could glean from the *cheder* at the *bies ha mikdosh*. (classroom at the temple), which was known as The Great Choral Synagogue of Kherson. There, he studied Torah. But he was not one of the top students. This, however, did not prevent him from furtively reading some of the things written by Yiddish writers of the time.

“Otherwise, as far as his education went, it consisted of his apprenticing with his Uncle Meyer as a machinist. Kherson was an important ship building town and a large port where the Dnieper River flowed into the Black Sea. It was full of iron works and machine shop owners that subcontracted with ship builders and warehousemen for repair work and other types of skilled metal working. Uncle Meyer was one of them, an iron-worker by trade.

“Thus, Chaim did not grow up in a *shtetl* (village). Rather, according to the rabbi, he was a *shtot baucher* (city boy), who went about the streets of Kherson doing machinist’s work for others—welding here and there;

## David Selcer

drilling holes for screws to fix furniture; repairing sewing machines and any other jobs he could do with the tools from his uncle's machine shop. At the shipbuilding docks where he worked with his uncle, he learned how to machine parts for steam engines, how to fashion gears and other parts necessary for screw propulsion, and how to fix boilers. For those who could not become doctors, lawyers, or professors, if you were not in a family business, apprenticing as a tailor, a butcher or bootmaker was the second line down, but learning to be a machinist, or an iron-worker, was nothing to sneeze at either.

“And, Chaim was fortunate enough to do some travelling as a boy to Odessa with his father, who sold dry-goods. Chaim thought Odessa must be the most beautiful city in the world, with its palm trees, its beaches and its French style architecture. There, his father bought shirts and socks, dresses, aprons and tablecloths which he took back to Kherson to hold for sale, but the business was not yet big enough to accommodate another family member. Chaim also travelled on occasion with his Uncle Meyer to Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine.

In 1900, Kiev was a city which was both the heart of the Russian community in the Ukraine, having spawned the Romanov dynasty, the bloodline from which all the Czars came, and the center of the Ukraine's Jewish community, where many of the great Russian rabbis studied. At the time Kiev was awash in tensions between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Jews, as well as tensions between the Russian government in St. Petersburg and the socialists of the Ukraine. Communism was budding, but these were things that flew right by Chaim without any awareness on his part. It was as if politics was not a part of his genealogical make-up, and religiously, there were no other worlds than his Jewish world. He was oblivious to the social and political machinations affecting his life.

There was, however, according to the rabbi's eulogy,

## The Old Stories

one other educational source effecting Chaim Zeltzer, if you could call it that. “His uncle Meyer was an ‘activist’ who freely spouted his views. Not a religious activist, not strictly secular, nor was he an atheist, a socialist, a capitalist or a communist. Meyer was also not a monarchist, a nihilist, or a democratizer. No, Meyer was something much narrower—a Zionist. He believed with all his heart that the Jewish people should have their own nation and that it should be located in Palestine. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Kherson was the location of one of the main branches of the Zionist Movement.

“Thus, early in his life, Chaim’s ears were filled with the ideology of Zionism—national liberation, reclaiming the land from the desert and the swamps, tilling it in collective farms, reviving Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jewish people and the secularization of the *halakha* (Jewish law) by Jewish culturalism. He could not avoid hearing about Theodore Herzl, Chaim Weitzman, Eliezer Ben Yahuda and the like from Meyer, though he preferred not to listen to all this.

“But Chaim’s travels with his father and uncle had another influence on him,” according to the rabbi. In Kiev, Uncle Meyer introduced him to an unlikely Zionist friend of his—Sholem Aleichem.

“Nobody else knew it except his mother,” the rabbi claimed, “but Chaim read Sholem Aleichem voraciously, and the author’s characters reverberated inside him. Like them, there he was, on the cusp of being stuck in the old ways, but yearning for the new, though he knew not what they were. Leaving the generation of his parents, and heading out toward he knew not what.

. . .

Thinking about Pa’s eulogy triggered an annoying

## David Selcer

headache that was beginning to torment me. My father, reading Shalom Aleichem? The thought of it was too much for me. Aleichem was the greatest Yiddish writer ever to live. He wrote novels, plays, and short stories, all in Yiddish. The man believed that Yiddish, once spoken by almost eleven million people, should be considered another European language, and he plotted a grammar book for it. He was sometimes called the Mark Twain of the Jews.

And my simple father supposedly read him avidly. It was hard to believe that a man with whom I absolutely could not sit at a dinner table for longer than five minutes because it was so gross to watch him eat, was an avid reader of anything. He sucked his tea through a sugar cube held between his front teeth. He ate his peas with a knife. He tied his napkin around his neck like a bib. To me, he was little more than a Russian peasant, but he was a reader of Sholem Aleichem!

There was a great dichotomy between my view of Hyman Zeltzer and the view the rabbi presented in his eulogy, so great that I begin feeling I needed to go upstairs and lay down in order to escape the emotional tension with which this day was besetting me. As in many families, it is becoming apparent to me that either overly embellished truths are being told and myths are being manufactured to fit the occasion, or I really do not know my father. In any event, there is nothing I can do about it now. My forehead is throbbing.

## THREE

*“This is an ugly and mean world, and only to spite it we mustn't weep. If you want to know, this is the constant source of my good spirit, of my humor. Not to cry, out of spite, only to laugh out of spite, only to laugh.”*

**Sholem Aleichem**

I sleep as soon as my head hits the pillow; then awaken; and then sleep again. Dreams drift into my slowly disappearing consciousness, invading my subconscious, carrying me back to Kherson, although I'd never been there. Pa had no birth certificate I keep remembering as I fall in and out of nap mode. Finally, I succumb to sound sleep.

It's 1903, and I'm riding behind Pa and his Uncle Meyer in a four-wheeled wagon with rubber tires, drawn by Kasha and another horse named Victor. Pa looks very big for his age. In my dream, I keep seeing Kasha's head and neck rhythmically bobbing between the hames on his horseshoe collar, up and down, as the soft-tired wagon quietly passes down Nekravsova Street toward the Suverovsky District.

My sub-conscious has confused this wagon with a junk wagon I'd seen later as a young boy in Cleveland that had soft air-filled pneumatic tires. When Pa was a boy, they didn't have rubber tires that were filled with air. The finest of carriages had only hard rubber rimmed wheels.

The day is chilly, as we pass colored stucco houses, pink, yellow and white, with red tile roofs, and then a stodgy looking stone building, which must be a cathedral, judging from its pillared stone portico and golden dome. It's late in the Spring, and the Cottonwood trees are filling the steel



## David Selcer

grey sky with floating seeds like a light snow. Today is different from other days because the wagon is not filled with Meyer's tools and machines headed for the ship-building docks to mill parts on contract for vessels being built by the ship builders. Instead, five goats occupy the back of his vehicle, headed to the central market for sale and slaughter. Pa has raised them inside the tottering fence surrounding the heavily weeded unkempt backyard behind the Zelitzer's unpainted wooden frame house.

"So, Chaim," Meyer says, turning to Pa, and putting on a teasing air. "What can I tell you about yourself today? Huh? What do you want to learn?"

"I don't know uncle. Tell me what you think I should know."

It's amazing, because their conversation is in Yiddish, a language of which I have no command. Yet I understand every word they are saying. True, it's impossible to grow up in an immigrant Jewish household like mine without picking up a few Yiddish words here and there, but it's not true that I can either speak or understand the language. I know only a *bissel*. It is the language my father and my mother use when they don't want me to know what they're saying, a foreign silly sounding language to me. But in my dream I am understanding it.

Challenged by Chaim's question, Meyer says, "Well, for instance, did you know you're a 'momzer?'"

*Wait a minute! A momzer is a bastard. What kind of thing is this for an uncle to call his nephew?*

Chaim protests vehemently. "I'm no momzer. If I were, I'd probably be living in the children's home waiting for somebody to come and adopt me. Instead, I live at home with my brother and sisters, and with my parents. So how can I be a momzer?" I could not imagine how uncomfortable Uncle Meyer's comment must be making Chaim—to be called a bastard by his own uncle, an assertion that placed in doubt the very fact that Meyer was indeed his

true uncle.

“You have no birth certificate,” Meyer replies calmly, reveling in the fact that his teasing had gotten under the fourteen-year-old’s skin. “Without a birth certificate, you’re a momzer in this country. Just try to get a passport or some travel documents. You’ll see. Or better yet, go try to get yourself baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith.” Meyer broke into laughter, elbowing his nephew playfully.

Chaim slumps in the wagon seat, evidencing anxiety. “Alright,” says Meyer, letting up on him. “Don’t worry. You’re not *really* a momzer. You’re a momzer only *technically* under the government’s regime. A momzer is a child born of a married woman by a man to whom she’s not married, or a child born of an incestuous relationship. Your parents were unrelated and they were married to each other, even before you were born. So you’re kosher. You’re not a bastard. You simply don’t have a birth certificate. It’s a mere technicality.”

But Chaim indicates dissatisfaction with this answer. Looking unappeased, he sits up and whines, “But why don’t I have a birth certificate? I have heard that each year on the Czar’s birthday people can go to the authorities and receive favors correcting legal matters. So why doesn’t my father go? I’ve heard about this birth certificate thing before, and I’ve heard my mother ask him to go apply for one for me when the Czar’s birthday comes, so why doesn’t he go?”

“What? You want to be baptized,” Meyer laughs?

“No—I don’t want to be baptized.”

“So what is it then? If your father was planning to send you away from the country, he’d get you a birth certificate,”

“No, that’s not it either. It’s because what’s right-- what’s right is right! I should have a birth certificate like everyone else. So why doesn’t he get me one?”

"Ah, because my brother Eliezer is very wise," says Meyer. "He is afraid that if he goes and applies for a birth certificate for you, it will subject you to conscription into the

## David Selcer

army, and the Russian army is no place for a Jewish boy to be.”

“But what if I want to be in the Russian army,” Chaim retorts petulantly?

Meyer pulls up on the reins abruptly bringing the wagon to a stop. He looks sternly at his nephew with uncomfortable surprise in his eyes. “What are you—a *mishugina* (crazy person)? Nobody wants to be in the Russian army—especially not this Russian army! If you don’t get shot by a Menshevik, you’ll get shot by a Bolshevik, and if that doesn’t happen, your commander will have you beaten for something, or some Cossack will come along and try to kick your teeth in because you’re a Jew. In this army you never even have to see a foreign enemy to get yourself killed! And the way things are going in the Russian Empire right now, even if you never run into an enemy soldier while you’re in the army you’ll probably be killed. I’ve heard that they send Jews off to wars without even giving them rifles. That’s probably what would happen to you. How would you like that?”

“Uncle, don’t you think you’re exaggerating? Why would they even want me in the army if they weren’t going to give me a gun? They’d just have to feed me and give me a uniform to wear, and what good would I be to them?”

“Intelligence, my boy. Intelligence. They’re always saying we Jews are so crafty and smart. That’s what they’d use you for, intelligence.”

Chaim broke into one of his uncontrollable fits of laughter. “Intelligence? That’s not what intelligence is Uncle. It’s not smarts. In the army, intelligence is spying, and spies still need guns. I think you’re just being unpatriotic when you say things like that.”

“Oy, so now he’s a patriot,” Meyer replies. “Next thing, he’ll be a patriot who wants to get himself baptized. *Veysmere!* (woe is me!).”

“Just teasing, uncle. I don’t want to be in the Russian

## The Old Stories

army. Hah!—Got you back though, didn't I?" Again Chaim gave out with that infectious laugh he was to have all his life.

"So what did you learn today Chaim? At least you learned what a momzer is and what it isn't—at least technically speaking. So don't be so sensitive. Ok?"

*Aha! So this is where it comes from, I dream! He learned it from his uncle. Harkening back to my youth, I remember how all my life, my father has jokingly belittled me without meaning to, and if I protest he says, 'Don't be so sensitive. At least you learned something. Didn't you?' Pa was just kidding, but he didn't realize his kidding was taken to heart and it really hurt, making me feel stupid and small. To him, his teasing me was a sign of love, a very stunted sign, but nonetheless, a showing of love—in his mind.*

Suddenly a brick hits the side of the wagon—then another. The goats become jittery, scraping their hoofs on the floor of the cargo box and bleating like sheep. Victor rears as best he can within his rig, but the horse evener prevents his standing on his hind legs. Kasha struggles to pick up the forward pace. A gaggle of men run out from a side-street, taking after the wagon and begin boarding it. In the intersection ahead of us two horses appear with rifle holding riders wearing crossed bullet belts across their chests. Meyer is forced to control the melee by rearing back on the reins, bringing the horses to an abrupt stop.

"Well, what have we here," asks one of the Cossack horsemen in Russian?

"Jews with goats," shouts the other.

"Get out of here," Chaim yells in Russian as he turns around toward the back of the wagon in a rage. One of the thugs answers by bashing him in the face. Another grabs Meyer's buggy whip and begins beating Meyer.

"Grab their goats and let's go," someone shouts as he opens the back gate of the buckboard. "Davai, davai, davai!" (Come on, come on, come on!) Quickly the goats exit the

## David Selcer

wagon and are driven off by the gang of thieves. The two Cossacks in front of the wagon accompany them on horseback, yelling back over their shoulders, “Cmert’na vse Evrei!” (Death to all Jews!)

Chaim is holding his bloody face in his hands as he watches his uncle jump down to the street to calm the horses by grabbing their bridles. Meyer’s forehead is bleeding from the buggy whip and he’s breathless. His hat has been knocked from his head, revealing his black yamulka and his coat is torn at the shoulder.

“Why, Uncle—why?” Chaim cries. “Those men are pigs. I want them to die. *Sviniah, sviniah*—pigs!

“Maybe another pogrom is starting,” Uncle Meyer responds. “Chaim, remember! You must never speak to a Russian the way you did, no matter what he is doing, or trying to do to you. Never show disrespect for the *goyim* that way. You will only wind up getting beaten. They have clubs. They have knives, sometimes even guns or swords. You have nothing with which to defend yourself except your mind and your quick wits.”

“It’s not fair, Uncle! Why should they be able to treat us this way just because we’re Jews? We are also Russians. I will defend myself—I will, with both my mind and my body. Look, I am already bigger than many of them.”

*Enough with the being poor put-upon, always discriminated against Jews, and with the deluding of ourselves that we are smarter than our oppressors I dream. Where has this arrogance gotten us so far? It’s time to give all that up—to stop feeling sorry for ourselves but also that we’re better. I can’t tell if this is my thought or Chaim’s thought in the dream. It’s as if I’m having a secondary dream. But in my murky state of mind the primary dream suddenly intervenes to overtake it.*

“Many Russians don’t really feel we’re Russians, Chaim,” Meyer opines. To them we’re unlike any of the other nationalities they’ve conquered to make up the Russian

## The Old Stories

Empire. To them, we're just *traifeneh smuts*. That's right. They think of us as forbidden dirt,— thieves, like they think of the Gypsies. That's why we need our own country, our own state—in Palestine. You have heard me talk about this many times before. As Jews we need our own homeland, our own government, our own army. Only then can we be safe in our homes and on the streets."

"But for now we are living here in Kherson Uncle, and I think of it as my home, the home of my family and their family before them. What shall we do in the here and now?"

"Now, in the here and now, that is, with no goats left to take to market, let us turn around and head home for the day," Meyer says. "It will never get any better in this country for us. Never!"

When they arrive home, the Zelitzer household is abuzz. The Shertok family is visiting, having brought their two daughters and their 8-year-old son Moishe along. Boris and Eva Shertok (later to become named "Sharett") are both Zionists who are preparing to move their family to Ottoman Palestine. Only a delay in their receipt of the necessary travel documents through the Turkish Caliphate is holding them from leaving. Their upcoming journey is the most important thing on their minds at the moment, although not as important as they could ever have imagined. How could they have known that their little Moishe would someday become the leader of a country that does not even exist at this time? Moshe Sharett, the second prime minister of Israel.

Eliezer greets Chaim and Meyer in despair when they return to the Zelitzer house. 'It's trouble for certain,' he says. "It's another pogrom. Another pogrom has started."

All over the city Jewish shops and businesses are being ransacked. Word travels quickly of the plundering, but there are no stories of any deaths so far. According to Boris Shertok, the pogrom has started because a young Jew from Kherson named Lev Davidovich Bronstein, who calls

## David Selcer

himself Leon Trotsky, has given a speech somewhere outside Russia calling for working people in all the countries of the world to seize social, economic and political power and ally themselves as the proletariat with the peasantry to take over everything. The czar doesn't like this. The Russian bourgeoisie doesn't like it, and neither do the czar's henchmen, the Cossacks. Hence, the latest pogrom.

“This is just another example of why we're going to Palestine,” Boris Shertok declares. “Here, it's not enough that the Russians should blame us for everything that's already wrong with the country. No—in addition, someone has a new political idea they don't like, and if he happens to be Jewish, they blame us all for that too. That is why we need a complete break with the past—a new country of our own on a different continent. Things will never change here—never! Palestine will be the only place we can live in peace. It is our ancient homeland, and not only that, but it is a country without people waiting for a people, like us, without a country.”

Chaim smirks. He doesn't understand any of this, least of all what this Trotsky's theory has to do with the Jews. “If they don't like what this Trotsky has to say,” Eliezer argues to anyone who happens to be listening, “why take it out on the Jews? We aren't peasants from the farms who've been given land after serfdom was outlawed. Also, we aren't the unskilled laborers known as the proletariat. So this Trotsky person is not speaking to us or for us. Rather, we are workers who actually own their own means of production, like Meyer's shop, or my dry-goods business.

“We may be poor, or we may be wealthy, but we own our own means of making a living, and we are contractors and salesmen, not employees. The proletariat are not like us. They are unskilled laborers who own nothing, descendants of peasants who did not stay on the land after the abolition of serfdom, but rather went into the cities to look for work. And today, they are dependent on foreign investors, factory

## The Old Stories

owners, Russian industrialists and government run businesses for their jobs. We Jews depend only on ourselves.”

Chaim also could not understand his uncle’s obsession with Zionism, or the Shertok’s yearning to move to Palestine. What could a land without a people have to offer that Kherson did not? There was nothing in that land! True, here in Russia, maybe Jews weren’t treated like the other Russians, but at least Chaim had the Yiddish stories of his favorite author, Sholem Aleichem, to read in his own Yiddish language. The cheerfulness of Aleichem’s characters in the face of adversity provided Chaim with a coping mechanism for his own difficult life. What he did not realize was that Sholem Aleichem was also devoted to the cause of Zionism.

Even with incidents like the one he and his uncle had just undergone, Chaim, as a boy, is content to enfold himself within the culture surrounding him, a life of “*Yiddishism*,” so to speak, encapsulated within the Ukrainian city of Kherson at the southern tip of the Russian Empire. He is planning to go nowhere, reaching for no new political theory, dreaming no dream of the future. His view did not change even when his uncle once took him to Kiev for a meeting of *Hovevei Zion*, a group that was one of the forerunners and foundation builders of modern Zionism. There he was introduced to the most prominent member of the organization, Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, aka, Sholem Aleichem, himself.