

A gift to my students in Lit. 5217x from

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The rush hour regulars on the 5:07 to Great Neck -- with me in the middle -- were really being pushed to the limit. "Due to mechanical failure" the train had pulled out of Penn Station ten minutes late, then the air conditioning went, and then the lights. The poker game played on attaché cases behind me never got off the ground. The argument about Arabs and Jews coming from two seats in front of me got lowered almost to a whisper. It was so hot and dark that we were already at Bayside before the bundle of sweat with his battered satchel squeezed in next to me finally managed to get my attention.

"I'd know you anywhere," he said as his face lit up a tired smile. "I read your English column now in the Forward, though I liked the old one, in Yiddish, so much better. Too bad about Yiddish, isn't it? Anyway, I'm jumping down at the next station and I want you to remember me, Berl Esikmakher is my name, and what I went through in the war.

"I want to tell you, Mr. Sholem Aleichem, where the name shpringer comes from, because I may be the only one alive who knows. It happened to me, Berl Esikmakher -- my grandfather, may his spilled blood be avenged -- made vinegar for the whole town -- when they rounded us up, the Jews of Bilgoray, and loaded us unto a convoy bound for Belzec. (That was the place for killing Jews, you know, not far from Lublin.) The door of the cattle car was locked and sealed. The only fanlight was covered with iron bars. So the people crowded in the car broke the grating and some of them prepared to jump. It was very risky. Those

trying to escape could easily fall under the wheels or be shot by the Germans positioned on the roof. Then, just as the group of us was getting ready to jump, Yosl Yunever says, 'Jews, its time to davn Minha!' and those of us, he says, who were going to jump, should first recite the Kedusha prayer. (It was early for afternoon prayers but the car was so dark we had lost track of time.) And so, are you listening, we all said the Kedusha together and then went into a huddle to decide who should be the first to jump."

The air conditioning went on but the main set of lights continued to falter. My neighbor moved his battered satchel a little closer to the aisle.

"So why, you ask, did we recite Kedusha before trying to make the getaway? Why Kedusha, you ask, and not a chapter from Psalms? The answer is simple! In the Kedusha, when you get to the 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' what do you do? You get on your toes and jump three times, and that's called shpringen kedusha. So in order to better jump from the train, do you see what I mean, we jumped the Kedusha first, and with God's help, I'm here to tell the tale. And that's where the name shpringer comes from too!"