

that was too lazy to grow. There were the slaughterhouses. There were the tanneries. And there was the cemetery.

And windmills waved at one another with their skinny, useless arms. They were plowing the air and plowing through the winds and plowing up the entire countryside. The fields were silent, and silent was the only road that sprawled crooked over the hunchbacked hills and the valleys. Silently, the road carried twelve looming league-posts with black and white stripes—silently it carried them together with Mendel the Miller from the shtetl to the railroad station. ❀

(Chapter One)



THE DRAFT

FISHEL BIMKO

In the springtime, right after Passover, with the first gentle rays of the summer sun, a new worry afflicts all the little Jewish towns: the draft. The gang of Jewish roustabouts starts in, rubbing out and crossing out the list of the draftees who have to report this year: talmudic mannikins, pale, puny adolescents, and the better class of artisans, who croak for genteel marriages (God help them if the draft is breathing down their necks). They, the gang of roustabouts, libertines, who tie on the community feedbag all year long—they join forces with the goyim early on: thieves, pickpockets, butcher scamps—they're needed as ornaments in families to scare off all the fine people; first of all, they're to milk their benefactors dry, and especially, they're supposed to protect the town, to keep it from being harmed, God forbid, by those goddamn peasants, those bastards, who hit town in the fall and can easily make a shambles of the place; and the roustabouts aren't offering their services for the love of Jews, to keep a Jewish shop intact—oh no, they don't give a shit—they're doing it out of hatred for their enemies, they want to smash a peasant's jaw so that he'll remember for the rest of his life:

THE DRAFT!

Right after Passover, when the lame goy from town hall had handed out all the cheery notices to all the young men who had to report for physicals this year, the homes of the soft, worn-out boys were visited by a new worry; the fathers got new creases in their foreheads and planned to get rabbinical advice as though

they were about to embark on a long voyage; and mothers began moaning, and talking with a Days of Awe intonation, trying to find, in between two words, an ancestral merit from under the ground, to redeem their sons from the goyim's hands. . . .

Berel the Lout, one of those roustabouts, who had gotten a notice but couldn't read it so well and wanted to know what they wanted from him, suddenly had an idea, he clapped his forehead: "Aha!" and, as proud as a pregnant peacock, he went off to Leyzer's tavern.

"Ah, Leyzer? . . . What did I tell you? . . . Did you forget? . . . Ah? . . ."

And after guzzling his fill, downing a few mugs of beer, he became extremely cheerful and, as was his habit, he launched into a half-drunken heart-to-heart talk with himself.

"Can you imagine! . . . Every year I thought: Now I'm up, now I'm up. . . . But they forgot all about me, they didn't want me. . . . Ha. . . . Ha. . . ."

In the evening, he went around to all the other draftees on the same list, boys near their reckoning, and he started encouraging them, reminding them what they had to do this year to get control of the town and become its real masters.

"Oh, those peasants, those goyim!" he screamed, with blood-shot eyes, clenching his fists. "We'll teach them to destroy the town. . . . Trying to be big cheeses. . . . I'll fix their wagon. . . ."

In the evening, around prayer time, he crashed into the synagogue and lumbered over to Avrom Makhels, a rich man, who had a dozen houses and mills, and who also had a good heart, and, most important of all, he had a kid who was going to get hitched this year, and so Berel said to him in a tearful voice:

He, Berel the Lout—if he had to go off and serve, he'd still be Berel the Lout; and if you're a good soldier, then the fire won't burn you anyway; you get a ribbon and sometimes two, and you don't have to worry about the liquor either, but the main thing, well, he didn't have the money to go away. . . .

And he swore:

He should only make it safe and sound, do his hitch in the service and come home safe and sound, and he was sure that

Avrom Makhels' boy would remain at home. . . . Avrom Makhels apparently caught the drift of his sermon and slipped him some money to make him hold his tongue, passed it to him secretly, so that no one could see, and he also assured him:

If things really got to that pass, then he'd make sure that Berel had everything he needed to go off: shirts, pants, buttons, brushes—anything a soldier needed he'd be sure to have for his knapsack, and even money, too, cold cash. . . .

So Berel left the synagogue, slurped down a few more steins of beer at the first tavern along the way, to make up for the sobering blast of the wind, and then he rolled down the street, dead-drunk, barely able to keep on his feet. As luck would have it, who should come along but a recruit, one of those soft adolescents, a mama's boy, newly married, a delicate thing, all skin and bones, pale and scrawny, and Berel the Lout smacked him on the shoulder with all his strength, and burst into uproarious laughter:

"Get a load of the soldier, one of the boys. . . . Hahahaha! . . . A soldier. . . . Hahahaha!"

And he began ordering him around:

"Leeeeeft—MARCH! DOUBLE TIME!"

The young man stood there bewildered. The first smack had sent the glasses zooming from his nose; but then he looked around and saw who it was, that mock brigand, and the fear of God left him, but he was so embarrassed in front of the people clustering around him that he turned as red as a young girl getting her first kiss. And to get rid of his harasser, he said:

"For God's sake, already, it's not the end of the world! . . . If you have to go, then you have to go. The law's the law—that's what the Talmud says!"

Berel the Lout got a kick out of the heroic soldier-boy, and threw his arms around him, hugging and kissing him. . . . The young man tried to struggle free, but Berel kept obstructing him with his big, burly, rocking body and waving his hands so close to the boy's face that he had to twist back his head to keep from getting a bop on the nose, and this chutzbah made Berel so furious that he screamed:

"What?! . . . You want Berel the Lout to suffer for you and all

you stuck-up bastards, you pigs, who wear galoshes on your aristocratic feet even in the summer and who eat meat for dinner even on a plain Wednesday? . . ."

And he grabbed the boy's lapels and shook him for all he was worth, and when the young man saw that he was in for it, he writhed out of Berel's hands, scooted into a doorway, and vanished. . . .

Berel stood there alone, cursing. His anger gradually waned, but he still waved his arms drunkenly at the passersby, and with tears in his eyes, he poured out his heart to them:

He, Berel the Lout, was going off to serve in the army and—that would be the end of Berel, the town could already forget Berel, he was off to the war: shooting . . . stabbing . . . killing. . . .

And he burst out crying as though certain that: He was off to battle tomorrow, and would never come home again.

The summer slipped off unnoticed. Berel had stopped working right away, he loafed around, and women were right when they said: It was a miracle he didn't go crazy. But where did such a guy get food—his face showed no sign of hardship, God forbid. And the answer:

He was a recruit; a recruit lives off the community. Avrom Makhels, Sholem Yankels, Borukh Moyshes, all such Jews with houses, sawmills, refineries—there were lots of them in town; and if they didn't have all that much money, stuffing their bellies—they all had sons facing the draft, and the quota had to be filled.

And he, Berel, knew what was happening with all these recruits: which of them had gone away and—where he had gone . . . and—what he had done there.

At first, he was alone; gradually, in the course of time, he started getting visitors; one of them, Shmuel the Beanpole, who had started to walk—actually, he had always walked, and on his legs he was as tall as Og, King of Bashan, a long drink of water—but he was walking now for other reasons; because of varicose veins on his calves. And for that reason, doctors supposedly once told him to wear rubber stockings, but Shmuel the Beanpole was no fop, he wouldn't let himself be talked into such rubbish.

So he and his father battled away. His father would tell him: "Listen, Shmuel, do what you're told!" And Shmuel: "Leave me alone!" Lately, just before induction, the "fop" had sobered up and gone about the thing on a grand scale, walking his legs off, hoping he'd flunk the physical.

Shmuel the Beanpole had gotten Berel as a partner; the two of them plodded and plodded along, but Berel couldn't understand why the Beanpole took him down back streets and deserted roads, until. . . . He caught him in the act, and with a cheerful smile, as was his wont—he slapped him on the back.

"You rat. You wanna stay home too? Sø who's gonna go? Reuben, the widow's boy, her only son, that shlemiel, so that the army'll trample on him like a worm?"

And someone else joined them in the course of time: Little Borekh. Everyone knew he'd get out of the draft. But no one minded, because they thought of him as the kid in the gang. And once Berel held him between his knees and teased him with the solicitous affection of a father:

"Well, Borekh, you've got a hernia on the right side, God should only do you a favor and give you one on the left side—then you'll be divinely privileged to wear a truss on both sides, so they'll kick you out of the army twice."

By early autumn, you can smell the Draft Board in the air; along with the Days of Awe mood, there's a special Draft Board mood. A cold wind blows, yellow leaves come pouring from the trees, chestnuts fall and splinter to pieces, and gangs of recruits march through the streets, they've already quit their jobs, and they go about with canes in their hands like holiday strollers, but without that feeling of good cheer in their hearts.

And if someone asks them:

"What's all this walking around gonna get you?"

They shrug, they frown half-gloomily, knitting their brows, as if to say:

"What can we do? We don't know whose turn it'll be tomorrow."

And in the synagogues, ^{פּוֹרְטֵי-טָל וְיָרֵךְ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ} the little one-room hovels or the big houses of study, you can see a lot more young men, hanging around to say another prayer or two, even at twilight, and deep

into the September night, which is longer than an ordinary summer night; some of them sit there, studying the holy words with profound ardor, chanting, rocking, swaying, bending creased and worried faces over open Talmuds, and looking as though they were pouring out their bitter hearts:

"These are such great days. Oh, Father, Father, and when else can we beg you: Please help us to stay at home!"

One boy, with burning black eyes—for a while he stopped chanting the holy words, though rocking on with his scrawny, God-fearing little face, with his curly earlocks bobbing over his cheeks; and a deep sigh tore loose from his skinny, hollow chest:

"Oh, Father, Father, do not cast me among the goyim. Do not let me be wrested away from the religion of my fathers, from the Torah. Help me, Father, help me, send me salvation."

Near the stove, plain, uneducated workers were sitting, almost abashed, and praying from the prayer books; they had stopped shaving, and their beards looked grimy, they frowned, they devoured the psalms, and one of them spoke in the silence like a woman reciting a prayer for the dead:

"We cannot study the Torah, but we are still your Jews; we keep the Sabbath, we know about the Days of Awe, look upon that as our merits; do not let us be scattered, do not let us eat non-kosher food, do not let us profane the Sabbath and the holidays, God forbid. . . ."

In those days, the younger generation split in two: One half, the soft pantywaists, who could be kneaded like clay figures—they went to synagogue to pray. And the other half, with Berel the Lout at their head, the roustabouts, they went to Leyzer's tavern. The crowd was made up of tough tailor lads, apprentices, who couldn't read or write, and who had always regarded the military as "bullshit."

"We'll get used to it soon enough . . . Sewing tunics . . . making boots . . . baking bread—who cares? . . . And the three years'll be up before you know it. We'll bring back a few hundred rubles, we'll see the world, and that'll help us make a decent match. Thirty-six months—that's nothing . . . So—live it up, boys, live it up like there's no tomorrow!"

Along came a policeman, they linked arms with him and took

him to Leyzer's tavern, and they drank him under the table. Then Berel the Lout put him on top of the table and asked him to dance a kazatska. The policeman could barely keep his eyes open, the booze started boiling inside him, and when the onlookers, all glassy-eyed, began whistling through their fingers, he thought: "It's Easter in the barracks, fellows! Bang those drums!" And he tucked in his coattails and launched into a jig. He kicked up his heels and wedged his hand into his ribs, and he danced. Rivers of sweat came pouring from his face, his hair stuck to his forehead, he turned as red as a lobster and—he kept on and on until he totally forgot that he was among Jewish recruits, that he was in Leyzer's tavern; he pulled out the naked sword from its sheath, waved it over their heads, and screamed in his hoarse, drunken throat:

"Hey, Jews . . . we're gonna slaughter all of you!"

The crowd was in an uproar; only Berel the Lout kept his head. He deftly and adroitly slipped the sword out of the policeman's hand and smashed his fist so hard into his gut that it boomed like a barrel.

"You goddamn pig, you shouldn't show yourself among human beings; go fuck yourself!" *370 263 1/2 ves-27*

The policeman—flying down to the floor like a child's ball and looking as though he'd guzzled down a whole glass of vodka at one swoop, started begging, pleading, weeping:

"No . . . I swear— . . . I didn't mean it. . . ."

The crowd was yelling and shouting and they wanted to settle his hash for him.

"Rip off his epaulettes!"

"Smash his sword!"

Only Berel the Lout took his part:

"Leave him alone, boys. We don't have to do anything to him."

He put him on his feet, wiped the sweat off his face with his handkerchief, and even defended him:

"What do you want from him? It ain't him, it's the liquor talkin'. He's got a good heart, the goy. Leave him be. He's got an old lady at home and seven brats. . . ."

The crowd was seized with pity for the policeman, they chipped in a few kopeks for attacking him, they tied them up in

his shirt so he wouldn't lose them; Shmuel the Beanpole and Little Borekh started walking him out, they led him into the street respectfully and honorably, and after them came the entire crowd. . . .

Outside, they stopped to think:

"What are we gonna do with him?"

The crowd screamed:

"Throw him away!"

"Leave him in the street!"

Berel the Lout said: "The poor guy!"

Someone in the crowd yelled: "Shove it up his ass!"

And Berel: "He's got an old lady and seven brats at home."

Someone cried:

"Take him home!"

"Take him home!"

Little Borekh played a prank, he yelled into the man's ear with his womanish voice:

"Where d'ya live?"

The policeman shook his head a little and tried to stand up straight, the crowd laughed, roared Finally, they all hit the road, singing and whistling, the policeman flew into the air, he hovered aloft—when they came to the town limits, they halted, they looked around, they gaped.

"Where's his hat?"

The policeman was gone.

The escorts stood there and shrugged:

"Where the hell is he?"

"What'd ya do with him?" Berel shouted angrily.

Someone said:

"He must have given us the slip!"

The crowd laughed.

"Find him!" shouted Berel.

The crowd thundered:

"Fuck him!"

"Go to hell!"

"Find him!" Berel shouted angrily over their voices.

No one paid any attention; they all ran back to town and knocked on the windows of the wealthy boys:

"You sleepin'?"

"Get your ass outa bed!"

"Time to say your prayers!"

"Get to synagogue!"

And they stayed up all night, as though watching over a newborn baby-boy during the ritual night before its circumcision.

By the Days of Awe, all the recruits were at home. Thus, normally, they came home, not at any fixed time, but mostly for a holiday, and they managed to get back to town before Rosh Hashanah.

"C'mon: It's Rosh Hashanah! We'll go to synagogue too. We just have to . . . well . . . we have to have a look . . . find out what's happening. . . ."

And on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they were all in synagogue. They held the little prayer books in their hands—but whether they were really praying wasn't all that certain The old men mumbled: "There's a draft board for them every year. If only they knew they were Jews and realized they have to pray. . . ."

And Berel the Lout very personally made an effort, and he stood in the antechamber of the synagogue throughout Yom Kippur with a ravenous stomach—he was fasting; at every "I have sinned," when he saw them beating their breasts, he beat his own breast too.

The morning after Yom Kippur, when the deadline of heavenly terrors was past, everything went back to its normal trot. They roused through the streets all night long, yelling and screaming and getting drunk like it was going out of style.

Berel the Lout was his same old self. Wherever there was a trial, he was the judge; wherever there was a party or a funeral, he was the leader; and if he said it was day, then it was day

He was outraged at a few sons of rich families who had refused to pay him a ransom, and he swore: They would all have to go and serve with him in the same outfit; even if they bound up their heads and their ears, even if they crammed cotton into their shoes, and even if they didn't have a tooth to their names—it wouldn't help the motherfuckers a bit. . . .

On the Feast of the Torah, he and his whole gang went back to synagogue, all of them dead-drunk; Berel could barely crawl up to the reading platform, he clambered on all fours, banged his fist on the pulpit, and heaved into a long sermon:

Well, you see, since he and his whole gang were going to boot camp, and everyone knew about it—well, then they ought to be allowed to carry the Torah scrolls around the platform, as Jews always do on this feast, to celebrate the completed reading cycle of the year.

Well, what they had coming to them—they got! They were honored with the Torah scrolls, and the cantor started off with them around the platform, squealing in his squeaky voice: “He who helpeth the poor!” And the entire synagogue rolled in the aisles. . . .

The boys turned crimson, they were furious! It was humiliating! It wouldn't have taken much to make them throw away the Torah scrolls—with guys like that, you never know what's going to happen next And they might have beaten the shit out of the administrator and the cantor.

That night, they got even with the town for what had been done to them; they smashed all the tabernacles set up for the holiday, they tore off the wings and dragged them away with the walls and the red-fir branches and scattered them to the four winds. . . . ❁

נסיון יל-טקארסא וסל



ACQUIRING A GRAVEYARD

AVROM REYZEN

The tiny Jewish town was isolated from the rest of the world. Only rare echoes came straying here from the cities or even the large towns. No one needed the little shtetl, and it needed no one. It got along all on its own. With potatoes from its own fields, flour from its own windmill, and meat from its own sheep. As for clothing, Leybe the Tailor was a genius at his trade, and he sewed for both women and men. True, the material was brought in from the city, but this was done by Yankel, who was practically the only storekeeper in town; once a year, he would travel to the state capital to buy various goods. But Yankel was a quiet man. You didn't have to hawk your wares in the shtetl. And he was so quiet about his trip that it almost seemed like a secret: Every year, he would vanish for two days with no sign of life, and when he came back, only a few people, not all, would find out where he'd been. The curious ones would pounce upon him:

“Yankel, what's happening out in the world?”

But Yankel had nothing to say. To his way of thinking, there was nothing to tell—everything was trivial! Once though, when they really cornered him and he felt he had to tell them something, he smirked, stroked his black beard, and replied:

“It's like, well, say—a hundred shtetls rolled into one. Altogether, it's a hundred times bigger than our little town, so how can you be surprised at the hubbub!”

And that was the only news that the townsfolk, Jews of course, ever received from the big world, once in a blue moon.