YEKELE, JUVINILE DELINQUENT

Every human community has its misfits, and Buczacz is no different. Throughout *A City in its Fullness* generally, Buczacz is presented as a place in which the norms of worship and study are broadly respected. The norms may be realized only by a few, but most citizens participate in their practice to the degree their education allows. Even someone like Feivush makes an effort, as we have seen, doing his best to approach the holy texts through a Yiddish digest meant for women. Yet when deviance occurs, and it must occur, how is it handled? Terms such deviance and delinquency, products of mid-twentieth-century sociology and criminology, actually make a good fit for understanding Buczacz, whose rules of conformity may not have been much different from those of small towns in America. There will always be some young people who, because of the temperament they have inherited or the deprivations they have experienced in childhood, cannot or will not accept and live by the values of the society into which they have been born. If the existence of "wayward youth" then is a given, the question becomes what to do about them.

The eponymous hero of "Yekele" is just such a home-grown variety of juvenile delinquent, Buczacz style. The existence of a lad like Yekele is no cause for sensation. Rather, the story's focus is trained upon the ways in which the new Austrian regime has affected how Buczacz deals with delinquency such as his. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, one of the major changes after the partitions was the constriction of Jewish legal authority. Under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to be sure, the magnate was the law of the land in the towns he owned; but when it did not affect his interests, he generally allowed the Jewish community to police itself and adjudicate its internal conflicts. This adjudication took place through the local rabbinic court (*beit din*) or through policies enacted by consensus among the elders who constituted the kahal, the community's official body. When the Austrians created the province of Galicia and brought its population within the civil practices of the Empire, the administration of justice was transferred to state courts. Aside from ritual matters, civil litigation and criminal offenses were now adjudicated through the state apparatus. By mutual agreement, two Jewish business men could choose to submit a business conflict to a rabbinic court, but if one refused the matter would be taken to a civil court. In the stories from the Austrian period in *A City in its Fullness* rabbis are seen very little, or, as in the case of "Feivush the Enforcer," not

at all. When they do appear, they have to be forced by emergent circumstances to take action. And this is a period, moreover, when Buczacz was lucky in its rabbis and had a succession of figures who were much beloved and respected, and, perhaps more importantly, stayed in Buczacz.[1]

Unlike the rabbinate, the kahal did not decline in importance, but its role shifted. Even after the establishment of a civil administration, the Austrian provincial government continued to relate to the Jews as a kind of separate estate for certain purposes, and it used the kahal to do its will, or at least to communicate its will, to its Jewish subjects. We will soon see in the story "Disappeared" that it was the kahal that was charged with the task of providing a fixed quota of young men for army conscription. Who they provided and how then obtained them was left entirely to the kahal. The kahal, it should be remembered, was not an elected body but a self-perpetuating council of elders. At its head stood a man who held the position of *parnas*; the office could be variously held for a sustained time or rotated for short periods. The kahal was by nature an oligarchic form of communal leadership, and the qualifications for membership included commercial acumen, wealth, Torah learning, charitable generosity, knowledge of gentile languages, and strength of character. The particular mix of these characteristics varied of course according to time and place. In the stories that take up the remainder of this chapter, the profile of the Buczacz kahal is far from generous. Its members are represented as being vain, corrupt and dictatorial, and in addition to being used by the Austrian rulers to do their will, the members of the kahal become adept at getting the Austrians to do *theirs* as well.

Before discussing the case of the defiant and ill-used Yekele, it needs to be pointed out that Agnon left us two recensions of his story. *A City in its Fullness* contains side by side two stories with the identical title ("Yekele"), distinguished only by subtitles—supplied by Emunah Yaron—indicating "One Version" and "Another Version." Agnon's daughter found both texts among the stories intended for the project, and, rather than making a determination that one was the final version and the other a preparatory draft, she chose to include both. Upon reading the stories, it is easy to see that she acted very responsibly. The major plot events are the same, as is Yekele sad fate, yet the events are shaped differently in each; there are different emphases and different details. Moreover, "Yekele II," which is what I shall call the second version, is about a third longer. But yet again, it is not simply a matter of added material but of different or varied material. Each is a self-contained and finished story with its own pleasures. Why did Agnon

write both? It is likely, simply, that he wanted or needed to tell the story in two different ways because one would not do. For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to discuss the second version because it makes a more coherent station in the examination of the Austrian theme and because it would be distracting to jump back and forth between the two. I shall cite some elements of comparison in the notes.

The keynote difference between the two is Agnon's decision to make R. Yisrael Shlomo, the parnas (leader) of the kahal, the focus and point of departure in the second version, whereas Yekele plays that role in the first. True, the story is named for Yekele and the reader is naturally drawn to the misadventures of the colorful and insubordinate scamp. Yet the crushing reality the story exposes derives directly from the authority wielded by the parnas, an authority abetted by Austrian rule and unregulated by rabbinic morality. Thus Agnon seeks to prevent us from mistakenly thinking that it is Yekele's incorrigibility that is at fault; instead, he makes it clear that the genealogy of evil is rooted in the way in which power is concentrated and abused, whether it is in gentile or Jewish hands. In the unblinking presentation of this truth, the narrator, as we have found so often in these stories, is more hindrance than help. As chronicler, he must convey the events that took place. But his own subject position is identified with the generality of the community, and the generality of Buczacz is beholden to R. Yisrael Shlomo for his largesse and inclined to be compliant with his will. The conventionality of the narrator's sentiments is at odds with the horrific act of injustice at the center of the story, and the gap between the two embroils the reader in a spreading web of tragic fatalism.

In the narrator's sympathetic introduction of R. Yisrael Shlomo, the parnas's power is presented as both unprecedented and justified. There has never been in recent memory, whether in Buczacz or the province as a whole, a leader who has attained his prominence. His achievement is explained by his being "wealthy, philanthropic, well bred, elegant, resolute and unyielding" (508). In a more conceptual mode, the narrator ascribes his success to three factors: a distinguished lineage, his personal forcefulness, and Buczacz's readiness to yield to authority. This third necessary condition, which makes a strong connection with the image of the community in "Feivush the Enforcer," is presented without criticism as merely an enabling factor. But there is a telling difference. In "Feivush," the community consensus, portrayed as a kind of collective actor, is the main force moving events. In the Yekele stories, by contrast, the broad will of the community possesses no independent force because it is entirely subsumed in

the will of its strong leader. The narrator, perhaps despite himself, provides an excellent account of how R. Yisrael Shlomo goes about purchasing the good will of the good people of Buczacz. His blandishments are everywhere at once: gifts at circumcision ceremonies and weddings, dowries for poor brides, and meals to comfort the bereaved during their week of mourning. His beneficences find grateful recipients, who in turn are further disposed to defer to him. His influence becomes such that the narrator "can say with some certainty that there was no one in the town who did not accept R. Yisrael's authority unconditionally."

With one exception, that is. Yekele is an orphaned youth who occupies a rung on the social ladder of Buczacz that is as low as R. Yisrael's is high. He has the distinction of being the only person in the town who scoffed at the parnas, "spoke ill of him, and did not even deign to address him as 'Reb,' a title of respect the whole town gave him even when he was not present." At first report, the powerful man is amused that there should be anyone who does not respect him; but when reports of Yekele's insolence are repeated, his equanimity is disturbed and he utters the wish that the boy come to an early end. This intemperance reaches Yekele's ears, and the exchanges between them escalate in vituperation until their mutual antipathy is common knowledge. The narrator makes a show of investigating the origins of their antagonism, but his efforts miss the point entirely. There can be no "real" reason why a man of R. Yisrael Shmolo's immense prestige and power should be affected by *anything* said by a social nullity such as Yekele. Unless, that is, his grandiosity rests on so precarious a basis that anything other than complete acclamation can topple it over. In the face of such danger, there is no telling what a man would do to preserve his position.

There are undoubtedly comic possibilities inherent in this picture of inflated self-importance vulnerable to the wiles of an irreverent mischief maker. But Agnon decides instead to take the story in the direction of tragedy, and builds a plot about the inexorability of the crushing of a minor delinquent by an insecure and rage-full oligarch while the community looks on impassively and the traditional organs of conscience are neutralized by the new gentile regime. Now, one might think that this plot-line would be advanced by filling out Yekele's character and thereby strengthening our bond with him. Yet, although we are surely sympathetic to Yekele and abhor his victimization, Agnon declines to tell us much about his life or to develop him as a character. (There is more of this is in the first version of the story.) Instead, a disproportionate amount of narrative investment is devoted to his pre-natal origins and the

peculiar figure of his father, and it is from these that we are asked to make inferences and understand something essential about how Yekele came to be the way he is. And if this were not enough of a digression from the ostensible main business of the story, this excursus is followed by another long passage, which lists, in exhaustive and often absurd detail, the voluntary benevolent associations that operated in Buczacz.

Who is this R. Moshe whose life gets more attention than the eponymous hero of the story? He is introduced to the reader as being "the youngest of the early Hasidim in Buczacz" (509), and this identification does a great deal to explain who he is, while still leaving unexplained contradictions. The timing helps to date the story, because the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, died in 1760 and Dov Ber of Mezeritch, the disciple who helped to spread the new doctrine in the region, died in 1770. If R. Moshe died around this time, just on the eve of the partitions of Poland, then Yekele would have come of age during the second decade of Austrian rule, a time of the legislative activism in Viennese chancellery regarding the Jews of the new province. The timing also helps to explain why R. Moshe's behavior is so peculiar in the eyes of Buczacz. The city's scholarly culture and its proud loyalty to the liturgical practices of medieval Ashkenaz made it more resistant to the explosive spread of Hasidism than other communities in the region. The laxity in the fixed time for prayers and the shift to the rite associated with the kabbalist Isaac Luria (*nusah ha'ari*) were disturbing and subversive changes, which almost amounted to a succession from the community. The succession was literal when it came to the separate prayer houses established by the Hasidim. Contempt for the new movement was not limited to the elite. In "Feivush the Enforcer," when the new thug accompanies the brutal kick he gives Feivush with the taunt: "If you want to lie around, get yourself over to the bathhouse or to the place where the jokers pray." By jokers (*letsanim)* he means the Hasidim.[2]

Of the joy and earthiness that will later characterize Hasidism there is little in R. Moshe. In his disregard for the body and the world he embodies more of the asceticism of the Hasidism of medieval Ashkenaz. He is a holy man not in the sense of being a wonder worker but in his desire to immerse himself wholly in contemplative worship and the study of mystical texts. He takes no responsibility for the practicalities of life and leaves the burden of earning a livelihood to his wife. While others don the talit and tefilin only for early-morning prayers, R. Moshe wears them all day long as a sign of his withdrawal from the world and his desire block out all but the sacred. He devotes himself to studying and teaching the esoteric lore of the Zohar and

the writings of the ~~Safed kabbalist~~ Isaac Luria, and the mystical treatise *Hemdat Yamim* never leaves his hands. (note: The allure of this book also conquered R. Elya is the story "Hahazzanim." See Chapter Four, note 13.) He spends half the week running among the town's synagogues checking to the make sure the Torah scrolls contain no scribal errors.

Similarly, married life for R. Moshe is an institution that exists only for a higher purpose. He divorces his nameless wife after ten years when their union produces no issue, in accordance with talmudic guidelines. (note: See Mishnah Yevamot 6:6) But in accordance with another talmudic principle he takes her back so she will not have to be alone for the Passover holiday at the end of a brutal and impoverishing winter. Wondrously, after so many years of childlessness, she conceives a son on the Friday night before Passover. Sadly, R. Moshe dies soon afterward, and his wife dies giving birth to the son, who is Yekele. The miraculous circumstances surrounding his birth come to light as the narrator explains the origins of the boy's name. That Passover, R. Moshe and his wife were facing the holiday with no provisions when a man from the villages drove up with a wagon full of meat, fish and vegetables, as well as a large purse full of coins, which he proceeded to bring into their house. It was later reported that this Elijah-like figure, whose name was Ya'akov, drowned with his wagon in the river. "And when the boy was born as she was dying," the narrator informs us, the mother "instructed that he be named Ya'akov. But because everyone loved him, they called him Yekele. He is the Yekele of our story" (511).

But of course he is anything but beloved and blessed. From the tragic ordeal of Yekele's life we realize retrospectively, if we have not already worked it out from the precious stylization of the episode, that the story of his origins is a parody of a Hasidic wonder tale. The only wonder is that he survived--until he didn't. Our narrator is not a maskil, who would openly and wickedly ridicule the miraculous pretentions of the Hasidim, because he cannot discount the pillars of religious faith he shares with them. But he is not above showing us that R. Moshe took the quest for holiness so far as to push it over the top and empty it of meaning. His obsession with holiness is impotent and barren, and he and his wife can create a child only by supernatural intervention. A child created in this way must of necessity be a blasted vessel into which evil can enter more easily than good.

Now the miraculous wagonload of good things is necessary to create an essential premise of the plot. R. Moshe donated the excess wine he received to the Hevra Kadisha, the town's

burial society, in exchange for a promise that if his wife gave birth to a boy he would registered as a member of the society. The promise was kept, and it was this membership that eventually entangled Yekele in the concatenation of events that led to his execution. (In "Yekele I" much more space is devoted to Yekele's early life, his resistance to attending heder, and the fearlessness that makes him a good gravedigger.) The very idea of a truant, delinquent, and penniless boy belonging to the Hevra Kadisha patently absurd, and the narrator knows it. The burial society was the wealthiest and most prestigious and exclusive club in Buczacz, and there was a long waiting list of the successful and pious waiting to gain admission. The narrator issues one of his famous understatements: *qetsat qasheh*, it is a little difficult to understand. "Nothing happens without a reason, of course," he admits, "but why this was we do not know, and so we will have to be content only with the facts" (511).

As if to divert attention from this quandary, the narrator directly launches directly into to the second long digression in this short story. This is a catalogue of some twenty voluntary associations that existed in Buczacz, some devoted to the study of sacred texts and others to social welfare. The catalogue is a fascinating document unto itself, but its value as an ethnographic source is equivocal because it mixes important and weighty endeavors, such as the study of Mishnah and the providing of poor brides with dowries, together with activities of a far more peculiar valence, such as the society "founded by craftsmen in town in order to provide hens for the kapparot ritual to those who could not afford to buy them" or the society whose members "made lanterns which they brought to illuminate the ceremony of sanctifying the new moon" (513). The whole lengthy catalogue sticks out like a sore thumb and works to impede the forward movement of the story. And that seems to be exactly the effect that the narrator seeks to achieve, consciously or not. Not only does he wish to camouflage the preposterousness of Yekele's membership in the Hevra Kadisha but he wants to anticipate and neutralize the calumny and moral diminishment that will likely be Buczacz's lot in the reader's eyes for standing by while a terrible injustice is carried out. Buczacz is more and better than that, the narrator urges us to see. Just look at the many ways in which the community takes care of the poor and the needy.

When the narrator finally returns to story, events take place at a rapid pace. R. Yisrael Avraham, one of the richest men in town, has been waiting for years to become a member of the Hevra Kadisha, and to celebrate his admission, he has contributed funds to turn the society's

annual banquet in a sumptuous, once-in-a-lifetime affair. While R. Yisrael Avraham and the other man are celebrating all night, his wife is at home asleep. Deep in the night, his home is broken into and all the silver and gold and promissory notes from Polish nobles are stolen from his strongbox. The greedy thieves even take the golden earrings from the sleeping wife, who awakes and shouts. Then "one of the robbers gagged her with a handkerchief, and in a gentile language told her, '*Cicho bestia*!,' meaning, 'Shut up, you animal,' or I'll strangle you" (514). The matron identified the voice as belonging to Yekele.

The journey from this accusation to Yekele's being condemned to the gallows takes place with startling rapidity. Because of the prominence of R. Yisrael's wife, inquiries are made, and it is soon discovered that Yekele was not present at the banquet and he is nowhere to be found. Two days later he returns to town of his own accord. He is wounded and roughed up, and, under pressure from his relatives, he reveals that he absented himself from the feast because he thought he would be forced to serve the leaders of the society. He went to a neighboring town to buy a cask of aged mead so he could show up his fellow members by producing a beverage superior to theirs. He ended up drinking the mead himself, and in his drunken state he was an easy mark for a gang of peasants who attacked him. Unaware of the break-in at the home of R. Yisrael Avraham, he assumes that R. Yisrael Shlomo is seeking to punish him for failing to report for duty at the banquet. He is insolent with the magistrates and calls them shills of the powerful parnas. Once he is informed of the severity of the accusations against him and taken to prison in iron shackles, he utters, "God help Reb Yisrael Shlomo. I swear he will not leave my hands alive" (515). The parnas is shaken by his threat, and he "moved quickly to bring the matter to the attention of the regional judges, and he was not satisfied until they condemned Yekele to the gallows." Before anyone knows it, an official hangman arrives from Czernovitz, sent for by R. Yisrael Shlomo, and a gallows is erected on the river hillside, a location that will create a natural amphitheater for the members of the Polish nobility who will come from wide and far for the public spectacle.

Yekele's fate is dispatched so quickly that we are barely aware that the entire drama is staged exclusively by R. Yisrael Shlomo. If there exists even a modicum of due process and civil procedure, he controls it and rides roughshod over it. Savor the irony here: The Austrian regime has taken over many of the areas once dealt with by rabbinic courts, and now comes a single powerful and wealthy Jews and uses the Austrian regional courts for his own purposes, for

a vendetta against one impudent and offensive youth. Where is the rest of the Jewish community? The unhappy answer is that this man has *become* the community. Still, there are several leading figures who, together with the rabbi of Buczacz, come before the parnas to protest. They assume, mistakenly, that the hangman has been brought merely to frighten Yekele, and they protest that even "tormenting him is still a grave sin." The dismissive answer they receive is instructive.

> Reb Yisrael Shlomo sighed and replied, "What can I do? The matter is now out of my hands and there is nothing more to be done. I'm not the judge or the one in charge or the one giving orders, and besides, the law of the land is the law." (516)

The imperious parnas is not only deceitfully camouflaging his own initiatives, he is also invoking--and traducing—the well-known halakhic principle *dina dimalkhuta dina*, the law of the land is the law. This principle, enunciated first in the Babylonian Talmud (Nedarim 28a and Bava Kama 113a) and developed by innumerable medieval authorities, states that, under certain conditions, regulations, such as paying taxes, imposed by the royal authority or the state are binding in the same way as the statutes of Jewish law.[3] The application of this principle is complex and fraught, especially at a time when rabbinic authority is being curtailed. But here it is evident that R. Yisrael Shlomo is adducing it as a piece of sophistry to conceal his own machinations.[4] The picture becomes clearer when the rabbi and the notables, unsatisfied with the parnas's response, attempt to register their concerns with the Austrian officials directly. They are rebuffed and told that any matter pertaining to the Jewish community or to a Jewish person goes through the esteemed Israel Salomon Behrmann, and any further protest will be punishable as an attempt unduly to influence the judiciary.[5]

In short, this is the story of a lopsided duel between a powerful oligarch and a boy who refuses to acknowledge his authority. As a mediating term in this confrontation, the community is belated and enfeebled. They withdraw from the drama and cede the stage to the police officials, the hangman, and the gawking Polish nobles. The narrator allows the Jews of the Holy Community of Buczacz to put in a cameo appearance at the story's conclusion.

> On the day that Yekele was taken out to be executed, all the God-fearing people of Buczacz went out into the fields and forests outside of town. They walked about the whole day weeping and crying. From time to time they spread out their hands in the direction of the town saying "Our hands did not shed this blood."

The verse they utter comes from Deuteronomy 27, which describes a ceremony to be performed by the elders of a town near which a corpse has been found ~~whose~~ and the murdered cannot be identified. The town has incurred guilt and impurity because it has failed to provide the hospitality and protection that might have prevented the man's death. To expiate the guilt, the elders sacrifice a calf by a stream outside the town and recite the formula about their hands not having shed this blood.[6] The picture of the God-fearing of Buczacz weeping as they wander the fields is an affecting and surreal image of regret and ineffectuality. There is no question that they are guilty of many sins, foremost among them accepting R. Yisrael Avraham's blandishments in return for acknowledging his rule over them. Yet their heartbreak and contrition are also real. But tragically they come too late.

[1] Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kra (the Neta Sha'ashuim) served from 1794 to 1814, and Rabbi Avraham David Wahrmann (the Da'at Qedoshim) from 1814 to 1840.

[2] For the attitude that *A City in its Fullness* takes to Hasidism, see "Hasidim harishonim," 526-30. Also , see Chapter Two, XXX. It is important to note that the volume's implicit bias leads to a kind of underreporting of the importance of Hasidism in Buczacz. Historical period is an additional factor. In the mid-nineteenth century, Galicia had the greatest number of Hasidic institutions in Eastern Europe. But this was not yet the case at the end of the eighteenth century and the turn of the nineteenth. The Hasidic dynasty centered in and named for the town of Chertikov, close to Buczacz, was later prominently represented in Buczacz, and Agnon's grandparents were affiliated with Chertikov Hasidism. By the end of the nineteenth century these distinctions exerted far less force.

[3] See Shmuel Shiloh, *Dina dimalkhuta dina* [The Law of the Land is the Law](Jerusalem: Academic Press, 1976).

[4] The general communal opinion pauses for a moment to register the fact that "a woman's testimony is not accepted according to Jewish law," but then goes on to say, "still the matter needed to be investigated" (515) and be absorbed in the groundswell to condemn him.

[5] In "Yekele I" the agency of R. Yisrael Shlomo is mediated by the active presence of the local governor, who prods the compliant parnas into considering the death sentence. The governor is also given a semi-comic scene in which he bosses his clerk around like a petty tyrant.

[6] The ritual is described in the ninth chapter of Mishnah Sotah. The ritual was abrogated, we are told in mishnah 9, once murderers became commonplace. It could also not be performed outside the Land of Israel while the Sanhendrin existed. The actions of the Buczaczers are merely a symbolic expression of their bad conscience and their powerlessness.