

Winnipeg Tales

Arthur A. Chiel

Résumé

Arthur A. Chiel fait le récit de trois contes propres à Winnipeg et caractéristiques des premiers Juifs qui vinrent s'établir dans l'Ouest du Canada.

Les deux premiers contes ont trait aux souvenirs du rabbin Feivel Lechtzier.

Le troisième relate les temps difficiles où il fut pénible en hiver de pouvoir rassembler un minyan lors de l'anniversaire de décès de la mère d'un rabbin.

It was late afternoon of the first day of Shavuot, in June 1952. Feivel Lechtzier, old and feeble, stood with difficulty before the Rosh Pina Congregation leading the *Mincha* prayers. Reb Feivel was the last survivor of the Russian Jewish group which had arrived in Winnipeg in May, 1882. As he led the service his voice quivered but his Hebrew was clear, his devotion firm. He leaned on his elbow for support as he repeated aloud the *Shemonoh Esrey*, reaching a crescendo with each *Boruch Atto*. Reb Feivel completed the prayers and sat down in a front pew. Several men extended their *yasher koach*, I among them. He smiled and asked us to sit with him — there was a little time yet until *Maariv*.

Feivel Lechtzier smiled, "You know, friends, it's not like it was in my younger days when I could gallop through a *Mincha* one, two, three. It was child's play then. But the youthful strength is gone. I do the best I can. One mustn't sin."

"You don't do badly at all," we reassured him. "God grant that we do as well when we reach your age." We asked Reb Feivel to tell us about the early days in Canada and we could see that he was pleased. And he began:

"Seventy years is not yesterday. It's not easy to remember. I was only a lad of eleven when we came to Winnipeg. Still I recall a bit here and there. I remember the first death. It happened shortly after we arrived. We were in the Immigration Sheds by the Red River. There were sixty families in a large bare shed and we were cold and hungry. The angel of death was at the door. First to go was a poor, starved infant. The mother cried piteously and the father stood

in stunned silence. We wanted to help, but how? And what was to be done with the dead child?

“My father, Simon Lechtzier, volunteered to take the infant for burial. He wrapped the child in a cloth and carried the sad bundle away. He was certain that the earlier Jewish settlers had somewhere set aside a cemetery for the Jewish dead. Imagine his disappointment when he learned that there was no *Beys Olom*. In anger he walked into Louis Wertheim’s tobacco shop on Main Street and asked for a box to hold the bundle he was carrying. Wertheim gave him a box. My father deposited the parcel, then asked Wertheim to keep it in the store until later in the day. Wertheim, a nice sort of fellow, a German Jew, agreed. When my father returned to the Immigration Shed he informed us that the dead infant was attended to and the matter rested.

“That is,” continued Reb Feivel, “it rested until next morning when Wertheim opened the unclaimed box and discovered the dead child. Distraught, he rushed into the Shed and shouted. ‘Where is that miserable fellow? Where is he?’ And my father came forward. ‘That was a terrible thing to do,’ said Wertheim. ‘It was downright criminal. You could be arrested for it.’

“My father, an old *Chevra Kadisha* man from European days was not cowed, not at all. He stood his ground firmly. ‘You left me no choice. You Jews should have a cemetery already. Don’t you know that before anything else a Jewish community establishes a *Beys Olom*?’

“And Wertheim knew that my father was right. Chastened, he proceeded to approach Finkelstein, Ripstein, Coblenz, Frankfurter and other early residents who had preceded us. They raised money for a small plot of land. The infant was buried. Within the next several months four more children died and they too were laid to rest in the new cemetery.

“And then a new problem came up. We discovered that the cemetery was located in a disreputable neighborhood. It was on Thomas Street, the red-light district of those days. We were deeply ashamed that our dead should lie in such unclean surroundings. Once more my father took the lead and he approached the pioneer residents. He upbraided them for their careless choice of ground. Did they not respect the honor of the dead? They must find a new burial spot immediately.

“‘Lechtzier,’ they indignantly countered, ‘you’re a big *baal chutzpah*! We put out our own money and bought a cemetery and now you play the aristocrat. The cemetery isn’t good enough for you, hah? See if you can do better for yourself!’

“Ah, but they didn’t know Simon Lechtzier. He was made of strong stuff and when he knew that he was right no one could put him off. Not that this was

a simple matter to resolve. Money was hard to get in 1883. Some of the families were just beginning to move out of the Immigration Sheds — the barracks we called them. My father and the other immigrants worked for the Canadian Pacific as track-layers. With their meager earnings they made down payments on homes for their families. I said homes. You should have seen the shacks they were buying on the flats by the Red River. But at least families could begin to exist as human beings instead of living like prisoners.

“Money was hard to find. But the honor of the dead was at stake, my father insisted, and he proceeded to collect funds for another cemetery. He was stubborn and he succeeded. After some months he had collected enough money from his fellow immigrants to make an initial payment on some land in Elmwood, on the outskirts of Winnipeg.

“The snow was still plenty heavy on the ground when the new B’nai Israel Cemetery was dedicated. It was on a Sunday morning, in March I believe, when the men and the boys got together outside our home. My father and his friends borrowed several horses and sleighs from gentile neighbors and we piled ourselves on, huddling together for protection against the prairie winds. And we were off to the cemetery dedication.

“We assembled in the snow-covered field. My father and the others opened their Psalm books and they read aloud eighteen chapters, the number symbolizing life, from the sacred book. Next we circled the field, symbolically laying claim to it for our community. Once again we stood huddled together while Wolf Moskowitz made a short speech.

“‘My friends, we have brought with us eighteen bottles of liquor. But before we partake of it we pray that it be the Lord’s will to remove from us, the house of Israel, all kinds of disease, destruction and disastrous plagues. May He deliver us from unmerciful, evil decrees that visit and afflict this world. So for him that trusts in God, let lovingkindness surround him. Amen!’

“Moskowitz drank down his glass and everyone took a drink of *schnaps*, chanting with fervor — *Lechayim! Lechayim!* To life! To long life!’”

On a late Sabbath afternoon, a few weeks after he related to us the cemetery story, we prodded Feivel Lechtzier once more. How about another tale of the early days in Winnipeg?

“Well, *chevra*” he said thoughtfully, “there is a story that’s not so nice and maybe it shouldn’t be told at all.”

To which one of the men responded, “We’re all grown men, Reb Feivel. Feel free to speak. After all a story is a story and should be told.”

“*Nu*, all right,” said the octogenarian. “When Jews demand, who am I to hold back? Here it is.

“After all every barrel of apples has its rotten fruit and in that group that came over with us was one *paskudnyak* who would have done just as well to stay behind with the Czar. Unfortunately he came to Winnipeg and brought shame upon all of us. Yossel Getzelovitch was his name, a big, muscular fellow.

Most of us struggled hard to make a living for our families. This was 1884, when most of us had become farmers, peddlers and storekeepers. Life was plenty difficult but we managed to exist. We lived with the hope that better times would come. But not Yossel. Strong as he was, he wouldn’t work. He found himself an easy business. He became the keeper of a disorderly house.

“Don’t imagine that the Jews sat by with folded arms. We tried in every way to straighten him out. People were talking! ‘Is what?’ was Yossel’s comment. We told him he would not be permitted into the synagogue if he continued his miserable business. So he would organize his own *minyán*, countered the brazen fellow.

“We bore our shame in silence — until that day when the terrible thing happened. On an early morning a young girl was found lying on the ground in front of Yossel Getzelovitch’s house. She had jumped out of a second-story window from the room where Yossel and his wife had kept her locked up since her arrival several weeks earlier. Now the police knew the story and Yossel and his wife were arrested.

“We were disgraced by this no-good who had refused to listen to our pleadings. What would the Gentiles say about us? Would they allow more Jews to come to Canada?

“Our woe was multiplied when on the day following their arrest, Yossel and his wife were released on bail. You would have imagined that they had learned their lesson, that at least they would be ashamed. But they went about as if nothing had ever happened. What to do now?

“That night a Scotsman knocked on Getzelovitch’s door. Would Getzelovitch be interested in looking at a horse that was available at a reasonable price. It was in a stable at the other end of Main Street. Yes, Yossel was interested and he would go along with the man to see the horse. They walked together down the length of Main Street. They turned off into an alley-way and they entered a dimly-lit stable.

“Before Yossel had a chance to say *alef-beys* there was a burlap sack pulled

over his face and he was tied up with rope. Onto a wagon he was loaded and out of the stable rushed horse-and-buggy and Getzelovitch, headed for the open prairie to the north of Winnipeg. Destination reached, Yossel was lifted from the back of the wagon by hefty hands and was heaved onto the ground.

“Nobody spoke a word. It was a very silent business but also very efficient. They rolled Yossel with gusto — in tar and feathers. Yes, tar and feathers was something we had learned about from our Canadian neighbors. When they had a troublesome character they did the same.

“Through with their work, they left Getzelovitch to cool off by himself. Before leaving him, however, they untied his hands and feet, leaving only the bag over his face and tied about his chest.

“The following morning the Winnipeg newspapers carried the full story about the prairie incident and they reported that the tar-and-featherers were being sought by the police. But that was only the newspaper story. Because actually the police didn’t look too hard. Or if they did investigate they seemed to look in the wrong places. Yossel’s ‘Hebrew compatriots,’ as the newspapers described the culprits, were never discovered.

“What happened to Yossel and his wife?” we asked Feivel.

“They made a quick getaway,” chuckled Feivel. “When last we heard of them they were on their way to Argentina.”

The octopus-like tentacles of the aggressively growing city of Winnipeg have extended into a variety of directions, taking vise-like hold of suburban areas which not long ago constituted farmlands and country-side. In this process, the octopus-city has displaced the original farm inhabitants, among them about seventy-five Jewish families who were dairy-farmers in West Kildonan Township, north of the city limits. In their inimitable talent for Yiddishizing the vernacular of the land, these *Tevyes* took the original Scotch name to their bosoms and gave forth with — *Vest Kildonye*.

Dee Milch-Leit as they came to be known in the larger Winnipeg Jewish Community were in the main Ukranian Jews who came to Canada in the early years of this century. They were not learned men but intensely loyal Jews nevertheless, devoted to the tradition of their fathers before them. Eager to preserve their Jewish ways, they soon pooled their very meager resources and built for themselves a Synagogue which served also as a Talmud Torah for their children. The *Vest Kildonye Shul* was a veritable bee-hive of activity. Fathers and

children prayed in full force on the Sabbaths and Holy Days. Joyous family and communal celebrations were held in the *Shul* and, according to reliable testimony, he who had not attended a *Vest Kidonye Chassene* had simply not lived. Because they were purveyors of milk, in their celebrations *dee milch-leit* had an ardent predilection of *Yash* (*Yayin-soref*, i.e. liquor). And when the fiery water took full effect a Hasidic fervor would overcome them which would burn into the wee hours of the morning, burning itself out only in time for the morning *minyan* when they would wearily don their *Taleisim* and *Tephillin* and recite the morning benedictions among which was also, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord Our God, who removeth the slumber from our lids.” But then was it the Lord’s fault if it were not really so this particular morning?

Late afternoon *minyanim* were not easy to come by during the week-days, particularly so in the winter months when darkness fell early and *dee milchleit* were just returning from their routes. In those early years there were not retired elderly Jews to constitute a *minyan*, or, perhaps more correctly, if there were elderly Jews in *Vest Kildonye* they had not the wherewithal on which to retire. And here we arrive at the point of our story.

On one icy winter afternoon, in 1906, Reb Hayim wanted to observe the *yahrzeit* of his mother, may she rest in peace. He arrived at *Shul* in time for the evening service but, alas, there were only seven men gathered, good friends of his whose attendance he had solicited. He, Reb Hayim, was the eighth.

He asked the aged *Shammos* in Yiddish, “Nu, will we have a *minyan*, do you think?”

The *shammos* nodded slowly, dolefully, “I don’t think so. You know how it is in winter. It’s impossible to get hold of ten Jews.”

But Reb Hayim was determined to say *Kaddish* for his mother and he spoke to the seven men. “I ask you to do me a favor. Wait here just a little while longer and I’ll find two more Jews.” To which they responded with a shrug, for where at this hour could he get two Jews in *Vest Kildonye*? Not one to be easily deterred, Reb Hayim left and the seven men waited on, huddled around the hot, pot-bellied stove.

Some fifteen minutes later Reb Hayim returned with two men in tow. A look of glorious victory was written across his bearded face as he brought the ninth and tenth men up to the front of the small *shul*. With vigor he stepped up to the Reader’s table and led the congregants through a hasty prayer service. Upon conclusion of the final *kaddish* he stepped down, put his hand into the leather bag hanging at his right hip (the milk-man’s cash register) and took out four dimes. Ceremoniously Reb Hayim handed two ten-cent pieces to each of the men he had brought.

“But this is more than we expected,” protested the recipients. “we had agreed on fifteen cents each.”

It’s alright, it’s alright. It was well worth it to me,” said Hayim. “My mother deserved it.” After the two men had left, Reb Hayim turned to his friends and said. “I know you’re wondering, all of you, about this whole *gesheft*. Well quite simple. On my way to the Synagogue, riding my cutter, I hoped to myself that there would a *minyan* on hand in *shul*, when I arrived. A little way down the road I saw two fellows laying shingles and I thought to myself then and there — maybe these two would help make up the *minyan*. Sure enough when I arrived here I found need for two more, so I rushed back in the cutter. To tell you the truth I wasn’t sure that the shingle-men were Jews so I approached them and asked in Ukrainian, ‘*V’Yivrey?*’ (Are you Jews?). To which they answered me, ‘*Vos macht ihr sich narish, Reb Yid? Farvoss redt ihr Yevunish?*’ (Why such foolishness. Why do you talk Greek?). And I said to myself, ‘There is a God in this world.’”

“‘Would you come to fill out a minyan?’ I asked them. They hesitated. ‘Nu?’ I prodded further. ‘We would come’ they said, ‘but we’ll lose about a half hour from work because ‘till we come and ‘till we go —’”

For a moment I was disheartened but then an idea came to my head. ‘How much do you earn for an hour’s labor?’ They were taken aback and they scratched their heads. Slowly they answered, ‘We earn twenty five cents an hour, each of us.’”

“‘Good,’ I shouted up to them, ‘I’ll make a bargain with you, I’ll pay you for your time.’ Happily for me they agreed and they crawled down from the roof, got into my cutter and off we were to *Shul*. And the whole story, with coming and going and *davening* took twenty-five minutes.’”

The seven men around the stove smiled. “You’re smiling probably because you think I overpaid them. *Nu, mayla*. But if you had known my mother, may she rest in peace, if you knew her, you’d agree with me that she fully deserved it — even an overcharge!”