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staccato reports tore through the silence of the night, causing a great owl to take flight from a nearby tree and cast its ragged shadow across the silver moon. Frozen by fear, and now completely sober, the revelers waited for Yankel to reappear. The tense silence loomed as thick as white farm butter, until gently broken by the sound of sobbing. Slowly something emerged from the doorway. It was a small figure and at first it seemed that Yankel was exiting on his hands and knees. As the figure became illuminated by the moonlight one could see that it was not Yankel but a young boy, barefooted, and carrying a fishing pole.

The child wailed as he approached the knot of men who he believed had come because of his cries. "My new stiefell (jack boots)," he sobbed. "They were sucked off my feet by the mud. My father will beat me when he sees that I have lost them!"

"Who are you, boy?" inquired the schneider. "I don't think I have seen you in Chelem before. Who is your father?"

"I am Yoshke Fischbein. Surely you know my father the Rabbi?" answered the boy.

"Rebono Shel Olam," (Master of the universe) cried the balagole, as the bottle

slipped from his fingers and shattered with an expensive and regretful "platch," on the damp cobbles at his feet. "It is the young Fischbein. I recognize him. I was part of the search party who looked for him forty years ago. We dragged the teich, and his body was never found, only his empty stiefell held fast by the mud."

Velvel took the lad by the hand, walked, this time soberly, to the Rabbi's door and knocked loudly. Lights came on in the house until finally the old man opened the door. "Nu, Velvel, what is it that cannot wait until the light of day?" he complained, sleepily adjusting his square framed glasses to get a better look at the group who had the chutzpah to disturb his rest. At first the Rabbi saw only the fishing rod in the hand of Velvel and began to enlighten him on the gentile habit of drunkenness. Then he noticed the small white arm that disappeared into the coachman's other hand. Letting his gaze follow the arm, the Rabbi found himself gazing into the tearful face of his long lost son. Why the boy was still wearing the suit in which he had disappeared, and his bare feet were missing the well cared for, and lovingly polished stiefell, which stood in their place of honor in the Rabbi's study.

Bending, the old man

lifted the boy in his arms and carried him into the house; then into the bedroom, which had been carefully kept as a shrine to his lost son. There were tears in the Rabbi's eyes as he thanked the would-be revelers, sending them back to their homes with his blessing.

The next day all work stopped in Chelem. Rabbi Fischbein invited the whole congregation to give thanks to the master of the universe for returning his son safe and sound. Yoshke could shed absolutely no light on his disappearance. He had lost his stiefell in the mud, and become afraid to go home without them. He had wandered into the back of the Shamus's house, where there had been only a black cat to keep him company. Yoshke had fallen asleep until awakened suddenly by loud noises like gunshots. On venturing outside to see what was happening, he had seen the group of men who he felt must have been looking for him.

Yankel had completely disappeared; Schmattes found his Nagana on the ledge beside the cat and turned it over to the Rabbi. Life in Chelem went on undisturbed for many years. The old Rabbi Fischbein died, and his son, Yoshke, became the new Rabbi.

In 1914, the German army marched into Chelem,

causing the Tsarist officials to flee. The Chelemers and the German soldiers spoke almost the same language, and the Jews were happy to have the yoke of Russian oppressors lifted from their necks by the surprisingly considerate invaders.

As the war ended the Germans were driven out and the Red army replaced them. Life for the Jews again became

hard and many immigrated to Amerika, where they started a successful community of chicken farmers in a place called Petaluma, in California. The cat still lived in the back entrance and as by custom, was fed by a new generation of villagers.

Part 2 of this story will be published in the August/September double issue of The Post

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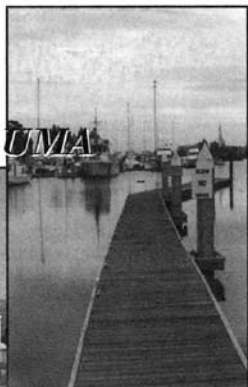


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