

Of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

(Three stories of future Jewish History
-- In memory of Shmerke Kaczerginski, Partisan-poet of Vilna)
By Leybl Botwinik @* 1997

"...My name was once known to you, Ask not now who I am. Ask not. I no longer have a name, I have only a number, My number is three-eight-five-six...." - from Sh. Kaczserginski's "Milyon"	"...באַקאַנט אייך געוועזן אַ מאָל איז מײַן נאָמען ניט פּרעגט איצט ווער בין איך, ניט פּרעגט. איך האָב ניט קײן נאָמען, איך האָב נאָר אַ נומער: מײַן נומער איז דרײַ-אַכט-פּינף-זעקס (3856). - פּון ש. קאַטשערגינסקי'ס "מיליאָן"
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Story 2 - Million

[Author's note: The conversation takes place entirely in Yiddish]

"Khayim-Shmuel! Oh why, why..." spit out Leah bitterly, as she pushed herself out from his embrace. "Why must you be so different? So distant? So cold? ..."

Khayim-Shmuel Schmid sat quietly on the wide, white, soft sofa, immersed in his thoughts. He felt himself afloat, as if on a cloud. The room was in semi-darkness, lit by a sole corner lamp. Strains of tranquil classical music floated in the air. "Leah is so beautiful, standing there in the semi-darkness," thought Khayim, "as if the light emanated from within her. Enveloping her. Caressing her..."

"What? What did I do?" He spluttered suddenly, as if he had just woken up from a dream.

"It's not what you did. It's what you didn't do! I'm your wife, your mate. I wish to be as one with you... But when you hold me ... sometimes, -- like just now,-- I feel as if you were somewhere else, somewhere far...", and quietly, with a sad undertone, as if lost and seeking, "You still love me, don't you? Or is there someone else...?"

Khayim sprang up, as if bitten. "What are you talking about? Leah, darling! You're my one and only. There can never be anyone else. You know that. But..." and here he paused and looked deeply into Leah's eyes, "I can't give you **all** my love, -- my full devotion, because..."

"Aha!" interrupted Leah, "I knew it! You haven't been telling me the whole truth. You're hiding something... I've noticed you going out, alone, in the evenings,

returning late, tired. -- Now tell me, where do you go, what do you do? Who are you spending your time with?!!"

"Stop it. Stop screaming, Leah. I beg you. Calm down and I'll tell you everything. You know who we are, -- what we are, ... where we are. Come on over here, sit down. Good. Now roll up your left sleeve, and I will too."

"I don't want to."

"You must! Here, don't you see why we exist?"

On his left arm was tattooed a number, consisting of four digits: 3, 8, 5, 6. His tightly clenched fist trembled. In his voice was a controlled anger. With grit teeth, and a voice crying out from the deepest void, from the worst Hell, he recited:

"Remember! Remember Ponar and Majdanek. Remember what the Nazi-Germans did to us. Remember the Amalekites. Remember who you yourself are: Where we come from; Our folk-treasures and our poverty; Our sufferings and our joys; Our high points as well as those fallen moments of our people; -- and on that basis, rebuild that which has been destroyed..."

"Oh, you're just living in a dream-world, Khayim. You sound like a recorded message. Look around you. You're not there, in the 'Old Home'. This is a different time, a different place. Who needs those old memories of a world which no longer exists, -- which will never again be. Let's begin anew, make a fresh start, erase..."

"No! Never erase! We dare not. We have a debt, a destiny to carry out. Not just to remember, but to rebuild..."

"To rebuild? -- Ha! And how are you going to go about that? You know, that I can't even... That we ... can't have children. And to build? For whom? You don't even belong to them, — to the Martyrs. You're not one of the survivors. Why you're not even..."

"I am a Jew! And until the end of my years. True, we weren't there. True, we're not from that terrible era, not from that place. But we carry in us their spirit. We **are** a part of the Millions."

"Spirit? Millions? You don't know what you're talking about. You think, that because you have some second-hand information in your brain, about that era, -- seen films, read and studied the history of that Swastika-Crusade, the Nazi War

against the Jews, -- and because you have those numbers burnt into your arm like the real sufferers..."

"Enough, Leah. You just don't understand..."

"Don't interrupt me, Khayim! Do you actually believe that those four digits are a key to the souls of the six million martyrs? -- Not even to one. You've only talked yourself into believing that you're somehow connected to them. You're nothing but a complete fool, -- a robot..."

It was suddenly quiet in the room. Leah's heated words were abruptly stilled, as if drenched in ice cold water. Her hand shot to her open mouth, as if to catch those last escaping words. But it was too late. With frightened eyes she looked to Khayim, then ran over to him and fell into his arms, sobbing:

"Oh, please forgive me Khayim. That's not what I meant to say..."

"It's all right, it's all right... You're absolutely correct. I wanted to do too much, all at once. But remember, wherever we may be, whenever that may be, so long as a spark of memory exists, we must remember the martyrs, and immortalize their souls. How was it said by the partisan-poet Shmerke Kaczerginski in his song, 'Milyon':

'צעשאַכטן מיין פּאָלק איז,
דעריבער מוז יעדערער
זיין איצטער ווי אַ מיליאָן'
[Butchered are my people,
therefore each must
now be like a million]

"But Khayim, how can we, -- what right have we to carry out that final wish?"

"Come with me, Leah. I'll show you. You say, that I am not ready yet; that I'm like a cold robot, and therefore without the real Jewish, humane spirit necessary to carry out this holy mission, -- to be as one with the millions, to become, myself, a million. And if it is not for me to fulfill, then it will be carried on by our children and children's children..."

"But Khayim, what are you talking about? You know, that we can't have any children..."

"Shush. Come with me and you will see what I've been so busy with. I tried, on my own, to create a child, an heir, -- in the laboratory. I wasn't successful. But maybe, together with your help, we'll succeed."

Khayim went to the apartment's exit with Leah. Having opened the door, a thick, swirling red cloud surrounded them. The heat outside was several hundred degrees. The poisonous atmosphere contained gases similar to the Zyklon-B which was used to gas to death hundreds of thousands of Jews in the death camps. A 300 kilometer-an-hour wind blew outside.

Ignorant of wind, heat and poison air, the two robots, -- Leah and Khayim -- held each other lovingly, as they made their way to the laboratory building not far from their house. Everywhere around was empty as a desert.

Just off the side of the building, was a sort of grave-marker. It was made up of remnants of a spaceship which had long ago crash-landed on this death-planet. The sole passenger had only one identifying feature: on his left arm were tattooed the digits: three-eight-five-six.

With his last breath, after crash-landing, he input the four digits into his on-board computer. This was a code, a sign, for the apparatus. The pre-programmed system absorbed into itself the man's spirit and soul, and transferred them into the two robots which accompanied him to this new world.

* Story 2 which appears above is a translation from Yiddish (by the author) of the original short story "Milyon", second in the trilogy "Fun Nekhtn, Haynt un Morgn", originally published in the Yiddish students' magazine "Yugntruf" (Aug-Dec 1985 issue, New York).

This translation was especially made by the author, Leybl Botwinik, for the CyberCozen bulletin of the Rehovot (Israel) SF Club, and appeared in the May 1997 issue.