

Of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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

"...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. Kaczerginski's "Milyon"	"...באקאנט אייך געוועזן אַ מאָל איז מיין נאָמען ניט פרעגט איצט ווער בין איך, ניט פרעגט. איך האָב ניט קיין נאָמען, איך האָב נאָר אַ נומער: מיין נומער איז דריי-אַכט-פינף-זעקס (3856). - פון ש. קאַטשערגינסקיס "מיליאָן"
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Story 1 - Remembrance

It was a warm Spring day. The sun was shining, and the cool Spring breeze brought with it a freshness which drove away the winter-webs, which had kept people cooped up, indoors, during the cold months of snow. Children tore out of their houses like arrows shot from a bow.

Old Joseph went out to the balcony, looked around, and breathed the fresh air in deeply. It was great outside -- lively and joyful. Seeing his grandchildren playing on the grass, he went down and sprinted over to them with a fleetness that someone younger than him could not have matched. He caught up his youngest grandchild in his arms, and...

"Gran'pa! Gran'pa! Look at the transparent coloured ball that Poppa bought for us!"

"Yes, I see, Saul. The ball is really nice. Look at that little robot running round and round in the inside".

"You know, Gran'pa, that's what makes the ball fly zig-zaggish, and it's so hard to chase -- but I can catch it anyways", little Sarah said with pride.

It was getting warmer outside. The grandfather, Joseph, sat down on the porch steps, and started rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"What's that, Gran'pa?" said Saul, pointing at the old man's left arm.

"Yes, Gran'pa, tell us. What do those four numbers mean?"

* * *

"Remember, little Joseph. Remember what was done to us... And now, you must go".

Joseph's father Daniel gave him a kiss in the forehead, and added quietly, "May the One Above protect you".

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A quiet sadness embraced them both. Joseph looked forlornly up at his father. His father's eyes were shut tight, as if he tried to keep the tears from showing. Who knows whether they will ever again see each other? Joseph did not want to leave, but he knew that he must. Thin and short of stature, he was able to slide out under the barbed-wire which surrounded the camp. His father dared not accompany him, because he would be missed, but who would care, if a small boy, not yet eight years of age, disappeared? Accompanying him was only his father's spirit, and the words: "Remember! Remember!!"

He ran deep into the night. During the day he slept, at night --- on he ran. The days and the nights seemed to pour one into the other. He would beg for food from a stranger; sometimes he would steal. Little Joseph forgot everything, but that he must live, and that he had the numbers burnt into the skin of his forearm. This was his sole comfort in the cool spring nights.

It was truly war time. Everywhere were ruins and refugees. It was a different sort of war, though. Here, the enemy came in with strength and was immediately off, elsewhere. The Front moved forward. The armour and artillery, the soldiers and their weaponry, --- all was elsewhere. The trembling of the earth from bombs and artillery stopped, and the tumult of airplanes stilled, but the fear of killings dominated.

The government first surrendered and then caved in under pressure from the anti-Semites. Harsh decrees were enforced against the Jews. Jews may not do this, Jews may not do that. Youth were sent to prisons, concentration and work camps. The intelligentsia, teachers, writers, doctors and engineers were shot. Pogroms broke out, and innocent, helpless women, children and old people were murdered. Jewish books and holy texts were burnt. And this was only the beginning.

Little Joseph witnessed all this through the eyes of a child, but he well understood the meaning of hunger and suffering... and death. He knew that they wanted to wipe out every memory of the Jewish people. And he thought of the numbers etched into his mind, burnt into the soft skin of his child's arm: 3856 --- Remember!

Eventually, he was captured. The soldiers treated him brutally: shoving, beating, torturing and starving him.

The new rulers used the newest technologies to carry out their dark deeds. All sorts of experiments were carried out on the prisoners. The lucky did not survive. The newest invention for "solving the Jewish problem" was "Forget-gas".

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Those who did not immediately perish, or go mad after breathing in the gas became like zombies, and had no will of their own. Their minds were totally wiped clean. The memory and the identity --- totally erased.

"You little bastard! You will forget your corrupt Jewish nation. Be proud to be among the first to have the honour to try out our new experimental Forget-gas. If this doesn't kill you [ha, ha, ha...] then we'll remake you, and you will become one of us, of those who are worthy of ruling the world..."

When the war finally ended, many difficult years later, and the might of the dark enemies was shattered, there were millions of Jewish refugees, starved, weakened, and sick, without a clear awareness, without a memory of who they were and where they came from. It would have seemed that the enemy of the Jews had won. There was not one Jew in the world that had not undergone the Forget-gas process. But not everyone had forgotten. Not everyone's memory had been wiped clean.

Little Joseph did not forget. The numbers burnt into his arm did not let him forget. The numbers cried out to him: "Remember Joseph, my son. Remember Ponar, remember Auschwitz, remember the Hamans and the Khmelnitzkis. Remember the Hitlers and Stalins and Arafats. Remember the executioners of Jews. Remember who you are and what your Nation is. These numbers which are burnt onto your skin are the same which were burnt onto my arm, when I was a small child. And such also had been done to my grandfather, and to his grandfather before him, throughout the generations. And if ever one world is consumed: Remember! --- and you will be able to build a new one. Let this reminder of a previous age be passed on from generation to generation..."

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"Gran'pa, are you the only one with those numbers --- the only one who remembers?"

"No, Sarah. Throughout the generations, over all the planets where Jews live, the offspring of the first sufferer with the burnt in numbers 3856 spread. We did not forget, and we began teaching the others about their origin."

"Are you many with the number?"

"We are few, very few. But each is like a million... like a million."

* Story 1 which appears above is a translation from Yiddish (by the author) of the original short story 'Yizkor', first in the trilogy "Fun Nekhtn, Haynt un Morgn", originally published in the Yiddish students' magazine "Yugntruf" (Aug-Dec 1985 issue, New York).

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