

DOCTOR WATCHMAKER

Avremke the Watchmaker was the first man in the village of Michalishek to be honored with the title, “Doctor,” unless we consider as competition the title which was given to the dragonfly: Doctor of Snakes. No one knew why the green, brown or blue dragonfly was named Doctor of Snakes, it was just as puzzling why some folks named it: Devil’s darning needle.

Avremke was named Doctor Watchmaker because he treated like patients the watches and clocks which were brought to him for repair.

If a clock struck seven at midnight he would say: “The clock suffers from a brain-disorder, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” Though it was an instant operation, he just moved the hour hand to the midnight hour and the clock was out of danger.

If a watch limped, crawling with an irregular tick, he would say: “The watch was probably wounded in a fall, it requires a thorough examination to determine how serious its illness is and what is to be done to cure it.”

And he would add a philosophical knot: “The watch drags the nights and the days, retarding time, if all the watches were as slow and clumsy they would delay the coming of Messiah . . .”

If a watch was in a rush, running a mile of time in a minute, he would say: “It looks like it is in a race with falling stars, lost in the great beyond.” Finally he gave a down-to-earth judgment about the impatient watch, accusing the crooked hairspring of confusing the motion of the balance wheel. He straightened every twist of the hairspring, rounded in perfect circles, equally distant from one another. Then the watch was benzined, brushed, oiled, starting life anew, spick and span, traveling through time in measured pace to a faraway future – all smiles.

He gave the wheels names out of his rich imagination. He named the center wheel the **big attic wheel**, the third wheel the **small attic wheel** because these wheels resembled tiny attics. If one of the attic wheels broke a tooth, he felt its unbearable toothache. He cut the rotted tooth out with a tiny saw, made bright yellow brass by melting copper and zinc together, soldered a tiny piece into the wheel, filed it as tenderly as a painless dentist, until it seemed a new tooth grew into the wheel as if by Mother Nature. After such an operation, a new title was added in his honor: Dentist of Watches.

He diagnosed a watch with an injured balance wheel as a heart attack and spoke in the manner of a Christian Barnard:

“I will try to cure the damaged heart of the watch, if it will not be possible I will have to fit into it a heart from a dead watch though it may reject a strange heart so I can't guarantee the life of the watch.”

Whenever he made a dead watch live, he felt like the Cabalist who gave life to the Golem of Prague. It seemed to him he delved into the mysteries of Life after death. He listened long to the heartbeat of everyone of the watches. Every watch seemed to have its own language which he thought only he understood. He heard every watch asking God: **Did time exist before heaven and earth were born? Will time live on beyond the end of all life and death?**

Every sick watch or clock, his patients, received the healing treatment of an idealistic doctor who did everything possible that every watch or clock should live a long healthy life, without losing or gaining the smallest intervals of time.

He saw the wheels starting to move like the dead bones of the visions of the prophet Ezekiel.

He weeded out all the watch and clock diseases with tools skilled as his fingers which seemed to command the tweezers, cutting pliers, round and flat nosed pliers to give life to the dead watches. Every tool was struck with wonder at the touch of his hands over his work bench, which he called a laboratory where he performed experiments, test theories.

He invented his own loupe, a magnifying glass through which the tiniest wheel of the smallest watch was magnified so large it seemed the wheel of a wagon. When he looked through the insides of a watch with his homemade loupe, he was inspired as Galileo looking into the skies with his telescope.

One of his devices could weigh the tiniest particle of a watch, a sort of a scale which was so sensitive in conveying sense-impressions it could distinguish the difference in weight of a piece of paper after a word was written on it.

Avremke the wizard of watches gave the tin watch cases the color of the bluebird, blue sapphire or blue sky. This is how it was done:

The watch case was rubbed thoroughly with sandpaper, polished smoothly with something called diamond-dust, bathed in oil, held with grasping jaws of small pincers over a burning wick, until the oil was well fed with smoke. The watch doctor waited for the case to cool off, then wiped the smoke away with a soothing chamois. He returned the works of the watch into its case, it seemed the watch had the color of a summer dream.

If anyone preferred the watch case to be dark as a starless night, he applied the same process again (except for the use of sandpaper) and the

watch turned black as Poe's Raven.

Avremke the Watch Doctor taught many of the farmers, shepherds, woodsmen who did not have watches or clocks how to tell time by the shadows of trees. When the shadows were short they knew it was about noon, when the shadows were long it was the end of day.

On cloudy days he taught them to tell time by two pots, one half filled with water was so knee-bowed that drops of water fell into the empty pot which was marked with black number circles; every hour reached another circle. It was easy to tell time until nightfall.

At night a tall lit candle served as a watch by similar marked circles. As the candle dwindled to a new mark, it was a later hour. The end of the candle meant the end of the night, dawn was nearby.

He loved to entertain one of the wandering beggars who passed through the village of Michalishek well-supplied with the news of thousands of villages, dreamful little towns and roaring cities. The wandering beggar named himself Star Sage, explaining to him that we are all tiny as fly specks as we face the many worlds of the universe, that the village of Michalishek like the whole earth is spinning in constant circles around the sun, that the earth keeps time like a perfect watch which just left his masterful hands.

Doctor Watchmaker argued that even if what the Star Sage says is true the earth of the village of Michalishek is motionless, unchanging as its life.

The folks named the self-proclaimed Star Sage "Star-Struck" or "Star-Skunk" because his concepts were not in the Bible or the Talmud, also because he was a close pal of the deranged village beggar Itchke (nicknamed Itch-Mite) who dared to say that God creates only fools who come like trapped guests on earth, damned to turn into dust that God is a Fool-Killer.

Even though Avremke the Watch Doctor believed that the star-sage is a sinner on his way to Gehenna he listened to him with searching ears. He even accepted from him one of his mysterious drugs in exchange for an old clock with chimes to strike the hour, a drug made of saffron, garlic, the yolk of an egg and blue-purple bell flowers of the deadly nightshade, a remedy which was supposed to cure all diseases.

Avremke the Watch Doctor began to see watches like stars. He imagined that stars get sick like watches. God can heal stars like the Watch Doctor can heal ailing watches. Only God can take apart a star and put it together like a watch, ticked and toyed. God is the watchmaker of stars.

Doctor Watchmaker heard the watches say: **We are on our way to unknown, endless destinations.** Nonetheless he reckoned there must be

FOREVER AND EVER AND A WEDNESDAY

an end to everything on earth. Even watches stop because they get tired of the repetitions of the four seasons of the year. The wandering beggar told him about a land where there is only one season, only summer. Such a land seemed to him to be a pitiless bore. He thought even time will one day reach the end, only the dream is endless.

He dreamed of inventing a watch which will make time go backwards as well as forward. When summer will reach autumn it will return to April, old people will return to childhood, again and again, will bypass death like the morning star after a long night, dawn in, dawn out.

However, on second thought he feared people could not bear such tedious repetitions, would pray for death to free themselves of eternal humdrum.

Velfke the Mystic advised him to destroy all watches, ripping time to shreds so that he would be able with the **Shem Hamfoyresh** – the unutterable name of God, return life to the beginning of all beginnings.

MENKE KATZ

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AND A WEDNESDAY**

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**To my wife Rivke
who has always been
a genuine inspiration**

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A WORD OR TWO

The village of Michalishek where my unknown forefathers, the fortunate poor of Lithuania, lived, laughed, cried hundreds of years was a tiny dreamful island, embraced by the Viliya River, its bosom friend forever and ever and a Wednesday.

To get out of the village, we had to shout ourselves hoarse to reach the ears of the barefoot captain, across the river, until we could finally hear the old barge sighing, propelled by tide-worn dragropes.

The fare for carrying the folks across the river was half a penny per family. None of the captains could afford to lower the price, but neither had they raised it since the birth of the barge, ages ago, when its logs were still fresh with the scent of cut-down birch trees from the nearby forest.

The forest across the river seemed to have no end, dense with bush and jungle where bears with long shaggy hair, with clawing toenails, large powerful beasts with the proud blood of their family Ursidae moved slowly, awkwardly, when they ate fruits, nuts, berries, acorns, bird's eggs, or honey of ripped bee hives but they could run at awful speed at a stray woman, man or child. It was said that left of the women were only twisted strands of their braids and the shock of a bear hug; left of the men were fistfuls of beards which fluttered in the wind like broken wings. It was said, children were quickly devoured leaving only the terror of their lost footsteps.

Hungry robbers lived in the underworld of the forest and died in the hollow trunks of ancient trees.

There was a forbidden path in the depths of the forest which no one dared to enter. The folks of the village named it Blood Alley. Bentke, the old fibber of the village, said he remembered when the trees were princes. He had seen the sorceress, Malke Lokshendrei, transform the princes into trees. It was rumored that if anyone dared to raise the head of an ax against a tree so much blood would flow from the crown to the roots, it would drown the tree chopper.

The wise storytellers saw the summers like blooming fools, the true blossoms unfolding during the below zero winters. For only then did the princes sneak out of the forest, armed with frostbows, and sail to their castles, in boats built by frostwork on the icebound windowpanes of the village.

Michalishek was the Isle of Potatoes. The tall singing folks lived mostly on potatoes. The crooked alleys always echoed with songs about

love-starved maidens, about dews which are the tears of fallen angels, and many potato songs which poked fun at themselves, such as: “Sunday potatoes, Monday potatoes, Tuesday potatoes, Wednesday, Thursday potatoes; Friday, in honor of the Sabbath, for a change, again potatoes.”

The potatoes of the village were not as prosperous as the Idaho potatoes, the green mountain potatoes or the King Edward VII potato apples. Many of our potatoes were lying ill (as if in pain) in beds of stingy earth, attacked by early or late blight. O the earth of Lithuania is a wretched miser.

The most welcome guests were the wandering beggars (their aged clothes gave the village the appearance of an outlandish rag fair) with beggar bags on their shoulders filled with crusts of bread, with skeletons of herring, with faded onions (some were gnawed by larvae of the onion fly) and many other such dismal delicacies.

At the midnight blues, when sleepwalkers were led by the moon over the roofs made of straw, rushes, reeds, the clusters of huts resembled a bit Sleepy Hollow, the village which still stands safely in the dreams of Washington Irving.

The poor folks of Michalishek were among the richest on earth, for their hearts were always filled with thankful prayers, contented with their potato goodies which were handed to them by the good will of their destiny. Their riches were their legends which they loved so much that they thought they were gifts of God, given to them like invisible wings with which they could fly back to Adam or to the end of all life on earth.

Aunt Beilke was crowned as the champion storyteller of true stories as well as of enchanted brides who can live only in legends, where their beauty had been tested through the ages by all the neighboring towns and villages.

During the long winter nights she heard winds – soloists, lonely winds; winds – invisible singers and dancers in concert with the songs of the folk which they named dainos. She heard winds – forlorn nomads in snowbergs and winds which tell of the days when the land of Lithuania (as large as South Carolina with half as many people) was a proud empire.