

**Memoir by Fayvl Yavitsh Alvin (Philip Alvin) submitted for the Mikháleshik  
Yizkor Book**

**Translated by Lena Watson from the original Yiddish text**

We shall call this episode

## Yánkele's Tragic End

### I

Three full years passed after that bloody Simchas Torah. After Yánkele did that bloody and tragic deed, he was away from the shtetl for a long time, but then reappeared, aged 18. Even though three years had passed, the entire shtetl looked at him as if he were a murderer. No one spoke to him, but he was soon back to his escapades. The people in the shtetl started to speculate where he had disappeared for such a long time. Had he been caught back then, he would've been torn to pieces. And yet, despite the fact that it had been a long time and that the people in the shtetl had calmed down a bit, they still harbored hatred towards him. As well as towards his parents, who failed to control a son like him: he was a danger to the whole shtetl because with all his escapades, he could cause somebody's death, God forbid...

But let's tell the story in its proper order. In our shtetl, there was a blacksmith by the name of Reb Chaim, with his wife, Basia, and their five sons and two daughters. His eldest son, Abe, had emigrated to America before I was born, which means I never met him. His second son, Avreml, was 20, and his middle son, Zisl, 19. These two sons worked in the smithy with their father. The fourth son was Yánkele. He had a defect, a stutter. He also had a minor infirmity: about a quarter of his left thumb had been cut off. He didn't want to go to kheyder or study general subjects with a private tutor. Nor did he want to learn a trade and didn't even want to learn from his father in the smithy. Despite this, he was a healthy and physically strong youth.

All he wanted was to get into trouble, squabble, fight, threaten kheyder boys with beatings, swindle money out of them, buy and sell pigeons, and other similar things. He didn't want for anything – on the contrary, his mother was fonder of him than her other children because the poor boy had been punished with a defect. The fifth, youngest son, Benyómin, who was almost 15 at the time, was quiet and good-natured and did well both in kheyder and in general subjects with private tutors; in one word, he was a gentle and nice boy. When he was older, he started to learn the barber trade. He mastered it quickly and opened his own place. Both Jews and Christians used to come to him, and he earned good money. Later, he got married and had children, and everyone in the shtetl loved him.

Reb Chaim the Blacksmith [Khayem der Shmid], despite being in his sixties, was healthy and strong. He used to stand in the smithy with his two sons from morning till night, and the strikes of the hammers on the anvil would resound in the shtetl all day long. He used to shoe horses, make hoops for wheels, scythes, sickles, axes, knives and cleavers – in short, all the things that Jews or Christians needed. Reb Chaim the Blacksmith was the wealthiest blacksmith in the shtetl. He had his own beautiful house. Later, he bought another house, a smaller one, so it can be said that he was a wealthy man. His wife was a pleasant and quiet woman, who used to give alms to the poor, and everyone loved her. None of this prevented Reb Chaim from being an observant Jew. Every day, he would go to the Beth Midrash to pray with the first minyan and then sit and study at the table where the others sat and studied. And he was very good at studying. He was regarded as one of the most distinguished householders of the shtetl.

As everyone knows, or as it's commonly believed, blacksmiths are the healthiest of people. Whether it's true or not, I don't know, but it would be a great injustice to withhold what I do know about Reb Chaim's sons Avreml and Zisl and not to tell at least a little bit about their strength. Telling everything there is to tell about their strength would take up a lot of space, so I'll record only selected episodes here.

Most of Reb Chaim's work in the smithy was shoeing horses because an unshod horse wouldn't be able to take a single step. Just as there are temperamental people in the world, there are temperamental horses, too. They just wouldn't let themselves be shod. It would be dangerous to lift a leg of such a horse – it could give a kick and kill both blacksmith and person holding its leg. So what do you do? The horse had to be shod because the peasant wouldn't be able to work with it if it wasn't shod. Now, listen and be amazed. The horse would be tied up to a beam and

left to stand for ten or fifteen minutes so that it would calm down. Then, like a flash, Avreml would leap up to the horse, grab it by both hind legs and give them a shake, and the horse would drop down to the ground like a stack of hay. Zisl would then come running and sit on the horse's neck, not letting it lift its head. Then, Reb Chaim took a long piece of rope, tied its four legs so that it wouldn't be able to stand up, and shod all four legs. No other blacksmith in the shtetl was able to do this. And this wasn't all. Zisl could take two back wheels of a cart (I say back wheels because they were bigger than front wheels), a wheel in each hand, raise them above his head and hold them like this for five to six minutes, then lowering them down to the ground again. How many young strong peasants attempted to copy it, and no one succeeded! Avreml could demonstrate other thicks. He'd take a long iron bar about a quarter centimeter thick and wrap it around his arm as observant Jews laid tefillin. Or he'd break rings of a chain as if the rings were made of baked dough instead of iron. It would take up a lot of space to write about everything they could do with their strength, but I must relate, and in fact perpetuate, one episode that occurred and became the talk of the shtetl for a long time.

In Mikháleshik, there was a poor man by the name of Shimen Shepsl, whose entire possessions consisted of a horse and a cart, yet if truth be told, the horse was more dead than alive. The poor man was all skin and bones and he made a living by chopping wood in the forest and selling it in the shtetl.

On Succoth, he'd chop fir branches to cover the sukkah roofs with and bring them to the shtetl to sell. No one would haggle with him because everyone knew he was a poor man. Every Friday, he would bring his cart filled with yellow sand, which housewives spread on the floor in honor of Shabbos so that the house would look brighter. All the women would buy a box of sand from him, whether they needed it or not. Every woman saw it as a mitzvah because he was poor.

Behind the shtetl, there was a sandpit the depth of a human height, filled with golden sand. Shimen Shepsl would place his horse and cart right by the pit, climb down the pit with a ladder, and shovel the sand out next to his cart. Then he'd climb out of the pit, fill up his cart and drive to the shtetl to sell it.

One Friday, when he placed his horse and cart by the pit, a peasant with a large dog came by, and the dog savagely attacked Shimen-Shepsl's horse. The frightened horse overturned the cart and fell into the pit still harnessed to the cart... Shimen-Shepsl, in tears, ran into the shtetl for help. You can say that the entire shtetl, young and old, came running. As it always is in such

situations, everyone wanted to be clever and give advice, but nobody actually did anything. Someone said that it was necessary to bring long ropes, tie them to the horse and the cart, and everyone had to pull. Eventually, the horse and the cart would be pulled out. Someone else said that it wouldn't work and that he had a better plan: everyone had to bring spades, and make a ramp a short distance from the pit to its bottom; then the horse would pull the cart out. In this way, everyone gave advice and made plans, but no one took any action.

The sandpit was behind the shtetl, where Vilna Street started, in fact, not far from Reb Chaim's smithy. When Reb Chaim struck the iron with the hammer in his smithy, he didn't know what was going on, but when he went outside for a minute, he saw people running from all over the shtetl. He went back inside and said to Avreml and Zisl, 'Something's happened by the pit where Shimen Shepsl gets sand. Run there quickly, perhaps they need a hand.'

So, they both ran to the sandpit and saw what was going on there. Avreml shouted to Zisl, 'Jump into the pit!' and both jumped inside. Avreml unharnessed the horse, took it by its head and instructed Zisl to take it by the tail. On count three, they both lifted the horse, and it stood on its legs. Then, Avreml told Zisl to get under the horse's belly, and he, too, got under its belly. On count three, they both heaved the horse and threw it out of the pit. Then, Avreml removed the back wheels of the cart, and Zisl, the front wheels, and flung them out of the pit. Then, the two of them tossed the cart out, climbed out of the pit, harnessed the horse and went back to the smithy.

The whole thing took them no longer than half an hour.

The people in the shtetl couldn't stop talking about it and marveling at the strength of the two sons of Reb Chaim the Blacksmith. Later, Reb Chaim the Blacksmith got word that the people in the shtetl were collecting money to buy presents for his two sons. He said it had to stop: his sons wouldn't accept them because the mitzvah they had done on that Friday could not be bought even for millions. They had saved a fellow Jew from ruination, and an animal, too, because had they come ten minutes later, the horse would've suffocated in its collar. The shtetl kept talking about this incident and marveled at their strength, and a quiet blessing and a prayer were on everyone's lips for God to grant them strength for as long as they lived.

When Avreml was in good spirits, he would call a boy and give him a piece of thin tin to bend, laughing. Avreml would take a horseshoe, bend it with his bare hands and make a wreck out of it. His arm muscles were so firm that he would ask children to hit his muscles with a

hammer, while he laughed. Groups of boys were always hanging outside their smithy. They loved watching them bring those heavy hammers down.

Yánkele, too, was a strong boy, but he used his strength for escapades and to fight with everyone. He used to wear boots with tall bootlegs, and tucked into the bootleg of his right boot was a long pointed knife, sharp at both ends. He had made it himself in his father's smithy and used it on more than one occasion. He was also very fond of pigeons.

He used to buy and sell pigeons and had a special place for them in his house. His parents didn't stop him from doing it.

Despite being 17, he still hung out with kheyder boys. He demanded that every boy pay him a kopeck a week, and any boy who did would be under his protection, which meant that if another boy beat him, Yánkele would get even with him. Many boys did pay him. It goes without saying that their parents didn't know about it. Those were kopecks that the mothers gave to their boys to buy a beigel for breakfast, so one day a week a boy would skip breakfast and give his kopeck to Yánkele. If two boys had an argument, they'd come to Yánkele for a judgement. The guilty one would get two slaps on the face, and they would go back to being good friends again. In this way, Yánkele held all the boys in the shtetl in fear of himself. They were afraid of telling their parents because Yánkele could take revenge. It was for this reason that everyone in the shtetl hated Yánkele, above all Uri the Cobbler. He never stopped cursing him. And as it turned out, the Master of the Universe heeded Uri the Cobbler, and his curses came true..

In Mikháleshik lived a feldsher by the name of Hirshe-Khone. He wasn't a trained feldsher, but his grandfather had been a feldsher, and his father had been a feldsher, so he also became a feldsher. He was loved not only in the whole of Mikháleshik, but also in the entire area around Mikháleshik. Peasants called him 'doctor.' He was a good and friendly person and didn't take payment from the poor. He had a wife, two sons, and a daughter. The older son was called Itsik, the younger one, Abe, and the daughter, Beti. Itsik was a young man of 18, Abe was 13, and Beti was 10, all very nice children. Itsik and Abe went to a state high school and wore uniforms with caps. Their coats had silvery buttons and colored trouser stripes. Itsik was a tall and athletic young man, who looked like a handsome officer in his uniform.

Itsik had been Yánkele's enemy ever since the story with Uri the Cobbler took place. He couldn't stand him, and Yánkele knew it, so he, in fact, avoided having words with Itsik. Yánkele also knew full well that Itsik, too, could throw a punch that could break every bone in his body,

so he was cautious. Itsik was a quiet, cultured boy, and he always avoided confrontation with Yánkele even though he wasn't afraid of him. Itsik always said: that animal had to be suffocated, otherwise he'd bring further misfortunes upon the Mikháleshik residents. Yánkele was always setting the boys who were his hangers-on against Itsik. Itsik knew about it, but didn't show it.

It's difficult for me to recall in which year it happened, but I know it happened a couple of years before the outbreak of WWI. What I do remember is that it happened in winter, it was Hannukah because Hannukah candles shone from every Jewish house, and it was on a Friday night.

In Mikháleshik, there was an inn, a very long building. It stretched partly along Vilna Street as far as the market of the seven stores. It had two large gates: one gate from Vilna Street, and the other gate from the market side. Both Jewish and Christian coachmen used to stay overnight, eat and get a drink there, and they had no problem with turning their coaches. They'd drive into one gate and leave through the other gate. The owner of the inn was called Red Dovid the Innkeeper.

Reb Dovid had a brother in Vilna. Before Hannukah, one of the daughters of Reb Dovid's brother had come to stay for a few weeks. She was almost 18, very pretty and fashionably and elegantly dressed. When the Mikháleshik young men saw her, they got completely besotted. Everyone wanted to win her friendship. Yánkele, too, started to dress better and wanted to get the girl to like him because his two defects aside, he was physically a handsome young man. Yet, he couldn't hide his stutter, and when the girl heard him speak, she dismissed him. Of all the young men dancing around her, she took a fancy to Hirshe-Khone's son Itsik and wanted to walk around with no one else but him.

It was a Friday night. There hadn't been such a beautiful winter evening for a long time. The snow had been shoveled from the road to the side of the houses. There were piles of snow outside every house, and because of the warm air, the conditions were great for making snowballs. It was a bright night. Shabbos candles and Hannukah candles flickered from every house. After the evening meal, the Jewish residents went out for a walk to enjoy such a beautiful evening. The walking route had always been from the start of Vilna Street to the inn where the market began. That stretch had a special name, 'Kumse.' I don't know what the word means and don't even know where it comes from. At the time when everyone was out for a walk, Yánkele and a bunch of boys stood making snowballs, a whole pile of them. This was the place where the

well was located, between the houses of Hirshe Khaye's (Gopshteyn) and Reb Leyb-Yehúde the Gemora melamed. Yosl-Dovid, the chimneysweep, or stovemaker, lived behind them. He was a soldier in the times of Tsar Nicolas [I], who had served 25 years in Russia.

Among the walkers were also Itsik the feldsher's son and the Vilna girl, who strolled arm in arm. When they approached the well, where Yánkele and his gang of boys stood by the pile of snowballs, Yánkele ordered the boys to pelt Itsik and the girl with snowballs. The boys obeyed, but Itsik and the girl laughed heartily at it. This made Yánkele lose patience. He ran to the snow pile, pulled out a large frozen snowball, and holding it with both hands, jumped up to Itsik and the girl, and brought it down abruptly on the girl's head. With a cry of pain and bleeding, the girl fell to the ground, and Yánkele ran back to the pile of snowballs. Itsik chased him, grabbed him and punched him in the face twice. Yánkele hit him back, and for some time they exchanged fist blows, but Yánkele realized that Itsik was stronger. He bent over and pulled out his knife from his boot, taking aim to stab Itsik in the heart. But Itsik quickly grabbed his hand, yanked the knife out and with all his might plunged it into Yánkele's left side with his right hand.

With a loud scream, Yánkele fell to the ground, the snow turning red with his blood. Itsik fled at once. The boys screamed for help; all the walkers came running to save Yánkele, but sadly, he was already dead. A policeman with a bared sword arrived and told everyone to disperse and leave Yánkele lie because he couldn't be moved until the police came from the county-seat shtetl. The county-seat shtetl was Varnyán<sup>1</sup>, 16 km from Mikháleshik. The policeman sent a telegram to Varnyán, and two hours later, several mounted policemen and a doctor arrived. Two of them rode into the woods and the nearby villages in search of Itsik, while the doctor removed the knife from Yánkele's side and said he had to be taken to Varnyán for an autopsy. They placed his body on their wagon and left. The two policemen protected Hirshe-Khone's house so that Reb Chaim's family didn't force their way into the feldsher's house. A strange thing happened there. The following morning, the policemen announced that Hirshe-Khone's house was empty. And it was true: there was no one there. To this day, it's unknown how it happened.

Five days, or a week, later, a sealed coffin was delivered to the shtetl, secured with nails and metal hoops, and bearing an inscription that said it was strictly forbidden to open the coffin on pain of lifelong imprisonment. No one was at the funeral except for Yánkele's family. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Now Vornyany, Belarus.

buried next to the fence of the cemetery according to the law, which says that murder victims must be buried by the fence. Reb Chaim the Blacksmith said kaddish for a whole year.

This tragedy was talked about for a long time. As for Itsik and Hirshe-Khone's family, nothing is known about them to this day.

Fayvl Alvin