

**Memoir by Menke Katz published posthumously in the (Oxford) *Yiddish Pen*
(no. 21, April 1996, pp. 25-31)**

Translated by Lena Watson from the original Yiddish text

Menke Katz (1906-1991)

Once Upon a Time There Was a Tale¹

(memories of Svintsyán and Mikháleshik)

Once upon a time, there was a tale. To me, it seems that the tale began a very long time ago as if it happened beyond the Dark Mountains, on the other side of the mythical River Sambatyon. I see my childhood so far away – not because I am in my eighties, but because of the different world of Lithuania’s longed-for shtetelach.

I was born in the shtetl of Svintsyán², in the Vilna Governorate, yet all my books of poems are full of mentions of the small shtetl of Mikháleshik³. My family lived in Svintsyán for no more than 14 years; in Mikháleshik, on my mother’s side, for hundreds of years. On my father’s side, also for hundreds of years, in the shtetl of Svir⁴. These shtetlach were neighbors.

I will begin with my first day in kheyder, when I was five years old. I remember the assistant, Tall Tsále, or Tsale the Beanpole, carrying me to the kheyder on his shoulders (there was another assistant in the shtetl, with three nicknames: Tsalke the Hunchback, Dwarf, Lilliput). I saw him as a giant who carried me away to an unknown land.

The rebbe Moyshe-Binyomin sat me down at the big table, in the middle, amongst a dozen little boys, and said to me, ‘Be a good boy, you’ve come here to study the Torah.’

¹ Published posthumously. This chapter of the memoirs, which the poet wrote approximately a year before his death, in April 1990, is published on his fifth yórtsayt.

² Now Švenčionys, Lithuania

³ Now Mikhalishki, Belarus

⁴ Now Svir, Belarus

My first days began next to an angel. Tall Tsale stood behind me and said, ‘An angel will soon start throwing candies.’ When a candy landed next to me, I really believed that it was from the hands of an angel. Each child got a candy; my friend, Yoske Tsirls, got two because he was an orphan (he could say like Sholem-Aleichem’s Motl Peysi the Cantor’s son, ‘I have it good – I’m an orphan.’) Yoske let me give a lick and bite off a tiny piece off his second candy.

Yoske Tsirls was orphaned (just like Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield) six months before he was born. He was my closest and best-loved friend. In the morning, we arrived in kheyder together, and in the evening, walked home sharing a lantern. Our houses were as close to each other as our friendship.

On Shabbos, we would come into kheyder to listen to the Midrash tales that the rebbe would tell us. On Shabbos, he did not carry a rod, and his mood was festive. We all listened with great pleasure to the beautiful stories the rebbe told us with a kind smile on his face, always explaining the moral of each story.

The rebbe’s assistant, Tall Tsále, also used to tell us stories. He would act out each story for us. For example, when he told us how Honi the Circle-Drawer prayed for rain during a drought, he arranged the boys in a circle, stood in its middle and said he would not leave the circle until it rained. Then he showed us how Honi the Circle-Drawer slept under a carob tree for seventy years, woke up from his generation-long slumber, and no one recognized him, so the Lord of the Universe heeded his prayer and let him die.

What I learned from the rebbe in kheyder, starting with the first verse in Genesis, inspired my poems and deepened my philosophy of life and death. For example, ‘In the beginning, God created (*‘boro’*) the heaven and the earth.’ The rabbi did not just translate the word *‘boro’* as ‘created,’ but also explained that God *created* the heaven and the earth, and man *made* things. I learned from this that a poem must not be made, it must be created. When I write a poem, I do not forget what the rebbe taught me about how precious they are. There is miracle upon miracle in words; God created the world with words; words create something out of nothing. I learned from the Midrash stories that words were worthy to have crowns placed upon them. When Moses was in heaven, he saw God place crowns on the letters (‘When Moses ascended to the heights [to receive the Torah] he found God sitting and drawing crowns upon the letters.⁵’). The Zohar says that the Master of the Universe kisses and adorns every word with seventy crowns. We can learn

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Menahoth 29b: 3-5

from the rebbe as from the Roman poet, the master of the word Horatio, who said already over two thousand years ago that the poet had to chisel and file down every word and must never let the writing file out of his hand.

In 1913, when I was seven years old, I was already quite at home in the kheyder, while my older brother Eltshik was past bar mitzvah age. We loved each other so much as if we had one heart and one soul. Eltshik regarded me not as a little boy but as a close friend. He entrusted his most intimate secrets to me and told me that he loved with his entire being his 12-year-old Dveirke, whom he referred to as his bride.

Eltshik sent Dveirke two to three letters a day with me, even though she lived in the next street. Every time I brought her a letter, she gave a shake with her long plait adorned with flowers, her face wreathed in smiles. She would fold an envelope out of colored paper and give me the embellished letter with a tremor in her heart. I would run like lightning with the letter, unable to catch my breath, as if I were carrying a new-found treasure for Eltshik. Day in, day out, I was his trusty postman.

Their meetings were clandestine. They would meet behind the shul yard, at sunset, where only paupers used to come to spend the night in the poorhouse after a day's begging. I realized how much Eltshik and Dveirke loved each other when he confided in me that they would soon pledge eternal love in the middle of the night in the Beth Midrash, and I were to be their witness.

And this is what happened. By the full moon, the three of us came to the old Beth Midrash. The windows were shut but not locked. Eltshik lifted me up and pushed me through the window first. A couple of minutes later, all three of us were inside.

In the empty moonlit Beth Midrash, every shadow gave us a scare. It felt as if the souls of all the dead that had died in the shtetl floated around there. I heard the silence recite the Kaddish prayer so that even the sinful souls could get into Paradise. I trembled like a leaf in the wind when I saw Eltshik open the Holy Ark and the two lovers lay their hands on the Torah scroll, swearing eternal love till the end of time.



My brother Eltshik

The Beginning of World War I in 1914

My father was already on his way to America. He had left behind my mother, Badonna, with five children: four brothers, Eltshik, Berke, Menke, Yeiske, and my sister, Blumke.

Our shtetl, Svintsyán, was surrounded by hosts of German soldiers. We saw automobiles, lorries, airplanes and cannons for the first time. The Germans of the First World War cannot be compared to the murderous Germans of the Second World War, but in 1917, as in the time of snatchings, they snatched young men and sent them somewhere ‘for labor,’ where battles against the Russians took place.

Eltshik had been hiding in an attic for weeks until he was discovered by a German gendarme in a uniform jacket decorated with medals. My mother’s tearful pleas to let the boy stay with us for at least a couple of weeks because he was ill, had a bad cold and was running a

fever had no effect, and the gendarme took him away to the accompaniment of the wails of us all.

My mother called Eltshik in her sleep, hoping he would come to her at least in a dream. On sleepless nights, she would roam the streets and alleys, roads and paths, calling his name, as if she hoped he would appear by some miracle. Dveirke, consumed by heartache, looked like a sixteen-year-old mournful widow; she no longer had flowers woven into her long braid as if all the flowers had wilted forever.

Suddenly, on an ordinary Wednesday, quite unexpectedly, Chaim-Meir, a vagabond from Svir, came with news that he had seen Eltshik in the shtetl of Buvíts,⁶ not far from Mikháleshik, alone in a barrack, ill, hungry and pining for his near and dear, and so lonely as if he had been abandoned not only by people but by God himself. The pauper gave him bread from his knapsack, brought him a mug of water from the communal pump, and promised him that he would carry his greetings to his family.

My mother said to me, ‘Menke, you and I will walk to Buvíts to Eltshik.’ She asked Mariashka the tinker’s wife to keep an eye on the three children, Berke, Blumke and Yeiske. She took some old wives’ remedies, clothes, and plain bread, and we set out on the long journey on foot to Buvíts.

The war between the Russians and the Germans was still ablaze, and bullets often flew around us.

When the night fell, we stayed in the village of Shimeníshik (there is a longer poem about our night in Shimeníshik in my book *Burning Shtetl*, volume 1.)

Finally, we reached Buvíts. We looked for Eltshik in every barrack, rummaged in the empty houses, and found no sign of life whatsoever. The small shtetl of Buvíts was a deserted no-man’s land – only a bent madwoman roamed around all alone as if she were the only survivor at the end of the world. She shrieked at the top of her voice, ‘Jews, rise from your graves, the Messiah is here!’ The abandoned shtetl Buvíts looked like a place of oblivion, a shadow of death.

We ran out of places to look for Eltshik. When we returned to Mikháleshik, our family met us with horror and tears in their eyes. It was already after Eltshik’s funeral. We went to the cemetery to mourn and grieve Eltshik.

⁶ Now Buivydziai, Lithuania.

I Remain in Mikháleshik

My grandfather harnessed a horse to a cart and drove my mother back to Svintsyán. I stayed behind in Mikháleshik. The first weeks in Mikháleshik were very sad. In my dreams, Eltshik kept sending letters with me to Dveirke, his bride, and for the first time my mother was not with me. I felt out of place in my grandfather's house even though he belonged to the shtetl's elite and his house was the finest in the shtetl.

I was glad when my aunt Beilke, a widow with three children, took me into her poor home. Her house, or cabin, with its small windows, earthen floor, and chimneys covered with decades of soot was dearer to me than my grandfather's wealthy house. Her house resounded with folk songs and fantastical stories that my aunt Beilke used to tell us.

Young and old from the other side of the river used to come to listen to her stories. She led the listeners through the hidden worlds of her tales. Her cabin transformed into an enchanted castle.

A month later, I started to go to kheyder. Yankl-Dovid was a rare melamed. I was happy to see such a good-natured rebbe. He hugged me and expressed his sorrow at the death of my brother Eltshik. Yankl-Dovid was a gemóre melamed without a rod. I joined Year Four. The children were studying the sixth chapter of the Talmudic tractate Bobe-Káme (Bovo Kamo).

I was astounded by how freely the rebbe involved the children in deep discussions and that they could even criticize both Mishna and Gemora. One discussion around the strange threesome from the Mishna, a deaf man, a fool and a minor, was especially sharp. When a child expressed a Gemora thought that was novel and insightful, the rebbe recorded it in a ledger.

The rebbe's charming only daughter, Leyele, was an exception in the kheyder. Sixteen at the time, she sat to the side, together with the eleven/twelve-year-old boys, and studied Bava Kamma with diligence. Jesters used to say, 'A hen that crows, a goy that speaks Yiddish and a girl that studies the Gemóre are matters of perplexity.'

Almost every day, two seventeen-year-old boys popped into the kheyder: sometimes, my cousin Yankele, sometimes, Itske, Khonke the Feldsher's son, sometimes both. They were both

in love with Leyele. Considering there were old spinsters already in their late twenties in the shtetl, it was a marvel that Leyele was being wooed by two handsome young men. People used to say, 'One hair of Leyele's braid adorned with flowers can pull more strongly than ten bulls.' People also said that Leyele's pure fortune was worth more than a pound of gold.

The two boys who had been friends were now rivals. Itske challenged Yankele to a duel, but Yankele was sure that Leyele was his without a duel. Everyone loved Yankele, but not Itske, who was stuck-up as if the devil himself was his uncle.

No one knew why Itske came every day to my uncle Chaim's smithy, allegedly to watch my uncle Chaim and his five sons strike sparks out of heated iron on the anvil with their hammers, but what he came for was to whet knives as if he were a cutthroat.

Indeed, Itske was one. One Friday night, after prayers, when we went for a walk in the streets of Mikháleshik, Itske attacked Yankele with a knife and stabbed him. The entire shtetl came running to the crime scene. Who could save the bleeding Yankele if not the murderer Itske's father, Khonke the Feldsher? Khonke said that Yankele was dead.

Yankele's family shook the shtetl with heart-wrenching wails. Itske, the murderer, quickly swam the River Vilja and disappeared somewhere in the woods beyond Mikháleshik. Yankele's five brothers also swam the Vilja in hot pursuit of Itske to bestow upon him the same death that he had given Yankele.

Peasants reported having seen a young beggar with a knapsack. It was obvious that the beggar was Itske. Every time it seemed that Itske would be caught any moment, he eluded the grasp of the pursuers and vanished into thin air again. After chasing after Itske for tens of versts, Yankele's brothers returned to Mikháleshik, devastated and broken. They took revenge on Itske's innocent father, Khonke the Feldsher. They trashed Khonke's house, where he and his grandfathers had been born.

Khonke and his family had to flee from Mikháleshik. The shtetl remained without a feldsher for some time. No trace of Itske was ever found. He was rumored to have fled to America.

The Mikháleshik residents looked askance at the beautiful Leyele as if it were her fault that her suitor Itske had stabbed to death her other suitor, Yankele. After this tragic love story, other young men gave Leyele a wide berth, and her girlfriends also dissociated themselves from

her. She roamed the backstreets of the shtetl suffering from mental health problems, talked out loud and shouted at herself like a semi-deranged person.

Leyele's father, Yankl-Dovid, the melamed, and her mother, Sore, the rebbetzin, were concerned that Leyele would remain an old spinster, so they married her off to the widowed Meyerke the Mender, an unskilled tailor with a brood of children, twice her age, a man in the cognizant age, but with no cognizance, a boor and illiterate ignoramus. People said Meyerke the Mender lived in abject poverty, but as the saying goes, a beautiful wife is half a livelihood.

Leyele lived through downfall, poverty, penury, and destitution. In winter, she sat in the market by a hot pot of coals selling frost-bitten apples, wandering through the dreams of her past stormy loves.