

The knife with the rosewood handle

The story which follows, a story which is born in suspicion and uncertainty, has one misfortune (some call it luck) which is (that it is) true (truthful?): it is written by the hand of honourable people and reliable witnesses. But if it is to be truthful in the way that its author dreams of, it would have to be recounted in Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian or Yiddish; or, above all, in a mixture of all those languages. It would be then, by the logic of events and the dim, deep and unconscious happenings, that a Russian word, or two, would blaze into the author's consciousness—a word that can be as gentle as *telyatina*<sup>1</sup> or as hard as *kindzhal*<sup>2</sup>. If, therefore, the author could reach the unreachable and devastating moment of Babylonian confusion, one would hear the humble prayers and terrible pleas of Hanna Krzyzewska, uttered in Romanian, in Polish, in Ukrainian, and besides that (is if the question of her death is just a consequence of some grand and fatal misunderstanding), during her death-bed spasm and lull, her raving would turn into a prayer for the dead, said in Hebrew, the language of genesis and dying.

An out-and-out hero

Miksha (we'll call him that for now) sewed on a button in less than ten seconds. Alight a match and hold it between the fingers. From the moment you strike it to the time it sings the fingers, Miksha has already stitched the button onto the officer's coat. Reb Mendel, for whom Miksha worked as a kalfa<sup>3</sup>, cannot believe his eyes. He affixes his glasses, takes the match, and says, in Yiddish: "Come, one more time, Herr Miksat." Miksha threads the needle again, Reb Mendel smiles and stares at the kalfa, then suddenly throws the match out the window and spits on his fingers. Miksha, who has already sewn the button onto the coat of Herr Antonescu, triumphantly says: "Reb Mendel, it takes a single match to burn the entire oil fields of Ploiesti." While this one looks into the future lit up by an immense fire, Reb Mendel with those two still wet fingers suddenly tugs the button on the coat and twists it as if he is wringing the neck of a chicken. "Herr Miksat", he says, "if you weren't thinking so stupidly, you could become an excellent master craftsman...Do you know that the Ploiesti wells amount to several millions of gallons of crude oil?"—"That will be a lovely flame, Reb Mendel", says Miksha, enigmatically.

Circumvention (Evasion/ outsmarting/ outfoxing)

Miksha didn't become a master craftsman. He sewed the buttons for two more years at Reb Mendel's, listening to his Talmudic sophistry (trickery?), and then he had to leave, pursued by damnation. One day, it was with the coming of spring in the meaningful (significant?) year of 1925, Reb Mendel complained that his Koshinshinsk hen disappeared. "Reb Mendel", Miksha answered him, "search after the thief amongst the Yids." Reb Mendel understood the weight of the insult and for a time he no longer mentioned his Koshinshinsk hen. Miksha, likewise, kept silent; he waited for Reb Mendel to master his pride. The old man was fighting with himself, placing every day on the altar of his Talmudic self-importance, one hen. He stayed up with a stick in his hand in the chicken coop, until dawn, scaring the skunk by barking like a pig. Towards dawn, he would nod off, and from the chicken coop another hen would disappear. "May I be struck down by the great righteous one who said that all living things are equally worthy of his care and grace", says Reb

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<sup>1</sup> Veal

<sup>2</sup> Dagger

<sup>3</sup> Journeyman

Mendel on the ninth day. “Can it be that that one Koshinshinsk hen, which is worth at least five *czzerwony*<sup>4</sup> is equal to one skunk which destroys the poor and still smells far and wide?—It can’t, Reb Mendel”, says Miksha, “you can’t compare (disguise/ cover up?) a hen which is worth five *czzerwony* with a stinking skunk.” He says nothing more. He waits for the skunk to destroy what he can destroy and to prove to Reb Mendel that his Talmudic babbling about the equality of all godly creatures is worth nothing until justice is realised on earth, by earthly means. On the eleventh day, Reb Mendel, tired from his wasted vigils, bloated and red-eyed, with hair full of feathers<sup>5</sup>, steps in front of Miksha and starts beating his chest: “Herr Miksat, help!”—“Alright, Reb Mendel”, says Miksha. “Brush your kaftan and take the feathers out of your hair. Leave the matter to me.”

## The Trap

The trap that Miksha knocked off was a distant copy of those that his grandfather used to make in Bukovina: a vague and nostalgic memory (souvenir/ keepsake/token?). Outside of this meaning, it was a simple box made from hard beech boards, with a lid that opens from the outside but not from the inside. As bait he put an egg, for which he unequivocally verified that in it, as in a coffin, was a rotting Koshinshinsk chicken. In the morning, as soon as he stepped into the yard, Miksha knew that the animal had been caught: the smell reached all the way to the gate. Reb Mendel, in the meantime, did not emerge from the house. Overwhelmed by the long vigils, he gave himself over to sleep (daydream?) and fate. Miksha caressed with his heavy peasant hand the last remaining of Reb Mendel’s hens, which was stony with fright, and let it into the yard. Then he lifted the lid of crooked nails and, the moment when the wet animal snout appeared through the crevice, he brought it down with a heavy blow of the hand. No less skilfully, he threaded the rusty wire through the nostrils of the skunk, tied his paws and hanged the animal in the door frame. The smell terrible. First he made one cut around the throat, like a purple necklace, then another two in the root of the paws. Peeling the skin around the neck, he cut two more slits for the toes, akin to button-holes. Awakened by the horrific screaming or by a nightmarish slumber, there, all of a sudden, appears Reb Mendel. He presses his nose into the skirts of the crumpled kaftan, and with blood-shot and startled eyes he looks at the live and bloody hank (ball?) which, dangling from the wire, gurgles at the door jamb. Having wiped his knife on the grass, Miksha stands upright and says: “Reb Mendel, I have freed you from skunks once and for all.” When he finally happened to speak, the voice of Reb Mendel rang harsh and ardent, like the voice of a prophet (soothsayer, oracle?): “Wash the blood of your hands and face. And be damned, Herr Miksat.”

## Consequences

Miksha soon understood, on his skin, what Reb Mendel’s damnation means: in the entire Antonovska region, the craftsmen sought recommendations for kalfas from no one other than Reb Mendel. And at the mention of Miksha’s name, a Jew would start to ramble (maunder?) in Yiddish and Hebrew, beating his breast and tearing his hair as if it was the Dybbuk that was being spoken of. Not even Reb Yusef, the worst of all craftsmen, not just among the tailors, wanted to take him on for a job. Learning of Reb Mendel’s damnation, he let Miksha go after all of two days. Miksha in return swore that one day he will revenge himself for the insult that the Talmudists have inflicted on him.

Translated from Serbo-Croat by Joshua Sex and Sanja Todorović

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<sup>4</sup> Red złoty (Polish: *czzerwony złoty*; also known as Polish ducats or florins) refers to circulating gold coins minted in the Kingdom of Poland (later, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) from 1526 to 1831. Whereas “złoty” could simply refer to the colour, *czzerwony* (red) specified the material as gold.

<sup>5</sup> In Serbian, the word *perje* (feathers) is another word for dandruff.