

The meeting of the creator and his protagonist was free, cordial and short. Routine greetings, fragmented, tasteless and senseless words were exchanged. And there was one and only reason in their meeting on Podrzeczna Street – while Motke rubbed with his fingers the thousand-złoty banknote "the present owed" by the writer to the archetype of his famous work. The meeting was over and completed until next year, when the two would meet again, and the writer would once again stick into his hands the note so longed for by Motke. But once – so my father z"l told me – Motke resented the writer for calling him "Motke the thief" in his book. "I'm not a thief," Motke claimed. "I make a decent living by my profession"... Indeed, in Shalom Asz's view, Motke did not steal the property of others.

Motke scared all the haters of Israel, who harassed "the common Jews." The Gentiles feared Motke boys like death. A knife, an ax, a hammer, a cleaver, a stone, etc. – these were the weapons of the butchers, porters, bakers and other "common people" who knew how to preserve the dignity of the Jewish people, their lives and property. They had Motke as the head and leader.

When Shalom Asz compared Motke to the "Golem" of Prague or to "Noah Pandre" (by Z. Schneur<sup>1</sup>), Motke did not understand the intent of his friend. But in his heart and in his senses, he understood and said to him: "Shalom, do you hear, Jewish blood will not be free in Kutno!" And between his teeth he hissed "We will not stretch our necks for slaughter" and fell silent.

Quiet and peaceful, without saying "goodbye", as if his tongue stuck to his palate, the writer turned away.

He knew very well that his choice was not in vain – and that was his reward.

## SHALOM ASZ AND MOTKE

*translated from the Hebrew by Eli Rubinstein*

Every year, in late summer, the writer Shalom Asz came from Paris to visit his elderly mother, who lived at his brother Wolf's house. The great writer's visit became a special experience for all the city's residents, Jews and Christians alike. First, his visit was dedicated to his mother, spending time with her and giving her the respect she deserved. But his mother was also proud of her beloved son and famous writer. While at his mother's house, he greatly enjoyed the large library his father had dedicated to his mother. Indeed, when the son had returned to his permanent residence, to Paris, his library was a faithful reflection of the spirit and greatness of the son, Shalom.

However, already on the evening of the first day of his visit to Kutno, the writer was impatient. He found no rest for himself. His associates knew the reason – he had not yet met his protagonist, Motke, who was already eagerly awaiting the writer's arrival. And before he could handle addressing his family, acquaintances and fans – he inevitably felt like seeing Motke first.

Zvi ASZ, Nahariya

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<sup>1</sup> TN: Zalman Schneur (1887, Shklov, Belarus – 1959, New York), Hebrew and Yiddish poet and novelist. A descendant of the founder of the chassidic Lubavitch movement.