

## THE SHTETL OF SHALOM ASZ AND ITS HEROES

*translated from the Hebrew by Sara Mages*

In the small town lived the distinguished writer and from it, he drew his inspiration, he described it and dreamed of it all his days. He raised his heroes from the narrow alleys and out of the crooked houses, and took them out into the air of the wide world. They are living heroes – and not fabricated from the heart. Asz rummaged in every corner and saw the innocent and frightened eyes, the modest mother and the humble maidens, the Jewish poverty, the carters, the idlers, the matchmakers, the butchers, the fishermen – Asz saw them all and immortalized them all.

A lot of headaches caused him, Shalom Asz, his heroes who used to abuse and curse him for describing them in his many books. It is told, that Berel "Mozni Wojtek," one of Shalom Asz's heroes, wanted to break his bones. It happened in the nearby town of Łęczysca. Shalom Asz was miraculously saved from his dangerous fists and fled for his life as Berel shouted after him: "Some day, you will fall into the hands of a simple uneducated person; some day, I will teach you a lesson for putting me in your book. I will crush your ribs." Berel Mozni was a sturdy carter and was famous for his strength. Truth be told, whoever feared for his life turned away from him. Even the gentiles treated him with respect and called him the "Jewish Cossack." He was considered privileged among the carters, had a broad beard and always served as a *gabbai* in the carters' synagogue. By nature, he was not a bad person towards those who knew his character. I remember that he hated to death the merchants who seemed bloodsuckers to him. In this respect he was also influenced by his revolutionary daughter who always told her father that all the bourgeois should be killed. This thing got stuck in Berel's mind and he looked forward to the "revolution." He comforted the other carters in their trouble and told them: wait a little while. When the "popular masses" will come, everything will work out; and at the time of the act, he swayed his large hairy hands and blew expletives and curses towards the merchants.

Without a doubt, one of the most interesting heroes of Shalom Asz was Motke the thief that everyone knew in the town. Shalom Asz became very famous in the Yiddish literature by the description of this hero. All theaters

presented the play "Motke the Thief" with extraordinary success. I remember, that when the Warsaw troupe arrived and wanted to present "Motke the thief" in our town, there was "trouble." Motke ran like a madman across town and in great anger tore the ads off all the walls as he screamed: "What? They call me a thief?" They will present plays? I will beat them violently and mercilessly, you can call me by all sorts of names, but I have never been a thief." It was necessary for the troupe to give Motke a "bribe," and only then he calmed down and allowed to present the play on the theatre stage. He received, of course, two entry tickets in the first row, for him and for his wife. There was a noise in the theater, and everyone was watching how the living heroes would react to the play. But Motke and his wife laughed along with the whole crowd, as if the matter did not concern them at all.

Lately, Motke had fallen from grace and become a human shadow. His health deteriorated and he suffered from various ailments. Only his thief's eyes were still burning. His voice became hoarse, and when he spoke, he put a finger on the scar on his neck – a reminder of the surgery he once had. He was still engaged in his previous art, known to all who read Asz's book by the name of this hero.

His wife managed all the affairs, while he, Motke, asked for alms and also became... religious.

Motke liked to talk about his troubles in front of people. It was possible to talk to him about everything, but – not to mention the name of Shalom Asz. To the sound of this name alone, he became furious and a torrent of curses poured out of his mouth.

Until the last liquidation operations, some of Shalom Asz's heroes were still alive including "Motke the thief." They perished together with all the martyrs of Kutno. Now this town now lies under its ruins, and no trace remained of the well-known synagogue street that has become a city garden. The six-hundred-year-old cemetery was completely destroyed, and its tombstones were taken for paving streets.

This is how the town of Shalom Asz was cut from the land of the living and disappeared forever.

Abraham LUSTIGMAN, Tel Aviv  
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