

A Story from Bodzentyn

“SHMULECK THE IRONHEAD”

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Son of Towia



Grandson of Gitkind Fruchtman, who was a dairyman in Bodzentyn

My great-grandfather Labish was a good man. You could even call him a Mensch, a real gentleman. Actually Mensch really means more than just a 'real gentleman' . It means a good man; an outstanding man; a man of his word; a kind man and a man you could trust. After doing business with such a man you would go home to your wife (if you had a wife). You would say to her "Sweetheart, you know that man Yousel, the shoemaker, the son of Chaim, the furrier, well he's a Mensch." This would tell her volumes. In the same way if you had said. "Sweetheart, you know that man Yousel, the shoemaker, the son of Chaim, the furrier, well he's a Potz." This would tell her volumes as well. A Potz is the opposite of Mensch. Potz, in Polish, is what one sits upon. It also means a Jerk. However, it is more than just a Jerk. A Potz is a real Jerk.

You should know that my great-grandfather Labish, as I have told you, was a Mensch. He was a big man, strong as an ox, and made his living as a drover. That is, he owned a horse and wagon and was paid to deliver goods. In a town divided between Jew and Gentile, both respected him. Moreover, although he was the only non-Gentile drover, the other drovers treated him as one of their own.

In Baizecheen, as in most of Poland, before WW1, the Jewish and Gentile communities, through ignorance, either, hated, feared or mistrusted one another. The Russians, who ruled Poland, encouraged these feelings. Since the Jews were the middle class and owned most of the stores, it was easy to blame them for the economic woes of the country. Poverty caused by high Russian taxes and oppression. However, there were many individuals, in both communities, who rose above the prejudices of their neighbors and had friends in both cultures. People like the Mayor, my great-grandfather Labish, my grand-father Nuchum, my father and my father's friend Stashu and his family and many others.

Anyhow, while Labish was a Mensch, his younger brother Shmuleck was a Potz. This is the story of how Shmuleck became known as Shmuleck the Ironhead or simply as just

Ironhead. If you were calling to him across the street you would not shout, "Hey, Shmuleck the Ironhead." You would simply shout, "Hey, Ironhead." He would immediately turn his head, which was not made of iron. That was his name. He knew it. The whole town knew it. Only his wife possibly called him Shmulek. However, most likely she called him Potz. If he had to take out the garbage she would most likely say, "Hey, Potz, take out the garbage." Only a Potz would let his wife talk to him that way. He let her because he was a Potz. A real man would have lifted his wife's skirt and given her a good smack on her bottom. Shmuleck's wife would have smacked him back.

On the other hand, my great-grandmother Chana, I have heard, always called her husband "Darling." In turn he always treated her with affection. He was so affectionate he gave her six beautiful daughters in almost as many years. This was in a town and at a time when people did not use surnames. My great-grandfather Labish was known affectionately and with some pity as Labish with the six daughters or simply as Six Daughter Labish. Why pity you ask? Well, in those days, not so very long ago, one asked the good L__d¹ for strong sons to help with the family business. Only one or perhaps even two daughters were needed to help with the housework. Besides, as you must know, a parent had to provide a dowry for daughters. Having six daughters and no sons, no matter how beautiful or hardworking, was considered by the townsfolk to be something less than a blessing. Just ask yourself. How much housework can you share among seven females under the same roof?

Labish on the other hand was the happiest man in Baizecheen. Mensch that he was, he considered each daughter a gift from G_d² and loved each one of them fiercely. A lesser man would have complained that our dear L__d had burdened him unjustly with all these daughters. Not Labish. He was a Mensch.

¹ L__d is used not to write the holy name.

² G__d is used in order not to write the holy name.

Life had not always been easy or happy for Labish. His parents had died of the fever when he was a young boy. Do not ask me what fever. In those days any fever was called “The Fever”. Anyhow his grandparents, who owned a stable, took over the care of Labish and his younger brother Shmuleck. They did not have much time for Labish so the young boy spent his spare hours out of school hanging around the stable and the drovers. It was only natural that as he got older he began to accompany the drovers on their deliveries. When his grandparents finally gave the stable to his Uncle Yankel, when Labish was sixteen, he convinced Yankel to give him a horse and wagon as his own father’s inheritance.

Chana met Labish when he was delivering sacks of flour to her father’s store. “Hey,” she called. “Why is a drover wearing a skullcap and sideburns?”

“Why is a little girl not in the kitchen at her mother’s skirts instead of asking silly questions of an observant man?” retorted Labish.

“Ha,” she replied. “I am a young lady of fifteen and you are but a child.”

This conversation continued the same way for three weeks until Labish got up enough nerve to ask her name and she retaliated by offering him a cold glass of water. Chana’s parents could do nothing to discourage the friendship between their little jewel and the only Jewish drover in Baizecheen. Before a year had passed, Labish presented himself to Chana’s father with the deed to his house in hand as well as a letter of recommendation from the Rabbi. Chana’s father could not refuse his blessing. Besides it was common in those days to marry young.

One then two then three, four, five and six daughters followed at the biblical prescribed two-year intervals. Labish took his religious obligations seriously. As I have written before, Labish considered himself to be the most fortunate and happiest man in Baizecheen, if not the entire world.

However, all his happiness, unfortunately, did not protect Labish from an unexpected early demise. It is too sad a happening to tell in great detail; however, many townsfolk attributed his death to the "Evil Eye." Do not ask me to explain the Evil Eye. That is a subject for a whole other story. If your grandparents come from Eastern Europe, and they are still around, ask them about it. The outcome of Labish's death was to leave my great-grandmother a young widow with six young daughters, the eldest being barely fourteen years old. In those days there was no such thing as life insurance. So as you can imagine Chana was left in a difficult situation. Except for her late husband's house and his horse and wagon she had nothing. As the eldest son he had inherited the house from his father.

That Labish had inherited their father's house never sat well with Shmuleck. He started whining right after the funeral at the Shiva. A Shiva is a Jewish wake that lasts eight days, except that instead of eating and drinking, as at an Irish wake, they eat, gossip and pray. Jews are grand masters at the latter two. Anyhow, Labish was freshly in his grave and almost the entire town was praying for his safe journey to heaven. (By the way how safe can your journey be when you are already dead?) Shmuleck was whispering to his cronies that the house should now be his. Even this small group of friends, that he had, advised him to be quiet. "How could you take away the house of your own brother's widow?" they asked.

"But it should be mine," he whined.

"Shut up, show some respect," they replied.

Chana, on the other hand, was much too grief stricken to pay much attention to anything except her dead husband and orphaned daughters.

This all came to a head a few weeks after the funeral. Shmuleck finally gathered up enough courage to bring up the subject of the house to Chana. Chana was, of course, still in mourning and struggling to figure out how to earn a living and care for her daughters. Driving a wagon was out of the question. Anyhow, against the strong objections

of his wife and small circle of friends, Shmuleck, the Potz that he was, approached his sister-in-law. At the time she was standing at the pressing board and pressing, or some would say ironing, a dress for her eldest daughter. Since she had no electricity this involved heating up the pressing iron over hot coals. Shmuleck pulled up a chair and sat himself down beside the pressing board. He immediately started on how Labish's house rightly belonged to him. Chana said nothing but lifted the hot iron from the dress and smacked him squarely in the face with it. Or as the townsfolk would later say, gave him a "klop in der punim." It was not a short smack either, she pressed the hot iron onto his face until she could hear his skin sizzle.

My great-grandmother was a very strong woman. Moreover, her many friends had warned her about her brother-in-law's intentions. As a result, on top of her other problems, she had been forced to worry over this gossip for days. Therefore, you can understand the anger that made Chana hold the hot iron onto Shmuleck's face until it burned him. Shmuleck, hands covering his burning face, ran howling with pain from the house and into the street.

It's not every day that our Baizecheeners are blessed with such free entertainment. One of their least liked citizens, face in his hands, howling in pain, dancing up to a horse trough and plunging his face into the cool but dirty water. Water that dozens of horses daily slobbered into. If you have ever seen a horse drink then you know what I mean by slobber. Shmuleck sputtered and tried to wipe the horse water from his mouth and beard. He ran, or really danced, his long coat flapping in the wind, howling to the river at the end of the street. The women washing clothes scattered before him as he plunged fully clothed into the icy waters. The townsfolk roared in appreciation.

Since Shmuleck had made no secret of his designs on his well-liked brother's house, they, the townsfolk, figured that Chana had just given him his inheritance. Shmuleck was not liked, so many who were witnesses, later gleefully described the scene, to anyone who would listen, as Shmuleck's dance of shame.

Shmuleck never mentioned the inheritance again. But G_d reminded him of his greed and insensitivity every day of his life. Every time that he looked in the mirror to trim his beard he was reminded. He saw the brand from Chana's pressing iron on the tip of his nose and on his forehead.

For a short while the townsfolk called him Shmuleck the Ironhead. Just as they called Joseph the Blonde and Joseph the Shoemaker. However since everyone agreed that there would in all likelihood only ever be one Ironhead, in Baizecheen, they dropped the Shmuleck and called him simply Ironhead.

In fact, no one ever used the term Shmuleck again. They used Ironhead instead and considered it to be equivalent.

Anyhow, that is how Shmuleck the Potz got the name Ironhead.

Oh! You want to know what happened to Chana and her six beautiful daughters, including my grandmother Bella? They lived happily ever after. You wish to know how? Well, Chana sold the horse and wagon. With the proceeds she ordered from Kielce, the big city, a large barrel of axle grease. She and her three youngest daughters repackaged this grease into smaller tins. Her three eldest daughters then carried these to the market in a small handcart. Their late fathers' many friends were happy to help the family. From then on they all bought their axle grease from Chana and her daughters. If someone did not, a "klop" on the head from a fellow drover reminded one where to buy axle grease.