

*A Story from Bodzentyn*

“YOSSELEH THE GOAT”

By Stanley Weisberg

Son of Towia



Grandson of Gitkind Fruchtman, who was a dairyman in Bodzentyn

The story of Yosseleh the goat takes place in the early 1900's in Baizecheen, a town in Poland. To be exact, the town was really in Russia at the time. However, everyone, even the Jewish people spoke Polish. Christian townsfolk and peasants fervently considered themselves to be Polish, not Russian, and prayed and plotted for the overthrow of the Russian invaders. The peasants mainly plotted while drinking copious amounts of vodka. They defeated the Russian army every Friday night. However, the Russians returned every Saturday morning with a headache. All of Poland prayed for the return of the glory days of the Polish Empire. The Poland of Chopin, when Poland had dominated, politically and culturally, the Slavic regions of Europe.

In those days, of which we write, it was unheard of for a Jewish or even a Gentile child to have a pet. My father did. He had Yosseleh. Yosseleh was a little goat. Every family had a fenced yard and a small barn where they kept a few animals such as chickens or ducks or sheep or goats. Sometimes even a milk cow. However, these provided food for the family; eggs and milk and meat. It was unheard of to feed an animal just as a pet. Of course there were dogs but these were kept for hunting or sheep herding. Their roles as pets were secondary.

For a child to have a farm animal as a pet was not a good idea. This would always lead to a very traumatic event in the child's life. The pet would inevitably end up being a guest at dinner. It would be the main course. Or like they say in fancy restaurants, the entree. For the pet it would not be the entree, it would be the exit.

Since this event in the child's life was always the cause of much screaming, pleading, tearing out of hair and copious amounts of tears. Allowing children to treat a farm animal, as a pet was not considered to be such a good idea.

My father, Tevyeh, however, made his own rules. Did he not at the age of eight break the

windows in the Hebrew school? In those days Rabbis and teachers regularly beat their students on the knuckles or backside with a stiff wooden rod or a ruler. Somehow it was common belief that boys absorbed learning through their knuckles and their backs. Especially, if pushed in by the whack of a stiff wooden rod. This was considered part of the learning process. Girls did not go to school; they stayed home and learned all that they needed to know from their mothers.

Tevyeh was beaten on one such occasion. He was singled out because he asked the Rabbi a question about G-d that the Rabbi could not answer. "Rabbi, if G-d is so powerful why does he allow disease and war to happen?" Every explanation from the Rabbi was answered by another question. Finally, the Rabbi in frustration picked up his rod. He hit my father four times, as hard as he was able to, on his backside.

That night Tevyeh sneaked out of bed. He ran to the school gathering four large stones along the way. He then broke four windows with these stones. One for each blow of the Rabbi's rod. Before the last shard of glass hit the ground he was back home, safe in his bed.

Local hooligans were blamed for the broken windows. However, Tevyeh looked the Rabbi straight in the eye the next morning and he was never again beaten.

Anyhow, such was my father's stubborn personality. He badgered his father Nuchum, my grandfather, an equally stubborn individual, until he was allowed to buy a baby goat and to keep it as a pet. He did so with money he had earned running errands for the neighbours and selling axle grease for his grandmother. He was allowed to keep the goat as long as he paid for the goat's upkeep himself. Since it was his goat, bought and paid for, it was not to be part of the family livestock. He was twelve and could look after the goat himself.

Tevyeh named the goat Yosseleh. That is Yos or John in English. However, Yiddish is a strange language. It has what scholars call diminutive endearments. To my knowledge not

found in other Germanic languages. However, the L--d knows that I am no language scholar. This is how it works. The common name Yos can become Yosel when referring to a child or a close friend. Yosel can mean little Yos or dear Yos. More commonly Yosel means dear little Yos. Yos can also become Yosseleh. This is a stronger term of endearment meaning dearest littlest Yos. Only small children (or pet goats) are called Yosseleh. Adult Yoses are called Yosel out of habit. The only Yos that I know of is the Jack in a deck of playing cards. He is called the Yos. Jack on the other hand in Yiddish is Yank. No one is ever called Yank. They are called Yankel or the endearment diminutive Yankelleh.

Tevyeh bought Yosseleh the goat from my grandfather's neighbor Eric the Blond. Yosseleh adored Tevyeh and Tevyeh adored Yosseleh. The little goat followed my father everywhere. When Tevyeh was happy and walked with a swagger, Yosseleh swaggered after him. When Tevyeh was sad and walked slouched over, hands in his pockets, his little goat schlepped after him head down and ears drooped. He followed Tevyeh to school and waited for him outside the front door.

The entire town knew this little goat and to whom it belonged. Any other child, Jew or Gentile, would have had his goat stolen by the local hooligans. However, Tevyeh was a bit of a tough character himself and no one dared mess with his pet goat. Tevyeh even hooked up a cart for Yosseleh to pull. With the cart they could carry his grandmother's tins of axle grease to the town market to sell. Tevyeh also gave rides in the cart to his friends and siblings. All the children loved Yosseleh and one of them was always hugging onto the little goat.

Life was too good and as usual when things are going too well, the Evil Eye finds out and something bad happens. One market day, a horse from a nearby farm became frightened in the market and bolted. The poor thing was probably not used to the commotion. If you had ever

been to Baizecheen on market day, you would know what I mean. Vendors are shouting their wares' in at least three languages and haggling over prices in as many. The smells of the market would have challenged the nostrils of both man and beast. All of this, the commotion and smells would be too much for a young horse never before away from his quiet pasture.

What happened was that the frightened animal charged right for the open fields that he saw in the distance. Unfortunately Tevyeh and his goat were in the way. Tevyeh's back was turned and he did not see the charging horse. However, his little goat saw the charging horse. Yosseleh did not run away. He stood his ground, protecting his friend and master. The frightened horse turned at the last minute. However, it was too late, one wheel of his wagon crashed into Yosseleh and broke his leg.

Tevyeh carried his poor, injured little friend home in his arms. Tears flowed down his cheeks. Half of the children in town, also in tears, followed behind. It was a bizarre procession that wound its way through the town to my grandfather's house.

The town veterinarian, Dr. Silepin, set the little goat's broken leg. Such was the popularity of Yosseleh among the town's children, including his own, he refused payment. Everyone agreed that this was a first. Dr. Silepin tried to keep his generosity quiet. But such a momentous occasion became the talk of the town. It overshadowed the tragedy of the goat's broken leg. In fact, people soon forgot what the doctor did without charging. The not charging was gossip for weeks.

Tevyeh knew that once broken, his goat's leg would never really heal and would break easily again. The goat could be butchered for food but a sick animal or an animal with a broken leg was not considered to be "kosher" or clean. The leg would have to heal first. However, eating Yosseleh the goat was out of the question. He could be sold for someone else's table or he

could be put down and buried. Nuchum stubbornly maintained that the goat must be sold. Not selling the goat was a luxury only the rich could afford. It was agreed that once the leg was mended Nuchum would take it to a neighboring town's market. There the goat would be sold. This way no one that Tevyeh might know would be feasting on his pet. For two months while the leg mended, the goat was kept in his stall. Tevyeh had these two months to say his goodbyes.

Finally, the dreaded morning arrived. Tevyeh had sat up all night long cradling Yosseleh in his arms in a corner of the barn. At daybreak all the children of Baizecheen were there to extract one last hug. So many noses were rubbed onto Yosseleh's neck that half the town's children later came down with the sniffles. On the other hand Yosseleh was having a grand time. Although he was used to the adulation of children he had never experienced this much at one time. He returned the hugs with kiss-licks of his own. This of course made the children, who were bravely holding back their sadness, burst into tears.

My grandfather finally had to wrench Yosseleh away from Tevyeh and the children. He then took him up onto the horse and wagon that he had borrowed for the occasion. This amidst a chorus of, "No, no, not yet." The poor little goat that had never been up on such a big wagon before began to shiver and make fearful little bleating sounds of "Bah, Bah." It could break your heart. Tevyeh, along with all the others who had ridden in Yosseleh's cart ran after the horse and wagon until the edge of town and then tearfully waved it out of sight. The pitiful bleating of his

departing friend and the musty smell of his wooly coat would that would haunt Tevyeh's dreams for years.

Nuchum returned later that day with a basket of packages wrapped in heavy paper. This, he said, was a young lamb that he had bought for a good price while he was at the market. Since he wanted no more pets or other foolishness in his house he had the lamb slaughtered and had the local butcher dress the lamb.

This word "dress" in the English language bothers me. We take some poor dead animals skin off and we call this "dressing" the animal. It is obvious to me that this should be called an "undressing." However, as I told you before, I am no language scholar.

Now in those days, without refrigeration, meat would only stay fresh for a day or two, so Nuchum sold most of the lamb to his neighbors. He kept only enough to feed his family for two suppers. My grandfather then gave Tevyeh the money that he said he sold Yosseleh for. Whoops, did I write, "that he said he sold Yosseleh for?" You see, my father told me, years later, that he never fully trusted his father. You see, young goat and young lamb once they are cooked, look and even taste alike. You have probably never tasted young goat so you must take my word for it. Anyhow, Tevyeh knew this. Also, he thought, it was too perfect. His father leaves with his goat and comes back with a lamb ready to be the entree, or dressed for dinner, so to speak.

The outcome of it all was that, although his father insisted that the meat was lamb, Tevyeh ate the next two days at his friend Moishe's house. While my father was confident that he would be able to tell the difference, he could not bring himself to even try.

Years afterwards when Tevyeh was leaving Baizecheen and Poland forever, arms around his mother, he asked, “Mother, remember years ago my pet goat Yosseleh?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Mother,” he pleaded, “I have to know. Was it really lamb or was it goat that was served that evening?”

The last words he would ever hear from his mother were whispered in his ear as she tearfully bid him good-bye forever.

“Sweetheart, it was goat.”