

Zvi Preigerzon. Between Purim and Passover

[1]

The days between Purim and Passover – that season when the town dries out and spruces up. There are many blessings and a particular touch of grace in the kindnesses of the renewed orb of the sun, blinding eyes and hearts as it goes. Here and now, on the first day of April, the roosters strut about in the yards, alongside the fences and the gutters, raising their crests, and stepping about with that slow, methodical gait so typical of their breed, as they launch their cries all the while, tinged with the joyful tones of spring. The Jewish women took a deep breath, clambered and climbed up their ladders in order to scrub, rinse, and whitewash the walls. Somewhere off in the distance the windows were thrown open and an intermittent sea of sound swam back and forth in and out of the houses, to the popping patter of the sewing machine and the heartfelt song that accompanied it:

Let's make up
Buy me candy by the pound...
Come to me before the Sabbath,
Speak soft and sweet as the sun goes down...

That was the song sung by one of the loveable young women, a real Daughter of Israel, and all was well outdoors. Comrade Piston – Gedalia the coachman's horse – announced the return to the ringing town of Ivan Semyonovich, or Comrade Lavrov, from his latest honorable '*komandirovka*' [note – official journey].

"Ho, ho, Piston!" Gedalia cracked his whip, from his perch, across the glistening back of the horse, and the latter flicked his tail in satisfaction and filled the void of the world of the Creator with coquettish snorts and steaming mounds of rather prosaic manure. Here and there a Jew – may he be forgiven – stretched his reedy neck to get a look at the traveler, and then immediately shrank back with nonchalant indifference into the space between his shoulders, saying:

"Meh, here comes the *Meshumad* [note – apostate]!"

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The town was humming with its customary ring, bathed in the Nisan [note – the Hebrew month in which Passover is celebrated] sun, fresh dust, and scattered yawns. Alongside the shops of the Cooperatives wooden carriages slept their habitual slumber, and horses stood around chewing hay, flicking their ears and tails. Head Worker Comrade Lavrov noticed this at once. He was in charge of the administration of all the town's Cooperatives, the town's first and foremost citizen, and before he had even completed his journey, sitting in Gedalia the coachman's comfortable carriage, Comrade Lavrov had already begun to fulfill his communal duties.

Gedalia the coachman, who was wrapped up, despite the heat-wave and the dust, in a thick burnous, issued his command to Piston with a sucking sound and subtle murmur of the lips, and the horse came to a halt and stood still in a full display of pomp and decorum right alongside a colored wooden gate – the home of the honorable Comrade Lavrov.

Somewhere off in the distance the jaws of a window still gaped wide and one of the loveable young girls was gently wafting her voice through the opening:

Let's make up,
Won't you please caress my hair!
Your fingers, my beloved,
Drip myrrh and balsam everywhere...

Comrade Lavrov leaped lightly from the crushed carriage, stuck a '*poltinnik*' [note – half-ruble] into Gedalia's palm, and rushed up to the front door. His wife, he well knew, Shoshana Moiseevna, was about to give a shout of joy and rush up to him with her face all aglow. The delights of her breasts, piercing the thin fabric of her blouse, would be gathered lovingly to his heart. And Vladimir Ivanovich, his eight-year-old boy, would pinch the corners of his *pidjak* [note – jacket], saying: "Daddy, my toys..."

Every single *komandirovka* was filled with the promise of gifts for little Volodya...

[2]

And Volodya was spinning his yellow wheel around the table, going round and round, and then back again. Varya, the country nanny, was sitting by the window and knitting a thick stocking. The clock chimed: one, two, three, four – up we go!

"Papa, papuch'ka!" Volodka cried out when Ivan Semyonovich entered the room, leaving the wheel to its own devices, as it promptly ran into one of the chairs and fell with a spasm on its face.

Comrade Lavrov affectionately kissed his son. Varya got up from where she was sitting, took a light blue envelope from her bosom and handed it to Comrade Lavrov. Her yellow cheeks were lit with a guilty smile, and the stocking suddenly seemed rather sorry as it hung there in her fallen hand.

"The '*barinya*' (lady) asked me I should give it to you, Ivan Semyonovich. Three days ago already she left."

The sun inflamed the pink buds along the walls, and through the window, out in the garden, the twisted trees were prattling away with their naked hands. Comrade Lavrov's heart was suddenly seized by a dark cloud of melancholy, as his knees bent, went weak, and the man seemed rather wretched as he sat down in the armchair across from him.

"March 29," wrote Shoshana Moiseevna. "Greetings, dear Vanya. I'm leaving this place, leaving for good. Were my father still alive, with his little snuff box, his twisting beard, and his obsolete books – he would mock me and my folly. But they were right, after all, Vanya, our ancient ancestors, that is, with the heavy burden of their heritage that they bore. It is difficult for a Jew and a Gentile to live under one roof. At times it's like my soul doesn't even have the air to breathe. My beloved Vanya, you must understand me, and not blame yourself. My heart so longs for a Jewish environment, for the lilt of my grandpa-papa's voice

as he sings his morning prayers, or the lighting of the night lamp with its yellowed leaves. Oy, oy, my grandpa-papa used to sing, crying out with all his heart to God in heaven over all the injustices and abominations, all the terror throughout the world. And now, whenever I go outside, the Jewish women won't even exchange a single word with me, whether good or bad – I'm like an apostate myself here, Vanya. And you...

"My beloved Vanya, if only you were a complete Gentile, if only you were a whole man. Remember how you used to regale me with tales of your childhood, tales of your '*Goyishe*' [note – Gentile] father and your Jewish mother. The boys in the street would throw stones at you and call after you: *Zhid!* [note – pejorative term for 'Jew'] From the time you were a little boy, all because of those black eyes you inherited from your mother, those Jewish eyes of yours, you bore the weight of your burden. How you despised that burden back then, my beloved Vanya.

"Your mother! That woman with the pale face, fiery eyes, such a good woman, such a compassionate woman, such a loving woman – your mother! Once, you told me that your mother brought you to the Synagogue, in secret, as night fell, and the long days of suffering continued. How afraid you were at the time, or so you told me. It was clear to you that one of those *Zhids* would wrap you up in his *tallis* [note – prayer shawl] and carry you off to some arid cave, the cave of horrors. You moved off into a corner and began to cry...

"Now too, how well I know that you can't stand the Jewish nation. However that may be, at night, in your sleep, I can hear you as your lips murmur with the memory of that mother of yours. It is so hard, so hard for me with you, my beloved Vanya. Here you are, a Gentile, and yet you have a little bit of Jew in you too. '*Meshumad*' – that's what the Jews call you here.

"And as for our little Volodka..."

And so on and so forth went the letter that Shoshana Moiseevna had written, that Jewish woman with the fine pair of breasts, she who, ten years earlier, had finished the Hebrew Teachers' School in Odessa, that city that is the mother of all Israel in the Diaspora.

[3]

Ivan Semyonovich, Comrade Lavrov, got up and stepped outside, with his head bare and his walk somewhat faltering. The setting rays of the sun rang in the dust, gilding the dirt with flittering paths of gold. The tall columns of dust made off – a strong wind from the hills rose up, as if angering all the piled-up layers on the ground, shaking them, stirring them, and blinding the eyes of every living, breathing thing. And as the evening came on, it seemed an evening of raw nerves and deep sadness to Comrade Lavrov, as the dust once more seemed to bury the entire town beyond all possibility of resurrection.

And so, Sosanka was gone, she was gone, gone, gone – she had left him, that dark woman of his, that beloved woman, with those little hands of hers. Sosanka, he used to say to her, my dear little *Zhidovochka* [note – Jewess], my heart's beloved! Let the light touch of

your laughter refreshingly graze my moustache with its song, and say: My dear Vanya, it needs a little bit of the blade today, don't you think...?

Or else – those times when she would come to him, circling him mischievously, mirthfully a couple of times, and then say, with somewhat capricious severity: Look, Vanya, I've worn my light-blue dress today, with the black ribbons and the long sleeves – your favorite dress, Vanya. And then she would cast her eyes up to the ceiling and point to the beloved little curve in her neck and say: One kiss. But just one kiss! Vanya, Vanya, my mad, mad Vanya...

The sun was sinking ever lower and the hustle and bustle of the town was falling still. Yet still the sewing machine pattered away, issuing its final blows of the evening:

Come, my heart's little girl,
Come, let's make up, my sweet!
I'll give you yet a golden kiss,
And then together we shall eat porridge...

Then even that young woman's voice fell still and the darkness rose up from the edges of the town and enveloped all creation, pregnant with silence and suffering. From the dusty Synagogue the air was cut with the hoarse chorus of sad voices, intoning the evening prayers. Ivan Semyonovich suddenly recalled his mother. A strange wave of longing began to wash over his eyes – and as though bearing some heavy load of suffering, Comrade Lavrov, the Head Worker, went down to the dimly lit '*Shtiebel'* [note – Synagogue]. The sounds gripped the building in a vise, waving and shouting that song of sorrow, as a small number of aged Jews mumbled away their ancient murmur, and the mass of burning humanity buzzed away against the darkening windows:

Ay, ay, ay –
Protect us, dear Lord, as we come and go,
Now and forever...

On tiptoe Comrade Lavrov makes his way outside and begins wandering the streets of the town. And so, those are the Jews, the ones who stole his Shoshana from him. There is some sort of cursed power in those ramshackle tombstones of theirs. Here he is too, Ivan Semyonovich, that partial *Meshumad*...

"Comrade Lavrov, nu, what about my son?" the Head Worker suddenly heard the pleading voice of an elderly Jew right nearby.

Comrade Lavrov was the first and foremost citizen in town, and dozens of people turned to him each and every day looking for work and a living.

"I have a son," said the old Jew, removing his hat, for some reason, in a show of excessive charm and submission, "And he has a wife and two children, and they're literally dying of hunger."

Lavrov remained silent and walked along, with his head held down, slicing over and over again through the darkening air of early evening. Here the town came to an end, and a

sleepy little path began to crawl and wend its way into the distance. Here and there a star seemed to murmur, and a lone flame occasionally flickered in some distant window frame...

[4]

Comrade Lavrov, Ivan Semyonovich, crossed the wooden bridge that spanned the river and turned right, towards the jumble of hills and ditches that were known as the 'Valley of Tangled Thorns'. The deeply sorrowful Ukrainian song about the Cossack knight who traded his wife for a pinch of *'titun'* [note – tobacco] made its way across the vast distance, covered by the dull barking of dogs, the occasional scream in the night, and the chirping denizens of the wild.

"Comrade Lavrov," came the Jew's voice once more from behind, "Nu, I have a son, after all..."

Lavrov made no response, and began climbing up the hunchbacked hill, his heart trembling with anger. Why won't they give you a moment's peace, these Jews, why can't they leave a man a little plot of land where he can be free, why do they always have to stick their noses into everything – why is there no escaping them...?

"Comrade Lavrov," the Jew's voice returned once more with a polite clearing of the throat. "Nu, how about it, what's going to be with my son?"

Ivan Semyonovich turned in a stormy fever to face the Jew and shouted at him in an irritated voice sick with outrage: "To hell with you! Do me a favor and just go to hell! I don't have any work for you!"

The Jew was also climbing along up to the top of the hill and broke into a thin round of laughter:

"Does your honor think he is going to scare me, Comrade Lavrov? Heh-heh, but I told your honor: I have a son, and he needs to make a living. You must find work for him, Comrade Lavrov."

The very tail of the moon appeared off at the edge of the heavens, and then the pale mistress slipped in and rose in all her glory – like some shiny bowl of copper. To the right and to the left, from off in the distance, dogs began barking lazily at her apparition, and the night owls' hoots rang out in all directions.

Then all of a sudden the elderly Jew began screaming at Ivan Semyonovich, Comrade Lavrov, in a thin, desperate voice, as the two of them stood up there atop the hunchbacked hill, enveloped as it was in the barking night:

"Ah, you have no work?" That's what the old Jew screamed. "And do you think that I didn't just see with my own eyes how you went into our Synagogue and offered up the evening prayer there? And do you think that a 'Head Worker' like you is allowed to go to the

Synagogue? I'm going to let everyone know! I'll shout and scream it from the hilltops! I'll write a letter to Comrade Kalinin. *Meshumad, Meshumad, Meshumad!*"

Lavrov suddenly leaped at the old Jew's neck and seized it in the vise of his firm fingers. The Jew's sparse beard caressed Lavrov's hands, as his throat kept grunting over and over again with overwhelming force and desperation:

"Meshumad, Meshu-mad, Meshu-..."

Lavrov was growling away as well like a famished beast of prey, as he gathered all his strength to choke that entire screaming nation, so concerned as they were with every last penny, never giving you a moment's rest, that nation that had stolen his wife from him, his peace of mind, his very life...

Then the old Jew began convulsing and contorting himself, as his legs smacked and knocked against one another, like the knocking sound of that Jewish sewing machine through the wide-open window:

Let's make up,
Enough with those Gentile ways...
Buy me a ring of gold,
And we'll be wed like the Good Book says!

And then the old Jew's grunting and twisting came to an end, and his body was hurled with a forceful wave into the ditch down below. At the bottom of the ditch a foamy spring stream flowed along, limping its twisted way through the fields as it washed the 'Valley of Tangled Thorns'. And in the middle of that Valley of Tangled Thorns, pendant and fluttering in the air, up above the river and over the ditches, Comrade Lavrov was approached by that Jewish mother of his, all wrapped up in white, with her hair all disheveled, and the candid fabric of her clothing was flooded with two streams of blood pouring from the very whites of her eyes. And that bent neck of hers was so wretched and sorrowful, as some horrible prayer fell like a leaf from her whispering lips in the night...

"Ay! Ay!" Comrade Lavrov suddenly screamed in terror, and began slip-sliding down the side of the hill, running away. The wind scattered the shouts, and the stars waved and screamed their sorrowful tune. The distant barking and the chirping cricket sounds issued some ancient murmur, as all creation began to wave and sing its song of suffering:

Ay, Ay, Ay –
Protect us, dear Lord, as we come and go
Now and forever...

[5]

Comrade Lavrov opened the front door anxiously and entered his house. Vladimir Ivanovich, his eight-year-old boy, rushed up to him with an exultant shout:

"Papa, Papka! But we tricked you! It's April Fool's Day today! We tricked you!"

There was a joyful samovar whistling atop the table, covered as it was with a white tablecloth. Shoshana Moiseevna got up from where she was sitting and embraced her husband. The delights of her breasts, piercing the thin fabric of her blouse, were gathered lovingly to his heart. In the next room the bed was all made up rather tastefully in white, a canopy of comfort and contentment.

"Varka!" said Shoshana Moiseevna, "Give Ivan Semyonovich a cup of tea! My beloved Vanya, hurry up and wash your face off as it's covered with dust from your journey, and let's have ourselves a cup of tea. How pale your face went, you silly man. But after all, it's April Fool's Day today!"

And Volodya pinched the corners of Comrade Lavrov's jacket:

"Daddy, my toys..."

And out the window, throughout the town, a hush, a hush was hurled.