

Howard Luxenberg

GETEL'S STORY

I was five or six; we lived in a small village near Grozny. My father was the Rabbi. Rabbi Avrum Ziskoff. We were in his study. I was playing, he was at his books, when the Cossacks flew down into our village and forced their way into the room. They were so tall and big and strange that I thought the room would burst from their noise and abuse. But my father greeted each of them by name, and they grew quiet and obedient, almost like normal men. So I thought, at the time, these are not the Cossacks that the old women talk about, who come from nowhere to torment the village.

I did not understand all of my father's conversation. A deal was struck between him and the Cossacks: he would teach them his magic if they would undergo an initiation. In the end, Uncle Azriel, the mohel, was sent for. I thought this strange; there was no male baby to circumcise.

I never saw the Cossacks or my father again. My father made me learn two stories, the story of Abraham's covenant with God, and the story of Abraham's death. He made me repeat them until I knew them by heart. Then he pinned a note on me—I still have it—and sent me away. I cried and refused, and he reminded me that he was a Rabbi, that everyone in the village obeyed him, that even these noisy Cossacks obeyed him, that his daughter would obey him, and that no harm would befall me.

The note was on sheepskin, and was repeated in Russian, Yiddish, German, Polish, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Latin, and Arabic. The note said, "My name is Getel. My father is Rabbi Avrum Ziskoff, a servant of the God of Moses." My father knew English too, of course, but there was no English on the note. His notion was that the authorities would stop me only when they no longer understood the note, and my destination was America.

Much later, when I had travelled so long that my clothes no longer fit me properly, I was stopped by a uniformed man who could not read my note. He called another uniformed man over, and then another, until a swarm of uniformed and uncomprehending men surrounded me. None of them understood the note, so I expected I was in America and would go no farther.

At the end of the quarantine, a man who dressed and carried himself like my father came and got me. He spoke to the authorities in English, and to me in Russian. He said, "I am Rabbi Joseph Solomon. Welcome to New York." He wanted to unpin the note, but I wouldn't let him. I struggled and because I didn't want to cry I blurted out the two stories my father had made me memorize. Rabbi Solomon whistled, and spoke in English to no one in particular. My father had this habit, so I was put at ease. He left the note alone. I told him about the Cossacks, how my father had made them quiet, how he had sent for Uncle Azriel, how I had been sent away. This new Rabbi just whistled, and talked out loud again to no one in particular.

He took me to his home, and I met his wife and daughter. Yetta was about my age at the time and spoiled. So I was bragging to her about my father. I said he knew everyone's name, even people he had never met. Yetta called me a liar; she said no one could know everyone's name. I said God could, and my father could. Yetta's father came in to settle the fight, and when it was my turn I stood my ground, and blurted out every Cossack's name—every Dmitri, Fyodor, Mikhail, Alyosha, Illya—every one of them, just as my father had on the afternoon when I had last seen him.

At that point Yetta's father took her aside and explained, loud enough for me to hear, that with God, anything is possible. Yetta became quiet at this, and so did I. Even Yetta's father became quiet, and looked, wrapped in his silence, like the Cossacks after my father had called them by name.

That afternoon passed like a dream, with everyone tiptoeing around me; and when they did speak to me the words were like words in a dream, passing directly from their mouths to my brain. I couldn't remember hearing the sound of them being spoken. That evening, as I lay in bed, I heard the sounds of visitors. Yetta's father got me out of bed, and told me to get dressed. I put on my clothes in the darkness, and waited. Yetta's father brought me downstairs to his study, where other men, rabbis, argued until they noticed me, and then they fell silent. Rabbi Solomon spoke: "Do you remember everything you said to me when I first came for you?" I nodded. "Could you tell me again?" Rabbi Solomon was speaking in Russian, and he made no mention of the others around him.

I hesitated and then spoke, also in Russian, afraid that if I got one word wrong something terrible would happen to me. I saw one of the others whispering, and that made me even more afraid until Rabbi Solomon said simply, "He's translating."

So I told them again about the Cossacks, how they wanted to learn my father's trick of knowing their names, how he sent for the mohel, how he taught me the story of Abraham and the circumcision of all his household, even the servants, and the story of Abraham's death. No one spoke, and their silence seemed to suck all the air from the room so that I had to breathe deeper and deeper, and my eyes were sore from meeting so many stares so that soon they were filled with tears and I was sobbing. Then I knew I was crying not for the silence or the stares, but for the story, because I read its meaning in the faces of the others.

They took off my shoes, put slippers on my feet, and said the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.