

MUSHROOMS IN BRONX PARK

(From A Book of East Side Memoirs)

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1.

Yes, the summer. It was painful to draw one's breath. The sun blazed with sheer murder all day. At night, steam rose from the ghetto stoves like a Russian vapor bath. There was never any relief from the weight pressing on our necks and skulls. People were sick, doctors were busy.

The Jewish babies whimpered and died. The flies thrived. Everyone was nervous; there were many quarrels down the air-shaft. I would wake in the dead of night and hear the whole tenement groaning and twisting in the bedrooms. People went out exploring for sleep as for a treasure. Hollow-eyed ghosts stamped the streets all night. Families slept on the docks, in the parks, on the roofs. But the world was hot.

2.

Some nights my mother spread the bedding on the sidewalk in front of our tenement. While she and my father fanned themselves on the stoop and gossiped with the neighbors, my sister Esther and I slept there in the street.

The street cars, the wagons, the talk, the sudden shrieks, the million shoes of passersby grinding like an emery wheel on the pavements did not disturb my sleep. But one night something did happen that left a permanent mark on my mind.

It was the evening before the Fourth of July. There was the usual debauch of patriotism. Kids were shooting off toy cannons and firecrackers and their fingers in every street. The skies were lit with a city's bombardment. Grinning Italians shot their revolvers at the sky. Roman candles popped red, blue and yellow balls at the sky. Pinwheels whirled, Catherine wheels fizzed and turned, torpedoes crackled, and rockets flew like long golden winged snakes above the tenements. It was fun, but then I fell asleep on the bedding spread by my mother in front of our tenement.

I had slept an hour, when some careless person threw a lighted cannon cracker out of a window. It exploded on the pillow beside my face. I leaped up with a scream of fright, and ran to my mother. I trembled and sobbed, and saw my blood stream. A big slice of flesh had been torn from my left shoulder; I still bear the scar.

This shattered meat healed quickly; the blood was soon forgotten. What remained was the nightmare. For weeks after that Fourth of July I woke every night, with a scream. I was reliving the explosion. My parents did not know what to do. The fat and cheerful Dr. Mirelsu gave me pink pills to take. They did not help. The thin and gloomy young Dr. Solow mumbled something about sending me to the country. But was that possible, my parents asked? So he gave me greenish medicine to take. It did not help.

I was losing weight. My mother took the advice of a neighbor and called in a Speaker-woman, Baba Sima the witch-doctor. It was she who cured me.

3.

There were many such old women on the East Side. They were held in great respect. The East Side worshipped doctors, but in nervous cases, or in mishaps of the personal life, it reverted to medievalism.

Lovers sought philtres of the old Babas, to win a victory over a rival in love. Deserted wives paid these women money to model little wax figures of their wandering husbands and torture them until the false one returned.

Baba Sima called one summer night, as I lay pale and exhausted by the dark mental shadows. She was a hump-backed kerchiefed old crone, with red rheumy eyes, and protruding belly. Her flabby mouth was devoid of teeth, and was sunken so deeply that her nose and chin almost met. She was dressed as poorly as any old synagogue beggar. She sniffled and panted after the climb up-stairs, and my mother gave her tea. She talked a bit, took a pinch of snuff, then waddled into the bedroom to look at me.

"Nu, nu," she said, cheerfully, wiping her nose and sweaty face with a green rag out of a mysterious satchel, "if it was only a firecracker, I can cure him. The boy has been frightened, but I will pass the fright away from him. He will be sound in a few weeks, with God's help."

She turned me on my stomach, and with a blunt knife traced magic designs on my bare back, mumbling over and over in sing-song:

*"Tanti beovati,
Tanti sabatanu.
Tanti Keeliati,
Tanti Lamachtanu."*

"To him, and to her, and to us, and to it! The serpent and the fire, the ocean and the sun! God is Jehovah, and Jehovah is God! Rushyat! Cushyat! Cum! Tum! Sum!"

She rubbed my back lightly with a pungent oil, and the first treatment was over. My mother paid her a dollar and invited her to tea. The old lady grew amazingly greedy; she drank four glasses of tea heaped high with my mother's best rose-leaf jam. She gobbled at least a dozen butter cookies. Then she sniffled off to her next call.

I was left irritable and sceptical. This foreign hocus-pocus did not appeal to me, an American boy. I was ashamed of it. I feared the boys in my gang would hear of it, and would tease me. My mother stroked my hair.

"But no, my dear," said my mother with great earnestness, "no one will tease you. Don't you want to be cured of your fright? It isn't good to be frightened in this world; one can't go through life with a fright inside. One is not a man then. This is a famous Speaker; your poppa knew her in Roumania. She knows more than most Doctors. She learned her wisdom from a famous Zaddik. She is sure to make you well."

The next visit Baba Sima went through the same ritual and drank another gallon of tea with dozens of cookies. The third visit she left a prescription. My mother was to walk through the pushcart market on Orchard street, and buy a glass at the first pushcart selling household things. She was forbidden to bargain, but to pay the first price the peddler demanded. The same night, I was to take this glass to the East River. If there was a moon, I was to drink a glass of river water; no moon, two glasses. Then I was to throw the glass into the river, and repeat the words: Cum, tum, sum.

I did this. On the fourth visit the Magic-Maker prescribed a paste of horse-droppings gathered in the street; mixed with a spider's web, honey, grits, thyme, my own urine, and paper. This was smeared on my forehead for a week.

On the fourth visit the Magic-Maker brought many things in her bag. She set them out in the kitchen stove, muttering weird rhymes. Then she poured the lead from the melting ladle into the pail. The lead hissed and steamed as it dropped into the water. As it cooled, it took on a jagged outline. The Magic-Maker regarded the lead long and painfully. Her toothless jaws worked; her eyes watered as if she were crying, and she took many pinches of snuff.

"It is a horse!" she announced triumphantly at last. Our little family group, watching her fearfully in the gaslight was startled. "Give me another glass of tea; my cure is done, it is a horse!"

We stared at the chunk of jagged lead. Yes, we assured each other in amazement, it had taken on the shape of a horse. And the next night, exactly at midnight, my father led me into the livery stable, and I whispered into the ear of one of the coach horses:

"My fright in your body; God is Jehovah." I said, giving the horse an apple which he munched sleepily. "Cum! Tum! Sum!"

And thus I was cured. The nightmares did not return. I woke no longer screaming in the night. Yet I was sceptical, and could not believe in the magic. I asked Vaska the stable-hand whether



Weight of Sorrow

Woodcut by Gan Kolski.

the horse now woke at night, screaming. He said the horse didn't. I tried to make things fit, but couldn't. I was cured. It was magic, all right; that greedy, dirty, foolish old woman knew some deep secrets of life. She had cured me, all right. I never told any of my friends about the magic, I was too ashamed. But I marvelled all that summer, and not even my parents could explain it all. They had not heard of the greater magic: Suggestion.

4.

After I was cured, our family life went back to its normal summer routine. My father went out to work, my mother cooked and baked, my sister Esther played jacks and skipped the rope with her girls. I played with my own gang, I fought, stole apples, read Buffalo Bill stories, went swimming, watched the prostitutes. At night my father told fairy-tales to his admiring friends, and we drank beer. Then we searched for sleep on the roof, or on the sidewalks. The world was hot.

Every Sunday morning in summer my father itched to be off somewhere. He did not want to stay in town on his one free day. But my mother hated trips. When he rode to Coney Island to bathe, my mother never went along. She hated the pushing and excitement of a million frantic people.

"It's a madhouse," she grumbled. "Why must I fight a lot of hooligans because it is a Sunday? I can rest better sitting here on my own stoop."

She made my father angry. He loved swimming; he could swim way out beyond the lifelines. And he loved, too, as much as I did, the razzle-dazzle, the mechanical blare, the gaudy savage joys of Coney Island.

"But the fare is cheap, only a nickel," he said. "Where else can one go for a nickel?"

"I don't care", said my mother, "It's a madhouse. Coney Island is a place for monkies."

"Bah!" my father sneered. "You are an old Baba grandmother. You would like to sit by the stove all your life!"

"No," said my mother, calmly, "in Hungary I went to places. I used to walk there in the fields and the woods. But Coney Island is different. It has no fields."

"Nu," said my father, irritably, "let us go to the fields then. I will take you to Bronx Park next Sunday."

"Has it a forest there?" asked my mother.

"Yes, it has a forest," said my father.

"Nu, we will see then," said my mother, casually, "maybe I will go."

She was not enthusiastic. My mother had the peasant's aversion to travel. In her little Hungarian village no one ever travelled far, except to America. The East Side was her village now, and she saw no reason for leaving it even on Sunday. She still lives on the East Side, on the same street, in the same tenement* an un-hurried peasant. She has never been out of New York City. There are millions of such peasants in New York.

5.

Sunday came. My mother had evidently decided to make the trip to Bronx Park. She rose at six to get things ready. She ironed a dress for Esther, a waist for me; she darned our stockings, and packed a lunch of salami sandwiches, pickles, cake,

oranges and hard-boiled eggs. Then she swept the house, cooked breakfast, and woke us.

"Stand up!" she said, yanking off our bedclothes.

"Why so early?" my father groaned sleepily.

"We are going to your Bronx Park," sniffed my mother. "Have you forgotten?"

At breakfast my sister and I were crazy with excitement over the trip. My mother had to slap us. She was flustered and grumbly; the thought of travel confused her.

In the elevated train her face flushed purple with heat and bewilderment. No wonder; the train was worse than a cattle car. It was crowded with people to the point of nausea. Excited screaming mothers, fathers sagging under enormous lunch baskets, children yelling and puking and running under everyone's legs, an old graybeard fighting with the conductor, a gang of tough Irish kids in baseball suits who persisted in swinging from the straps—sweating bodies and exasperated nerves—grinding lurching train, sudden stops when a hundred bodies battered into each other, bedlam of legs and arms, sneezing, spitting, cursing, sighing—a super-tenement on wheels.

Northward to the Bronx! And at every station new mobs of frenzied sweating families loaded with lunch baskets and babies burst through the doors. There was no room for them, but they made it for themselves by standing on our feet.

My father cursed each time a fat wet matron flopped in his lap or trod on his corns.

This was New York on Sunday. All the trains and street cars were crowded like this. Seven million people rushing to find a breath of fresh air! Pfu! said my father.

"In Roumania it is only a little walk to the country," he said. "Here it is a fight for one's life. What a crazy land!"

But my mother became happier as the train rolled on. She leaned out of the window and smiled. In the streets below, the solid palisades of tenement had disappeared. There were small houses, each set among green weedy lots, and there were trees.

"It's a pleasure to see green things again," she said. "Look, another tree! I am glad we came, Meyer! When we come to Bronx Park I will take off my shoes and walk on the grass. I haven't done it for fifteen years."

"They will arrest you," snarled my father, as he glared at the fat Jewish woman standing next to him, who persisted in grabbing him around the neck each time the train lurched.

"I want to pick daisies!" cried my little sister.

"Yes, yes, my darling," said my mother, fondly, "daisies and mushrooms, too. I will show you how to find mushrooms. It is more fun than picking daisies."

6.

Ach, at last the Bronx Park! My father bought us popcorn to eat, and red balloons. Then we walked through some green fields. My mother sighed as she sniffed the fragrant air.

"Ach," said my happy mother, "it's like Hungary! There is much room, and the sky is so big and blue! One can breathe here!"

So we walked until we came to a menagerie. Here we saw a gang of crazy monkeys in a cage. They were playing tag. We fed them peanuts and watched them crack open the shells. Then we saw a lion, two tigers, a white bear, some snakes, birds, and an elephant. All of them we gave peanuts.

Then we walked far into a big lonesome country. It had a big field with no one in it. It had a forest at one end. We looked for signs: *Keep off the grass*. There were no signs. So we walked into the middle of the field, and found a wonderful tree. This tree we made our own.

We spread newspapers under the tree, and my mother laid out the lunch. We were hungry after our long ride and walk. So we ate the salami sandwiches and other good things.

My father drank two bottles of beer. Then he stretched on his back, smoked his pipe, and looked at the sky. He sang Roumanian shepherd songs. Then he fell asleep, and snored.

My mother cleaned away the newspapers. Then she looked to see if no policeman was near. There was no policeman. So she took off her shoes and stockings and walked around on the grass.

My sister and I left her and went hunting for daisies. We found some and brought them to her. She made two daisy crowns out of them, the sort children wear in Hungary. Esther and I put on each of the crowns.

Then my mother took our hands. "Come," she said, in a whisper,

"while poppa sleeps we will go into the forest and hunt mushrooms."

My father heard the whisper. His snores abruptly ended.

"Don't get lost," he mumbled, not opening his sleepy eyes.

"Pooh," said my mother, "lost in a forest? Me?"

"All right," said my father, turning on his side and snoring again.

7.

In the forest everything suddenly became cool and green. It was like going into a mysterious house. The trees were like walls, their leaves made a ceiling. Clean, sweet voices sang through the house. These were the birds. The birds lived in the house. Little ants and beetles ran about under our feet. They lived on the floor of the house.

I smelled queer, garlicky smells. I saw a large gold coin lying in a bed of green. I looked closer, and knew I was fooled. It was sunlight. The sun made other golden lines and circles. I heard running water.

My mother walked in front of us. Her face looked younger. She sniffed the air, and stopped mysteriously every few minutes.

"I am smelling out the mushrooms," she explained. "I know how to do that. I learned it in Hungary. Each mushroom has its own smell. The best ones grow under oak trees."

"I want to pick some," said Esther.

"No!" said my mother, sharply, "you must never do that. You are an American child, and don't know about these things. Some mushrooms are poison! They will kill you! Never pick them!"

"Do they come on strings?" I asked.

"Those are the dry mushrooms", explained my mother. "Ach, America, the thief, where children see mushrooms only in grocery stores! Wait, I will show you!"

There was a flush of excitement on her black, gypsy, face. We were surprised at our mother. She was always so slow-moving and careful. Now she jumped over big rocks and puddles and laughed like a girl.

"Stop! I think there are mushrooms under those leaves!" she said. "Let me scratch a little and find out. Yes, yes! do you see? My nose is still sharp after all these years! What a pretty silver cap it has! It is a birch mushroom. Its parents are those birch trees. When mushrooms grow near pine trees they are green, and taste of pine. But the oak mushroom is the finest of all. It is a beautiful brown."

She broke off pieces of the mushroom for us to nibble. "It is better with salt," she said. "But how good it is! It is not like the rubbish they grow here in cellars! No, the American mushrooms have no worth. They taste and look like paper. A real mushroom should taste of its own earth or tree. In Hungary we know that!"

We followed her, as she poked around under the trees and bushes for her beloved mushrooms. She found many, and lifted her skirt to make a bag for them. Each new mushroom reminded her of Hungary and of things she had never told us. She talked to us in a low, caressing voice. She stooped to the mushrooms, and her eyes shone like a happy child's.

"Ach, how people love mushrooms in Hungary! In the season everyone is in the forest with a big basket to hunt. We had our own favorite spots where we went year after year. We never plucked mushrooms, but cut them close to the roots, like this. It means they will grow again next year."

"Momma, can mushrooms talk to each other?"

"Some people say so. Some people say that at night mushrooms not only talk, but dance with each other. They are little jolly old men with long beards. In the morning they become mushrooms again."

"Birds talk to each other, too, people say. I used to know the names of all the birds, and their songs. I knew good snakes and bad, and killed the bad ones with a stick. I knew where to find blueberries and huckleberries. I could walk twenty miles in a forest and find my way back. Once, two girls and I were lost in a forest for days and found our way back. Ach, what fun there was in Hungary!"

Suddenly my mother flung her free arm around each of us, and kissed Esther and me.

"Ach, Gott!" she said, "I'm so happy in a forest! You American children don't know what it means! I am happy!"