V

NACHMAN, THE CHICKEN EXPERT

I.

CHASKIN'S APPEARANCE AT HOREPASHNIK WAS greeted warmly by the colonists.

"Chaskin has come . . . Chaskin is here . . ." was heard everywhere. In a moment he was showered with questions. Everyone had some business with Chaskin. The agronomist listened attentively, settled disputes and gave advice.

I remained standing alone observing the scene. How different, I thought to myself, these people look from their brethren in the nearby Polish ghetto. Their faces were roughened and tanned by the strong sun of the steppe. Their peasant attire—top boots and motley-colored blouses—lent to their undersized ghetto bodies a robust appearance. Even psychologically . . .

"Are you a stranger here?" a plaintive voice interrupted my meditations.

"Yes."

"Maybe an American visitor?"

"Yes."

"Maybe from New York?"

I turned toward my interlocutor. He was a man

of about forty-five with a wrinkled, sour-looking face. Unlike the other colonists, he wore a pair of half-shoes full of holes through which one could see his bare and dirty feet. With his dishevelled hair and long threadbare coat, he seemed fantastic, even if somewhat repellent.

"And who are you?" I asked.

The creature waved with his bony hands.

"I am nobody now. But I used to be somebody in the old days. Yes, who am I? Don't you see, a pig. They tell me that I am a peasant but I know that I am a pig. At least you live like a human being. We . . ."

He did not finish his sentence, but let out a prolonged and deep sigh. I recognized the sigh. It used to be a frequent trick of ghetto *schnorrers* to arouse one's compassion and pity. Incidentally, this sigh had already become a standard joke in Russia. Wherever I went, I heard the story of the two Jews who tried to enter a street car in Moscow. The car, as usual, was crowded and the Jews had much trouble in getting in. When finally they did get in, one of them let out a prolonged *"Oi-i-i."*

"Comrade Rabinowitz," his companion protested, "how many times have I asked you not to talk about politics?"

Unfortunately, the approach of some of the Russian Jews to Soviet politics is still expressed in a sigh. Of some, however, but not of all. The majority of the Jews at Horepashnik, for instance, did not complain about their personal lives. They wanted

from Chaskin instructions and practical advice, not pity and compassion.

I shall never forget the scene at the kolhoz's chicken coop.

"Chaskin!" came a voice from inside the coop.

"It is I, Nachman," replied Chaskin.

"It's you, it's you, I know it's you," said the voice. "Where have you been all this time, comrade Chaskin? You are forgetting us. I was already going to send for you . . ."

"Any trouble?"

"A mountain of it. I have trouble with the white chickens. Some of them died."

An elderly man of about sixty, with a white patriarchal beard, emerged from the coop. He held in one hand three white eggs.

"Look at them, just look at them," he said, showing the eggs to Chaskin. "Real beauties, eh? A year ago we certainly didn't think that we were going to have such eggs."

I looked at the old man in amazement. There was so much love, so much emotion in his voice when he spoke about the eggs and the chickens. The discussion between Nachman and Chaskin was prolonged and technical. I understood very little.

It reminded me, however, of another discussion about eggs. Somewhere in the Talmud there is a reference to eggs. Years ago when I was a very young boy I remember bearded men discussing them. But those were talmudical quibblings over theoretical eggs. Nachman's, on the other hand, were real . . .

2.

Both Chaskin and myself came to the collective intending to stay only a few hours. Chaskin had a great deal of work to accomplish and I was anxious to visit some of the other collectives. But it so turned out that I did not visit the other farms until three days later. This was all Nachman's doings.

"I wouldn't think of letting you go tonight," the old man argued with Chaskin. "The American must be fatigued. He is not used to our ways. And you . . . you, too, should take a rest. Besides, there is so much that I want to talk to you about. *Nu-u,* let's go into the house and no more arguments."

Even Chaskin, overburdened with work though he was, could not resist Nachman's plea and we decided to spend the night under his hospitable roof.

The house, a small one-story wooden structure painted all white, as is the fashion among the Ukrainian peasants, was located a short distance from the coop.

As we entered the vestibule with the earthern floor, Nachman announced:

"We have some important guests, Esther. Prepare something good and don't forget to boil a dozen of our best eggs!"

"A plague on you, old devil," a woman's voice replied from the kitchen. "Since when are you telling me what to do? You think I am one of your chickens?"

"All right, all right," the old man replied apologetically, "but there are guests and guests. You know who is here? Chaskin and a man from the land where you pick gold in the streets."

He winked at me and let us pass into the dining room. Himself, he remained in the vestibule and began to murmur something under his nose.

"He is probably ashamed of praying in front of us so he is saying his evening prayer in the vestibule," I remarked to Chaskin as we sat down to wait for our hosts.

To pass away the time, I gazed around the room.

It, too, was decorated in typical peasant fashion. The walls were whitewashed, and the furniture consisted of a long wooden table, crudely made—obviously Nachman's own handiwork—a few chairs and a cupboard. On the wall hung a picture of Kalinin, president of the Soviet Republic and chief patron of Jewish colonization. In a corner on the floor, yellow-leafed, battered prayer books and Talmuds were lying in a pile. They were covered with thick dust. Apparently, neither the prayer books nor the Talmuds had been used for a long time.

Suddenly the cackle of a hen was heard in the vestibule. It was followed by Nachman's low murmur. Chaskin went to the door and opened it. He beckoned to me.

In the dimly lit vestibule, Nachman's tall, lean figure was bent over a crib in which there were a number of chickens. He was whispering to them and patting their white necks gently. The hens, as though understanding his language, cackled in reply.

"Shadows of the *Tsadik Baal Shem Tov*," the agronomist whispered in my ear.

"Yes," I whispered in reply, "the reincarnation of Chassidism."

Indeed, this scene reminded me of those marvelous tales of the Chassids that I had heard as a child. Only years later, I learned that Chassidism was a sort of revolutionary movement among the Jews in the seventeenth century. They were a Jewish sect of pantheists who revolted against the bigotry and dogmatism of the Jewish law. It was a mystical philosophy which caught the imagination of ghetto dreamers, unacknowledged poets and unconscious revolutionists. The *Baal Shem Tov,* the originator of this movement, it was said, could speak the language of birds, chickens, dogs, stones, etc. And there was Nachman, tall, lean, with a long white beard, talking quietly to the chickens.

"A Red Chassid," I remarked again.

"The unity of poetry and life," replied Chaskin.

"Nachman, Nachman," Esther's voice came from the kitchen. "What will I do with a man like that? He lets the guests wait while he plays around in his hospital. He wouldn't ask if his wife was in good health, but he'll nurse the chickens day and night."

Soon Esther, a little stout, lively woman, appeared with a plate stacked high with eggs, black bread, butter and tea. We sat down to eat.

During the meal I asked Chaskin if he knew the fantastic looking Jew who had confronted me earlier in the evening.

"It is Hyman," interjected our host. "He has already been after you, that idler. It is funny how quickly he can scent an American. He has an uncle in New York, probably a poor beggar himself, and he is forever trying to get dollars out of him. Now that Hyman knows that you are here, you won't be through with him so soon. Before you leave he will yet pay you a visit with his nine children."

"Doesn't he do any work?"

"'Let the peasants work,' he will tell you. How many times have I said to him: 'Hyman, be a man and do some work. Forget that you were once an owner of a little shanty. This is a new world we live in. You ought to be glad that there is work to do.' But it is just as though you would talk to a piece of iron. Instead, he runs around the villages and complains to the peasants. And the Russian peasants have a good time and laugh."

"They laugh?"

"Sure they laugh. They laugh because we Jews cry."

3.

Later Chaskin told me the story of Nachman. It is at once an insignificant story and a great epic, symbolic of the transformation that has been taking place among the Russian Jews.

Nachman was a Bible teacher in a little village in the Ukraine. The revolution that has abolished the priest and the rabbi also abolished the trade of the

Bible teacher. Nachman and his wife became destitute. At first, he sought to fool the Soviet officials. He devised a contraband scheme of teaching the Torah. While he would instruct a pupil in the Biblical wisdom his wife policed the door. This continued for several years.

One day both Nachman and his wife disappeared from the village. They were practically naked when they appeared at the collective.

"I want to become a tiller of the soil," said Nachman to the chairman of the collective.

The chairman was sceptical. Nachman insisted. After much bickering and discussion, he was admitted into the collective. His job was to take care of the chickens. When I saw him, he had already been at it for half a year. He learned to love the chickens, and became famous throughout the farm as a chicken expert.

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Why he was placed in charge of the chickens in the first place, is a story all in itself. It is organically linked up with the history of the birth of the collective.

In the year 1929, the declassed Jewish inhabitants of the city of Melitopol decided to settle on land. With the assistance of the Geserd (a local organization affiliated with the Ozet and Komzet), they organized in 1930 a collective farm which was named Horepashnik.

At first, the majority of the members of Horepash-

nik decided that instead of going to the Crimea, where the Soviet Government was then distributing land among the Jews, they would rather settle in the vicinity of their home town. But there was no free land around Melitopol. The district was overcrowded. Only the Melitopol co-operative society still had 270 hectars of land (a hectar is two and a half acres) which was as yet not distributed. The Melitopol Jews leased these 270 hectars and established their collective farm.

According to the correspondent of *Emes*, A. Miroel, who had investigated the history of Horepashnick, not even one of its members had any previous experience in farming. And yet, during the first Spring the collective farm had sown corn, oats, Indian-wheat and planted vegetables. It had fulfilled its share of the Five-Year Plan in agriculture 115 per cent. Horepashnik won a Government prize. Henceforth it grew and developed. After a year of existence the Jewish farmers of the collective farm Horepashnik became the proud owners of 35 horses and 75 cows.

But that was only the beginning. In 1932 the Horepashniks realized that in the restricted area of Melitopol they would not be able to expand and they decided to move to the Crimea. In this case, too, they were assisted by the Geserds of Melitopol and the Crimea. A brigade of "explorers" were sent out to find an appropriate spot for the collective and on March 20, 1932, Horepashnik with all its possessions moved to the Crimean steppe, located in the district

of Saki, not far from the famous health resort, Evpatoria. Instead of 270 hectars, it now had 4,500 hectars of land on which to develop a socialist agricultural farm.

To relate the story of the growth and expansion of Horepashnik, or for that matter of any other collective farm—for example, Molotov, Icor, "The Jewish Peasant,"—in detail, is to repeat the tale of pioneers of all times and all over the world. It is the story of struggle, sacrifice and progress. It is still an incomplete chapter and will be so, I think, for many years to come.

Now about Nachman: his biography as an agricultural pioneer began in the month of March, 1932, when the collective had just moved to the Crimea. It was an extremely cold month. Icy winds blew from the Black Sea and the rains poured down unceasingly. Jewish settlers kept on streaming into the Crimea from every Russian ghetto. The Government organization was not prepared for such a rush and there were not enough houses to shelter them. And ghetto immigrants kept coming and coming. They sought shelter wherever they could. Some found refuge in the nearby peasant villages. Others, the younger and bolder elements, settled in the steppe in hastily constructed barracks.

Nachman was one of the latest arrivals. No place had been found for him where to lay his head. But such a predicament did not disturb the former Bible teacher who, in his sixty years of existence, had already tasted pogroms, persecutions, poverty and

starvation. He found a place for his wife in a peasant home and for himself a place in the chicken coop which had been hastily constructed in the steppe. He lived in this coop for several months during which period he became intimately acquainted with the chickens, and thus he was placed in charge of them.

"But isn't he a religious man?" I asked Chaskin after he told me the story about Nachman. "How does he get along with the younger, atheist element?"

"Of course, Nachman is religious," replied Chaskin, "but as long as it doesn't interfere with his work, it is no one's business. And the old man prays only on rainy days. The moment the sun begins to shine, he is off to his work. He forgets his God, the old heretic."