



The Angel and the Donkey: With Codices about Fire and Water

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Fragment of a novel

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The town was as tiny as a bird's egg.

But what kind of bird could have laid it? A magpie, a hen, or even, perhaps, a firebird? In any case, it rolled down to the ravines along the Strypa River where it cracked open. And when it did, people with cattle and fowl walked out, birds scattered about, beasts and serpents crawled forth, wheat and oats were sown, and trees and bushes bloomed.

Thus the town took root along the Strypa.

Later it matured, first stretching out along the river; for a while the high hills slowed its growth. Later the streets appeared organically: first parallel to the river, and then branching through the valleys and ravines, resembling a peeled-off eggshell from above. On some day of some year that no one quite remembers, Jews arrived in the town. They stopped at the river, bought a plot, and set to building. The scream of their carts carrying sandstone for the synagogue, mikveh, and homes pierced the town's air for fifty years. Then it finally came to a halt, with only their *beys-oylem* on a hill outside the city growing. They brought with them scrolls and velvet embossed with square script and carried them into the first synagogue, which they would later call Old. They had booths in the markets, opened shops, and every Saturday quiet descended over their quarter, impressive for its age. The descendants of the ones who spilled from the bird's egg and first settled those steep slopes above the Strypa passed through this stillness more than once without understanding why the city was so quiet. Perhaps it was this calm that filled the Universe when the Creator first decided to make the world, in which a place was eventually found for a town called Buchach.

Many years passed before Buchach dressed itself in stone, managed to build and then neglect a fortress, pave a few streets with cobblestones, and build a city hall. People tilled

and sowed the surrounding fields, traded in cattle and fur, held onto their churches, cathedrals, and synagogues so that, having come from the earth, they could return to it once again. So it was and so it will be as long as this world exists. Wars came and razed what had been built; fire destroyed neighborhoods; floods carried away bridges and streets, but the town kept on living, much like trampled blades of grass that stand up straight come spring. It also lived the Word — as offered by books, declaimed by the prophets, and recorded by ancient writers for future generations. The decedents of those first people—those who emerged from the bird's egg — and those who came by cart from distant lands and whose faces bore a southern bronze, read and listened to various books, but they were all about one and the same—the salvation of souls. For time in Buchach, as everywhere ultimately, was temporary. Abodes were temporary and human life as well. What was eternal were the heavens, the soul, and perhaps the Strypa. The city remembered the fires and floods and even the plague, which cut down a few hundred residents from every quarter. The echoes of these misfortunes passed from family to family, and the records of these events were kept in the magistracy, of course until they were swallowed by fire or drowned in a flood.

The family of Yehuda Farb lived in Buchach.

By then, the government was Austrian. In other words, that's how many centuries had passed since the bird's egg cracked open and people had filled in these hilly ravines. Yehuda was a fur trader. He traded in furs and heard the Strypa flow past the city. He saw the sturdy stone buildings and measured life in his short stride as he crossed over the bridges of Buchach: Palace, Gymnasium, and Black. He also prayed, read books, and dreamed of Jerusalem.

Every time the Hutsuls brought a load of tanned sheepskins, it set him off sneezing.

The wool smelled of tallow and the Carpathian herbs that blanketed their blue hills. There were always many people milling about Farb's store on the first floor of his home, which looked like a sharpened pencil. It was mostly other members of the tribe buying something from him, but also some goys who came from various cities with the tanned pelts of sheep, rabbits, foxes, and wolves, or water voles they'd trapped and were trying to pass off as young fox or winter hare. But Yehuda was a meticulous businessman and he carefully checked all goods he was offered. When he had accumulated a decent amount, he would send them to the local tailors. They made whatever their hearts desired, from shtreimels to Ukrainian shearling coats, which he then sold in his shop. But he wasn't above selling the plain pelts either.

When Farb's daughter Esther married Mordechai Halevi Czaczkes, he called his son-in-law to his shop, opened his accounting books, and told him how to conduct business. His son-in-law fell in love with other books and became a Hassidic rebbe at the Chortkiv court of Dovid Moshe Friedman, who was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. Yehuda Farb and his

family belonged to the opponents of Hasidism, the Misnagdim, who recognized the authority of Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman. Nevertheless, the traditions of both Hasidism and Misnagdim somehow got chummy under the son-in-law's one roof.

Time in the town trickled by as slowly as the flow of the Strypa. People were born, got married, and died, and no one thought of trying to turn back the tide, just as it never occurred to the human race to change what was destined.

The first to be born to the Czaczkes was Shmuel Yosef. He was a strong child with a large head, which made his father think he'd become a learned rabbi, his mother, "oy, so big!", and Yehuda that this newborn would eventually take over his store. What the other relatives thought at that time matters not. That old Farb was tickled with his new son-in-law went without saying. Truth be told, Czaczkes wasn't good at much of anything. It's possible the future father- and son-in-law met in Lashkivtsi at the market where they had both gone to sell their goods. For the younger man, that is Czaczkes, sometimes tried to earn his living through commerce in addition to writing and studying the Talmud. It was then that Farb asked the young man to become his companion. As it turned out, he became his son-in-law. After he gave away his daughter, who would have children like a rabbit, Farb eventually realized that his son-in-law understood business like a wolf knows the stars.

When the oldest grandson, Shmulie Yoselie, was growing up, he used to frequent his grandfather's shop on its small street in central Buchach, not in order to master the ways of commerce, but to lie down on the sheepskins and read, one leg tossed over the other. He was thirteen and a student at the local cheder. He always wore a black *kabat* jacket from under which his dirty tzitzit swung back and forth like cut-off chicken heads. He'd walk the few hundred meters from the cheder to his grandpa's store and then go home for lunch after he'd read his fill.

Every Saturday in the Czaczkes home, amid the shouts of children and the bubbling of the Saturday meal, there was time for conversation and song. As soon as Shmuel Yosef turned thirteen, he was present in the synagogue or houses of prayer in the Jewish quarter that were so close together that a hen could have run from one to the other in the rain without getting wet.

"Shmuel," the old man addressed his grandson. "Is school already out?"

"Yes," the boy answered, peeking up from his pile of sheepskins.

"What a smarty-pants," Farb chuckled to himself. "It's a shame I'll have to give the shop to Anchel." By then the Czaczkeses had another son and together with the Farbs had decided that it was the younger one who would go into business.

Farb noticed that the sleeves of his grandson's frock coat were rolled up and guessed that before coming to the shop he had again been catching fish barehanded in the Strypa. He knew the boy couldn't pass up a chance to play down by the river. No matter that in spring he'd come down with whooping cough after fishing like that!

"Has your father returned yet?" The old man decided to leave the topic of the river alone.

"No," his grandson said, not lifting his eyes from his book.

In addition to a thousand other thoughts floating through Farb's head, there was one that wouldn't let him go: his son-in-law had gone to Chortkiv to meet with and listen to an esteemed rabbi from Chernivtsi in the court of Dovid Moshe Friedman, yet a week had passed with nary a word from him. It wasn't like Chortkiv was beyond mountains and seas, but the father-in-law's heart was always troubled by Czaczkes's inability to adapt to life. His head was wise, but it had gone to a fool.

While Grandpa Yehuda was driving away this swarm of thoughts and looking out the shop windows, Shai got out the ink and plume given to him for his bar mitzvah and started writing. His grandpa's question caused his little heart to yearn for his father. Out of nowhere, words came to him like the flow of a river. There were so many that Shai didn't know what to do, so he set them to paper. He wrote them down, crossed some out, and saw that he had composed a poem. He read it over with pleasure. While his grandpa stomped around the shop sorting fox fur hats, Shai felt like the creator of his own small world, hidden for now from others' eyes. He read it again, committing every word to memory in case he accidentally lost the paper or his classmates at the cheder stole it from him.