

Excerpt from the play

MY NEIGHBOUR THE JEW

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My Neighbour the Jew

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Lyrics by Kirils Ēcis

Scene 3. Old Friedman's Funeral

PHOTOGRAPHER seats the spectators in chairs placed one behind another: there is a row for each decade of Friedman's life. As Photographer tells Friedman's biography, he hands one of the spectators a pebble and speaks as if relating the story of their life. The scene is set in the Green Synagogue in Rēzekne.

PHOTOGRAPHER:

It is 1922. You are Old Friedman, the old free man who died today. Your son has washed you and dressed you in white. You are laid in a very simple pine casket. The lid is closed. You are surrounded by the whole family; the rabbi reads a prayer, and ten men recite it after him in Yiddish.

BOY WITH A PRAYER BOOK: *(reads a prayer in Yiddish while Photographer tells the story of Friedman's life)*

May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified *(the congregation responds: Amen!)* throughout the world, which he has created according to his will. May his Kingship be established and may His salvation blossom and His anointed be near during your lifetime and during your days, and during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel, speedily and very soon, and say, Amen. *(The congregation responds: Amen!)* May his great name be blessed, forever and to all eternity. Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honoured, adored and lauded be the Name of the Holy One, Blessed be He *(Amen!)* – above and beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations which are uttered in the world, and say Amen. May there be abundant peace from Heaven and good life, satisfaction, help, comfort, refuge, healing, redemption, forgiveness, atonement, relief and salvation for us and for all his people, upon us and upon all Israel, and say Amen. *(Amen.)*

May He who makes peace in His high places grant in his mercy peace upon us and upon all the people of Israel, and say Amen.

PHOTOGRAPHER:

It was only yesterday that you were 80 years old; today you have already joined Eternity. A tassel of your prayer shawl has been cut off. Everything is alright. Death is a part of your life, and you have lived it with dignity. We will bury you now. But while we are carrying you out of the room in Rēzekne, Prime Minister Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics in Riga will task Deputy Minister of War Colonel Laimiņš with drawing up the rules for a design contest for a memorial pillar in Riga in honour of the fallen heroes of the War of Independence. The contest lasts until 1930, and the winning design belongs to Kārlis Zāle. Your grandchildren, the children of your son Yakov Friedman, will go to Riga in 1935 to watch the unveiling of the Freedom Monument. We will not be laying flowers on your grave.

It is 1912. You, too, are Old Friedman. You are around seventy. You sit in your workshop and give advice to your son Yakov. He repairs clocks, and he has learnt this trade from you. You were a good teacher and Yakov does not really need your help, but he loves to have you by his side; he listens attentively to what you tell him and interjects once in a while to tell you about the things he read in the paper yesterday. You see, the Fifth Olympic Games are taking place in Stockholm; they were opened by King Gustaf V, in whose name the winners are awarded medals of solid gold. For the first time ever athletes from Latvia are taking part in the Olympic Games as members of the team from the Russian Empire. They do not bring back any gold but two bronze medals instead – Haralds Blaus in clay pigeon shooting and Joseph Schomacker in team sailing. You say laughingly that they should have sent you to the competition, because you were an excellent marksman in the army. You would have brought back real gold instead of bronze! At last! But it's too late now: there will be no real gold medals in future Olympic Games, only gold-plated silver ones.

It is 1901. You, too, are Old Friedman. You are sixty. You live in Amerika. It is a poor Jewish neighbourhood in Rezhitsa [*the name of the city of Rēzekne under the Russian Empire*]. You are one of five watchmakers in town. Many of your neighbours have been living in real America for over ten years now; they even have set up a relief society that takes care of those who stayed behind in the homeland. Two of your sons, Samuel and Leib, are also in America now. But you do not want to leave. You know what it means to live in foreign parts. You want to be home. It is 11 September. You have come to watch the inauguration of a second railway station in Rezhitsa. There is a great bustle because a train from Moscow travels to Ventspils for the first time today, via Riga. The decree issued by Tsar Nikolai II three years ago has been carried out now and the Moscow–Ventspils railway line has been built. You stand in a crowd of people. A marching band plays, everybody smiles. Not you. All this brings back memories of a different railway journey.

It is 1873. You are Friedman. Finally free, and thirty-two. After a twenty-year absence, you are finally back. Nobody recognises you anymore; your Mama is dead. You speak perfect Russian, and you are of Russian Orthodox faith. You were the best among riflemen. Your eye was sharp and your hand was steady. Now you are standing by your mother's grave and recalling what you wrote to her in a letter from Vitebsk. 'Dear Mother! There is a God in Heaven, after all. Remember – in the first letter I received from you, you wrote me of your grief and suffering, of all the curses in the Torah that you pronounced upon Rabbi Kloyah for abducting me and taking me away? And lo! I met our enemy. Two weeks ago I was assigned to guard some prisoners who were ordered to clean the streets in Vitebsk. I recognised Rabbi Kloyah in their midst. He was pulling a wheelbarrow meant for the horse manure that was swept up off the streets. My first thought was that I could now avenge the suffering he had caused you. Then I realized that it would be small-minded of me to take revenge on a man whose fate was as miserable as his. The real revenge would be repaying his evil deed with good! I took a cigarette from my pocket and gave it to him when no one was looking. And when the time came for him to cart away the manure, I told him to take the lightest of wheelbarrows, for, believe me, he looked unwell and weak. I did whatever I could to make his life easier: I even procured him some food and gave him some money. He looked at me and said: 'My son, my son. Who are you and why are you treating me with such mercy?' – 'My heart knows the sorrow of soul,' I replied. 'Twelve years ago I was as desperate as you are now, but that was exactly because of you, Rabbi Kloyah, for I am the son of the widow Deborah, her sole support.' And he remembered you, dear Mother, and he fell to the ground, begging for forgiveness. I helped him up and asked the officer to send him away to get some rest, because he was ill. I comforted him and said that the suffering he had caused me had not destroyed me, and that he, too, must have faith in God, who can help even the lowest-fallen man get up again. But he did not accept my solace and a week later was sent to another prison. Believe me, dear Mother, if it were in my power, I would have saved him with all my heart and soul, where tenderness and warmth for him had now taken root. But when God has averted His face from someone, there is no hope for this lost soul. Have faith in God, Mother, and you will see your son soon, for in five years my twelve-year service will be over. And after one more year they will send me back to you. You will see that I am completely healthy, tall and strong, and you will rejoice and be proud of me for mastering the Russian language in all its minutest points and grammar rules. My commanding officer, who has taken a liking to me for my marksmanship, tells me: 'Abraham! When you go back to your town, you will be fit to teach Russian!' I hope that in three years I will be relieved from service completely, for our kind and just Tsar Alexander II has issued a decree providing that service from now on will be fifteen, not twenty-five years long, and I hope that pertains to me, too. Live and be well, dearest Mama, live and have faith in God, and

shalom to you and all our brothers who are scattered across faraway lands and isles.’ While you are thinking of your late mother, the first nation-wide Latvian Song Celebration has started in Riga. 46 choirs are taking part. 1019 singers make up the grand choir: 791 of these voices belong to men and 212 – to women. Choirs have come to Riga from the regions of Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Zemgale. There are no choirs from your native Latgale.

It is 1868. You are in the army. You are 27. You receive a letter from your Mama. She remembers the night when you were taken away to the cantonist school.

FRIEDMAN’S MOTHER:

‘Fifteen years have passed since that heinous night, but my blood boils every time I think of it, and it seems to me that it is happening all over again. You were twelve, your father was already dead. It was the night of the Simchat Torah celebration. We lived in a small hut, and you were asleep by my side. The following day I was about to take you to a farmer who used to know your father well. I wanted to ask him to hide you at his house for a while. It never occurred to me that they might come to take you away on Simchat Torah. Because it is a time for drinking and getting drunk. I had also fallen asleep, and our door was locked, but they still broke in; before I realized what was happening, they had already grabbed you and were carrying you away. I screamed at the top of my voice but they paid no heed. They had been drinking and they were drunk, and they had to take you because they had been paid. In the morning I went to see Rabbi Kloyah. He was sitting at a bountiful table. My heart was bleeding; I fell to his feet and wept and begged him to let you come home. But he told me: “Your son or the son of any other woman, it is the same to me. We must give him away, and, once he is in our hands, I cannot give him back to you. He will grow up into a man, if not under your roof then under someone else’s.” When I heard these words, I cursed him with all the curses that can be found in the Torah. Be damned, you murderer! Your wife shall be a widow and your children shall be orphans like my son. May the money you were paid for my son bring you misfortune! May you choke on it, because it is my and my son’s blood you are drinking! But Rabbi Kloyah did not answer me, he only sipped his tea and said: “What sweet tea, oh it is sweet!” I left his home in tears. That was the last time I saw you.’

It is 1853. You are Friedman. You are 12. And you are conscripted into a cantonist school.*

Cantonist’s Song, performed by PHOTOGRAPHER, FRIEDMAN’S MOTHER and BOY

They will come and take me,
Leave nothing in my stead for you,

Carry me off like a piece of wood,
Use me like a soulless tool.

Farewell, dearest Mama,
I'm now owned by the Tsar.
Christened with a foreign name,
Now I'm in his power.

Nobody will ask me now
If my feet are frozen cold.
'Hold your tongue!' they'll yell at me,
My longing will remain untold.

Farewell now, dearest Mama!
Farewell, my darling boy!
I'll grow as tough and hard as a fist,
Always ready to fight and toil.

If I ever come back home,
None of you will know me.
A mangled language I will speak,
A beard now covering my cheek.

Farewell, dearest Mama,
I'm now owned by the Tsar.
Christened with a foreign name,
Now I'm in his power.

It is 1841. Your name is Friedman. You are born at a time when a so-called conversion of Jews is taking place in the Russian Empire, steps that force them to renounce their traditional lifestyle and faith. All Jews must become Russians. The plan was attempted in 25 governorates that overlapped the Jewish settlement areas, and Latgale, part of Vitebsk Governorate, was severely affected. Kahals were more heavily taxed;

Jews needed permission from the authorities to change their place of residence; many Jewish boys aged 12 and even younger were forced into cantons – military training battalions – where they were converted to the Russian Orthodox faith. From 1844, Jews had to pay a tax for wearing their special traditional garments; in 1851 this kind of dress was banned altogether. Permission to wear it was given only to elderly people and, with the Governor's assent, individually to people who had submitted a request. The same year saw a decree on disbandment of autonomous kahals if it was deemed they had not embraced the process of conversion. During the 30 years of his reign, Nikolai I issued some 600 laws and decrees regulating the life of Jews.

It is 1841. Abraham Friedman and [*Latvian poet, author of the national epic Lāčplēsis ('The Bear-Slayer')*] Andrejs Pumpurs are born.

* **Cantonist schools:** (*Russian Empire, 18th-19th century*) Initially gymnasium-like regimental schools, later reorganized as 'asylum-orphanages' for orphaned children of military personnel, then reorganized again into cantonist battalions. The schools carried out forcible conscription of underage recruits from indigenous peoples, Old Believers, Gypsies, and common vagabonds from 1805, Jews from 1827, and Poles from 1831.

It is estimated that between 30,000 and 70,000 Jewish boys served as cantonists. All cantonists were institutionally underfed and encouraged to steal food from the local population, as well as to convert to the state religion of Orthodox Christianity. Conscripts were required to serve in the Imperial Russian army for 25 years after completing their six-year military studies.