Siegfried Kapper

Tales of the Prague Ghetto

Translated by Jordan Finkin

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Translated from the German by Jordan Finkin
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siegfried (Salomon) Kapper (1821–1879) was a Czech-Jewish writer, scholar, and folklorist. He earned his medical degree in Vienna in 1847 and took part in the revolutionary movements of 1848 in that city, being elected to the Austrian parliament. That year he published a collection of poetry (*Befreite Lieder*), giving voice to that revolutionary spirit. While a student, he advocated strongly for Jewish emancipation and was sympathetic to Czech national aspirations. He notably published poetry in Czech (*České Listy*) as well as German, and he translated Bohemian and Moravian folksongs into German.

Kapper traveled through Central and Eastern Europe, developing an interest in the local cultures. He practiced medicine in several Bohemian towns before settling in Prague in 1867. There he became a civic and cultural figure, serving on various committees and giving lectures on literature and on Slavic culture. He translated collections of Serbian and other Balkan folklore, and penned popular travelogs of his journeys through Southeastern Europe.

Kapper's interest in Jewish matters never waned. The stories he wrote about the Jews of Prague (collected posthumously as *Prager Ghettosagen*) display both his intimate connection to Jewish themes and his intense interest in folkloristics. As a testament to the significance of his impact on Czech Jewish life, in 1920 the prominent association of Czech Jewish academics—Spolek Českých Akademiků Židů (Society of Czech Academic Jews)—changed its name to Akademický Spolek Kapper (Kapper Academic Society), and a year later published a collection of his writings.

Kapper died of tuberculosis in Pisa in 1879.

GENENDA: FROM PRAGUE GHETTO'S OLDEN DAYS

The moon emerged from the thick clouds right above Braník's monstrous limestone outcrops, scattering its magical light in a thousand glittering stars over the gently flowing waves of the Moldau. A profound silence lay over the waters and the surrounding landscape, broken only by the monotonous, rhythmic stroking of oars.

A skiff had set off from the shore by Braník and was gliding slowly and peacefully down the wide river.

The boy at the oars sang a pious hymn in long-held notes. Zerah stared at the floor of the skiff in front of him, lost in thought, as Golda leaned against the side of the little craft. She gazed down into the dark, mysterious depths as she toyed with a willow twig in the waves as if trying to fish those fleeting, glimmering little stars out of the water—stars which seemed to emerge from the deep to dance their moonlit roundelay on the softly rippling waves.

"My child, I promised to tell you the story of Genenda!" old Zerah broke the silence. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes! do tell it, Grandfather," Golda replied, pulling the willow twig out of the water and turning to face her grandfather.

"Come then, my child," he continued, urging the girl closer to him. "Come, sit on the bottom of the boat, over here, by me. It's not safe to sit near the edge, you might get dizzy. Good. Now I can start!"

Golda sat down on the floor of the boat, beside her grandfather, and lay her black locks on his knee, watching him with her large, dark eyes and listening attentively with expectant anticipation.

Zerah began: In the year 1040, the banks of this river were still hemmed with reeds from time immemorial, and dark, ancient forests stretched off over mountains

and plains on either side. There was still little arable land and few fertile pastures, and there were neither villages nor farms to be seen scattered through the valleys to the right and left as they are today. Yet even then the proud Vyšehrad[1] loomed over those sharp rocks. Now you can only see the decaying walls and half-crumbled towers where princes once sat with their advisors deliberating over the welfare of the people, passing judgment on what was right and what was wrong. Even then our forefathers dwelt here in this land, with their houses and communities, and made their living honestly by the fruits of their labor according to the laws of the Book. They were still few in number and they did not yet live all together in their own quarter of the city, segregated from the other faith, separated by walls and gates. In the shelter of the prince's castle, at the foot of the Vyšehrad stood their few houses made of unbaked bricks and roofed with straw, relying on one another in pious community, pleasing to God.

In one of these houses, closer to the shore than the rest, lived Rabbi Baruch, known as the Chazan, or Cantor.[2] God had blessed him above so many others with the gift of song, and his understanding of string music exceeded anyone else at that time. Both became a rich source of profit for him. The whole week long he would wander the country with his songsters and his fiddle, enlivening the festivities of the noblemen in their castles and the burghers in their marketplaces. They paid him handsomely, for wherever he went good cheer followed, and wherever he brandished his bow hearts did not fail to rejoice.

However, on Friday evenings and on the Sabbath and holidays he stood before the Holy Ark, his singers at his side. He prayed with them out of a large Siddur,[3] singing Psalms, chanting the weekly Torah portion, and leading the congregation in their prayers. When the service came to an end, he returned with his singers to his house by the shore

to spend his Sabbath rest in quiet domesticity, to pray from God's word, to nourish his soul and strengthen it for the week's worldly pursuits.

In the doorway Genenda would be waiting for him, the last of his darling children; the others, two sons and two daughters, had all been laid to rest a year ago. And shortly thereafter he had gone to bury their mother as well. Genenda was the only one left to him. She went out to meet him and greeted him with all her childlike sweetness, "Good Sabbath!" He kissed her, lay his hands on her head, and recited the blessing of the four Matriarchs over her. He then went inside where the table was spread with wine and cakes, all prepared for him and his singers. On the reading stand in the window nook his Talmud lay open so he could continue reading without having to leaf through to find the place he had stopped the previous Sabbath. All this Genenda had done to please her father. She would spend the whole day with him; for him she was the soul of the Sabbath.

He was content and lived happily like few other Jews. For he had achieved what a man requires to be happy: a sufficient living and a person who loves him and who deserves to be loved, his child.

One Sabbath—the Sabbath before Purim—shortly before the time for Minchah,[4] a stranger opened the door of his house.

Rabbi Baruch rose respectfully from his chair as the young man had very refined features, an elegant bearing, and looked much like the young nobility of the country. Rabbi Baruch noticed, however, that before entering the house this stranger touched the mezuzah,[5] his lips moving faintly as if he were praying. He then approached the Rabbi cheerfully. Rabbi Baruch recognized a son of Israel and extended his hand in welcome, "Is it well with you?"

The stranger answered, "Very well!"

Rabbi Baruch bade him come closer. “Who are you? Where have you come from? And what do you want in the house of Rabbi Baruch the Cantor? If you are in a hurry to tell me something important then do so at once. But if you are not pressed for time and your mission can wait, please be my guest at the third Sabbath meal, which I was just about to begin. Then you can speak with me of what you will.”

“You are the master of the house!” the stranger replied. “Your wish is my own!”

Genenda had been reverently reading a book of Psalms. She had not even looked up when the stranger entered, for she was pious and God-fearing and it was a sin to interrupt one’s reading of the Holy Book or one’s prayers. She went and brought cold meats, white bread, and dried fruits on a shiny tin platter and placed them on the table along with a silver beaker of wine.

After the meal ended, the stranger began: “My name is David and I come from a large and celebrated trading city on the Baltic behind whose walls and in whose houses great wealth and immeasurable riches are stored. My father was considered one of the most powerful merchants in the city. His ships plied every sea and his money sat in every bank. I was his sole heir, and since I was sufficiently worthy and honorable to continue his name to the next generation he betrothed me to the daughter of an equally respected business associate from Portugal. On the very day my wedding was arranged, the Almighty—blessed be His name!—determined a different fate for me and that my hopes should come to naught. For three days in a row, messengers of ill arrived at my father’s house. One bore a letter from my father’s largest debtor in Lisbon. He described how he would never be able to pay his debt for he had lost all his property in a deal gone bad and had to flee to Africa in order to evade the hands of the law. The next one brought

word of pirates in the South Atlantic who had plundered and burned a ship which was just returning from India laden with the majority of our money in silks and spices. Finally the third recounted how in the sea around Helgoland where there are innumerable sandbanks and hidden reefs a storm shattered the ship carrying the rest of our wealth in ready money. It had just left Amsterdam, the crown city of commerce, whence our business manager had sent the debts he had collected.

"The wealthy merchant from Lisbon received word of my father's misfortune in the harbor of a city on the French coast, just as he was about to marry off his daughter to me. He turned right back around and wrote to my father, repudiating the engagement and declaring that neither I nor his daughter were any longer bound by the pledge.

"But the misfortunes were not yet exhausted. My father's loss was more that he could bear. The judges sold our house and garden and all of our expensive tapestries and furniture. As if all of this were not enough, they locked my father up in the deepest dungeon of the debtor's prison. There he was to languish till someone might volunteer to pay his debt or go his bail, or until death should take pity on him and settle the accounts.

"Not only did they throw me out of my childhood home, but they drove me from the gates of my native town. I went door to door to the houses of my father's friends, but they neither wanted to listen to me nor know me. I reproached them, reminding them that my father had always stood by them in similar times.

"I set off to wander the wide world, to earn my bread and seek relief and redemption for my hapless father. I have roamed across many countries and have seen many cities; I have gotten to know many peoples but have found no one to take pity on me and my father. I have told my tale in the hovels of the poor and the houses of the rich. Their hearts

were moved, their tongues condoled, their lips consoled me, but no hand was lifted to help me.

"After some weeks I came to your country. When I arrived, everyone spoke of Rabbi Baruch the Cantor, praising his singing and extolling his virtuosic skill on the fiddle. From that moment it was my most fervent desire—next to redeeming my father—to come to know a man of such renown and spend some time in his company. In better times I too devoted myself to song and fiddle-playing, loving art above all things. So I permitted myself no rest and wandered day and night till I learned where you lived and could step inside your house.

"So now you see me here before you; you know my name and where I come from. But it is my most ardent wish that you permit me to learn from you and that you take me on as one of your songsters. I will gladly serve you and promise to obey you in all things, as you wish. Perhaps at your side I might develop into a skillful cantor and return with honor to my native town with sufficient earnings to redeem my father."

Rabbi Baruch listened attentively to the stranger, and Genenda felt sincere pity for this man who at such a young age had endured so remarkable and woeful a fate.

Now that he understood what the stranger wanted, Rabbi Baruch stood, picked up his large prayer book, and instructed him to recite and chant various passages by way of examination. Finding that David knew how to read in a clear, intelligible way and that his voice had a pious tone, he said to him: "David, you shall be one of my songsters! There is much, indeed nearly everything, that you must learn. You seem not to be so practiced in the traditional style of singing. But you are industrious and attentive and well-intentioned, so you might well soon become a good singer."

Rabbi Baruch and the stranger went to the synagogue to recite Minchah. In the twilightening period between

Minchah and Ma'ariv they continued to talk until the stars appeared in the sky, signaling the beginning of the evening prayers and the end of the Sabbath. The stranger took his leave of Rabbi Baruch, promising that on the eve of every Sabbath and festival from then on he would come to the Rabbi's house in order to learn how to sing, but that on the weekdays he would go about the country in search of employment.

The next morning, Rabbi Baruch arose early and gathered his fiddle and his songsters. He blessed Genenda and they set out beyond the distant mountains as that evening they were to sing and play at the castle of an esteemed knight, many miles away.

Genenda was left alone in the little house. She was used to spending such times either taking care of small household chores or in preparing sumptuous and inventive embroideries in silk and gold. Orders came from near and far when someone wished to dedicate an ark curtain or a Torah mantle for a synagogue. From time to time her playmates would come over in the evening and tell each other stories and sing songs, as was their way.

That week, however, neither her work nor her songs were much of a success. She often sat alone for hours at a time brooding, though she knew not over what, and feeling sad, though she had no idea why. When her friends were absent for some time, she was impatient; and when they did visit her, she remained silent, telling none of the many stories she knew, nor singing songs with them, though she had the finest voice of them all. When one of the girls started singing a song and then another chimed in, and then another, and finally all of them together—her dark eyes moistened and her sweet voice resounded with a marvelous brightness as if she were trying to sing into her own beautiful, brimming soul. The girls exulted at the song and said it had never sounded as lovely.

So the week passed till Friday came again. At an hour after noon Rabbi Baruch returned to Genenda and his community. And after him the new singer arrived as well.

While all week long Genenda had been taciturn, pale, and sad, now she danced cheerfully around her room and into the little garden behind the house. She sang once again as an indescribably sweet redness flushed her cheeks. Rabbi Baruch, whom she had been deprived of for so long and whom she loved so dearly, was now with her once more. She hastened to spread the dazzling white cloths over the table and sideboard, scatter light-colored sand on the polished floor, and braid the seven wicks for the Sabbath candlestick.

Rabbi Baruch meantime busied himself with teaching the new singer the tune for the hymn "Lecha Dodi," for that evening at the Sabbath eve service in the synagogue was to be his first time singing with them. He brought a harp with him, and just as quickly as he caught the singular beauty of the tune and learned how to sing it he was also able to devise an equally beautiful accompaniment for it on the harp. Rabbi Baruch was overjoyed at his keenly intelligent pupil and heaped praise upon him.

When Rabbi Baruch stood before the ark and began leading his singers in "Lecha Dodi"[6] the voice of the new singer sounded singularly holy compared to the others—like the bells ringing in Christian churches; and his harp rang out with unaccustomed solemnity between the verses of the song—like the reverberations of a Cathedral organ. A profound silence reigned in every corner of the synagogue; not a breath stirred. All were gripped by the heavenly harmony of Rabbi Baruch and his singers as they stood in deep pious devotion.

Such it was on every subsequent Sabbath. The new singer's voice was splendid. He was soon able to sing all the prayers, indeed probably better than any singer ever could.