

## The Last Tale of Mendel Abbe (a satiric novel)

### synopsis

Mendel Abbe was a teller of tall tales by trade, and a New Yorker. He was also a manic depressive, deeply affected by events in the outer as well as his own inner Mendel world. On September 15, 2001, Mendel was napping alongside his wife as they drove home on the New Jersey Turnpike after a visit to old friends. Somehow, implausibly, the events of 4 days previous had escaped their attention.

Mendel awoke somewhere near Newark, New Jersey opened his eyes and was incredulous to see the absence in the New York skyline and the clouds of smoke billowing from where the twin towers had once stood. Mendel's shock became even more traumatizing when he got home, turned on the TV, and observed over the next several days how the media and government turned the tragic events into a circus of bizarre and misplaced chauvinist rhetoric promoting the heroic role of the, now victimized, United States in modern history.

Driven by angst, and his own nature, Mendel begins a tale taller than the towers hoping to recuperate the sad state of history. He resurrects a group of characters from a little known *shtetl* in 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland, people invented by another New Yorker, Solomon Simon and the renowned writer, Sholom Alechem, for the amusement of Jewish children. The name of the place: Chelm; of the people: the Wise Men of. Mendel brings the Chelmites to the U.S. as escapees from Nazi terror and integrates them into the modern world, where their impact is profoundly felt. They become central to the events of our time. Mendel also invents a son for the U.S. president—a sort of a beat intellectual son—and that gets him into trouble with the authorities.

Mendel's activities are noted by Homeland Security and he is ultimately disappeared. However, Sophie, Mendel's wife, is no slouch. She was, in earlier years, a stringer with the New York Times and she has been collaborating with Mendel within the story to develop his satire. She finishes the book trying to be true to Mendel's satiric style though inevitably lacking the polarities of his manic depressive reality. Sophie publishes the book with an epilogue—a eulogy--to Mendel.

# The Last Tale of Mendel Abbe

Sonny Bush and the Wise Men of New Chelm

a Novel

by Marc Sapir

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## Preface

The first time I encountered Mendel Abbe I wasn't positively impressed. Have you ever met someone that you instantly found annoying, uninteresting at best, maybe disagreeable, irritating or even dislikable? But then were surprised, after a few encounters to have your reaction reverse, turn into fascination, as characteristics that seemed overwrought became endearing, as insights that sounded pedestrian and not at all insightful took on shades of light, subtlety, even brilliance, as the alleged egoist was transformed to teacher or lover or friend?

I won't bother you with the details, but to say that it took me a difficult little while to really appreciate Mendel. But then my admiration grew by leaps. When Sophie approached me to write the preface for this book, I was more than honored. Mendel and I were the closest of friends. I appreciate the chance to recall our bond and to here pay tribute to both Mendel's and Sophie's determination and wit.

On December 21<sup>st</sup> of 2001, Mendel Abbe and I were attending a conference at Columbia University on ethnography, myth, storytelling and humor in Jewish folklore. The auditorium was rather spacious and had the feel of an amphitheater. The theater seats, refurbished and comfortable, sloped up toward the back, though not steeply and there were three tiers to it, but no actual balcony. I distinctly remember that we were seated in the 11<sup>th</sup> row at the back of the lower tier close to an aisle. I had chosen that row because it was neither below nor above the panelists. Sitting there, our eyes were at the same level as those of the speakers on the smallish thrust stage and we could see their faces clearly. This was important to me, as I knew

it was also to Mendel Abbe, because we were there as much to read the facial expressions, body language and nuances of presentation of our mentors as to hear the expert commentaries. We knew in advance that besides the literary critics and academics, a number of the presenters would be some of our greatest living storytellers of Jewish lore.

Meanwhile, the conference was being picketed by a strident Zionist group because one of the invited speakers, a world expert on Jewish diaspora writings of Northern Africa, was a Syrian Jew, who, in the world view of the protesters, had divided loyalties that should not be tolerated. A month earlier, on November 11, this writer storyteller, Shalom Malik, had given a radio/TV interview in which he drew parallels between Saddam's Iraq a decade in extremis sub bombaris and the attack on the World Trade Center. He also had mentioned Sodom and Gomorrah. Naturally the picketers were mostly upset by his allegorizing Israel=s treatment of the Palestinians into the same word-painting as decadent empire.

There was no doubt that Shalom was controversial, but when the picketers began to shout that those of us attending the conference—a broad array of people—were Jew-haters, anti-Semites and self-haters, well, Mendel Abbe and I just shook our heads in mutual dismay at the strange new world that had come upon us since AAmerica lost its virginity@ three months earlier.

Just two hours into that day-long conference program, following a talk about the Agrandfather@ of the Jewish short story, Sholem Jacob Abramovitsh, a professor from Yeshiva University, ascended the stage and began a talk on the great story-writer Isaac Bashevez Singer. Professor Sachi Cohen hadn=t uttered more than a few sentences when a man dressed like a

Muslim—we learned later that he was actually the American sad sack Nazi sycophant portrayed in Chabon’s *Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay*—came screaming down the aisle and lobbed a bomb onto the stage. I have no idea what kind of explosives this fellow used, but the thing itself was big, and it hit the ground with such a thud that its landing was more onerous than the explosion that followed. Luckily no one was hit by the projectile. And more luckily, the actual detonation, for all the fear and panic it caused among us in the audience, was a dud. Nails and sundry other materials spilled onto the stage as if the bomb were a paper sack rent by a snag. The dull thud of the explosion and the puff of smoke that came from the canister, which resembled a miniature keg or a backpacker’s bear canister, were most reassuring to the several hundred or so who had taken to their winged feet and were heading for exits at light’s speed. The sound of tension as well as scuffling feet filled that few seconds’ void after that thud, and then I felt a collective sigh of relief. People turned back toward the stage and waited and watched. Being on in years, I had not ascended more than a few steps from my seat and observed all this with amazement. I had risen instinctively and lost track of time and Mendel Abbe in the lurch. But when I turned back, as did so many others, what I saw in the row from which I had come was himself, Mendel Abbe, sitting placidly in his seat taking notes, unfazed. I know now that this story is what he was then beginning work on. And it was his wonderful story that imbued him with the calmness and perseverance to withstand so many more shocks that were to befall all of us.

Marc Sapir

## Compression/Decompression

“*Is this when history turned to fiction?*” he said.” *Underworld*, Don DeLillo

I awoke into this vague odyssey, lethargic and cotton-headed-it was 2001-and closed my eyes for three depressing minutes. I awoke again, focused, prescient, wired, ready to high step. In a word, I was that kind of bipolar who often couldn't even tell which side of the moon he was walking on, the light side or the dark. Bipolar! *Capish? Foshtaish?*

I awoke in an odyssey, 2001, and found I was driving north in a rental car with Sophie on the New Jersey Turnpike. She was driving, I was driving, who knows? I opened my eyes, Newark, it was September 15<sup>th</sup> and looked out eastward across the expanse of marsh, muddled low high-rises, Jersey City, then across the invisible water of Upper Bay to the usual backdrop. It was a clear day for viewing, saw it clearly: the grey-black and mostly-white pall of history, languidly drifting uptown from the still-burning absence in the Lower Manhattan skyline. Drifting? No. The smoke was drifting, but the bier of our future was shrouded in a dense suffocating symbolism, absorbing, engulfing, overcoming realities with a sleight turn of hand, through the symbolisms of empire, transfixing history to a prefigured inked blotter, like the captured-killed *mariposa*, a butterfly in the blottered display case.

Voyeuristic reality programming had reached its final pinnacle. A trapdoor opened and historicity, no longer flowing from conqueror to conqueror, waiting to be written, or even conjured by imaginative intellectual didacts, flew out and was snagged like the butterfly or fish or bird caught in the capture-release paradigm of a hypergeometric statistic—released,

marked, but never again free. And all those dead people...just the tip of an iceberg. The bitter, unavoidable, acrid arsine-like stench from 14<sup>th</sup> Street south—yes, I smelled it and breathed it, the premonition of erosive death—would surely, like so many depleted uranium projectiles of the Gulf annihilation, feast on epithelial linings and lung alveoli for generations. But the fabrication of endless war being conjured from these bitter realities would fuel a virtuality sufficiently compelling to dwarf the real stench and loss of life. How, you ask? Through the symbolic dehiscence of history itself. The technology of reality fabrication would thus climax orgasmically, turning humankind into an aimless, blind, wandering lot staggering toward nowhere in particular, except, it would seem, away from a sanguinary future.

I awoke in an odyssey, September 15, 2001, on the New Jersey Turnpike heading north to Manhattan. Upset, angry, perturbed, distraught, manic! Going out of my mind? Of course, and you? Wanted to escape from it, as if it were the second coming of the holocaust. I wanted to escape but there was no exit. I had to escape and so I became a great Houdini. I=Im Mendel Abbe, Jewish, American, with this story, helped along by Solomon Simon and David Grossman. This story=s roots are 150 years old, in a *shtetl*, in Poland. Maybe you=ve heard of the Wise Men. We can't go back there but still...

## In the Beginning (What Happened to Chelm?)

*Paragraph 1 etc: wherein the author asserts a delusional pomposity suggesting Prometheus himself returning, writhes and so creates an excuse, you hear me, an excuse for the reader to misunderstand the tone of the book and its vernacular, providing a useful reason to quit reading for those who won't/ can't "get into the book."*

Within David Grossman=s epic tale, *See Under: Love*, and within child Momik=s and storyteller Wasserman=s mighty struggle to repair the 20<sup>th</sup> century rent in the rich fabric of human history, there arose magical off-shoots, miracles; by-products surfaced from the depths of oceanic tidal despair, and yes, even unimaginably turgid outcroppings of conscious flotsam arose. I was reading there, and Wasserman, the feeling of him, in particular, reached out toward me, tentaculated around my torso, and squeezing energy from my innards, took on its own life, just as Kazik—like all children—was forced to externalize his parent, Fried, to become himself. Only backward. I was being sucked upon. Energy was undulating and ululating within the outcropping like a diaphanous fluorescent jellyfish=s streaming neural consciousness, while, looking outward along those many broken roads toward freedom, my mind saw, wandering through the mind=s eye and beating heart of Wasserman, miniaturized, individual members of another band, not exactly like the Children of the Heart, but similarly dissolute, lost, out of contact with each other in that way, they wandered disengaged, individuated to the tips of

their toes, stuck in the spongified morass of history like the grown children of contemporary times. What can I say? I offered thanks to the inner gleam in Momik=s eye, which bestows upon an undeserving narrator the good fortune to enter history, and in this case a path to seek the once and future band known to the world through the good graces of the Jewish narrative writer Solomon Simon as the Wise Men of Chelm. Pah! Bosh! Metaphysical nonsense, you say. Turn off your TV, dear reader, the screen has gone blank. You=re wasting energy.

You will, no doubt, find the recovery of the later lives of the Chelmites either remarkable or unremarkable, assuming you know of them of course, *kindele*. And from that root, the reader should at least pretend that the tale itself could not have sprung from a pretentious feeble-minded old fool, but represents the excavation of the lost history of an entire clan, the people of Chelm, themselves. We=ll see.

First, should the reader not have heard of Chelm and its brilliantly wise men, a brief reflection on their previously documented history should suffice. I can=t give you very much of it here. It isn=t such a big story anyway. Better for the history, the reader to make straight away to the library, search the children=s section; for now we need to proceed to how the men and their town disappeared from Poland and later such events. But an aside before that. If you go on your search, be you goyim or otherwise, look for Helm, not Chelm, because wise Solomon knew there being no sound in English to match our “CH” in the back of the throat, that “H” is closer to the literal truth—assume that getting close to the truth be a useful struggle. But for me it=s Chelm (though it might have been an “H”, Hebrew Ahay@[ \_] for all I know now, because I forgot to ask Solomon).

Chelm, once a town and later a burgeoning burg somewhere in Poland, was at that time populated, like many of our modern locales, by a large number of sheep, some fools and a few goats. It was thus very democratic, some would say domestic. The fools, I believe, were furry fellows with a tendency to shout Abaaaa, baaa, baaa@. The sheep refused to wear their winter coats with the fur side outward lest they be eaten by wolves, well, those I leave to your imagination. The Jewish citizens, on another hand, (for whose hand would that be?) were, in some respects, wise beyond their non-performance on the Standardized Achievement Tests required in the Polish schools they did not attend. They had creative abilities, though there were few measures available to describe them at the time. For example, when it came to choosing leaders, the people of Chelm had a knack for selecting the most brilliant and successful among them for mayor, city council, judges, school board, philosopher, scientist, jailer, police chief, librarian, fire chief, animal protector, and so on. They had a veritable Vaclav Havel of public servants. But selection wasn't that simple. As a former professor of mine once said, "In a world of such confusion and ignorance, who=s to know which are which?@"

AWhich what are which?@ I responded. But he adamantly refuse to answer my question. AYou should study philosophy,@ he later replied, which I took as a compliment since psychology was the field in greatest disrepute at the time.

Well, be that as it may, after the Wise Men of Chelm had failed to capture the moon in the pale, (do not sic the pale) failed to bring back the wonderful bagels from Warsaw, failed to lock up their prisoners in jail, failed to build a mill that would function on top of a hill, wasted

their money buying a barrel of justice, lost the feathers they set on the wind that never arrived in Chelm and brought special firefighting water from Warsaw instead of using their own stream, they managed to burn down the entire town trying to kill the cat who they actually needed to kill the mouse invasion. Fancy that.

All manner of other calamities had been taken in stride and they remained temporarily undaunted, but the destruction of the whole town caused the Rabbi to declare this an act of God. "Like the destruction of Jerusalem," he told the Chelmites in a hastily called meeting at the Temple, "It's a sign we must go out into the world and fulfill our destiny." What was their destiny? Why, naturally it was to bring their great wisdom to all of the fools of the whole wide world who never seemed to grasp the real way of things and always failed to partake of the wisdom and logic of the Chelmites.

It was, as you probably know, usual for the Chelmites to meet for seven days and seven nights to deliberate over any question or problem, big or small, before coming to an answer. The fire and the Rebbe's proclamation that they pack up and leave Chelm, however, was not the usual sort of problem faced by the Wise Men. This was a problem of a different type. So it took only seven minutes and seven seconds before Berrel the Beadle jumped up and said, "Couldn't we try and rebuild?" This brought a storm of ridicule from the gathered throng. "The Rabbi has spoken. This must be a sign from God," they all shouted in unison. But Gimpel the Mayor, who was leading the meeting, showed wisdom beyond his young years and calmed the citizens. "Don't be so hard on the Beadle, he told the people. He surely means well. Leaving our homes and our lives is not such an easy thing. Perhaps we should look for a further sign

from the Almighty. *Shma Israel...*

This impressed the people greatly and it was decided there should be a period of mourning for the town lasting seven weeks, ending on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) before the coming of the coldest season, before they would all decide when to strike out in different directions to make their ways in the world. Meanwhile, they would work together as a community to reconstruct some communal living facilities and stores so they could recuperate from their losses.

One evening shortly after this, Mishna, son of Pinya the Philosopher, with Moshe, son of Shloime the Scientist, and Gimpel's son Yossel, were making one more desperate effort to recapture the moon when a rocket scientist from the German border city of military industriousness happened into town. (By the way, on the Christian calendar it appears that the seven-week mourning period after the fire had turned into thirty seven years and seven days and indeed Chelm was rebuilt, not without great labors, to its former success. It was now 1937.)

Overhearing the discussion about the loss of the moon, the German scientist burst out in laughter. AAnd here they have been teaching us, our fine German schools, that you Jews are clever, intelligent but devious, lascivious and degenerate@, he exclaimed. AAre you really Jews? How can you be such fools? Wait till tonight and I=ll show you the moon in the sky and its reflection in the duck pond to boot, long after you have tried to capture it. That moon is almost a third of a million kilometers away, out in space. Soon, after the Great War, our scientists will send men in rockets to visit its surface.@

Yossel the Mayor giggled at the silliness of this German, while trying not to take offense at his disparaging remarks about Jews. "We don't need to take every insult personally," he whispered to Fleishman the Fiddler, "or else we'd be a miserable and despondent lot, wouldn't we?" "We'll certainly see this evening," he said to the German, who introduced himself as Krebs, no first name offered.

Suffice it to say that Krebs's predictions were not erroneous. Not only wasn't the moon captured, but every effort to explain away his explanations met with the terse, irrefutable logic of the German scientist. The Chelmites did not like the manners of this Krebs one bit, as he beat them down point by point with his harsh language and pointedness. But the one thing they spoke about most dejectedly at the town meeting that was called the following day by Yossel the mayor was that Krebs—after the first encounter—had neither ridiculed them nor tried to cheat them out of anything. This was one of the few town meetings in Chelm's splendid history of town meetings, that came to no great revelations of truth, that formulated no plan of action, that, in short, ended on a most despairing and depressing note.

Whether a result of Krebs and the self-doubt that had crept into Chelm or for other unrecorded reasons, two things seem to have followed close on the heels of the appearance of Krebs. A general gloom hung over the town, and shortly the elder citizens, beginning with Gimpel the retired mayor, began to die at a frighteningly rapid rate. And to add to that, Poles (non-Jews) suddenly took a great interest in the area and began to move into Chelm in a surprise in-migration wave, buying land and in some cases attacking Jews who refused to sell. Shortly, Mr. Hitler, the German Fuhrer, marched his troops into Poland and the pall that hung

over the Jews of Chelm turned from despair to quiet desperation. Three years later, not a single Jew, wise or foolish, was left alive in the town. There were rumors that they had all been marched off to the Nazi extermination camps in the night, that they had been killed by Poles in a pogrom and buried in mass graves, and that they had fled from Poland altogether. But there was not a trace of evidence to support any of these stories. And still the Poles left in the town will not, to this day, talk to an outsider about what, if anything, actually happened. Which is, as you may have guessed, where our story actually begins.

## Chapter II-The *Chelm Chronicle* Teaches Miracles

The old Chelm had been a small and rather unobtrusive Jewish town in rural Poland. It seemed less than possible, actually inconceivable, to those in the know, that the amusing, quaint but utterly silly and absurd world view of the Chelmites could somehow infect the modern world, but there it was. The greatest power on earth had changed its name to New Chelm and all of its institutions and people had begun to resemble a distorted and frightening version of the Old Chelm.

One morning, late in the days of 2001, for example, people awoke to see in their daily newspaper, the *Chelm Chronicle*, the report that Satan had been upon the earth recently and created a new kind of evil being called Athe terrorist@. Naturally there were still a few people alive who had experienced the terror of Nazi concentration camps, and many more who had

read books and seen movies and had the experiences of terror burned into their consciousness. Some had also heard this term used by the Nazis and their apologists to describe other people who fought against the Nazis. There were also immigrants to New Chelm from Adirty@ wars all over the world, like in Cambodia and Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Peru, where they or their loved ones had been hooked up to electric-shocking machines, had suffered other tortures, starvation, beatings with their heads in burlap bags, been scarred with thousands of burning cigarettes, had ears and tongues and other body parts cut off or out while they were alive, or had their children stolen from them, sold, given away, dismembered, or had their organs removed for transplantations into the rich. There were a few others whose children had been killed by a young man in the mid-west of New Chelm with a big truck bomb (he called the young children Acollateral damage@) when he bombed the Mullah Federal Building in Osamah, Chelm. To say nothing of the African experience in America of finding a loved one hanging from a tree in the front yard or burned to death on a dark, hollow night.

So some people awoke that morning and read this in amazement, because they weren't sure that more evil could be put on earth in a human form than had already visited them. But those naysayers were nevertheless appeased and their fears put to rest when Sonny, the quirky President of New Chelm, went on TV and assured that the evildoers would be hunted down and not allowed a minute of rest.

If Sonny the Sampler, the W of Bush, the President of New Chelm, is that dedicated to rooting out evil, the talk circulated on the streets and on Talk Radio, we should at least indulge him the idea that these evildoers are a new kind of evildoers that have to be treated in a new

and different way. So the President and his key advisors, Moishe, Shlemie, Nocham and Chande (who was a tall, angular and dark, beautiful woman), received wide coverage and approval in the *Chelm Chronicle* and the *Westinghouse-Disney News Hour's* instant poll for both their new war and for unique methods and definitions to fit their needs.

It would no longer be necessary that the Aterrorists@ fit into existing definitions of crime or evildoing. Since they were not warriors, or soldiers, or criminals, or war criminals or human rights abusers, they would not need to be treated in any way that had been delineated under previous battles with evil, such as the rules for dealing with the Nazis who had annihilated so many Chelms in the first place. And, naturally, New Chelm had taken on its new name to make sure that its previous name was erased from the ledgers of the World=s new International Criminal Court so all these new not-prisoners of war or not-war criminals would not need to go before that body. These were New Times, as the *New Times Newspaper* kept repeating, and for the sake of clarity, it was agreed to call anyone captured, imprisoned and accused of terrorist sympathies of being a Anot-prisoner-of-war@ prisoner. The world had changed, praise be to God, and New Chelm had to adapt. Just as there were now good prions and bad prions, with good configurations and bad configurations...well that=s another story...

But anyhohl, as my Jewish Polish-American great uncle used to say, that morning after the declaration of the Non-Prisoner of War status, one old man with a Polish accent called in to a talk show in Lost Angels and asked whether the violations of these fiends were similar to those the Nazis confessed to at the Nuremberg Tribunals. What was this Pole=s point? What was he getting at? Isn=t this picture of terror as clear as any clear day in Chelm? The show=s

host, a Mr. Krebs, then read off the man's phone number from the machine he had before him and by the end of the show the New Chelm Anti-terrorist Christ ilk Army (NewCAAtCIA, an organization that the government assured us has no connections to the leaders of New Chelm) had declared the man liquidated, for the stated reason that he had questioned the President's definition of evil. It was never clear what the man was questioning anyway, so people thought maybe he did deserve a slap on the wrist, metaphorically speaking.

In the succeeding 48 hours, only one further protest of this well-enunciated clarification was heard. It came from a representative of the small undersea animal known as the APortuguese man-of-war." The spokesnemone for the man-of-war insisted that the biological name be changed to the ANot-man-of-war@ since they (the men-of-wars) are none of the above. This protest was treated less harshly than the old Pole's. It was referred to New Chelm's Director of Home Security, Tom Duck, who had once caught a man-of-war off of Santa Catalina Island, where his family summered, and was clearly the most qualified to assess the claim. He decided that the man-of-war was extinct and that Earl Caldwell had not been in Memphis on the night that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and so no action would be required. The spokesnemone, however, a slimy sort of guy, was taken to an island resort, once claimed by Indians, and left to rot in the sun for seven days and seven nights.

The next day, the *Chelm Chronicle* reported that President Sonny the Sampler was very upset with the President of the Chelmite people of Polestine because that leader was secreting guns to his people to resist occupation by their neighbors, the Chelmite people of Iszhak. The World Chelmite Review out of London became confused by the state of affairs and thus

confused its readers. AOur Chelmites here and there are clipping their noses to spite their faces,” the World Chelmite Review editorialized. “We should have known when we allowed anyone who declared their allegiance to our New World War to call themselves Chelmitic we were opening up a new kettle of fish.” (Something was definitely mixed up with their metaphors.)

Simultaneously, in a far corner of the world (I say corner advisedly, since the magazine New Science of Chelm had declared the world to be incontrovertably a Rubik=s Cube, full of corners and sub-corners, and one of New Chelm=s leading mathematicians at the Institute of Defensive Tricklenology even proposed the idea that New Chelm was so deeply embedded in virtual existence that it had saturated a Kalabi-Yaw multi-dimensional space and could be in danger of budding off new universes) a news network not operated or co-operated from Chelm, named Al Jacuzzi, endangered its/their own very existence by ridiculing the President, Sonny of New Chelm, saying his pronouncements and actions were Abombastic@ and reducible to a dystonic dysphoria. We=ll show them bombastic, declared Shlemie, New Chelm=s Minister of War and Offense, while the President kept muttering over and over again, AProtonic euphoria, colonic arborea, neutronic bomboria@. That day, Al Jacuzzi=s headquarters in the city of Cable were transformed into a jetless hot tub by a 2,000-pound fearless fluzu auto-regulating paragliding German-designed bomb from Chelm.

Ah, but I progress where I ought to be digressing. We are way ahead of ourselves. The question at hand, if somewhat out of grasp, is how was the Greatest Power on Earth (GPE) transformed into New Chelm? And what happened to the Chelmites of yore? And is there

really such a science as Chelmaneutics? You can see as well as I that the heading says AThe Chelm Chronicle Teaches Miracles.” So what else besides Satan walking on the earth again? Tell you what else?

### Chapter III-The *Chelm Chronicle* Teaches Miracles Again

Yes, dears, it=s the *Chelm Chronicle*. I picked it up at the A & P. So what is the *Chelm Chronicle*? That=s not as easy as you might think, because there are two different Chronicles to chronicle. The *Chelm Chronicle*, which brought the news to many New Chelmites in the New World Order of the New World Chelm, is actually a somewhat distant descendent of the original Chronicles of the Village or Town of Chelm from which Solomon Simon annotated his history of the Wise Men of Helm. How could that be? Well, Shlemele, I=ll tell you about it, but it won=t be easy.

When I was little, I grew for nine months inside my mother=s womb until I was old enough to cry out for help. Then I was born into Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Jewish Hospital to be precise. But, truth be told, I never lived a day in Brooklyn outside that hospital, for my parents had prepared a cozy nest in a spanking new high-rise apartment project in the Bronx, which all New Yorkers know, is at least one if not two worlds apart from Brooklyn. In those days Ahigh-rise project@ meant you were coming up in the world (we got onto the 8<sup>th</sup> floor), so you can see how times have changed.

But before I was born, I heard my parents talking about my mother growing up in

Harlem. Harlem in the early days was uptown and the newcomers' favorite way out of the destitution of the lower east side tenements of Manhattan, where people were crammed by the dozen with only outhouses in the backyard and dangerous or no heating and no electricity and no air and so forth. We immigrants (of course I wasn't there at all) could not wait to get to Harlem or Brooklyn on our way up out of the dungeones crab of poverty and personlessness.

So anyway, when I heard my parents talking about mother's early days in Harlem, I listened very carefully to her words. Even though I didn't understand them, bobbing in my salty sea, I monitored and memorized them. Every single consonant, vowel and syllable (just the same way I learned to read Hebrew as a young kindle years later: fluent reader, star member of the Chazonim Club. Never understood a word beyond "shalom," "Atov," and "hagoffen.") But when I was seven, in second grade, I finally sat down one day and began to write out everything I had heard through those tender walls of obscurity. I finished my writings just before graduation from high school. And preposterous as it may sound, this is where I get to spill the beans on the Chelm connection. Yes, here's where the rubber, as they say, defeats the road.

See, there were many Jews in Harlem then. There were the white Jews like us (Ashkenazi) and the Arab Jews (like Hazim el Chazim, who taught me ex ante facto the dangers of trying to understand what I read in Hebrew or any language for that matter. AUnderstanding will get you *mishbuchas*,@ he used to tell me before I was born, as he picketed the Harlem Yeshiva) and the Asian Jews like Mordecai Chin and Nucham Pak Chi and Ak Chi Ho, and especially the Black Jews like Sammy Davis Jr., Nelson MitMondele, Malcolm Large, and that

baby ballplayer who was the first Black Jew to break the Polish Combined Slalom barrier (you know, when the Olympian owner, Dan Stopping, got confused by the desegregation pressure of those Blacks playing across the East river with the Dodgers—Robinson, Newcome, Gilliam etc—and absentmindedly hired a double trouble Black Jew—Elston Howard Levy. But this was way before that.) A colorful lot, we oozed into the culture and the street scene of Harlem and no one noticed the undercurrents, the ebbs and flows, the influence of our varied languages and happenstancing that occurred just beneath the surface of banal=s daily existence except for the Blacks, of course, who noticed that most of us were white and so we were going up, and they weren=t. Except also my mother, that is, who went to college at age 14 and was very perceptive on the days when she wasn=t totally out of her mind. She noticed so much, and later she told my father and I, inside, overheard it all.

And what I heard was about a network of Wise Men and their more earthly women who had flown the Polish coop just under the wire as the Nazis closed in on Poland and then Polish Jewry. And of how the Harlemites (Jews and non-Jews, but especially the African-Americans) had received the first refugees and helped them establish an underground railroad that ran from Warsaw to London, Paris, Prague and Copenhagen, to Toronto and Mexico City and Buenos Aires and then to Harlem, bypassing the statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island and U.S. Customs and Mr. Roosevelt=s prohibition on political and economic refugee immigration, via a subway tube from Staten Island that hooked into the IND, and then you got to Harlem.

Yeah, well, you might think it=s preposterous. But 6,236 Jews were saved in this way and bedded down in Harlem and of these the exact count of people and their descendants from

the original Chelm was 483. And the Chelmites and their descendants, they called this the Hell to Harlem railroad. They did, that=s right. Hy (in Russian) or Nu (as we say in English) so what harm can 483 Aillegal immigrant aliens@or Aundocumented Chelmites@ do? This country has absorbed millions and some became great advisors to presidents and designers of hydrogen bombs, like Edward Teller and such. No harm done there, so what could be the harm of 483 Chelmites?

Achhh, *mein liebe*, if you asked a question like that, I don=t know if I could go on. If you even have a pinche little thought in that direction, I purge you to go back again and read Solomon Simon=s books, both of them, about how the Chelmites managed their lives. Then you=ll understand. Then you=ll stop having foolish thought questions. Then you=ll stop doubting my story, which I have researched so pedantically. But enough! You know I=m going to tell you what happened. I already said I would and I=m good to my word. As sure as I=m Jewish, I wouldn=t lie to you. There were 483, no, not 451. I can=t name them, of course, but in due time you=ll be meeting a couple or three, at least, in these pages, and then you=ll understand how a can of worms can turn itself into a fine kettle of fish.

So anywhol, as Papa still used to say, Mother told Father a lot more than the numbers. She actually described some of the curious behavior that was specific to those who called themselves the world-savers from Chelm. And I got it down right here beginning with Crumple, descendent of Gimpel through Mottel and Shuttle, who by birthright might have become the Mayor had Chelm still stood (or stood still, if you wish) and would become a mayor anyway.

## Chapter IV-Crumple, Harlem's Jewish Bookie

Crumple, believe it or not, ran a bookmaking racket at Lexington and 124<sup>th</sup> to the East Side. It was the most curious bookie joint ever because Crumple always lost money. In fact, he was the only bookie in The Big Apple who borrowed money from his clients. Borrowing was a big boon to his business, which expanded at an ever accelerating pace. The word got out that if you bet with Crumple, you usually won, and even if you lost, Crumple would ask to borrow money from you to pay off the others and you could charge him 10% a month. As he lost more and more money Crumple didn't bat an eye. Asked how business was going, he could rattle off the number of regular customers he had, which was in the thousands. Eventually the word got out that Crumple was one of the Chelmites and that quadrupled his takers. Other bookmakers started to get nervous. Crumple was stealing away their business, even as he lost money into the hundreds of thousands. The bookies came up with a plan to lend him money to pay his debts and then buy him out in return for all the money he owed. And slowly the bookies bought up Crumple's loans. They were just about to make their move on him when one fair spring day in June the strangest thing happened. Two of Crumple's closest Chelmite friends, Nocham and Shloime came into his little shop.

Crumple sat at his little dilapidated desk made of plywood and two sawhorses. There was barely room for the two visitors. Shloime bumped his noggin against the small shelf on the opposite wall, on which rested a row of figurines. With the bump, one of the figures tottered, tripped and fell toward earth. It was Mottel the Mayor. Shloime deftly pivoted his left foot

outward on heel and caught the falling Mottel with his toe before the crash. Mottel landed gently on the floor, unbroken, and with that a gleam appeared in Shloime's eye as he bent to retrieve and replace Mottel on the shelf, next to Pinya the Philosopher. The others watching gleefully, now turned their attention back to larger matters.

Said Nocham, "Listen, Crumple, we've got a problem and you've got a problem. But we've got a solution and you don't."

Crumple answered them in good form: "What's your problem, maybe I can help you. But as for me, I have no problem I'm the best bookie in the area; my business is thriving."

Shloime, who though still a young man, had already graduated from City College of New York (later to become part of the State University), was undaunted. "We've heard about the horses in California."

"And what about the horses in California?" queried Crumple.

"Oh, there are ever so many horses there," gleamed Nocham. "And not only that, they are all Mexicans and will only eat Mexican food."

Crumple was a bit perplexed. "How can horses have a nationality?" he exclaimed. "All mean they don't speak a language, they have no passports, they cross the borders as property owned by humans (unless they wander in by accident), not like us, who had to sneak into this great land that welcomes all the world's tired and poor and wretched."

"Yes," retorted Shloime, "that's the buttled scut, but we have learned otherwise. These horses were born on the open range and in the mountains at a time when California was part of Mexico before the Mexican War, Gadsden Purchase and the Treaty of Guadalupe

Hidalgo, or at least their ancestors were. And they got very used to eating Mexican food and they even understand Spanish better than they understand English.@

“Okay, okay, so where is this going, good friends?@ chuckled Crumple, thinking it a fine joke. AWell, you can laugh, but we are going to California to open up a Mexican food factory for horses. The ranchers and cattlemen are just dying for this. We heard this from a >man with a horse= who was up the hill at the College of Columbus. And he offered to even sell us prime property in a place called Avenal, which is a very desirable location, a big city with thousands of workers to work in the factory.@

With this Nocham winked and said, AWe convinced him to sell some good acreage to the three of us. Since we don=t have the money, he agreed on condition that we trade him your bookie business.@

Now, you can imagine what a blow this was to Crumple. He nearly crumpled on the floor, that his friends would dare to sell his own business out from under him without so much as asking his permission. But after 25 customers came in and demanded collection of interest on their loans in the very few minutes that the three were chattering, it suddenly dawned upon Crumple that this business was getting just a little too busy and maybe the slower life he had heard Californians live would be more suited to his taste. He smiled and then ran home to his wife, Leica, and told her the good news. Now Leica, being a woman of slow wit, had never understood the advantages of her husband being a bookmaker, and one that owed his life to his customers to boot. She was therefore more overjoyed at this strange and unexpected turn of events than Crumple had possibly imagined. AWhen do we leave?" shrieked Leica. "I can pack in a day."

AYes indeed," said Crumple, "we can pack in a day.@ And so, for reasons that no one has ever explained to me, a Man from California with a Horse bought up Crumple's bookmaking shop and clientele and thus became the first Goy in the New York Jewish Mafia.

We've posted the first 6 chapters. If you want the full book by e-mail (free) just send a request by e-mail to [marcsapir@gmail.com](mailto:marcsapir@gmail.com). Paperback version can be purchased at Amazon.com and B&N.com or at my cost plus postage.