

THE ORANGE PEEL
AND OTHER SATIRES

Including all the stories from
The Book of State

S.Y. AGNON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW

WITH ANNOTATIONS AND A FOREWORD BY
JEFFREY SAKS

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Young and Old Together



Assembly of voters in Buczacz, 1907. The Zionist candidate Nathan Birnbaum is at bottom center (holding folded overcoat on right arm). The young S.Y. Agnon (né Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes) appears toward bottom right of the photo, with mustache, arms folded, head tilted to his right.

Chapter One

We Escort Dr. David Davidsohn as He Leaves Town

The train stood at the railway station, passengers peeking out of the windows, and two or three people hastened hurriedly by and were engulfed by the steam of the engine. The start of the journey had been slightly delayed and we stayed around to bestow honor upon our candidate, Dr. David Davidsohn, at the hour of his departure. Our candidate, Dr. David Davidsohn, who had not been elected, was returning to his hometown and we, the young Zionists of Szybusz, had come to pay our last respects. How we loved him and his speechmaking. How we adored his countenance and his discourses. He could even converse in Yiddish and even attended synagogue on the Sabbath before the elections. A pox upon those who claimed that he had done so deceitfully, just to capture the hearts of the people so that they would vote for him, for he had lived in Vienna for several years and had never gone to pray. It never occurred to them that he had gone out of love, out of love for the people who had chosen him to be their representative. There are many doctors in the world who write books of praise for the Torah and its commandments, even

though they don't fulfill all of the commandments that are in the Torah. Deeds are not the essence, but rather the radiance of Judaism.

Not only had the Zionists come to escort Dr. Davidsohn, but some simple Jews also had come; however those had returned home in the middle of the procession. But we, the young Zionists, didn't budge from his side even when he had boarded the train. To tell the truth, there were two or three among us who had wanted to head back right away but because they had shared a carriage ride with us, they also stood and waited.

It had been a day in early summer. The cherry trees were blossoming strawberries were sprouting from the earth, the winter clothes had already been stored away in the closet, and the air of the world was clear and pleasant, warming the cockles of one's heart. The scent of the tar seeping from the railroad ties, which blended with the aroma of the fresh grasses, aroused in one's soul wondrous yearnings for faraway places. Vienna, Dr. Davidsohn's hometown to which he was returning, loomed large on the horizon. Oh, how distant she was, and yet so close to our hearts! His intoxicating eloquence had not yet faded. Orations that were given in those great days would inspire the heart. Each time a word or a phrase would be mentioned, we would be extremely moved. Even the mediocre ones among us, who never had dared speak up against those more forceful and would bow their heads in the face of each and every decree, now hurled words of insolence even against the authorities. They recognized that they had been misguided and were not slaves to the authorities, but rather that the authorities exist to do their will, which is the will of the people.

Even though our candidate had not been elected his downfall was not a failure, for his defeat was not for lack of votes but rather caused by our opponents' misdeeds, the likes of which had never before been seen anywhere in the world. Here, we will relay just one of many stories. When one voter arrived to cast his vote and the *Bürgermeister* saw that he intended to vote for Dr. Davidsohn he said, "This man is on the dole," and the voter was disqualified. You may be inclined to assume he was a pauper, but he was actually a wealthy moneylender. Yet his clothes were shabby, in the manner of

the people of Szybusz who do not dress extravagantly. For had they done so it could have led to the desecration of God's Name, because the Gentiles would indict the Jews, saying, "You have a lot of gall, living off public funds and then daring to show off." And not only that, but several fraudulent ballots were cast in favor of the opposing candidate. Even the dead were casting ballots in that candidate's name. One Itzhak Mundschiel was even found wandering around the polling station announcing, "I have come to greet my ancestors, may they rest in peace, who have come from the world beyond." And we fervently fantasized that when the legislative session would convene and all the delegates had gathered, Adolph Stand, head of the Zionist Club, would immediately stand up and proclaim, "In this way so-and-so got elected to the legislative body." At which very moment, the big shots would become appalled and jump up proclaiming, "We can't reside under the same roof with that one." And right away the chief officer would appoint a special committee of men of truth who hate unjust gain to call for new elections in Szybusz, and the people would come to vote in Dr. Davidsohn, bring him immediately to the legislative hall and erect for him a podium of honor from which he would orate and be a luminary for the people, all of whom would walk in his light.

Chapter Two

When the Pogroms Erupt

While we were standing at the train station, we heard a rumor that the Jews of Pishevits were being beaten. I'd already heard this rumor in the morning at the study house, but I didn't give it its full due because at that moment I had been in the middle of the morning prayers and didn't want to stop, lest it be said that Zionists are not vigilant when it comes to prayer.

Pishevits is a small town near our city. Pishevits's shopkeepers obtain their merchandise from Szybusz, the daughters of Pishevits's poor work as servants in Jewish homes in Szybusz, and the craftsmen of Szybusz gaze upon their beauty and take wives from amongst them. In Pishevits there is a tobacco factory that employs many workers, who are Christian Socialists well known for their hatred of Jews.

Sigmund Deixel stood up declared, "All those who still nurture even a spark of nationalism within their hearts, should rise and go to Pishevits to rescue their brethren from the pogrom!" He hadn't even finished speaking when several young men who had been standing with one foot inside the train and the other outside of it, pulled their other leg inside the train so that they could go to Pishevits and defend their brethren there. They said, "It's not words that are of

the essence, but action. It's no great feat of bravery to make heroic speeches while standing idly by at a time when they are plotting to destroy us. What will the people of Pischevits do, living as they do in a town that is mostly Gentile, and how will they stand up to their enemies without help from the outside? As if it's not enough that they have been deprived of their rights and that their candidate has been disqualified, now they are trying to take away their very lives."

Mr. Deixel went on and added, "If I go, you surely must go. If I am going to Pischevits, although obliged in my representative capacity as president of the Student Zionist Association to attend Mrs. Zilberman's speech today, then all the more so you must go to Pischevits." His words made an impression on his listeners and even the weak ones amongst us were filled with courage and boarded the train.

Almost all of us came from good families. We spent our days working on the Zionist cause. On the eve of the Day of Atonement we would stand before the collection plates in the synagogues and study houses, collecting small change for benefit of the Jewish National Fund. On Hanukkah, we would throw a Maccabee Ball and on winter nights we'd visit our female friends who belonged to the "Ruth Sisterhood" and who gave biweekly lectures about the history of Israel. Since they didn't understand German, we would read to them from the abridged edition of Graetz and translate the words for them, and from that they would prepare lectures in Polish. At times, we would buy oranges from the Land of Israel and sell them at a profit for the benefit of the national fund. The rest of the escort party, some of whom were small time merchants and some of whom were artisans, had campaigned with us in the elections. Since they had spent time in the company of Dr. Davidsohn, some of his glory had rubbed off on them. As the Talmud says, "The Duke took hold of me and the scent of royalty was absorbed into my hand." And when they heard that a pogrom had befallen Pischevits they said, "Relief and deliverance will come to the rich from the government, which protects them. But who bears the brunt of every trouble? The poor do. And if we don't come to their rescue, then who will save them?" They hastily climbed the stairs of the railway car and rode with us to Pischevits.

And here it is fitting to mention one young Jew who was with us on that trip. In truth, he has already been included in the other group, the artisans, and so on, but since I'm going to expand upon his story in upcoming chapters I'll just give a small preview, so it won't appear that he suddenly jumped into the picture. This young man was named Alexander and in the days of the Russo-Japanese War he had somehow wound up in Szybusz, worked as a blacksmith's apprentice and become engaged to a housemaid from Pishevits. He was short in stature and his face looked like a Russian Gentile, so that were it not for the Jewish obstinacy that burst forth from between his eyes, you would never have known he was a Jew. He would lend me books from the Bund and I loaned him Mendele's *The Mare* which he has yet to return to me. Why would Alexander, a member of the Bund, have chosen to escort Dr. Davidsohn? Only because the day in question was the second festival day in the Diaspora and his shop was closed, and he was going to meet Peshi Shaindel his fiancée from Pishevits. As it says in the Talmud, "A man's feet are responsible for him; they take him to the place where he is wanted."

Peshi Shaindel was a maid, the daughter of Pesach the Teacher, and she served in Dr. Zilberman's house. She had another quality which was that she was literate, and she was involved with the Socialists and even the students among them did not refrain from conversing with her. Who among us is greater than Deixel, who was a Social Democrat, and he used to go with her hand in hand. And even after he eschewed Socialism and became an adherent of Zionism, he still went with her hand in hand. And she still would come to him to borrow books. There is no doubt that she enjoyed the company of that student, because from him she was fortunate enough to learn some new ideas of which no one in her family had been aware. In any event, in my opinion there was a fly in that ointment, because Peshi Shaindel began comparing Alexander to Deixel. And once, when Alexander took her hand in his she remarked, "How beautiful Deixel's hands are." "Deixel," she said, and not "Mr. Deixel."

Sitting comfortably on soft, red velvet seats on the train, in second class next to the doctor, alleviated our worries about the pogrom. The joy of youth was rekindled and new, good feelings filled

our hearts. We were happy to leave our town for a little while and go on a trip, and all the more so as we were sitting the whole way with Dr. Davidsohn, and all the more so as we were on our way to save a Jewish town.

One of the group members piped up and said, "Do you know what, let's sing "*HaTikvah*." Let our foes both hear and see that we don't fear them."

Deixel got up and extended his right arm like the conductor of an orchestra. We rose immediately to our feet and began to sing the lyric, "Our hope is not yet lost."

The doctor looked at him affectionately and a slight smile graced his lips. That Deixel really knows how to sing a verse in a song. We hadn't even reached the second stanza when our throats froze wordlessly. Wonder of wonders, all these years we had been singing the anthem "*HaTikvah*" and we'd never realized that we didn't know anything but the beginning. Seeking inspiration we started singing in Polish and German, songs such as "There by the Cedars" and "Hear, O' Brothers," Zionist songs that were going around the country. And thus we sang until the singers got tripped up on a song and returned to discussing the pogrom.

One of the members of the group said, "It's a pity. I have a sturdy cane at home and I didn't bring it along." This is like the adage told in Szybusz that goes, "The hand is ready to shake the Lulav frond, but the beadle has locked the citron in his house." Vovi Mundschpiel said, "It would be worthwhile for the press to note about this trip that for once the Jews traveled without luggage."

The conductor came in to check the tickets. One of our group got up and slipped him some change and thus we were able to use our third class tickets without paying second class fares. Dr. Davidsohn was taken aback and finally gave a smile, perhaps out of anger or perhaps out of shock.

This was the nicest trip I had ever taken. The doctor recounted events that had occurred in earlier days, such as when he and his students would take trips out of town and, not being used to seeing Jews dressed in Christian garb, the young Gentiles would stand bewildered not knowing whether they should throw rocks at them like

they did at all the other Jews. It didn't take long before they realized the truth and their hands, the hands of Esau, did what they always do. The doctor's story gladdened our hearts. All Jews are brethren. Even a Jew in Christian garb is still a Jew. Alexander stood in a corner and said nothing. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him, "I see you are not much interested in our discussion, in which case sing us some Russian songs as we've depleted our repertoire and I'm sure our friends would love to hear a new song." Alexander jumped up from his place as if stricken by a rock from a catapult. Finally he answered me with a snarl and kept silent. The fact that he was going to Pishevits troubled him greatly. There was nothing new for him about pogroms. It was by way of a pogrom that he had become orphaned from his father and his mother. And when the pogroms became widespread, he had joined up with the defense organizations until the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War when he escaped to Galicia. It was not out of fear that he had run away, but out of principle so as not to be killed for the benefit of Reactionary Russia. The conductor blew his whistle and announced, "Pishevits!"