

4/15/27 Forverts

AN AMERICAN SHTETL WHERE THE BUTCHER IS A KATSEV AND A SHTETL THAT FEARS STRANGERS

By Our Traveling Correspondent
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HOOSICK FALLS

'Ever hear of such a name?'

'Me?—never. Seeing as I'd never been there I'd never even heard of the place, let alone such a name—Hoosick—completely foreign to me and difficult to comprehend.

The town is located on the very border of New York and Vermont and it possesses about 12 Jewish families amongst a population of a little over 5,000.

It does have an impressive waterfall so it's clear why it's called Falls. But why Hoosick? That I was never able to ascertain.

The first thing I did was get myself a hotel room and then I went out in search of *mishpokhe*.

Wandering about for quite a while in the central business district, that was no bigger than a minute, there wasn't a single Jewish name anywhere to be seen. So I went into a restaurant to order something to eat. The Christian waitress began listing all their specialties: bacon and eggs; ham and eggs; country sausages and eggs; oysters with bacon; ham and oysters. That's how she tallied up delicacy after delicacy, course after course. I felt like I was about to die by her hand. So I said to her:

'What else do you have?'

'We have Pig's Feet,' she responded.

'Do you mean, the feet of a pig?' I countered already quite dead.

'It's very good,' she let me know.

Feeling like a goner I realized the further I questioned her the worse it got, so I said, 'Make it just eggs.'

'With ham or with bacon?' she asked.

'With nothing—just eggs is all I want.'

When I finished my meal I fell into conversation with the owner. The first thing I wanted to find out from him was why the *shtetl* was called Hoosick Falls.

'Did you see the waterfall?' he wanted to know.

'Yes—saw it.'

'*Nu*,' he went on, 'the town's name is Hoosick and because we have a waterfall we call it Hoosick Falls.'

'Yes,' my voice was now rising in register, 'but why is it called, Hoosick!'

'Hoosick,' he asks me, 'Hoosick?'

And I noticed the *goy* wondering at such a foolish question. To him it's just an ordinary name, Hoosick Falls, after all it's not his fault that to me, the

foreigner, it sounds so strange and unpleasant? But I realized I wasn't going to get anywhere with him so I turned the conversation to my Jewish interests.

'Tell me,' I asked him, 'Do any Jews live in this village?'

'Sure,' he responded, 'There sure are Jews living here!'

'Can you maybe name a Jew who lives here?'

'Yes Sir,' I can even name all of them!' he looked at me, smiled and then said, 'You know the best people in town are Jews. They're honest to no end! If only ours were as fine as the Jews are here. And he gave me some Jewish names and told me where their stores were. I thanked him profusely for his good opinion of my brothers and set out to the addresses he'd given me. It didn't take long before I finally found myself among Jews.

But what of it? Another *shtetl* with no *shoykhet* and no anything. So as there was no *shoykhet* and no anything I was really in trouble. If there are no factions then there are no meetings being held and no readings of the Torah and no *aliyahs*. There's nothing at all! But for my part I didn't give up. I continued to seek because I saw simple *heymishe* Jews—Orthodox. That alone to me is a wonder—how such Jews can survive without a trace of communal support.

I actually discovered that everything had already been there in the past. As the *taytsh* says: we already had a *shoykhet* here along with everything else that goes with it, but the community is falling apart. It's getting consistently smaller and nobody's lifting a finger to do anything about it. There's no more energy for communal activity.

There was only one sign of *yidishkayt* there, and that was the *katsev*. I'm purposely saying *katsev* and not 'butcher' because he runs his business in the old *heymish* way, nothing like in America. And aside from that he tells me proudly he's descended from generations of pure *katsevs*. He was very clear on what went on in the innards of a cow. 'When it comes to something not being smooth,' he said as he shook out his sleeve, 'all those American *shoykets* don't hold a candle to me.' All he has to do, he told me, is stick his hand inside to know if it's kosher or *treyf*. So it's actually no wonder that he never got along with the previous *shoykhet* that Hoosick Falls once had. In the *katsev's* own words: if the *shoykhet* declared it *treyf* I went and showed him it was kosher, prompting him to call it kosher so then I showed him how *treyf* it really was.

Naturally there were disagreements and several times a *rov* was even brought in to mediate. 'But the *rov* always sided with the *shoykhet*,' the old *katsev* complained to me, 'There aren't any good rabbis in America! Just sweep it under the rug and be done with it!'

That's how the *katsev* poured out his bitter heart to me.

In town, there was also a radically professed young man. Naturally, he reads the Forverts. He works in a beautiful store where his brother installed him with the hopes of 'maybe something will become of him!'

He had been a worker in New York, a bookbinder who belonged to the union and was active in it. His spirit yearned for more activism so he became a socialist, an activist and a mover. But his brother who'd already been in business in the country a long time made sure there was no point in it—saying that all his activism would at most only lead to consumption. So he brought him up to

Hoosick Falls and passed the business on to him saying: 'Now Brother, you run it and may God help you!'

'Nu,' I asked him, 'Is your brother happy with you? What does he say?'

'He, *nebekh*, doesn't say anything,' my poor shopkeeper sadly shook his head, 'My brother passed away not long ago.'

'So you're here all alone?' I queried on, 'So how is it? Is god helping out?'

'Just as you see,' my former bookbinder smiled, we make a living. What, I shouldn't have that either?' he asked me. 'It's nothing,' he added, 'but you can't take enough care here. I get robbed! And many times I see it happening, and there's nothing to be done about it. Go and do something about it in a small town like this!'

I saw from his easy smile that he didn't take the thievery to heart. But because of it he spoke very engagingly about the death throes permeating the tiny Jewish community there.

'There once was,' he relayed, 'two *shuls* and a *shoykhet* and when I arrived there was much contention among them. Both sides wanted to win me over, to join their respective *shuls* and there I was—a freethinker! Therefore,' he smiled, 'I went to this one, to that one, wanting to make peace among them but it was impossible. Then everything fell apart and now there is nothing at all.'

I spent that evening at the former bookbinder's house. And who should I run into there but the famous *katsev*. Also there was a young, rangy, 15-year-old Jewish lad, a grocer's son, who carried the whole Jewish community in his *tefillin* bag. Because, if he didn't feel like it, there wouldn't be a *minyén*. And if there's no *minyén* then there's no possibility for a *yortsayt*. And he doesn't feel like it very often. And if he does sometimes feel like it you can't really count on him seeing it through till the end because if he as much as notices a ballgame forming out the window he abandons it all and runs outside to play ball leaving the *davening* without a *minyén*.

So I called him over, the awkward, gangly boy, and said to him:

'What do you have against the Jews! Why don't you let them hold their heads up!'

'Because!' he said, 'Because when I was a boy I didn't put on *tefillin*, and do you know what they did? They threw me out of *shul*! So that's how I get my revenge on them now,' he yelled out triumphantly.

Afterward I visited a few more Jews and talked to them about the Jews who come around collecting alms. It turns out that Hoosick Falls Jews do not behave very spiritually toward these nuisances, not so much on account of the few cents they have to give but it's the feeding and finding them a place to sleep that gets to them.

'You never know who you're taking in,' one of them told me, 'This is America after all.'

Furthermore I discovered there was one among them, a business owner, who claims to this day, to be the president of the *kehile* even though there hasn't been a meeting in 8 years. But since the key to the *shul* is still in his possession he claims he's not going to be opening the *shul* if he doesn't feel like it, and he doesn't feel like it more than he feels like it

This is how a tiny Jewish congregation behaves in the diaspora—in the diaspora of a lanky, awkward youth and in the diaspora of a president who for eight years now is holding on to a key that he refuses to give up.

When I returned to my hotel late that evening the whole town had already sunk into a deep sleep. The rush of the waterfall resounded through the stillness. Its deafening rush pounded like millions of tongues surfacing from underground into the night. It seemed like the stillness was deliberately silent, as if the night was holding its breath on purpose, buoying the little town up on the fingertips of its soundless spirit, while the sky and stars peeked quietly down from above. Everything around was still, holding its breath in silent awe, listening to the roar of the falling river that didn't stop, even for a second, but thunderously plunged and plunged into the stillness of the night.

A spur from long ago, from ancient times, rose in me and I sensed the urge of early man, to kneel unclothed and murmur in supplication to the god of falling waters.

BENNINGTON, VERMONT

My heart would not allow it. Finding myself so close to a Jewish *shtetl*, how could I not visit it? It's true it was in another state but so what, the Jews there are yet the same!

Nu, so I actually journeyed over there and found a big, beautiful town of 10,000 inhabitants with 20 Jewish families.

The town possessed all the tools necessary to support a Jewish *kehile*. And if you needed them, a sum total of three *shoykhets*. Don't get scared now—not all of them slaughtered. Two of them, as we used to say back home, were home free. One of them, in the dry-goods business, told me he didn't do too badly if he stayed open on *shabes*. The other one, who also was done with slaughtering, pointed to several blocks of houses that were all his and informed me they were already worth up to \$200,000. He then extracted a yellowing piece of paper from a *seyfer* somewhere and showed me the deed along with another document identifying him as the chief rabbi.

So of course I acquired great respect for the man, not so much on account of the documents but because of the \$200,000.

I never met the actual *shoykhet* because he was out of town so I had to get along without him which is just as well as my columns are already too full of *shoykhets*.

So I went out looking for business owners. But they did not want to talk. I couldn't get a word out of them. They could not digest such a thing as me. All they could do was be suspicious of me—they thought I was hiding something from them, looking for an opportunity to snag them in my net. They were convinced there was an emissary hiding in me that sooner or later would spring out with an outstretched hand, and say, 'Give money, *yidelekh!*'

But little by little I gained trust—actually from the presidential body, who poured his bitter heart out to me, trying not to be sinful, but lamenting the constant flow of emissaries while 'givers' were very few, so that the burden

always fell on the same ones who always gave. *Nu*, so they grumble and defend themselves so they won't fall in.

Additionally: All the Jews are well off, you can say rich, as take for example that former *shoykhet*.

And are the Jews *frum* here—very *frum*. Naturally they have a *shul* to *daven* in on *shabes*, that is those who can tear themselves away from the store, run to *shul*.

I'm further told, that once upon a time a kind of modern *shoykhet* was brought over who *davened* in English. One *shabes* during blessing the new moon, he kept repeating, maybe more than 20 times the word *khayem*. *khayem* here and *khayem* there, *khayem* from front and *khayem* from back. And the congregation stood there on hot coals—impatient, having left their stores in foreign hands! And he was standing there and *khayeming*! So they left him in the middle of his *khayems* and went on their way. From then on he knew—no more colloquializing during the service. One more *khayem* and that would be the end of it!

Strolling down the beautiful wide street, I spotted a store with a Jewish name. It beckoned me and I craved a little conversation. Upon entering I saw a little, skinny *mentshele*. I asked him in a very friendly manner: 'Are you Mr. ...?'

'No, that's not me,' he replied.

'You must be joking,' I said.

Angry now, he said, 'I tell him I'm not and he says I am!'

I remained composed and tried to calm him by saying, 'Can you tell me where this Mr. is?'

'Go and find him!' he replied irately and ran off leaving me standing there.

Later I relayed this to several others who said: 'Oh that one, he's as loaded as *Koyrekh* and he never gives a penny to *tsedoke*! He probably thought you were there for some sort of donation. That's why he said he wasn't him, but he was him.'