A City in Its Fullness

S.Y. Agnon

Translated from the Hebrew

Edited by
Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks

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Yekele (I)

I will now tell the story of Yekele, the son of R. Moshe the Ḥasid.

R. Moshe the Ḥasid was part of a community of ḥasidim in Buchacz who served the Lord with all their might, every day, every hour, and every minute. In this, R. Moshe outdid them all. His friends claimed that the angels and the seraphs envied him the devoutness with which he served God, and according to those who know of such matters, there was no small measure of truth to this contention.

After having fulfilled the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, R. Moshe separated from his wife, left home, and abandoned all pursuits that normally occupy a person’s days and years. His sole concern was to address the needs of heaven.

It would be nice if I could describe just what this entailed, but what do I or anyone else in this generation know of such matters? I shall, therefore, say no more about the father and will tell only about what happened with his son.

R. Moshe’s son Yekele was a year old when his pious father left home to devote his every moment to the service of God. Two and a half years after he left home, he departed this world of travail, where the debasements of daily life eclipse the trials and temptations that dog a
person’s every step. Any confidence one has that he has escaped them is a dangerous illusion.

Yekele was left fatherless, his mother a disconsolate widow, impoverished, ailing, and laden with all the troubles penniless widows face. Such widows try to keep their troubles from the public, but by the time people take note of them they waste away in their poverty and die.

Yekele’s mother did die, and he was left an orphan. His sister, who was a few years older than he, was taken in to the home of a relative in another town. But no one in the family was willing to take Yekele, for he was a difficult child. He bounced around among a few poor neighbors until eventually he left them all and ran wild, going wherever his inclinations took him. He studied no Torah or anything about the mitzvot, and took no instruction in how to behave properly. Out of pity for an offspring of R. Moshe the Hasid, he was dragged into a heder. The first day there, he ran away. He did this not once or twice or thrice, but seven and even ten times, until all the well-meaning people let him go.

Yekele was thus left to his own devices, that is to say, to the whims of his infantile impulses. Totally lacking any self-control, his capacity for transgression was boundless. Because he was intimidated by neither the living nor the dead, the gravediggers accepted him into their ranks, and that became his occupation.

R. Yisrael Shlomo, the parnas of the town, got wind of all this and wrinkled up his nose at it. Yekele, in turn, got wind of that and understood that R. Yisrael Shlomo was not pleased with him, upon which he poured forth a series of rather insolent curses on R. Yisrael Shlomo. Jokingly he suggested that “even though Srul Shlomo doesn’t think much of me, I hold him in such high regard that I am ready to bury him right now.” It is not clear that these words of Yekele reached R. Yisrael Shlomo’s ears, but logic dictates that no one in Buczacz would report such things to him.

One year, on the night of the seventh of Adar, the following happened. For a long time, R. Yisrael Avraham, the richest man in Buczacz, sought to be a member of the hevrah kadisha. Its ranks were restricted to eighteen members, eighteen being the numerical value of the word hai, and membership, once gained, was for life. Many God-fearing people wanted to be in the hevrah kadisha because attending to the dead and
seeing a person's final state up close can bring one to the fear of heaven and, according to some, aids in meriting a long life.

That year R. Yisrael Avraham was finally successful and was accepted into the society. To mark the occasion, he made a sumptuous feast. There was white bread, wine, two meat dishes, baked fish, gefilte fish, turnips, goose necks stuffed with rice and raisins, and many other delicacies. In all the days of the ḥevrah kadisha in Buczacz, there had never been a feast like that, and it was savored by every member of the society.

While R. Yisrael Avraham was sitting with the heads of the society, eating and drinking and enjoying the wine and the food and a pleasant conversation with R. Yisrael Shlomo, not to mention the words of Torah that were offered between courses, robbers broke into his house. All the servants were already asleep, and R. Yisrael Avraham's wife, a woman of aristocratic bearing, had also dozed off. Even the little synagogue that the magnate had built for himself in his courtyard was empty, for it was now the middle of the night when everyone was in bed.

The robbers took everything they could find—silverware, copperware, clothing, bedding, pillows, and all the valuables they could get their hands on. Just as they were getting ready to leave, one of them remembered the lady of the house's jewelry, which was without compare in Buczacz. The robber figured out that it was hidden away in a little box under her head. Wasting no time, he approached her bed and began feeling around under her pillow. The woman awoke and let out a loud scream. Angered at this interruption of his labors, the robber scolded her and yelled at her in Polish, "Cicho bestia!" meaning, "Shut up, you animal!" Then, afraid that she would scream again before he could snatch the box of jewelry from under her pillow, he grabbed her by the throat and began choking her. It is not clear whether his intention was to strangle her or not, but, by the mercy of God, she was not killed.

When R. Yisrael Avraham returned from the banquet, happy at what he had finally attained and accompanied by a singing band of ḥevrah kadisha members, he entered his house and, understandably, was met with shrieks and wails and screams, for the robbers had cleaned the house out.

They ransacked the house but left no traces of their identity except for one thing: the voice of the robber who yelled at the lady of the house,
"Cicho bestia!," the meaning of which I have already explained as "Shut up, you animal!" These words were still ringing in her ears when she attested that the voice was the voice of Yekele.

Yekele was very hard for Buczacz to handle. There was no one in town who did not feel the sting of his gross impertinence or did not flinch at his strong language and his vulgar manners. He showed no respect even for the head of the community, R. Yisrael Shlomo, the town parnas, calling him Srul Shlomo, and not R. Yisrael Shlomo, as everyone else did because he was an important parnas, a wealthy man, and a leader with a large following on whom many depended. Besides which he came from an illustrious line of rabbinical eminences who ruled over many important communities and to whom many small-town rabbis were accountable. He was no less regarded and accepted by the government. Even the emperor's deputy, who hated Jews, paid heed to whatever he said.

The robbery and the strangling attempt convinced R. Yisrael Shlomo that the time had come to knock some sense into Yekele and to let him know that every hooligan winds up in jail. He summoned the chief of police who dispatched a pair of policemen to arrest Yekele. They went and bound his hands in iron chains and imprisoned him. Yekele declared to them, "Go and tell R. Yisrael Shlomo that when I get out of here I will kill him. And don't think this is just talk. You'd better know that when Yekele says he's going to do something, he means it." He repeated this warning to the warden of the prison and to all who came to visit him there, of which there were many. Some came out of pity for a Jewish boy whom the gentiles had locked up, and some came for the sake of his father, for in paradise R. Moshe was surely distressed at what was going on with his only son.

Yekele's words reached R. Yisrael Shlomo and he began to fear for his life. Esther Malkah, his wife, was even more afraid of what Yekele might do to her husband. R. Yisrael Shlomo cited the dictum that "if someone is coming to kill you, rise up and kill him first," but he had no thought of actually doing so.

A few days later, the deputy encountered R. Yisrael Shlomo as he was returning from a circumcision ceremony, where he had been the godfather. He met him with these words: "I am hearing some really nice
things about all of you. Some lovely things are going on in your community. Break-ins, thefts, robberies, violence, killing.”

R. Yisrael Shlomo replied, “You are exaggerating. I have not heard of anyone being killed.”

The deputy angrily retorted, “Anyone who attacks a woman is trying to kill her. And if he doesn’t actually kill her, he was ready to kill her.”

R. Yisrael Shlomo sighed and said nothing.

The deputy said, “I would like to know what you think about what happened and what law we should apply to that hooligan. How should he be punished?”

Said R. Yisrael Shlomo, “I hear he has been put in jail.”

The deputy laughed scornfully, “Yes, yes, they put him in jail. They put him in jail. From the day he was born he belonged in jail.”

Then the deputy added, “How long can you keep a troublemaker locked up? A year, two years, three? Eventually he goes free. He goes free and returns to his old ways. So they lock him up again and he sits in prison for however long he’s there. And then again they let him go. That’s with a regular troublemaker. But what about one who tried to strangle a woman? For your Yekele a life sentence would be letting him off easy.”

R. Yisrael Shlomo heard this and said nothing.

The deputy continued, “I do not know what the judges’ verdict will be. In my opinion, that Yekele of yours deserves the death penalty. The gallows.”

R. Yisrael Shlomo heard this and said nothing.

The deputy mused, Hm, he says nothing when he should be agreeing with me.

R. Yisrael Shlomo left and went on his way, the deputy returned to his office. He went in and sat down; sat down and got up; got up and started pacing up and down. He looked at the wall, then at his desk, and began yelling at the clerk responsible for taking care of the office, berating him for not noticing that the caretaker had placed the inkwell on the left and the container of sand used for blotting the ink on the right, when every schoolchild knows that the sand goes on the left and the inkwell on the right.

I was chewing out that clerk, he cast his eyes on another and did the same to him. Likewise with a third. Then he started screaming at
the caretaker on whom the government had wasted its money in paying someone in its administrative office to supervise him to make sure he did his job properly. Here he had gone and put what belonged on the right on the left, and what belonged on the left on the right. Finally he cooled down and went back to his desk and sat down.

He sat and brooded about the Jews in the town and how they acted as if they were still living as wards of the Polish Commonwealth and could do whatever they liked. He was particularly angry at R. Yisrael Shlomo. Everyone obeyed him as if he were the head official, as if he were the one in charge, as if he were the judge. The deputy was no less upset with himself, for every time he talked with R. Yisrael Shlomo he softened his speech and spoke to him respectfully, as if R. Yisrael Shlomo were the emperor’s deputy and not he. He did, however, take some comfort in having been able that day to tell him what should be done with the Jew Yekele.

The deputy inquired of the secretary if there was any new word about Yekele. There being none, he called for the judges and put the matter in their hands, and it turned out their opinion coincided with that of the deputy.

The town got wind of all this and was greatly upset. Fear enveloped it. Is Jewish blood a trifle? Is a person put to death on the strength of a woman’s testimony? Even if Yekele had threatened to kill her, the fact is that he didn’t. She was still wearing her jewelry and dazzling the gentiles. The word in town was that jewelry was the cause of all the Jews’ troubles. The gentiles were seeing the Jewish women going about all decked out and they became jealous, and it is well known that jealousy leads to hate and hate leads to killing. Jealousy is not only a gentile matter; Jews are susceptible to it too. A poor man sees his wife and children wasting away from hunger because he cannot buy even a crust of bread, while the rich stuff themselves with all kinds of good things and adorn their bulging bellies with expensive ornaments. It was not for nothing that Solomon said, *Hold not a thief in contempt for stealing to appease his hunger*, to which the author of the *Metzudot* commented that a thief who steals because he is hungry should not be scorned too much; indeed, he is doing so almost out of compulsion. But those rich people could feed the poor with the value of their jewelry, and they are
oblivious to their hunger, which could lead them to steal. But the case of Yekele is puzzling because the robbery took place while the sumptuous feast that R. Yisrael Avraham made for the ḥevrah kadisha was going on, and Yekele was at that feast.

At the trial the judges deliberated and sentenced Yekele to death. When news of the verdict reached town, there were still some people who felt that it was pronounced only to throw a scare into Yekele, for logic dictated that he did not deserve to die. But Yekele was not fated to die a normal death. When the judges sentenced him to death, the emperor’s deputy sent to Czernowitz for the hangman. And still there were people in town who believed that he had done so only to break Yekele’s impudent spirit.

The hangman arrived in Buczacz. He strolled through the streets, a short corpulent man with a mustache drooping over his lips on both sides, a small thick stick hanging on his arm by a braided strap. As he walked along he would curl his mustache or stop in to buy something at a store which he would then give to any young woman passing by. Every so often he would pull out the mirror he was carrying and glance into it. Buczacz was mystified by the hangman. It had never seen one before and so had no clear idea of what a hangman should look like. The consensus was that this one did not have the appearance of an executioner. Nevertheless, Buczacz was confident that the deputy knew about such things and if this was who he brought to hang someone, he knew what he was doing. Even so, it was clear to all that he was brought for the sole purpose of instilling fear into Yekele, and Yekele thought so too. But his insolence was unabated. “Tell Yisrael Shlomo to dig a grave and get some shrouds, because on the day I get out of jail I will take revenge on him,” he said.

The hangman stayed with a woman whose husband had died and whose bed was empty. He ate what she cooked for him and drank the wine she bought at the winery. She was a devout Catholic and he a devout Protestant, and the antagonism between the two religions did not interfere with the love between the two of them. He even played with her children and gave them nuts, raisins and candies. When they asked to touch the sword with which he beheaded people, he let them, upon which he would sweep the sword through the air and bring it up
against the neck of each of them, telling them that whoever touches an executioner’s sword and the executioner does not sweep the sword though the air and lay it against their neck is destined to be beheaded. He also taught the children German songs. Nothing made him laugh more than to hear them sing in their Polish accents “Satilki Nakh, Heilie Nakh,” which is “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht,” meaning “silent night, holy night,” the song that Christians sing in German on the night of Jesus’ birth.

Meanwhile, the deputy went around the town and its surroundings looking for a suitable site for the gallows. He found an excellent place on the sloping hills of what is called the Basztę, fortress in Polish, because of the fortresses that were there several generations ago, when Poland ruled the area. The fortresses have since collapsed but the name remains, and the place is still called Basztę. Even when not even a stone of their structure is left standing, edifices and fortresses retain their names. Some of those fortresses were destroyed by the Tatars, and some were leveled by the Poles themselves at the order of the Ottomans, who demanded that they be knocked down lest the Poles hide out there during their invasion. Today, there is no trace of any fortress. It is a place where cattle graze and old horses that can no longer be ridden or hitched to a wagon are bought to be flayed.

The deputy liked those hills that cascade down to the Strypa in terraces, one below the other, as if the Creator of the world, when He was about to begin His work, foresaw the day they would set up row upon row of seats for those who would come from near and far to witness the downfall of the Jew Yekele, when the hangman would place the noose around his neck. The top rows, right near the gallows, were reserved for the noblemen and their wives, owners of the great estates. Below them were the lords and ladies of the emperor’s court. Below them were the owners of the smaller estates, and below them were the gentlemen who dined with the nobles who owned the large estates. Below them were the townsfolk, and below them were those who worked in the fields and the peasant men and women. Below them were all those who flocked to any public event.

The time came and everything stood ready. On the seventh day of Adar they removed Yekele from prison and brought him outside the
town to the gallows. Before he was placed on the gallows they asked him if there was anything he wanted, for it is customary to give the condemned whatever they desire before they die. Yekele asked for a horse to ride on. He said he needed to stretch his body which was stiff from sitting for so long. They gave him a horse and sent guards along to make sure he would not escape. He mounted the horse and off he rode. When he noticed noblemen and noblewomen rushing to witness a hanging, he called to them jokingly, “Good lords and ladies! No need to run. As long as I’m on this horse, you won’t be late.”

He rode around for a while and then dismounted. They took him and led him to the gallows. The hangman said to him in German, “Son, do honor to the Lord God of Israel and give thanks to Him, then tell me what you’ve done. Don’t keep it from me.” Yekele, who did not know German and did not understand what the hangman was saying, answered him cheekily, “If you are a human being, then speak to me like a human being.” Those who knew German were moved by the hangman’s words from Scripture. Those who knew the Jewish vernacular were delighted by the condemned man’s impudence.

A few moments passed and then the hangman tied the rope around Yekele’s neck. As he did this, the eyes of all the lords and ladies were transfixed. A few moments passed and Yekele’s soul departed. At that very hour, not far from Buczacz, in the nearby village of Podlishi, all the Jews of Buczacz, led by the head of the rabbinic court, were offering prayers and supplications amidst much wailing. Suddenly the rabbi, together with all the devout, spread out their hands toward the town and declared, Our hands did not shed this blood nor did our eyes see it done.

And where was R. Yisrael Shlomo? I do not know. One can assume that he was not among those who witnessed Yekele’s death. Nor was he among the community that declared Our hands did not shed this blood.

I must add here that just as they were taking Yekele’s body down from the gallows, a runner arrived from the court in the town of Stanislav. In his hand was a letter from the court officials to the emperor’s deputy. The letter stated that Yekele, the son of Moshe, was not to be given the death penalty.
Yekele (I)

I have related here the main outlines of the story. Later on I will elaborate on its various aspects. But let me add one note of behalf of Yekele’s father, R. Moshe the Ḥasid.

There was in our town a distinguished Torah scholar whose teachings had wide authority. The halakhic queries he put to the greatest rabbis of his time were answered with utmost love and respect. In fact, when they published their books of responsa, his name appeared prominently and was cited with much admiration. That scholar was a descendant of R. Moshe the Ḥasid. Some say he was a grandson of Yekele, others that he was a grandson of Yekele’s sister. Either way, R. Moshe the Ḥasid merited to be his forebear.

Translated by James S. Diamond
with Jeffrey Saks
Yekele (II)

There was in our town a parnas who had no equal, neither among those who preceded him in that position nor among the provincial leaders. He was exceptional in every respect. He was wealthy, philanthropic, well bred, elegant, resolute, and unyielding. His name was R. Yisrael Shlomo, named after the pride of the family, the first Yisrael Shlomo, of blessed memory, who we have often mentioned. Whether it was the power of his pedigree or his own personal forcefulness, or the combination of the two, or because Buczacz was very accepting of authority, especially that of important people who have its interests at heart, everyone quailed before him. If he told someone “Do this” or “Don’t do that,” that person would nod and say “Certainly, certainly, your honor. Thank you for your good advice. I will always follow it.” With such words or something approximating them, but always with the same compliance, did the townspeople, the gentry and the common folk alike, comport themselves with him. And so, before we get to the story we are about to tell, we can say with some certainty that there was no one in the town who did not accept R. Yisrael’s authority unconditionally. And here I am pleased to note that he for his part treated them generously and graciously. If someone celebrated a brit milah and gave him the honor of being the sandek, he brought a gift for the infant. When the boy grew up and married, he would present him with a sum of money that was known as “the bridegroom’s oration award.” When
a poor man’s daughter came of age and the father was unable to provide her with a dowry, R. Yisrael Shlomo assisted him in making the wedding. Similarly, on unhappy occasions, he would send the meal of condolence to the house of mourning, and if they were poor, he would have food brought from his house to the mourners for the seven days of shiva.

Those who do good will always have people who are ungrateful to them. In fact, the latter will generally outnumber the former. By all rights, doing good should leave no room for ungratefulness. But the reality, hard as it is to come to terms with it, is otherwise. So it was with R. Yisrael Shlomo. After all the fine things he did for all kinds of people, there was one person in our town, Yekele his name, who scoffed at him, spoke ill of him, and did not even deign to address him as “Reb,” a title of respect the whole town gave him even when he was not present. When R. Yisrael Shlomo first heard about this he was taken aback. Some say a smile crossed his face, for he was amused that there was someone in town who was at odds with the prevailing consensus. But when he heard it for a second and then a third time, it started to bother him. But the beginnings of the chain of events to be related here are trifling compared to what they led up to, and so we shall not dwell on them.

Too much time has passed for us to know exactly why this Yekele started up with the parnas. On the other hand, we can relate what we have heard from the elders of the town, who heard it from their forebears. It seems that on one occasion Yekele did something that angered R. Yisrael Shlomo well beyond what normally provoked him, and this caused him to express the wish that “that rascal reach the end of his days as everyone does.” Some have it that what R. Yisrael Shlomo said was “I doubt if he will die the way other people do.” Whatever they were, R. Yisrael Shlomo’s words made an impression on Buczacz, and when the events, of which all I have thus far related is merely a prologue, reached their culmination, those words were clearly recalled.

Now having told about R. Yisrael Shlomo, of blessed memory, and the greatness of his doings, let us expend a few more drops of ink to say something about Yekele and his origins. We can begin with his father, for without fathers there are no sons.

Yekele’s father, R. Moshe, was the youngest of the early hasidim in Buczacz. Those hasidim opened a prayer house there where they
Yekele (II)

switched from the Ashkenazic to the Sephardic liturgy and followed the structure of the service as ordered by the Ari. R. Moshe lived with his wife for ten years after which, having produced no progeny, she accepted a bill of divorce from him without any rancor. That year was exceptionally cold. The many frosts made everything very expensive and those poor who did not freeze to death died of hunger.

When the Passover festival was approaching R. Moshe found himself without matzah or wine for the four cups or anything for the holiday. All he had was faith that the Holy One, blessed be He, would help him and save him from his plight. But he was heartsick at the fact that his divorced wife was completely destitute and alone in the world and would have to throw herself on her neighbors in order to sit at a seder. It’s true, he thought to himself, I have nothing to make Pesah with, but if I take my divorced wife back I can at least save her from having to throw herself at the mercy of others. He communicated this to her, and when she replied that “it is better to dwell as a duo than to live like a widow,” a marriage ceremony was held, and they put all their trust in God to sustain them on the holy festival of Passover.

Now a bit more about R. Moshe and his wife. R. Moshe was physically weak. His was completely detached from business matters, his sole concern being Torah and ḥasidic practice. As we have noted, he was among the early ḥasidim who preceded the Ba’al Shem Tov, some whom opposed the Ba’al Shem Tov. He was wont to pray with the rising of the sun, yet in the manner of all God-fearing believers in Israel in those days, he did not remove his tefillin until after midday. In the winter, when the days are short, he kept them on until nightfall, for, like some of that group of ḥasidim, he would recite the afternoon prayer in talit and tefillin. Some hold that when they recited the Shema at the evening service, the tefillin were still on their heads. It is on the basis of that practice that I once explained to some scholars why it is that in all congregations the worshipers customarily pause between emet, the last word of the Shema, and emunah, the first word of the prayer that immediately follows. They wait so as to allow the rabbi to remove his tefillin. I shall not go into detail about that here.

But even in the summer time, when the days are long, R. Moshe would spend the whole day on Torah. He gave regular classes in the
Zohar and the writings of the Ari, of blessed memory, whose texts were hard to read because most books then were not yet printed and were written in very small script that had to be read very slowly. There was one printed book that was always at R. Moshe’s side, and that was Ḥemdat Yamim, a book from which he took many good practices that were not followed in Buczacz.

R. Moshe had one other major routine. On Friday afternoons and the eve of festivals, he would run from one synagogue or beit midrash to another to check the Torah scrolls from which the weekly Torah portion would be read the next day. He even took the trouble to go to the place where the porters prayed, which was at the top of a hill and required a lot of stamina to reach. Since a person cannot in one day look through more than nine scrolls, he began his labors on Wednesdays, when the Sabbath comes into view and at the end of the morning service we add to the psalm for the day the first words of the psalm we say on Friday night, “Come let us sing unto God.”

Because he devoted all his waking hours to holy activities, R. Moshe had no time for worldly matters. His wife, therefore, took upon herself the task of supporting the household. She did this by preparing chickens from the time they were slaughtered to the point when they were put into the oven. This was one of several domestic chores that some of the wealthy women in Buczacz found it worth their while to hand over to other women for a small fee.

Let us now return to R. Moshe after he took his divorced wife back. On the Friday evening before Passover, he returned from synagogue to find his wife sitting as if she were in mourning. He made himself oblivious to her distress, sang “Shalom Aleichem,” and recited Kiddush over two loaves that were black as pitch. Then he dined on what his wife had prepared, which sufficed more to satisfy the minimum requirement of a Sabbath meal, that is, to keep one from fasting on the holy day, than it did to satisfy the body. This did not upset R. Moshe at all. He declared to his wife, “Well, now that the body has nothing to delight in, the true pleasure of the holy Sabbath is reserved for the soul, which is the way a Jewish person should feel the full joy of the day. And I am certain that God’s grace will be with us even on the holy days of Passover.” That very night his wife conceived and nine months later gave birth to a boy. But
R. Moshe was not to know of his good fortune. No sooner did his wife conceive when he died, and when the son was born, she too passed away. That son was Yekele. Why he was not named after his father is a story unto itself. When the eve of Passover was approaching and the couple still had no provisions for the holiday, a man from the country showed up in a wagon loaded down with all kinds of good things—meat, fish, vegetables, not to mention matzah and wine—all of which he gave them unstintingly, including even the parsley for the karpas. “Come help me get all this into your house,” he said to the couple. When R. Moshe asked him his name, the man answered, “Wait, I have not finished what I’m doing,” and as he said that he laid before R. Moshe a bag of coins. And then he vanished. R. Moshe stood there in astonishment. And as he stood there his wife counted out the money and found it to amount to 182 coins, which number she reported to her husband. R. Moshe calculated that the numerical equivalent of that sum is the name “Yaakov.” But he had no idea what the man’s intention was.

On the first night of Passover, after midnight, R. Moshe fell asleep while reclining after the seder. The Man of Truth appeared to him in a dream with a charming interpretation of the verse “You will show truth to Jacob.” He said, “If you think that it was I who came to you in the form of a man from the villages and that it was I who brought you the Passover provisions, you are mistaken.” And as he said this, he disappeared. The next day, R. Moshe’s wife told him that there was a report in town about a man from the villages in a wagon on his way out of town who somehow drove his horses and wagon into a river and drowned. The man’s name was Yaakov. R. Moshe then realized that this was the man from the villages who had brought him the Passover provisions, and he was greatly distressed at the idea that he might have been the cause of the man’s death. Whereupon R. Moshe and his wife agreed that if they would have a son, he would be called Yaakov, named after that man from the country. And when the boy was born as she was dying, she instructed that he be named Yaakov. But because everyone loved him, they called him Yekele. He is the Yekele of our story.

We do not know just how Yekele spent his first few years. He was in all likelihood a neglected child like all orphans who have no mother or father to guide them on a straight path. But in one circumstance was
he more privileged than most of the other townspeople: he was a regis-
tered member of the ḥevrah kadisha, the Jewish burial society. Before he
even came into the world, his father, R. Moshe, donated to the ḥevrah
kadisha the extra wine the man had brought him on the express con-
dition that should he have a male child, the boy would be enrolled as
a member of the ḥevrah kadisha. They kept their word, and while yet
an infant Yekele was made a member. In time the ḥevrah kadisha and
the gravediggers sent him on all kinds of errands and he served them
admirably.

On the surface, it is strange that the ḥevrah kadisha would enroll
as a member a child who had not yet been born when there were many
older and more mature people who wanted to join and were not accepted.
Nothing happens without a reason, of course, but why this was we do
not know, and so we will have to be content only with the facts.

Now since we have mentioned the ḥevrah kadisha and its pres-
tige, let us take a look at the other societies that were in the town, both
big and little. Some of them were as old as Buczacz, some were founded
more recently, and some we have no idea of when they came about, or
who founded them, or for what purpose. Some served to advance Torah
and some to promote good deeds.

I shall begin with those that pertained to Torah. First and fore-
most was the ḥevrah mishnayot, the Mishnah study society. When the
town was founded, or possibly when it was resettled after the pogroms
of 1648, the practice was instituted to study every day between Minḥah
and Maariv a whole chapter of Mishnah or two individual mishnayot
with the commentary of R. Ovadiah Bartenura and, if possible, that of
Tosafot Yom Tov. It is said that initially there was an explicit directive
that no one should leave for work in the morning without studying a
mishnah or two, and if he was not trained in Torah he should hear the
text read aloud by the Mishnah reciter. In the old beit midrash there was
a particular person who every day at the end of the morning prayers got
up and recited a chapter of Mishnah.

A second group, no less important as far as Torah was concerned,
was the ḥevrah Shas, the Talmud study society. Its luminaries took it
upon themselves to each complete one tractate of the Talmud over the
course of a year, and thus the entire Talmud was studied annually.
Third among these groups was the Alshikh Society. Its members gathered on Friday evenings after dinner to study together the weekly Torah portion with the Alshikh's commentary. At first it had many members, but when the Akedah Society got started, most of them joined the group to study the commentary titled Akedat Yitzhak. This branched out into a maḥzor study group that met before each festival to study the commentaries on the piyyutim, so that a person would know what he was saying in the service. This included Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for which preparatory study began on the fifteenth day of the month of Av.

A fourth Torah group was the Talmud Torah Society. It promoted the teaching of Torah. Its members realized no benefit from it in this world but in the world to come their reward for supporting it was incalculable. They paid melamdim to teach the children of the poor, for it is from them that Torah will spring. Initially all the children were brought to one melamed, but when it became clear that some families were embarrassed at having their children learning in a school for paupers, the children of the poor were farmed out to various other melamdim in the town, each child according to his capability.

Having enumerated the societies that involved Torah, let me now list those that promoted good deeds, first the ones that were established for the general good, then those that were set up to serve the particular needs of Buczacz.

The principal one was a society called Pat Le'orḥim, Food for Transients. A poor person passing through our town, when he was about to set out on his way, would be given food to take with him. The person in charge of this society was an old melamed who suffered from consumption and was not able to operate his own school house. If the poor transient was a woman, the melamed's wife gave her the food. She also went around on Fridays to all the homes collecting bread, assisted by a few righteous women.

A second such society was called Eruv Tavshilin. If the second day of a festival fell on a Friday, a member appointed for that day would go out to the nearby villages and remind the people there to make sure they put aside the food they had cooked for the Sabbath. They did this because those people had little knowledge of Torah and were very
involved in their business dealings with the gentiles and so were liable to forget the mitzvah of eruv tavshilin.

A third such society was Esther's Turn, which was composed of young men dispatched on Purim to go out and read the Megillah. Only a few townsfolk benefited from it, mostly the sick and the aged, who were unable to walk to the synagogue for the reading of the Megillah, and the maidservants of the rich, who were busy with cooking and baking. The boys would come and read it to them with the full cantillation. They did this without any thought of getting paid and they set up no collection boxes. They did accept whatever baked goods the various homes could offer.

There used to be a society in town, as there were in most communities in Poland, called the Society for Ransoming Captives. It was the largest of all the societies, but when the Polish Commonwealth ended, it ceased operating, and even though the Austrian Empire was no less harsh toward the Jews, the noblemen no longer imprisoned Jewish tax collectors who failed to pay the taxes on time, and so there was no longer any need to ransom captives. In addition, R. Yisrael Shlomo, who was held in high esteem by the gentiles, was an effective advocate for the Jews of the villages. Whenever there was trouble he interceded on their behalf with the authorities, and his words had effect. The Polish officials were also eager to accede to his wishes because they often needed him to advocate for them with the Austrians. On many occasions, the Poles paid no attention to Austrian laws and conducted their affairs as they had before Austria took over Poland. They thus incurred the wrath of the Austrian authorities and sought out R. Yisrael Shlomo to set things right for them.

Having now enumerated those societies that worked for the general good, let me now list the ones that benefited many people in our town.

The Hakhnasat Kallah Society, the Society for Dowering Brides. The name speaks for itself.

The Time to Be Born Society, for birthing mothers. Righteous women came to poor women giving birth and fed them, assisted them with money, and provided them with medications and diapers for the newborn. This society had its own special Sabbath, the Sabbath

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when the weekly Torah portion Shemot was read, for it contains in the first chapters of the book of Exodus the passage “When you deliver the Hebrew women giving birth.” Those who were called up to the Torah pledged to contribute eighteen coins; some pledged to give forty-four, the numerical value of the Hebrew word yeled (“child”); and some pledged fifty-two, the value of the word ben (“son”). I heard tell that the Parnas R. Yisrael Shlomo, of blessed memory, would donate 279 coins each year, the numerical value of the words ben zakhar (“male son”).

The Clothing the Naked Society, whose members went around to the homes of the wealthy and collected clothing and shoes for orphaned boys and girls and the poor. This society too had its own special Sabbath when people would pledge to donate to it. At first this was the Sabbath when the Torah portion “Ki Tavo” was read, for it contains the passage “The clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet.” Later on the society’s special Sabbath was moved back a week, when the preceding Torah portion “Ki Tetzeh” was read. That Sabbath was said to be better for honoring a society that “clothes the naked” because it contains the verse “A man shall not wear woman’s clothing,” and reading that remedied what some of the uneducated did when they dressed up like women on Purim.

The Righteous Lodging Society, for when someone took sick, each member of this society had to stay with that person for one night.

The Hidden Poor Society helped poor people who came from good families who were ashamed to go around begging. The members of this society went to them and gave them what they needed.

The Society for the Support of the Downtrodden, whose name speaks for itself.

The R. Meir Ba’al Haness Charity. Some say that this was something new and unprecedented and was founded by the first students of the Ba’al Shem Tov. Everyone agrees, however, that it was a significant corrective because it provided assistance to the poor of the land of Israel who subsisted only on what the Diaspora sent them. Several people from our town live in the land of the living, the Holy Land, and it is for that reason that I include this society among those that benefit our town.
The Sekhvi Vina Society. This was founded by craftsmen in town in order to provide hens for the kapparot ritual to those who could not afford to buy them.

The Kiddush Levanah Society. The members of this society made lanterns which they brought to illuminate the ceremony of sanctifying the new moon.

The Wine for Kiddush and Havdalah Society. This society distributed wine for kiddush and havdalah to synagogues and batei midrash. It was founded because of the frequent quarrels that broke out over who would have the privilege of performing that mitzvah. Along came a clever man who created a society to which all who were anxious to do this mitzvah could make a weekly donation, and the funds would be used to buy raisins to make wine. This did not end the quarrels, for there were still arguments over just who would make the wine. Eventually the matter was determined by a lottery, and this led to the creation of the Lottery Society. Now any mitzvah that people were so eager to carry out that they got into arguments over it, this one saying, “I should get to do it!” and that one saying, “No, I deserve to do it!” was put into the hands of the society which arranged a lottery to decide the matter.

The Arrival on Time Society. On Friday afternoons, its members would go to the outlying areas of the town to see whether the wagon drivers had returned from their travels before the onset of the Sabbath.

All these societies were as nothing compared to the hevrah kadi-sha. Not everyone who wanted to be a member of it was accepted; special pleading was necessary. Proof of this is the unsuccessful application of R. Yisrael Avraham, one of the richest men in Buczacz, who, with his own money, built a synagogue in his courtyard. He got in only through the assistance of R. Yisrael Shlomo.

After he was accepted into the burial society, R. Yisrael Avraham made a sumptuous feast for all the members. This was an annual event, but all prior such feasts were nothing compared with the one he made. From the conclusion of the evening service after the seventh day of Adar until morning prayers the next day, the prodigious consumption of food and drink went on without interruption. There are still elders in Buczacz who, when they come to tell of that feast, cover their mouths to keep from laughing, but the giggles that do get out tell more than what
was held back. To wit, when the revelers stood up to start the morning service, they all had to lean against the wall, and the standing prayer had to be recited sitting down.

That night, while R. Yisrael Avraham was sitting at the feast he made for the burial society, amid the meat and the fish and the braided hallot, the wine, the whiskey and the mead and all the other delicacies, something happened at his home. The doors were broken through, the house was entered, and everything of gold and silver, as well as the money and the cash box and the security deposits of gentile officials, were taken. Even the golden earrings that his regal wife was wearing were removed from her ears and taken. When she raised her voice to scream for help, one of the robbers gagged her with a handkerchief, and in a gentile language told her, “Cicho bestia!,” meaning, “Shut up, you animal,” or I’ll strangle you. The lady recognized the voice as Yekele’s.

The people in town did not believe that Yekele could be one of the robbers. They knew he was a lout, but that he was a robber or someone ready to kill—that was impossible for anyone to believe. It was out of respect for the standing of R. Yisrael’s wife, who insisted that it was Yekele who threatened her and said what he said, that the town leaders agreed to go and ask him. When they looked for him and could not find him, it occurred to one of the gravediggers that during the whole time of the feast he did not see Yekele. At that, his friends, too, realized that they also had not seen him at the feast. It was puzzling. One does not give up a chance to attend a feast worthy of King Solomon, one which he spends a year anticipating. So there must have been some reason why he was not there. They began to inquire whether there might be someone who was not one of the gravediggers or the servants or the officers or leaders of the society who could say they saw him. They became even more perplexed, and as perplexity grew, so did suspicion, especially since everyone knew that R. Yisrael Avraham’s wife was a lady of standing, and if she said it was Yekele’s voice, then the possibility was real. True, a woman’s testimony is by Jewish law not accepted, but still the matter needed to be investigated. Very soon there was no one in town who had any doubt that Yekele was involved with the robbers.
R. Yisrael Shlomo sent the town police out to go and look for Yekele. They searched without success. After two days he showed up of his own accord, and it was apparent that he was ill, his face all scratched up, and his whole body bruised. He was brought to the council house and interrogated as to his whereabouts, but he could give no clear answer. When they pressed him, he became insolent with the magistrates, calling them shills for R. Yisrael Shlomo. “I am not afraid of you or of him,” he told them.

His relatives came and asked him to stop being stubborn and answer the questions that he was being asked, though they had not yet told him what he was suspected of doing. After much pleading, he answered them as follows. “I was very upset that everyone was talking about the feast that R. Yisrael Avraham was making for the burial society. I knew a nobleman in a certain village who had in his cellar mead that had been aged for a hundred years. I went to buy a cask of it from him so I could show the members of the society that my wine was better than anything R. Yisrael would serve. On my way back to town, I sampled some of that mead, and that led me to take a little more. I kept on tasting and drinking until the whole cask was empty and I fell asleep. I was awakened by some gentiles who prodded me with their plowing tools and injured me.” Yekele did not yet know of what he was suspected. He thought they had wanted him at the feast so he could serve the leaders of the society, and since he was not there, R. Yisrael Shlomo was looking to have him punished. That is why he called the magistrates shills of R. Yisrael Shlomo.

After they informed him what he was suspected of and he made no effort to explain himself, they brought him bound in iron shackles to the prison where he was put under guard and treated with the full force of the law. Yekele was still holding on to the idea that sometime before tomorrow he would be freed. But he did say “God help R. Yisrael Shlomo. I swear he will not leave my hands alive.”

Word of all this reached R. Yisrael Shlomo, and it was apparent to everyone that he was scared. He moved quickly to bring the matter to the attention of the regional judges, and he was not satisfied until they condemned Yekele to the gallows.
R. Yisrael Shlomo then sent to Czernowitz for a hangman who was the son of the famous hangman appointed by the Emperor Joseph. He was famous because the rope he placed around the neck of the condemned never broke even once during his entire career.

Yekele still believed that all this was being done in order to strike fear in him and that today or tomorrow he would be released. Everyone in town thought likewise. But when it was reported that a hangman had arrived in town, several leading figures assembled, led by our excellent and righteous master and teacher. They said to him, “God forbid that we suspect your Excellency of wanting to destroy one of Israel, but tormenting him is still a grave sin.” R. Yisrael Shlomo sighed and replied, “What can I do? The matter is now out of my hands and there is nothing more to be done. I am not the judge or the one in charge or the one giving orders, and besides, the law of the land is the law.” They then went and petitioned the officials. But the officials paid them no heed because from the day R. Yisrael Shlomo was appointed the town’s parnas any matter pertaining to the Jewish community or to a Jewish person went through Israel Salomon Behrmann, whom they esteemed and whose wishes they followed. Unhappy and dissatisfied, the petitioners sought out the judges. The judges reprimanded them severely and told them, “If you say one more word we will charge you with trying to influence a judge and will punish you to the full extent of the law.”

Meanwhile the hangman from Czernowitz arrived in the town of Buczacz. R. Yisrael Shlomo arranged for him to stay at the home of a woman, now a widow, who, when she was a young lady, had worked in his house. The woman reported that her lodger was a short, muscular man with a thick, long mustache who spoke German, and who every time he opened a flask to pour himself a drink that smelled like whiskey, would, before putting his lips to the cup, lift up his mustache to the left of his nose. She further reported that every night he would pace around his room muttering words in languages she had never heard.

In any event, a place for the gallows was found on a hill called the Basztę, or fortress. A proclamation went out to the noblemen and noblewomen and the lords and ladies in all localities that on such-and-such day of such-and-such month at such-and-such hour in such-and-such place
a Jew would be executed. And from all those localities, all the noblemen and noblewomen and lords and ladies of all ranks came, everyone dressed in finery as if for a festival, to witness something they had never seen before.

The judges sent a delegation to Yekele in prison to tell him to prepare himself for death. But Yekele still clung to the belief that this was all one big comedy and it was all being done to scare him. They asked him what he wanted before he died, for they had a law that stipulated that before execution the condemned person was to be given anything he wanted except to be spared from death or to have someone else killed in his place. Yekele answered that since he had been sitting in one place for several weeks, his bones were numb and he wanted to ride a horse. A riding horse was promptly brought and guards were placed around him so he would not escape. Yekele mounted the horse and merrily rode out. When he saw a throng of lords and ladies rushing from all directions to witness an execution, he joked to them saying, “You need not hurry as long as I am here. It won’t happen without me!”

After he had ridden about to his satisfaction, he was brought before the gallows and hoisted up onto a wooden platform. As he was led to the noose, the official standing next to him said, “Confess now in the name of the God of Israel!” It was said that that official was a Jew who had renounced his faith. His spirit now aroused, Yekele began to recount one after another all the sins he had committed. But the robbery in the house of R. Yisrael Avraham, he said, was not of his doing. As everyone stood waiting to see if he would recant, he repeated his claim. “That sin I did not commit” he said. The hangman coiled the noose around his neck and did what he did. And even now the rope did not break.

A few days later, an order came from the Emperor absolving the condemned man of any punishment. By the time it arrived the sentence had been carried out and the case was closed.

On the day that Yekele was taken out to be executed, all the God-fearing people of Buczacz went out into the fields and forests outside of town. They walked about the whole day weeping and crying. From time to time, they spread out their hands in the direction of the town saying, “Our hands did not shed this blood.”
Yekele (II)

I take leave now of the horrific deeds that were done in the house of Israel. For even if this narrator’s intentions are positive, what he writes still contains a drop of criticism that can moisten a parched field and allow thorns and thistles to sprout and wound Israel. Happy is he who restrains himself while telling his story even if he intends to show that the evil deeds that were done were truly evil.

Translated by James S. Diamond
with Jeffrey Saks
419. Joseph / A reference to the biblical Joseph in the house of Potiphar (Genesis 39), who did not succumb to the temptations of his master's wife.

427. Yekele (I)

* "Yekele (Nusah Ehad)"; this story, and the parallel version that follows, "Yekele (II)," appear to be two different attempts at telling the same story. Neither was published in Agnon's lifetime. From the manuscripts in the Agnon archives of the National Library of Israel it appears that version I of the story likely predates version II, but even this cannot be established with certainty (both merely carry the title Yekele; the styling of the versions as (I) and (II), or more literally in the Hebrew edition: “One Version” and “Another Version,” was an editorial decision of Emunah Yaron). It is possible that Agnon always intended to include both versions in the final publication (the choice his daughter made), a kind of "Rashomon"-like attempt to tell one story from different points of view. The incident at the heart of these stories, the execution of an innocent Jew with the assent of the head of the Jewish community, is based on an event which Agnon claimed occurred in Buczacz in 1825, and which he already referred to in a very early story, “Ir HaMetim” (published in newspaper HaEt, 1907).

428. Seventh of Adar / Jewish tradition ascribes the seventh day of the Hebrew month of Adar as the date of both Moses' birth and death (Rosh Hashanah 11a).

428. Hevralah kadisha / The Jewish Burial Society that attends to the details of the funeral and burial. Men attend to men, women to women. The society customarily holds its annual meeting on the seventh of Adar and sponsors a festive banquet for its members, based on the idea that God Himself tended to the burial of Moses upon his death on this day (Deuteronomy 34:6).

428. Hai / Hebrew word for life, and the numerical value of its two Hebrew letters is eighteen.

430. The voice was the voice of Yekele / Yekele is a Yiddish diminutive for the Hebrew name Yaakov (Jacob), and the reference is to Genesis 27:22, “the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”

430. If someone is coming to kill you, rise up and kill him first / Sanhedrin 72a, and several other places in Talmud.
432. Polish Commonwealth / Galicia was part of the Polish Commonwealth until the First Partition of Poland in 1772, when much of it became part of the Austrian Empire.
432. Hold not a thief in contempt for stealing to appease his hunger / Proverbs 6:30.
432. Metzudot / 18th century commentary on the Prophets and the Additional Writings by Rabbi David Altschuler.
433. Czernowitz / Alt. Chernivtsi or Tschernowitz; city in western Ukraine, approximately 125 km. southeast of Buchacz.
435. Our hands did not shed this blood nor did our eyes see it done / Deuteronomy 21:7.

438. Yekele (II)
* “Yekele (Nusah Aher)”; see introductory note to “Yekele (I),” above.
438. The first Yisrael Shlomo, of blessed memory, who we have often mentioned / See Agnon’s Hakhnasat Kallah, Book I, chapters 11-13, and Book II, chapter 5; in I.M. Lask’s English translation (“In order to record the praises of Reb Israel Solomon”) as The Bridal Canopy (The Toby Press edition, 2015).
440. Ari / R. Isaac Luria (1534–72), one of the key figures in the development of kabbalistic thinking.
440. It is better to dwell as a duo than to live like a widow / Yevamot 118b, K kdushin 75a, and elsewhere.
441. Hemdat Yamim / Published in Izmir, 1731, is an anthology of kabbalistic practices of unknown provenance. It was erroneously regarded as a Sabbatian text. Gershom Scholem writes of it: “[T]his voluminous book remains in my opinion, despite all that strikes us as bizarre, one of the most beautiful and affecting works of Jewish literature (Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, p. 285).
441. Come let us sing unto God / The morning service on Wednesdays concludes with a recitation of Psalm 94 and the first three verses of Psalm 95, which is said in its entirety at the beginning of the service of welcoming the Sabbath on Friday nights; hence its association with and anticipation of the Sabbath.
442. Karpas / Green vegetable dipped in saltwater toward the beginning of the Passover seder.
442. 182 coins... equivalent of that sum is the name “Yaakov” / In the system known as gematria, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value. The four letters of the name Yaakov add up to 182. Yekele is a Yiddish diminutive of Yaakov.
442. The Man of Truth / The reference is to the prophet Elijah likely on the basis of I Kings 17:24, “And the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is true.’”
442. You will show truth to Jacob / Micah 7:20.
443. Bartenura... Tosafot Yom Tov / The Bartenura commentary on the Mishnah, composed by R. Ovadiah of Bartenura, Italy, in the 15th century; Tosafot Yom Tov is a 17th century Mishnah commentary by R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller of Prague and Poland.
444. Akedat Yitzḥak / Torah commentary called after the “binding of Isaac” in Genesis 22 was written by Isaac Arama, 15th century Spain.
444. Eruv Tavshilin / Lit., “mixing of cooked dishes.” A rabbinic device that allows the preparation of food for a Sabbath that immediately follows a Friday holiday to be prepared on that Friday, despite the general prohibition of performing activities on one holy day for the following day.
446. When you deliver the Hebrew women giving birth / The Torah portion comprises Exodus 1–6:1. The passage is at Exodus 1:16.
446. R. Meir Ba’al Haness Charity / Lit., “Rabbi Meir the miracle worker.” R. Meir (mid-second century ce) was an important rabbinic figure in the mishnaic period who, through a miracle attributed to him (Avodah Zarah 18a-b), became associated with charitable acts. Since the eighteenth century, several charities have operated under his name.
447. Sekhvi Vina / Lit., “discernment to the rooster,” after God’s question to Job (38:36), “Who put wisdom in the hidden parts? Who gave discernment to the rooster?” The phrase occurs in the first of the preliminary blessings in the morning “Blessed are You... who has given understanding to the rooster to distinguish between day and night.”
447. Kapparot / Lit., “expiations” ceremony, performed by observant Jews on the morning of the day before Yom Kippur in which the sins of an individual are symbolically transferred to a live fowl. The fowl—a rooster for a man, a hen for a woman—is swung around the head three times as biblical verses and a formula of vicarious atonement is recited. Money in the amount of the fowl’s value is often substituted for the fowl.

447. Kiddush Levanah / Lit., “sanctifying the moon.” This is a liturgy, rabbincally prescribed (Sanhedrin 41b–42a), recited in clear moonlight on a night, customarily on a Saturday night after the Sabbath, soon after the appearance of a new moon. The verses chanted express an acknowledgment of the divine presence in the natural universe.

450. To destroy one of Israel / After Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.


453. The Earliest Ḥasidim


453. Da’at Kedoshim / Rabbinic work written by R. Abraham David Wahrman (1771–1840), known as the Tzaddik of Buczacz, rabbi of the town from 1814 until his death.

453. Cotton caftan / The Hebrew text reads “kafṭan shel kitay,” which is nankleen, a type of Chinese cotton. Sailor’s pants often made from it. It was a term in Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Polish, which also became a Jewish family name for those who dealt in this merchandise.

454. Shabbatei Zvi... Jacob Frank / Frank (1726–91) was the founder and leader of a sect that sought to perpetuate and develop the antinomian and anti-rabbinic teachings and practices of the false messiah Shabbatai Zvi (1626–76). Frank saw himself as Shabbatei Zvi’s reincarnation but created his own syncretistic and eccentric blend of Judaism and Christianity. Frank was excommunicated as a heretic by both Jewish and Christian authorities. Agnon’s narrator often insists, against much historical evidence, that Frank was born and buried in Buczacz.

455. In a Single Moment

“BeSha’ah Aḥat”; orig. pub. in Haaretz (September 16, 1955).