

## **CYZEWO KLEZMORIM**

by Avraham Yosef Ritholtz / New York

Excerpted from:

### **Cyzewo Memorial Book**

(Cyzewo, Poland)

Edited by Szymon Kanc

Published in Tel Aviv,

former residents of Cyzewo in Israel and the USA, 1961

Pages 579-585

Translated by Wolf Krakowski

I am a grand-nephew from the Ritholtz klezmer family in Cyzewo (TSHIZSHEVE). If memory serves, I - as a boy, would lead my grandfather, Reb Gedalye the klezmer (may he rest in peace) to the house of study for his prayers on *Shabes* during his old age.

For this opportunity it is worth noting, that from our family, I was the first and perhaps the only one in Cyzewo that was worthy to carry the family name -- Ritholtz. This was during the years of the first World War, 1914 - 1918. Up until that time, I was also not excluded, as was the custom in other towns, from being called by one's father's, grandfather's, father-in-law's, or mother-in-law's name and even by one's wife's name and by one's trade.

And so my grandfather, may he rest in peace, was called Gedalye the klezmer. My father, may he rest in peace, Itzl the klezmer and I were known under the name: Avraham-Yosef-Itzl the klezmers.

To the Christians I was known as "Gedaltshik," according to my grandfather's name.

Unaware as to exactly how my grandfather, father and nearly the entire family actually made their living from repairing watches, they were called "klezmer."

Even though since childhood I used to help my father make his klezmer income, later, with my own efforts, I acquired real knowledge of the art of music, which I always used for social purposes. However, when organizing and presenting a Yiddish theatre orchestra and gathering, I was not referred to by the title "klezmer."

Maybe it was because it was not the source of my livelihood.

My grandfather left behind four sons and a daughter, all of whom occupied themselves with klezmer music.

Playing music did not even provide enough for a dry crust of bread and, since every family had several small children, each one actually had another income on the side.

My grandmother used to sell home-made cookies at fairs and markets.

My father and uncles occupied themselves with repairing watches.

But our town and community was too small to support this large watch-repairing family so, over time, we went hungry.

Not having any other way out, music-making kept the family from going under.

Velvl, the oldest of the brothers, moved to Tshexhanovtse and there, with his children, established a band.

Aaron, the youngest, went to Zembrove and he also established an orchestra comprised of his own and hired people.

My father and his brother Yidl both remained in Czyzewo and occupied themselves with both trades (music-making and watch-repair) which brought in just enough for their families to remain hungry most days of the week, until my uncle Yidl went off to America.

My father remained in Czyzewo, established a band and was, for many years, the town's only watch-repairman.

The ensemble comprised the following people: my uncle Itzl, first violin; Yitzkhakl the klezmer, second violin; Yitzkhakl's brother Melekh and my older brother Aaron David, trumpet and arranger and clarinet and flute; Aaron Leybl and Itche (both deliverymen) were bass-players and Yosl Daniels (sp) played the drums.

Years later, the size of the orchestra was diminished. There remained only the two violinists and I helped out on clarinet. Drummers were unemployed young men, volunteers.

In their heyday, the much-in-demand orchestra played at local weddings and sometimes at other celebrations in nearby towns like Yendzsheve, Zaramb or Sokole. Even at nearby Christian nobles' courtyards and rural at Christian weddings.

It often happened that a mother-in-law from a nearby town or countryside, for various reasons forgot to send a wagon to transport the klezmers. The entire orchestra would go on foot. The wages earned for playing were not enough to cover the rental of a small wagon.

At balls where we required a larger orchestra, we hired musicians from other towns, including Bialystock.

Concerning these special events at rural weddings and balls, which were both comical and serious, I will relate two episodes.

The first episode shows that, for all his simplicity my father possessed the strength to "conquer his desires."

It happened in the nearby town of Sudki.

On a beautiful summer Sunday afternoon, we were brought to a courtyard to play at a ball under the open sky. Between flowery rows, richly-covered tables were laden with fruit, candy, expensive chocolate and bon-bons. Various liquors. Separate tables laden with several smoked and roasted meats that strongly tore at our hungry appetites. It took our breath away.

The serving staff knew that Jews did not eat at the same table with Christians. They asked us if they should prepare a separate table for us. Not waiting for my father, who had gone somewhere to *daven minkhe* (say his afternoon prayers), we all agreed to the proposal.

But when we were seated around the table laden with appetizers, fried in butter and other tasty meats, it was soon time to prepare for **AKHILE** and suddenly the door flew open and there stood my father.

It is hard to say how long the silence lasted and for how long we sat motionless from fear. All of a sudden, my father began to yell with superhuman power:

"We have to leave! *Goyim, treyfnyake* (eaters of non-kosher food)!"

You devour *treyf* (unclean food)? Get out ! Get out!"

The band quickly dispersed. Jumped through the window, and . . . we had to make do with bread and butter, hard-boiled eggs and tea that my father had prepared beforehand, while we sat around the *treyf* table.

It never entered any of our minds to rebel against my father's handling of the situation.

For forty years my father was a klezmer musician in Czyzewo. But because of the anti-Semitism that developed in Poland during the anti-Semitic agitations, which were carried out especially in the Czyzewo area, Jewish klezmers were no longer hired to play at Christian balls.

. . .

The story that I will tell you, was told to me by my father when I was still a child. Even though I am not a believer in the supernatural, I will recall it nevertheless, because the seriousness with which my father spoke of it engraved itself strongly upon my memory.

When my grandfather was still a young man, shortly after his wedding, one *Shabes* evening two noblemen came into his home; they were elegantly attired and told him and his klezmers to come with them to a ball which they had planned for the evening.

They mentioned the name of a village which was not familiar to my grandfather. He agreed and called the group together. They sat down in a fine coach hitched to three horses and, after riding for half an hour, arrived in a courtyard that was already filled with guests.

The musicians were led into a ballroom and couples began to dance. All of a sudden they noticed that the dancers had chicken feet! [Translator's note: I think they could have been inbred nobility with malformed feet, a *mishpokhe fayler* (genetic defect). Tall tales are usually based on fact]

A fright fell upon the musicians but they didn't know how to get out of the situation.

They played on but were determined not to eat anything.

We had to play for several hours continuously because the dancers didn't want to stop.

It was close to midnight when the two noblemen who hired us, came over and said:

"We are very pleased with your playing. How do you wish to be paid - with gold or with chicken s\*\*t?"

"with gold" - said my frightened grandfather.

Suddenly, a mighty storm appeared. It became dark and they suddenly found themselves in mud, in the forest. The violins were hanging from the trees and they were full of dirt [Translator's note: chicken droppings?]. With strenuous effort, they retrieved them from the trees and barely dragged themselves home, tired and muddy.

On *Shabes*, they all went to the house of study to *daven* and say *goyml* (prayer for the safe return from a journey).

Even before the first World War, I initiated free music classes in my workshop (?), which I kept in the home of Yeshiye Gozshaltshani, and afterwards, at Peysekh Turavitch's, or as they called him, Peysekh the SOLTIS [translator's question: family name?]

The most able of the participants were:

Shmulke Vengozsh, who was killed by the Hitler gang; Mishl Litman's son, shot by the Poles; Itsche Lyubeltshik, who died in Syria; and \*Yivdl Lekhayim Simkhe Gramadzin\* (See Note below), who lives in America today. He took over the direction of the Yiddish theatre orchestra soon after my departure from Czystewo.

I thank my father and my great-grandfathers for their spiritual legacy and for my love of music that I maintain to this day.

My father, his three brothers and sister all died at a ripe old age, in the golden land, America.

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May Their Memories Be Blessed

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\*Translator's Note: Don't know if this is all one name or if "Yivdal Lekhayim" is some sort of "blessing" or honorific. But there is no comma between Lekhayim" and "Simkh." "Lekhayim" would be, in my experience, unusual for a name.

*AKHILE—we do not have a translation for this word.*