

# The Son from America

Isaac Bashevis Singer

**T**he village of Lentshin was tiny—a sandy marketplace where the peasants of the area met once a week. It was surrounded by little huts with thatched roofs or shingles green with moss. The chimneys looked like pots. Between the huts there were fields, where the owners planted vegetables or pastured their goats.

In the smallest of these huts lived old Berl, a man in his eighties, and his wife, who was called Berlcha (wife of Berl). Old Berl was one of the Jews who had been driven from their villages in Russia and had settled in Poland. In Lentshin, they mocked the mistakes he made while praying aloud. He spoke with a sharp “r.” He was short, broad-shouldered, and had a small white beard, and summer and winter he wore a sheepskin hat, a padded cotton jacket, and stout boots. He walked slowly, shuffling his feet. He had a half acre of field, a cow, a goat, and chickens.

The couple had a son, Samuel, who had gone to America forty years ago. It was said in Lentshin that he became a millionaire there. Every month, the Lentshin letter carrier brought old Berl a money order and a letter that no one could read because many of the words were English. How much money Samuel sent his parents remained a secret. Three times a year, Berl and his wife went on foot to Zakrocym<sup>1</sup> and cashed the money orders there. But they never seemed to use the money. What for? The garden, the

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1. Zakrocym (zä-krô'chäm).

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW      **thatched** (thăcht) *adj.* covered with plant stalks or leaves **thatch** *v.*

cow, and the goat provided most of their needs. Besides, Bercha sold chickens and eggs, and from these there was enough to buy flour for bread.

No one cared to know where Berl kept the money that his son sent him. There were no thieves in Lentshin. The hut consisted of one room, which contained all their belongings: the table, the shelf for meat, the shelf for milk foods, the two beds, and the clay oven. Sometimes the chickens roosted in the woodshed and sometimes, when it was cold, in a coop near the oven. The goat, too, found shelter inside when the weather was bad. The more prosperous villagers had kerosene lamps, but Berl and his wife did not believe in newfangled gadgets. What was wrong with a wick in a dish of oil? Only for the Sabbath<sup>2</sup> would Bercha buy three tallow candles at the store. In summer, the couple got up at sunrise and retired with the chickens. In the long winter evenings, Bercha spun flax at her spinning wheel, and Berl sat beside her in the silence of those who enjoy their rest.

Once in a while when Berl came home from the synagogue after evening prayers, he brought news to his wife. In Warsaw there were strikers who demanded that the czar abdicate. A heretic by the name of Dr. Herzl<sup>3</sup> had come up with the idea that Jews should settle again in Palestine. Bercha listened and shook her bonneted head. Her face was yellowish and wrinkled like a cabbage leaf. There were bluish sacks under her eyes. She was half deaf. Berl had to repeat each word he said to her. She would say, "The things that happen in the big cities!"

Here in Lentshin nothing happened except usual events: a cow gave birth to a calf, a young couple had a circumcision party,<sup>4</sup> or a girl was born and there was no party. Occasionally, someone died. Lentshin had no cemetery, and the corpse had to be taken to Zakroczym. Actually, Lentshin had become a village with

few young people. The young men left for Zakroczym, for Nowy Dwor, for Warsaw, and sometimes for the United States. Like Samuel's, their letters were illegible, the Yiddish<sup>5</sup> mixed with the languages of the countries where they were now living. They sent photographs in which the men wore top hats and the women fancy dresses like squires.<sup>6</sup>

Berl and Bercha also received such photographs. But their eyes were failing, and neither he nor she had glasses. They could barely make out the pictures. Samuel had sons and daughters with Gentile<sup>7</sup> names—and grandchildren who had married and had their own offspring. Their names were so strange that Berl and Bercha could never remember them. But what difference do names make? America was far, far away on the other side of the ocean, at the edge of the world. A Talmud<sup>8</sup> teacher who came to Lentshin had said that Americans walked with their heads down and their feet up. Berl and Bercha could not grasp this. How was it possible? But since the teacher said so, it must be true. Bercha pondered for some time, and then she said,

2. **the Sabbath:** a weekly day of rest and worship for Jews, beginning at sundown Friday and ending at sundown Saturday.

3. **Dr. Herzl** (hěrt'səl): Theodor Herzl, an Austrian writer and journalist who, in response to anti-Jewish feeling in Europe in the late 1800s, called for the establishment of a Jewish state.

4. **circumcision party:** a party following the Jewish ceremony called *brith milah* (brít' mē-lā'), in which a baby boy is circumcised and given a Hebrew name on the eighth day after birth.

5. **Yiddish:** a language—containing elements of German, Hebrew, and several other languages—spoken by Jews in central and eastern Europe and by their descendants in other countries.

6. **squires:** wives of country gentlemen (squires).

7. **Gentile** (jěn'til'): not Jewish (usually applied to people and things Christian).

8. **Talmud** (tāl'mööd): the writings that are the basis of Jewish civil and religious law.

WORDS  
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KNOW

**flax** (fläks) *n.* a plant that is the source of the fibers used to make linen

**abdicate** (äb'dī-kät') *v.* to give up an office or position

**heretic** (hěr'ī-tīk) *n.* a person who disagrees with accepted beliefs, particularly those of a religious group

**illegible** (ī-lěj'ə-bəl) *adj.* unreadable

"One can get accustomed to everything."

And so it remained. From too much thinking—God forbid—one may lose one's wits.

**O**ne Friday morning, when Berlcha was kneading the dough for the Sabbath loaves, the door opened and a nobleman entered. He was so tall that he had to bend down to get through the door. He wore a beaver hat and a cloak bordered with fur. He was followed by Chazkel, the coachman from Zakroczym, who carried two leather valises with brass locks. In astonishment Berlcha raised her eyes.

The nobleman looked around and said to the coachman in Yiddish, "Here it is." He took out a silver ruble and paid him. The coachman tried to hand him change, but he said, "You can go now."

When the coachman closed the door, the nobleman said, "Mother, it's me, your son Samuel—Sam."

Berlcha heard the words and her legs grew numb. Her hands, to which pieces of dough were sticking, lost their power. The nobleman hugged her, kissed her forehead, both her cheeks. Berlcha began to cackle like a hen, "My son!" At that moment Berl came in from the woodshed, his arms piled with logs. The goat followed him. When he saw a nobleman kissing his wife, Berl dropped the wood and exclaimed, "What is this?"

The nobleman let go of Berlcha and embraced Berl. "Father!"

For a long time Berl was unable to utter a sound. He wanted to recite holy words that he had read in the Yiddish Bible, but he could remember nothing. Then he asked, "Are you Samuel?"

"Yes, Father, I am Samuel."

"Well, peace be with you." Berl grasped his son's hand. He was still not sure that he was not being fooled. Samuel wasn't as tall and heavy as this man, but then Berl reminded himself that Samuel was only fifteen years old

when he had left home. He must have grown in that faraway country. Berl asked, "Why didn't you let us know that you were coming?"

"Didn't you receive my cable?" Samuel asked.

Berl did not know what a cable was.

Berlcha had scraped the dough from her hands and enfolded her son. He kissed her again and asked, "Mother, didn't you receive a cable?"

"What? If I lived to see this, I am happy to die," Berlcha said, amazed by her own words. Berl, too, was amazed. These were just the words he would have said earlier if he had been able to remember. After a while Berl came to himself and said, "Pescha, you will have to make a double Sabbath pudding in addition to the stew."

It was years since Berl had called Berlcha by her given name. When he wanted to address her, he would say, "Listen," or "Say." It is the young or those from the big cities who call a wife by her name. Only now did Berlcha begin to cry. Yellow tears ran from her eyes, and everything became dim. Then she called out, "It's Friday—I have to prepare for the Sabbath." Yes, she had to knead the dough and braid the loaves. With such a guest, she had to make a larger Sabbath stew. The winter day is short, and she must hurry.

Her son understood what was worrying her, because he said, "Mother, I will help you."

Berlcha wanted to laugh, but a choked sob came out. "What are you saying? God forbid."

goat sat down near the oven; she gazed with surprise at this strange man—his height and his bizarre clothes.

The neighbors had heard the good news that Berl's son had arrived from America, and they came to greet him. The women began to help Berlcha prepare for the Sabbath. Some laughed; some cried. The room was full of people, as at a wedding. They asked Berl's son, "What is new in America?"

And Berl's son answered, "America is all right."

"Do Jews make a living?"

"One eats white bread there on weekdays."

"Do they remain Jews?"

"I am not a Gentile."

After Berlcha blessed the candles, father and son went to the little synagogue across the street. A new snow had fallen. The son took large steps, but Berl warned him, "Slow down."

In the synagogue the Jews recited "Let Us Exult" and "Come, My Groom." All the time, the snow outside kept falling.

After prayers, when Berl and Samuel left the Holy Place, the village was unrecognizable. Everything was covered in snow. One could see only the contours of the roofs and the candles in the windows. Samuel said, "Nothing has changed here."

Berlcha had prepared gefilte fish,<sup>10</sup> chicken

The nobleman took off his cloak and jacket and remained in his vest, on which hung a solid-gold watch chain. He rolled up his sleeves and came to the trough. "Mother, I was a baker for many years in New York," he said, and he began to knead the dough.

"What! You are my darling son who will say Kaddish<sup>9</sup> for me." She wept raspingly. Her strength left her, and she slumped onto the bed.

Berl said, "Women will always be women." And he went to the shed to get more wood. The

9. **Kaddish** (kā'dīsh): a Jewish prayer recited by mourners after the death of a close relative.

10. **gefilte** (gə-fil'tə) **fish**: a traditional Jewish food made from finely chopped fish.

WORDS  
TO  
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**raspingly** (räs'pīng-lē) *adv.* in a harsh manner; gratingly  
**contour** (kōn'tōōr') *n.* an outline of a shape

soup with rice, meat, carrot stew. Berl recited the benediction over a glass of ritual wine. The family ate and drank, and when it grew quiet for a while, one could hear the chirping of the house cricket. The son talked a lot, but Berl and Berlcha understood little. His Yiddish was different and contained foreign words.

After the final blessing Samuel asked, "Father, what did you do with all the money I sent you?"

Berl raised his white brows. "It's here."

"Didn't you put it in a bank?"

"There is no bank in Lentshin."

"Where do you keep it?"

Berl hesitated. "One is not allowed to touch money on the Sabbath, but I will show you."

He crouched beside the bed and began to shove something heavy. A boot appeared. Its top was stuffed with straw. Berl removed the straw, and the son saw that the boot was full of gold coins. He lifted it.

"Father, this is a treasure!" he called out.

"Well."

"Why didn't you spend it?"

"On what? Thank God, we have everything."

"Why didn't you travel somewhere?"

"Where to? This is our home."

The son asked one question after the other, but Berl's answer was always the same: they wanted for nothing. The garden, the cow, the goat, the chickens provided them with all they needed. The son said, "If thieves knew about this, your lives wouldn't be safe."

"There are no thieves here."

"What will happen to the money?"

"You take it."

Slowly, Berl and Berlcha grew accustomed to their son and his American Yiddish. Berlcha could hear him better now. She even recognized his voice. He was saying, "Perhaps we should build a larger synagogue."

"The synagogue is big enough," Berl replied.

"Perhaps a home for old people."

"No one sleeps in the street."

The next day after the Sabbath meal was eaten, a Gentile from Zakroczym brought a paper—it was the cable. Berl and Berlcha lay down for a nap. They soon began to snore. The goat, too, dozed off. The son put on his cloak and his hat and went for a walk. He strode with his long legs across the marketplace. He stretched out a hand and touched a roof. He wanted to smoke a cigar, but he remembered it was forbidden on the Sabbath. He had a desire to talk to someone, but it seemed that the whole of Lentshin was asleep. He entered the synagogue. An old man was sitting there, reciting psalms. Samuel asked, "Are you praying?"

"What else is there to do when one gets old?"

"Do you make a living?"

The old man did not understand the meaning of these words. He smiled, showing his empty gums, and then he said, "If God gives health, one keeps on living."

Samuel returned home. Dusk had fallen. Berl went to the synagogue for the evening prayers, and the son remained with his mother. The room was filled with shadows.

Berlcha began to recite in a solemn singsong, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, defend the poor people of Israel and Thy name. The Holy Sabbath is departing; the welcome week is coming to us. Let it be one of health, wealth, and good deeds."

"Mother, you don't need to pray for wealth,"

WORDS  
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**benediction** (bən'ī-dīk'shən) *n.* a blessing  
**recite** (rĭ-sīt') *v.* to say out loud something memorized

Samuel said. "You are wealthy already."

Berlcha did not hear—or pretended not to. Her face had turned into a cluster of shadows.

In the twilight Samuel put his hand into his jacket pocket and touched his passport, his checkbook, his letters of credit. He had come here with big plans. He had a valise filled with presents for his parents. He wanted to bestow gifts on the village. He brought not only his own money but funds from the Lentshin Society in New York, which had organized a ball for the benefit of the village. But this village in the hinterland needed nothing. From the synagogue

one could hear hoarse chanting. The cricket, silent all day, started again its chirping. Berlcha began to sway and utter holy rhymes inherited from mothers and grandmothers:

*Thy holy sheep  
In mercy keep,  
In Torah and good deeds;  
Provide for all their needs,  
Shoes, clothes, and bread  
And the Messiah's tread. ❖*

*Translated by the author and Dorothea Straus*

## L I T E R A R Y   L I N K

# GRUDNOW

LINDA PASTAN

When he spoke of where he  
    came from,  
my grandfather could have been  
clearing his throat  
of that name, that town  
5 sometimes Poland, sometimes Russia,  
the borders penciled in  
with a hand as shaky as his.  
He left, I heard him say,  
because there was nothing there.  
10 I understood what he meant  
when I saw the photograph  
of his people standing  
against a landscape emptied  
of crops and trees, scraped raw  
15 by winter. Everything  
was in sepia, as if the brown earth  
had stained the faces,  
stained even the air.

I would have died there, I think  
20 in childhood—maybe  
of some fever,  
my face pressed for warmth  
against a cow with flanks  
like those of the great-aunts  
25 in the picture. Or later  
I would have died of history  
like the others, who dug  
their stubborn heels into that earth,  
heels as hard as the heels  
30 of the bread my grandfather tore  
from the loaf at supper. He always  
sipped his tea through a cube of sugar  
clenched in his teeth, the way  
he sipped his life here, noisily,  
35 through all he remembered  
that might have been sweet in  
Grudnow.

WORDS  
TO     **hinterland** (hīn'ter-lānd') *n.* a region far from large cities  
KNOW