



Science-Fiction Fanzine Vol. XXIII, No. 11; November, 2012

Of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

(Three stories of future Jewish History
 -- In memory of Shmerke Katczerginski, Partisan-poet of Vilna)
 By Leybl Botwinik @* 2012

From the Author:

Back in 1984 I wrote a trilogy of Yiddish SF stories based on the numbers “3-8-5-6” from a Holocaust song “Milyon” by Shmerke Katczerginski, the famous partisan-poet of Vilna (The music is my father’s. They were good friends). The stories were then published as “Fun Nekhtn, Haynt un Morgn”, in the New York Yiddish students' magazine "Yugntruf" (parts I&II, Aug-Dec 1985, and part III in Dec 1986).

The premise of the trilogy: How will future generations remember and commemorate the Holocaust? Would some of them possibly re-tattoo their grand/parents’ concentration camp numbers on their own arms, as symbols of one of the greatest Jewish/Human tragedies/trajectories of all time? How will this be seen 100 years from now? 1000 years? 10,000 years from now?

In 1995 – or thereabouts – I met Aharon Sheer, and promised him English translations of the trilogy for CyberCozen. The first story was published in May 1996. Part II was published in March 1997. ... and only now have I gotten around to translating the 3rd part. -- And this is due, mostly to a news item from early October, 2012.

Jodi Rudoren wrote the following for the NY Times: *Proudly Bearing Elders’ Scars, Their Skin Says ‘Never Forget’* concerning grandchildren of holocaust survivors in Israel who did exactly what I foresaw back in 1984. Apparently, there is a documentary film being screened in the US about this phenomenon. See:

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/middleeast/with-tattoos-young-israelis-bear-holocaust-scars-of-relatives.html?_r=0

Also:

‘Never forget’: With tattoos, new generation proudly bears elders’ Auschwitz scars

See: [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/49236457/ns/world_news-the_new_york_times/#_utm=14933801.511236860.1342446175.1348845442.1349101859.63&_utmb=14933801.1.10.1349101859&_utmc=14933801&_utmz=14933801.1342446175.1.1.utmcsr=\(direct\)%7Cutmccn=\(direct\)%7Cutcmd=\(none\)&_utmv=14933801.%7C8=Earned%20By=msnbc%7Ccover=1%5E12=L](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/49236457/ns/world_news-the_new_york_times/#_utm=14933801.511236860.1342446175.1348845442.1349101859.63&_utmb=14933801.1.10.1349101859&_utmc=14933801&_utmz=14933801.1342446175.1.1.utmcsr=(direct)%7Cutmccn=(direct)%7Cutcmd=(none)&_utmv=14933801.%7C8=Earned%20By=msnbc%7Ccover=1%5E12=L)

- Leybl Botwinik

P.S. For the record, part II was partly influenced by Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*.

P.P.S. Scans of the original Yiddish at: <http://www.leyblsvelt.co.il/lv-shprakhn-Eng.html>

or the Yugntruf website (issues 57-58, 60): <http://yugntruf.org/arkhiv/mekhabrim/> .

My website also contains my English translations: <http://www.leyblsvelt.co.il/lv-shprakhn-Eng.html>

"My name was once known to you, Ask not now who I am. Ask not. I have no name, I have only a number, My number is three-eight-five-six.... (3856)" - from Sh. Kaczserginski's "Milyon"	באַקאַנט אייך געוועזן אַ מאָל איז מײן נאָמען ניט פּרעגט איצט ווער בין איך, ניט פּרעגט. איך האָב ניט קיין נאָמען, איך האָב נאָר אַ נומער: מײן נומער איז דריי-אַכט-פּינף-זעקס (3856). - פּון ש. קאַטשערגינסקי'ס "מיליאָן"
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Story 3 – New World

The screen was alight with stars – beautiful, sparkling, glittering suns of warmth and light that cut through the cold surroundings of the wide empty cosmos. “Come to me ...” called each one distinctly. “Come warm yourself. I can chase away the cold and darkness. Only I can save you. In my light you will find your peace and your rest.”

“How false, how devious they are, these twinkling lights,” thought Khave to herself. She sat at the screen of her tiny spaceship “Star-catcher”. She was alone, entirely alone. She looked bitterly on at the stars, the countless beacons that falsely called out to her – and she quietly wept.

For eight years Khave has sought sanctuary. From star system to star system, she has flown the furthest space ways, seeking a planet to inhabit and live out the rest of her years in peace. A planet with water and grass, with air to breathe, with warmth and sunshine. Like a maiden in search of her betrothed – thus has she hunted.

There remained only about two years’ supply of food on the ship, and water for only a few months. In addition, her ship was not in very good shape. And even though Khave was an excellent hand at electro-mechanics, and maintained the ship on her own, she knew that she would not be able to make more than 2 or three more planetfalls in search of water. “Where,

oh where among the numberless night-eyes, will I find my promised planet...”

Khave looked over and tested all the ship’s controls. When she was sure that everything was in working order, she allowed herself to move over to the second cabin where her cot was.

Here, in her bed, she also didn’t find peace. Scenes from her home planet that she escaped from came to her dreams. A planet with a bloody history: Pogroms, edicts, persecution. In her nightmare she saw row upon row of prisoners being led to concentration and death camps. Lines of children, women, and men were stretched out for miles without end. Old and young marched in front of her dream-eye and were lined up against endless coils of barbed wire. Seared into their naked bodies, the numbers: 3856... 3856... 3856... and the numbers began to burn with red flames ... and the flames burned stronger and stronger and consumed everyone, and became even redder, and larger, and ...

With a shriek, Khave woke up from her nightmare. A cold sweat covered her. She breathed heavily, and her left arm pulsed – exactly where, on her skin, the four digits were burnt in: 3856...

Those were her people in the dream, who for countless generations had been persecuted and tortured. They were kept separated in ghettos

because they were ‘different’, ‘the chosen’. They were accused of being “rightest-capitalist-fascists” and concurrently “leftist-communist-revolutionaries”. They were censured by blood libels; that they wanted to take over the world; destroy the world... And all because they and theirs – all of them, men and women from childhood on – had those four digits burnt into the flesh of their left arms: three, eight, five, six! – And no one, not even the oldest among them, knew the reason for that, what the significance of the numbers and the following words meant: “Remember! Remember Ponar and Treblinka. Remember the Hamans and the Hitlers...”? What, where, when, who? No one knew anymore.

Suddenly, Khave realized that not too far away, a red light was blinking. This was probably what had woken her up from her dream. This light shone only when the electro-sensors detected a planet with water. Khave ran over to the ship controls in her nightgown. The computer was already spewing out information about the new found planet.

It was a little smaller than her home planet, but the atmosphere was livable and the air breathable. One side of the planet was covered by an enormous salt water ocean. The second side – the land mass – contained fresh water that was potable. These and other data were studied by Khave. There were no creatures on the planet, neither in the sea nor on dry land. The only signs of life that was identified were primitive microbes and organic matter that would be suitable, should she want to remain and build a house and plant a garden.

With this refreshing information, Khave landed her ship not too far away from where the sensors indicated that she would find water. She threw open

the door of her ship and with a lightness jumped out onto the warm earth. Around her all was quiet. The land was flat and dry – desert-like. The gravity of the planet was much less than what she was used to. Still in her nightgown and barefoot, she practically flew, running, dancing and jumping, seeking water. But she didn’t find any.

Khave ran back to her ship very worried. There she queried her computer – and the machine told her the bitter truth: Yes there was water, rivers and rivers of it, cool, refreshing sweet water – 250 meters below the surface. Khave did not lose hope. Maybe, somewhere else, – or at least not as deep, where she could dig up the earth and reach the water. The computer, connected to the sensors, began a search, studying its data and making its calculations according to the geographic and geologic possibilities of the planet. In about 10 minutes she had her answer: Five potential areas where she would be able to reach the water that was not too deep underground.

With an uplifted heart and fresh strength, Khave took out a flightboard from the ship’s storage, and flew over to the first designated area. Just nearby, she spied the remains of a burnt-out spaceship. She immediately flew over, and jumped off the flightboard. Khave understood from the model, that this was a very old ship – at least a thousand years old, perhaps from the very first human spaceships. Thanks to the fact that the atmosphere was so stable, the air so dry, it had never corroded. “Who knows what treasures are to be found inside,” thought Khave.

Her agile mind instantly grasped the functions of the various controls. She discovered that the energy cells still had some power, so she turned on the holographic recorder that would

project the ship captain's last recorded images.

An image appeared before her, floating in the air, just where the ship's command cabin had once been before it was consumed by the fire from the crash landing into the planet. Khave moved closer in order to see and hear the image. A handsome young man stood before her and seemed to be talking to her:

"Sholem-Aleykhem [hello]. I believe that those who are viewing me and listening will understand everything I say, thanks to the universal translation-wave streaming forth from my apparatus. Who I am is less important than what I am carrying with me on this ship. I don't have much time, because I am afraid that my ship will crash into the planet and I and the ship will burn up. I can only hope that the vital documents I carry with me will not be consumed. They are in another part of the machine. If you can see and hear this, then this is a sign that they have been preserved."

"In short, my mission is to carry the information packets that contain all histories, stories, and literature of my people – the Jewish People of the planet Earth. The name of this collection is "dos blutbukh" [The Book of Blood]. The reasons for that will become clear for those that will look over and study the material. My job is to transport this to a distant tribe of our people that has inhabited a planet that is far away from the normal travel lanes of planetary colonists, explorers and merchants. Since they are so isolated, there is a concern that they will lose contact with the rest of our nation.

"The second part of my mission is to re-seed such barren, desert-like, planets by dropping millions of experimental seeds that will turn a desert into a Garden of Eden. This will

enable future colonists and pioneers to arrive at green, non-barren planets, for them to inhabit.

"Travelling thus to my destination, I espied this particular planet and wanted to drop a few million seeds, but a meteor suddenly hit my ship and gravely damaged it. I see that I will crash-land on this planet and most likely not survive, so I am releasing all of my seeds, and hope something will become of them.

"Although this was not my target destination, I hope that someone will be able to carry out the first part of my mission so that the isolated tribe will not lose contact with the rest of our nation. I will now show you on a star-chart where the "Earth" is, where we are, and where the planet of my mission is located. I leave you now with the words of one of our writers, himself a survivor of the last great Holocaust that took place 5 generations ago:

"We remember, therefore we exist – thus can we build."

At this point, the figure turned somewhat and pointed to the star-chart where the three planets (according to their solar systems) were located. Khave's breath caught. When the young man turned and the image zoomed into the chart where he pointed to with his hand, she noticed that his arm had the same digits burnt into it as hers: 3856! And something else – the target planet he was to fly to was no more and no less than her own home planet.

Tears began to flow from Khave's eyes. Finally, after so many generations she could uncover the secrets of the mysterious numbers 3856. The great mystery, however, would remain so for her people, because she knew that the poor state of her ship would never permit her to ever fly back to her home planet, to share the information with

them. She had found a Yesterday. She had a Today, but she had no Tomorrow. She will need to remain on this desert planet until her food runs out. And thus, crying, her tears began to drip onto the ground.

A great noise began deep under the earth, under her feet. The rumbling became greater, until Khave felt that the very earth trembled. The shaking started spreading quickly. The earth began swaying back and forth. Suddenly a great convulsion like from an earthquake – and this threw the awestruck Khave to the ground. All around geysers of water shot up high, high into the hot air.

Khave attempted to right herself, but the earth shook too strongly. She was drenched by the thick aquatic mist that formed from the spraying underground canals. The entire land surrounding her, as far as she could discern was shaking with convulsions that were getting stronger. In the meantime, great black clouds gathered, and the air shook with thunder and lightning. A cold rain enveloped her. When Khave again tried to stand up, a wind caught her up and threw her again to the ground into the slippery mud. Her thin nightgown was ripped from her.

Khave wanted to run, to crawl, to swim. First she was immersed under the waters and almost drowned. Then she was almost covered under the earth and mud. And the earth quaked, and the wind blew, and Khave was helpless against the wild elements that seemed to be playing with her: At first muddied up, then washed clean by the cold rain, and then again sunk into the soft wet earth. And then, finally, half unconscious, she felt that the earth had gathered her in and covered her entirely – as if swallowing her up, and then with one last great upheaval she was thrown clear and lay half

embedded in the ground. She was without strength, and succumbed to asleep. Everything around lay quiet.

When Khave woke up in the morning, she felt entirely exhausted and weak. Each limb and muscle screamed out in pain after the terrible ordeal. When she slowly regained some strength, she got up and looked around and saw before her an entirely new world. The Sun shone and warmed her. The land had been turned over and reformed by the colossal earthquakes. The flat, dry desert had now been transformed into hills and valleys and streams with rivers that cut through the surroundings. She herself was standing atop a high mountain. Near her lay the overturned spaceship with the safeguarded secret-containing information packets.

Khave's spirit rose and a new strength invigorated her. The very air had a new taste – a freshness that was a result of the electromagnetic lightning storm that ionized the air. With astonishment, Khave saw how grasses and other plants began sprouting from out under the earth. And as she took it all in with great wonder, she felt that she had also won something from the magnificent miracle that played itself out before her. She felt that inside her own body, a new life was budding. The world-soul had undoubtedly joined with the spirit of the long dead pilot – through the widespread ashes in the air and in the earth – and had impregnated her during the stormy night encounter.

She was pregnant. She would have children. She was no longer alone. The planet had become and will be her betrothed, her lover, and her protector. And with a smile she looked down from the high mountain and saw how the rivers and lakes snaked around in the distance to form the four digits: 3,8,5,6.

* Story 3 which appears above is a translation from Yiddish (by the author) of the original short story "**Nay Velt**", third in the trilogy "Fun Nekhtn, Haynt un Morgn", originally published in the Yiddish students' magazine "Yugntruf" (Dec 1986 issue, New York).

The first 2 parts of the trilogy were "**Yizkor**" and "**Milyon**". The English translation can be found in the originally published CyberCozen issues May 1996 and March 1997.

This translation was especially made by the author, Leybl Botwinik, for *CyberCozen*.

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