

# LETTER FROM LOS ANGELES

## Dances mit Forverts

The other day I called the editor of The Forward. "I'm sorry to tell you my father died last week. Please cancel his subscription to the Yiddish edition, and start sending the English-language version to my mother."

It was the last of many such calls and, quite possibly, the saddest: Another of the dwindling number of readers of Yiddish was gone, not to be replaced.

My grief for my father's loss is, by tradition and temperament, a private matter. Suffice to say that Moses Kozinski was an extraordinary man who, after four years in a concentration camp followed by many more years of hardship in communist Romania, managed to instill in his only child a sense of pride in being a Jew and a human being. The public tragedy lies in the demise of a sense of humor and an outlook on life that can have no existence in any vernacular but Yiddish.

Some of my fondest memories of childhood are of my father reading me mainsalech, short stories, by Sholem Aleichem and poems by Eliezer Steinberg. Among my favorites was a poem by Steinberg about the feckless bear who went to fetch water using two buckets without bottoms:

Off der achsel mit zwei kannen,  
Tiet a behr zum brinnen spannen.

Shein die kendalech, yo, yo.  
Nor zey hoben nit kein dno.

In rough English translation:

Carrying two buckets on his  
shoulder,  
A bear takes a walk to the well.  
Nice are the little buckets, yes,  
yes,  
but they don't have any bottoms.

I laughed and laughed at the poor bear as he struggled to fill the buckets. Finally, in disgust, the bear would spit and run away:

Er tiet a spei and loift aveg!

Also among my favorites were Sholem Aleichem's letters from the luckless, ever-optimistic Menachem-Mendl to his beloved wife, Sheineh-Sheindl, as he traveled in pursuit of fortune. I used to listen for hours, urging my father, "Leis mir nu noch a mainse, Tate." And he would, reading my stories until he became hoarse.

When we came to the United States in 1962 there were two national Yiddish newspapers; Der Forverts and Der Tog, The Day. My father promptly subscribed to Der Tog; Der Forverts had a world-wide reputation as a socialist paper, and my father had had quite enough of that.

The Yiddish readings continued. I remember in particular a series in Der Tog by actress Molly Picon, describing her career in the theater and her childhood in Philadelphia. In the evening, after dinner, my parents and I sat in the living room and my father would read the simple, often touching vignettes of Molly's early life. The one I remember best was the story of the boarder. I forget his name, though his image — a tall, handsome man with a mustache — stays with me. This boarder had a remarkable habit: He would spend hours every day meticulously washing his hands. Molly or her mother would prepare the hot water and hand him a fresh cake of soap, and he would start the ritual.

First he would carefully scrub and clean every finger. Then he would carefully scrub and clean under every fingernail. Finally, he would grab a fresh towel and dry his hands slowly, lovingly. After a while Molly got to wondering that he never washed his face. Curiosity got the better of her and she asked him why. He looked at her in astonishment and gave her the obvious answer: "You work with your hands all day long; you eat with them; you touch a thousand things. They get dirty. But your face just sits there. No need to wash it."

One time Der Tog asked its readers to send in examples of Yiddish

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# Letter From L.A.: Dances mit Forverts

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humor. My father got into print with a series of quips about the elaborate measures (such as cutting off their trigger fingers) young Jewish men would undertake to avoid conscription in the Czar's army:

*Besser uhn a hond.  
As in dem Keiser's gevont.  
Besser uhn a kop  
As mit dem Keiser's knop.*

In English:

Better without a hand  
Than in the Czar's coat.  
Better without a head  
Than wearing the Czar's button.

Sometime in the late 60s or early 70s my father got a letter from the editors of *Der Tog* informing him of the paper's demise; the remainder of his subscription would be filled by *Der Forverts*. I asked him how he felt about that and he answered with the irreverent Yiddish proverb "*As se nit duh kein maidlech tanzt men mit shikses*" — if you can't find Jewish girls, you dance with gentiles. Each year, when it came time to renew his subscription, he chose to dance with *Der Forverts* again, and I once asked him whether it measured up to *Der Tog*. *Der Forverts* was a much better paper, he admitted, and not such a socialist rag after all.

My father was diagnosed with stomach cancer in February. After he recovered from surgery, he spent the last months of his life at home. Due



WILLIAM REAGH

MOSES KOZINSKI IN HIS LOS ANGELES MARKET, 1971: "My last memory of him in more or less normal condition...was of him sitting in his large chair in the living room, reading *Der Forverts*." He died last month.

in large part to the heroic efforts of my mother, he was able to remain at home to the end, finally dying in his own room. Up until the last few, awful days, he was able to speak and read and be with his grandchildren. My last memory of him in more or less

normal condition — albeit much frailer and unable to walk — was of him sitting in his large chair in the living room reading *Der Forverts*. Once in a while he would chuckle. It was that bittersweet chuckle I knew so well, evoked only by something he heard

or read in the mame-loshen.

We will never hear it again.

— ALEX KOZINSKI

*Alex Kozinski left Bucharest with his father, Moses, and mother, Sabine, in 1961. He is a federal judge in California.*