

A Tailor's Tale

The brick front of the tailor shop and laundry bore witness to the cruelty of sun and salt water. Tuck-pointing was long overdue and the aluminum frames holding the panes were pitted through in places. The ocean was two blocks away. When a hard rain was driven from that direction small rivulets would form on the inside sill. Mr. Maizel would then hurry to remove the packages of shirts and laundry that were waiting there to be claimed later in the day.

He joked to himself, "I doubt that my customers would find a final rain-water rinse to their liking. Another example of *mazel* [luck] not Maizel. If my father had a different name, then I wouldn't be here. But with my '*maizel*,' I've gone from *Hochstrasse* [High Street] in Berlin and to Ocean View Avenue here in Short Beach. Once I was a fashionable tailor of hand-sewn men's suits, now I mend tears and hem cuffs. I am only thankful for dirty shirts; such are my bread and butter. So, I should thank God; I survived!"

Mendel Maizel looked up from his sewing table. He thought he heard the door chimes. Then he felt the vibrations as a heavy truck rumbled past. An eyebrow was raised, "*Nu*, my luck, it didn't come through the window, just knocked on the door. So, Mr. Landlord will have to wait for a big hurricane to remodel. One good wave comes and takes the whole building into the bay and I get another ocean cruise. This time, on a houseboat, not the St. Louis thank you—back and forth. The wave comes at night, better yet; I'll be upstairs in back, my little apartment becomes now a luxurious stateroom, kitchenette *ensuite*."

Hochstrasse was a fashionable street in Berlin before the war and Mr. Maizel was a highly regarded custom tailor in one of the exclusive men's shops. There were no shirts, pants or suits on racks, just tables with bolts of expensive cloth. Appointments were strongly suggested, though with a title, a

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gentleman of rank would not have to wait. Herr Maizel started sewing in the back shortly after WWI. He quickly moved to the front and did his own fittings by the end 1923. Hitler's abortive putsch did not cause his tailor's chalk to waiver even the slightest. However, by the end of the decade he was once again in the back and lucky to have work at all.

Mendel went back to his sewing. He was careless and the needle went through to the middle finger on his left hand. He felt the pressure and laughed to himself. "See, more mazel. No pain. Those *momzerim* [bastards] in the camp took care of that ten years ago. But who's counting?"

He put the pants he was hemming down and opened a drawer on the right side of the table. He reached in and removed three large pins wrapped up in colored costumes – one red, one white and one blue. He stood up. He stuck the pins in the tips of the middle three fingers of his left hand. He turned to face the back of his store and marched off singing, "Over here, over there..." He stopped in front of the washing machine to remove the laundered white shirts.

One time a customer came into the front of the store and heard him singing in back. When Mendel returned to the counter, the man pointed out that the lyrics repeated "over there" twice. Mendel nodded his head and thanked him. Later, when he went back to sewing, he smiled to himself.

"Of course I knew that—I'm a citizen now in good standing. Nevertheless, for me, America stayed 'here' too long before going 'over there.' I've no family left; so, for myself, I sing it my way. And ha, who would have guessed a Cohan would be an Irish Catholic. A good Jewish name is Cohen! Only in America, even Irish Catholics can write good tunes. So maybe even George did help Irving Berlin. See, only in America." He smiled sadly to himself.

At lunchtime and again when Mr. Maizel closed the shop at night, he would walk along Ocean View Avenue from one corner, Atlantic Avenue, to the other, Pacific Boulevard, and hum to himself,

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"From sea to shining sea." Often he would skip and laugh. "Only in America can one make such a quick trip. I go from coast to coast and don't even get wet feet, at least when the sun is out."

Mr. Maizel would mutter to himself; ask himself questions. He was unaware that many times, he would wave his hand dismissively or whisper and answer, "What does it matter. Nobody cares." His conversations with Mr. Gutman, the grocer across the street were just as brief.

"So, Mr. Gutman, anything new today?"

"No, why, should there be?"

Neither felt the need to ask how the other how he was feeling. Nevertheless, Mr. Maizel did struggle to mask his depression with a smile when he talked with customers. He always wanted to tell someone about his time in the camps, as if the telling would wrap his pain in waves of sound that would be swallowed by the nearby ocean.

He had contemplated walking into the waves and not coming out. However, there was no guarantee that God would not bring a whale to save him. And then he would just be wet. "It would just be my mazel," he thought and abandoned that plan.

In the summer, Joshua Klein dropped his shirts off two or three at a time. He smiled and said, "Lightly starched." The first time he came, Mr. Maisel apologized and said he already had a JK on the collars for another customer. Joshua joked. "Then please add another J—JJK works for me." And that was how he explained it to his wife when she remarked on the new laundry marks on his collar. Maizel had told him, "I use a black marker so your wife can't say it's lipstick."

The second time he brought his shirts to Mr. Maizel he received a soft smile as if to say that the tailor was beginning to recognize a co-conspirator.

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One day after work, Joshua caught an earlier train home. When he stopped to pick up his cleaned and lightly starched shirts, Mr. Maizel saw him looking at the numbers tattooed on his arm. Maizel joked, "They were hoping to make me into a mathematician with these numbers. I shared a bunk with a young Hungarian. He looked at my numbers and said, 'Nu, good. They will work for a Chinese Remainder problem.' He predicted I too would remain when this was all over. So, perhaps you have a child; let him come look at my numbers, he too can grow up to be a mathematician."

Joshua shook his head. "Franz's only seven. It's too early to tell, but I think he likes stories better than numbers. Kids change all the time, so who knows."

The third time, Joshua dropped off three white shirts with no laundry marks. Mr. Maizel turned the collars back as he reached for his laundry pen. He smiled and nodded his head. "I was correct. I guessed you were also a survivor."

Joshua pretended he had not heard Mr. Maizel's comments and just said, "There's no rush. I've got to hurry now. I'm late for work."

Early the next week Joshua stopped to pick up those three white shirts. Mr. Maizel looked more pensive than usual. He fetched the shirts from the shelf on the wall, the initials "JJK" were clearly marked on the brown paper, wrapped around securely with white string. As Joshua collected his change, Mr. Maizel looked at him and asked, "If you like stories, come back some time. Stories I can tell you, you won't forget. For Franz, I think not, but perhaps later. Maybe better than numbers are the stories, even these. And you'll see; you too are a survivor."

Maizel broke off for a moment and looked into the distance. "Did you know that that Hungarian told me of another mathematician, called Piano [Peano] who said, 'God made natural numbers; all else is the work of man.' I told him, for these numbers, no thanks and that surely God could have done

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better by us. Hah, but he was wrong. I checked. It was a German Jew, Leopold Kronecker, who said that. That Hungarian must have had too much to eat.”

Joshua thanked him for the shirts and said that the next time he left work early; he would come by with a bottle of schnapps to help as he listened to the tailor's stories. “We can pour another glass for Elijah.” He walked home deep in thought.

Joshua sucked his lips in and out. He shook his head thinking, “The Brooklyn Dodgers are still in Brooklyn so all is right in the world – at least that is what I was told. I was barely a teenager while the war raged in Europe. Mom said she had some distant cousins trapped in Eastern Europe and others had family or friends trying to get out. Sure, I remember some rallies and demonstrations but I think we all kept quiet. Heck, one neighbor said he was sorry for those refugees, but we need our jobs for Americans. I remember my father worrying that if American Jews mouthed off, maybe they would kick us out too. He whispered to Mother that he had heard some guy on a soapbox in Union Square saying that we should make ‘Jews an export item. They're the ones that caused the depression and no way should real Americans have to fight to save any kike!’

“As for being a survivor, I don't understand that at all. But I suppose it couldn't hurt to visit with that poor man. He seems so alone.”

Joshua tried to smile as he walked up the steps to their rented summer bungalow. As he came in the front door, he heard Alma calling from the kitchen. “Hi, Honey. Little Franz is waiting for you on the beach by the lifeguard stand. Why don't you change and take a quick swim. I'll have supper ready in thirty minutes.”

Joshua put on a bathing suit. He came into the kitchen and exchanged a quick kiss. He was reminded to take a towel. He thought, “So ordinary, so pleasant. Who wants to think about horrors?”

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As soon as Franz saw his father, he ran up and grabbed his hand pulling him towards the surf.

"Hurray. The waves are so great today. I think the ocean is even saltier. Look how the water has dried on my arm."

Joshua laughed. He picked his son up and ran into the breaking waves. "Let's see if you are a fish or really a little boy!"

Two weeks later when he dropped off some laundry, Joshua remarked, "Mr. Maizel, my mother always told me that sometimes a terrible tasting medicine is necessary for a cure. I am afraid that your stories may prove to be just as bitter – but I am curious why you said that I was a survivor. None of my family was trapped in Europe."

The tailor smiled. "Well then, *bitte, eine meise* [please, a story]. But then, you must call me Mendel. Only the war has made me look so old. Otherwise, we would look like brothers." They arranged to meet in Mendel's apartment the following Wednesday when the laundry was closed. In truth, Mendel was born a quarter of a century before Joshua.

Wednesday came and Joshua left his place of business in the city early. He purchased a bottle of scotch across from the train station. It was not rush hour. He had a longer wait for the bus from the train station that ran along Ocean View Avenue to the mostly summer cottages on the west end of Short Beach. Joshua felt strange; it was as if he were sneaking off to some illicit interview.

Mendel's small apartment was at the back of the building up one flight of stairs. Joshua knocked and the door was opened.

"Nu, a palace, it's not. But still, here they won't find me. However, with a pickle from Mr. Gutman across the street, this becomes maybe a chateau. In addition, for special guests, we even have some rye bread or pumpernickel. Here you will not starve. Come, sit down, be comfortable."

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Joshua removed his jacket and sat down. He removed the bottle of scotch from the bag and put it on the coffee table. Mendel insisted he sit in the armchair. "There, you should sit like a king. I will be your jester. But first, a bite to eat and then, I see, something to wash it all down."

Mendel went to his small refrigerator and took out a plate. On it were slices of pickles and pieces of herring. He placed this on the coffee table and then returned with the bread, a cutting board and two glasses. "From the *yahrziet licht* [memorial candles] I have enough glasses to host a wedding... *nu* or a funeral... but for *l'chaiim*, they are perfect."

Joshua poured once. They raised their glasses, clicked, *l'chaiim* [to life] and swallowed at once. Mendel smiled and Joshua poured again. Mendel held up one finger – "But first, a bite. Mr. Gutman insisted. He personally picked the pickles and selected special herring. Such a man. He also has stories. We all do. That they gave us, oh yes, in spades."

However, the first drink made the little tailor animated and he could not contain himself. He laughed. He repeated himself. "Yes, in spades. You know that Mr. Gutman is not so strong, so he has this big Negro helping him in the mornings. Well one day, Washington was singing a song, 'They call me by a number not a name, oh Lord, they call me by a number not a name...' And Mr. Gutman rushes to the back of the store and shushes Washington, 'You should not sing about numbers, it upsets Mrs. Gutman. See, we have numbers here on our arms, from the camps. You have one too?'

"Well, Washington was shocked. He dropped the large carton he was moving. Mr. Gutman told me it was only toilet paper, so no one was hurt. 'No, Mr. Gutman,' he stammered. 'I didn't know. I'm sorry. Here, let me help you sit down. I'll bring you some water. And Mrs. Gutman?'

"And then the strong Negro explained how it was a prison song; the number being that of the convict doing time. And no, here they do not brand you and you do get three square a day... that too

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Washington explained. Mr. Gutman, just nodded and asked that perhaps when Washington sings, it should be of something happier.”

Mendel raised his glass and toasted, “*L’chaiim*. OK. So now, I tell you my story. But first, I get my little friends. You sit. I keep them in the night stand next to my bed, in case I get lonely and need someone to sing me to sleep.”

He quickly returned with two cigar boxes. These he put down on the table next to the breadboard.

“First, I want you to be comfortable. Here, I move the hassock for your feet. Sit back. I will tell you about Hitler’s little house of horrors.

“Hochstrasse you should know was famous in Germany. Only the wealthy or the aristocrats could afford clothes from there. The Commandant of the concentration camp must have noticed my previous occupation when I was unloaded with my travelling companions from our train ride.

“After we were checked in and registered, we were shown to our rooms. If the beds were not to our liking, we were told we could go to the showers the next morning. This cleanliness would get you next to godliness in record time.

“Two days later, after roll call, I was called out of line to the Commandant’s Office. ‘So, Misha, you were a tailor on Hochstrasse. If I find the material, do you think you can sew me some shirts and suits. Do well, then like Penelope and her weaving you can stay alive. Ha, there was Ulysses and there were you Jews wandering in the desert. You sew well; you stay alive. It’s really quite simple.’

“Naturally, I sewed as I never sewed before. However, on the training diet they provided, well, one would not faint from hunger. As my mazel would have it, one day I was careless and when I was pinning a shirt on the Commandant, a pin slipped and pricked his left arm. I knew I would have to pay for this lapse.”

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"The Commandant mimicked a Jewish accent, 'So, you call yourself a tailor. Do you know what it feels like to be pricked by a Jew? I thought not. I will teach you new feelings.'

"He nodded to the guards standing at the door. 'Take this Jew to the infirmary. Have the doctor call me. I think we have a volunteer for his tests on nerves.'

"I don't know what he told the doctor but I was strapped to the table and they stripped out some of the nerves in my left hand. I must have fainted. When I woke, the doctor said I should be proud since these experiments would help save German lives. In addition, I should not be surprised if I no longer had feelings in my left hand. That was the goal of this procedure. It was dark when they had the honor guard escort me back to my cabin. I was to return for testing at the end of the week.

"I was given three days vacation and three days of vacation diet. Luckily, my cabin mates shared some of their second helpings on dessert. I reasoned out that it would be best if I indeed had no feelings in the fingers of my left hand. Successful experiments live longer than failures.

"When I was brought back to the infirmary, they stuck my fingers with pins and poked with hot irons. However, the will to survive can be strong. I passed this first test; I pretended I had not felt a thing.

"Three more days passed and I was once again standing in line in the cold for roll call. The Commandant proudly announced over the loud speaker that he was glad that *Mr. Maizel* was with us once again. 'Mr. Maizel is a true patriot. He has successfully helped advance German science. And tomorrow, in gratitude, he can once again sew for the staff in my office. Mr. Maizel, see if you can raise your hand in a salute?'

"*Momzer*. He got his 'Sieg Heil.' It wasn't too hard since it was my left hand they butchered. Then I started to think about tomorrow. I knew I was not ready yet for any sewing. Moreover, if I didn't sew, it would be off to the showers, just as they say here with baseball.

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"I stayed up half the night thinking. I remembered my happy days in Berlin and the nights too, especially crawling from one Cabaret to the next. Jews were allowed then. Therefore, I thought I might as well go from Hoch to *Niedrigstrasse* [Low Street]. I had an idea for a comedy skit that would take advantage of the so-called numbness of my left hand.

"The next day when I was brought to the Commandant's office, I made a serious face and boldly asked for a moment. They may have been shocked for a moment to silence. I quickly turned around and knocked on the floor. I said, very formally, imitating the Commandant's voice, 'Enter, have you found me another tailor?'

"They laughed weakly but I was not to be stopped. I removed three long pins from inside my jacket. These I stuck in the fingertips of my left hand. I had made some rudimentary costumes from bits of rags.

"In a bright voice, much like a cabaret MC.... I introduced the three puppets standing on my fingertips: '*Madams und Herren*, please give a warm welcome for Joe Stalin, FDR and our Fuhrer Adolf Hitler.' Then I paraded them about with pomp, making one inane remark after another. I had Uncle Joe promising half the Caucuses if Hitler would take some of his Jews. Then I became lewd and had FDR point to Stalin's penis and wonder aloud how many Jews could sit on its head. He winked at Adolf and said behind his hand, 'We all know what a prick Joe can be. He's no angel.'

"Oh, I was creative. My life depended upon it. My audience warmed up once the Commandant broke into a smile, especially after I had Stalin and FDR bow to Hitler.

"Finally the Commandant said, 'Enough. Your comedy is better than your sewing. I have guests coming in three days, so, if you wish to live, you will come back then with better material. And you may take some of the rags in your sewing box for costumes.'

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"I was dismissed. Fear worked wonders. My little pin finger puppets and I became a regular comedy central. I was always on standby. When the Officers became drunk, I would be dragged with my pins to their dining halls. I wasn't dumb. I bent some pins and made a ferocious German Sheppard. If they were drunk enough I would bring my dog out, bark, and beg for food scraps. They gladly threw pieces of food at me that I would try to catch in my mouth. I do not think I would have survived without these extra rations.

"One time I had my dog pretend to lift his leg and piss on one of the table legs. They thought this was hysterical. One captain, well into his cups, yelled that I should really pee. He took out his luger and pointed at my head, 'I said you should pee.' The other officers fell silent but then started to chant, 'Pee, pee, pee.' I had no choice. I managed to void a small stream of urine on the table leg. I knew I would be made to pay.

"Sure enough, that same momzer then banged his gun on the table, 'Jew-dog. Now smell it and lick it up.' What could I do?

"So, Mr. Klein, I think enough of stories and now another l'chaiim. But, please then, some bread and herring. And then if it is getting late, I'll pack some of the pickles and herring; you should share with Mrs. Klein."

Joshua refilled the glasses and as they clicked them together, Mendel toasted, "To survival."

Mendel placed two small jars, one with pickles the other with herring along with two chunks of bread into a bag. As he handed them to Joshua he remarked, "You should not worry. The best any of us can do is to survive. You too in your own way."

Joshua slowly walked towards the beach and his summer rental. In truth, he was a little dizzy from the scotch. Mendel never did indicate why he thought Joshua was a survivor. He seemed to recall that he had told him that none of his family had been in Europe before the start of World War II. He

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tried to shake the cobwebs and depressing thoughts out of his head. He was not sure what he should tell Alma.

The bungalow they had rented was up on piles. "In case of any hundred year hurricane," was how the rental agent explained it. "Besides, it keeps things cooler and less sand blows in." As he climbed the stairs to the front door, he decided he would simply say that the tailor had asked him to stop for a bite. Alma should understand. Even though her family was not Jewish, they had some close friends on the St. Louis. One couple was assigned to England when the ship was forced back to Europe. The other couple and their young son were hosted by France. They had not survived the war. Now it appears that Mr. Maizel may have been on that same boat.

Alma called out from the side porch facing the ocean. "Is that you, honey? You're early." She put the book she was reading down and came around to the front. "You're looking peaked. Was the city especially hot and humid? Why don't you lie down for an hour? Franz is playing with some friends. When he gets back, you can go for a swim with him before supper."

Joshua did indeed feel a bit woozy. He thought that perhaps something was off with the herring. He gave Alma the bag that was in his hand.

"Yes, why don't I lie down? I'm sure I'll feel better in an hour. And Mr. Maizel sends this and his best wishes."

He went into their bedroom and stripped to his shorts. Alma came in with a cold glass of water.

"Here, sip a little and I'll put the glass on the nightstand. See, there's a nice ocean breeze coming in through the window. Rest. I'm sure you'll feel better when you wake in an hour."

Alma went out and closed the bedroom door all but a crack. Joshua heard her footsteps as she went to the back door. He was asleep before the door closed with a click.

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At one point Joshua dreamed. He saw Mr. Maizel in a conductor's uniform. The uniform at first looked like the ones he saw on the train into the city. Mr. Maizel was sitting off to the side on a high stool. There was a baton in his hand. Joshua saw himself standing on a platform at the station. Mr. Maizel was waving a train in and then pointing the baton at Joshua indicating that he should get on. Then he would sweep the baton to his left and the train would speed into the city. He would pause, the tip of the baton held high. Then he would reverse the direction moving the baton to the right. The train would speed back to the beach. Joshua would exit the train only to see Mr. Maizel raise his hand for a pause. Joshua would wait on the platform and then the process was repeated. Again and again, he would be motioned into the train for the trip into the city then back again to the beach. Finally, Joshua fell into a deep sleep.

Franz came home from his friend's house and ran directly to his parents' bedroom. "Daddy, Daddy. Let's go swimming. Mommy said we could."

Joshua woke with a start having only heard something about swimming. "Wow, son. I've had a hard day. Give a soldier a minute to wake up. Why don't you ask Mother for two towels; meanwhile I'll find my swim trunks."

Joshua rolled his feet to the side of the bed. He remembered some of his dream. He was going back and forth to work. That was nothing new. Everybody has to work. He shrugged his shoulders still feeling a little uncomfortable.

Joshua held his son's hand on their walk to the beach. The sun was still warm. He was able to relax and concluded that things were not all that bad. They left their towels above the high water mark and Joshua suggested they jog up and down the beach to the next breakwater. "We can race back from there to the towels. This time I'll see if you're a race horse or really a little boy."

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Joshua let Franz pull ahead in the last ten yards. When he caught up, he laughed, "Just as I thought. Not a boy or a fish, but today a race horse!"

They turned and walked to the surf. As the waves rolled up his feet, Joshua realized that Mr. Maizel had never opened his cigar boxes. He bent over and splashed some water up on his torso and face. "We old men have to do this, to get used to the cold water." Franz turned and began to kick water up on his father laughing, "Old man, old man."