

Mr. Asch on that defense stand in behalf of his play. He has to explain some basic things: that when we trade our souls for money, it's a long and lonely life without love.

*(O'Neill motions for another shot. He is pensive, then he shoots it back.)*

Your Mr. Asch is a fierce moralist.

They're gonna claim they're closing it because of *Homo sexualis*. That's bunk.

They're closing it because the play shows that every religion—even Jews—sell God for a price.

Give my admiration to Mr. Asch. He's crafted a play that shrouds us in a deep, deep fog of human depravity: then like a lighthouse, those two girls. That's a beacon I will remember.

*(O'Neill pays up.)*

Tell him to keep his head down, don't take any shots to his kidneys—then up, up, a left jab, right hook combination!

LEMML *(Totally lost)*: Yessir.

O'NEILL: Better luck on his next play.

LEMML: Oh, Mr. Asch doesn't write plays anymore—only novels.

O'NEILL: Smart man. Oh—the stage—I wish I could quit it!

"Dat ole davil sea make dem crazy fools with her dirty tricks! It's so!"

*(O'Neill lurches from The Hell Hole. Lemml watches him leave.)*

STATEN ISLAND: SHOLEM AND MADJE ASCH'S HOME

FROM NOW ON, ONLY IN YIDDISH:

*Sholem Asch, slumped over his typewriter, pretends to write.*

IN YIDDISH:

MADJE: Husband. That was Lemml on the phone.

ASCH: I'm trying to write! It's like a goddamn circus down here with you and the children.

MADJE: The children and I tiptoe around here like it's a goddamn museum. You have got to call him back. This is Lemml. He worships you. You just can't discard people.

The court has thrown out all the defense witnesses.

I've laid out your clothes. You need to change. We have to catch the ferry in a half hour.

*(They start dressing him.)*

ASCH: This is a nightmare.

MADJE: Harry will translate what you say if he has to.

ASCH: Like he translated my play?

MADJE: You just have to make an appearance in the courtroom.

ASCH: There are massacres right now all over Europe!! And

I'm supposed to care about what I wrote when I was in short pants?

MADJE: It's still a very important play.

ASCH: Madje. I can't. I just can't.

*(Asch is now dressed. He sits on the bed.*

*Pause.)*

MADJE: I wish you had never gone to Vilna. I wish you would tell me what you saw.

ASCH: I don't want you to know. You're my wife.

Everything is reversed now: like a photographic negative.

Our garden, our house, the theater, the streets in America feel very far away. What's real to me—vivid to me—

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I can't get the images out of my head. It's hard for me to kiss our children at night. And when as head of our delegation I reported all the atrocities I saw what is the response from our State Department? . . . These things happen.

MADJE: . . . I think you should tell your friends that you are struggling with this. Tell Lemml. He's wondering where you are.

ASCH: I have to put myself together. I don't want people to know I am sitting in my house, weeping.

Will you call Lemml?

MADJE: Of course.

ASCH: I'll write a letter to the court.

MADJE: Yes. Your words are powerful.

ASCH: I have to write something to change the way gentiles see us—that make them see that we are one people with one common root—or they will rip us out, root by root, from the earth until we are no more.

It's coming. It's coming here.

MADJE: No. It won't happen here. We're safe here.

1923, THE VERDICT: PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF  
NEW YORK VS. THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

JUDGE MCINTYRE: The defendants have been found guilty of presenting an indecent, obscene, and immoral play, exhibition and drama. Although the theatrical profession is not as exalted as the other literary arts, this judgment still signals that the People of New York State are entitled to morally upright, wholesome American drama. The time has come when the drama must be purified of Eastern exoticism, its sexual pollution and its corruptive attitude towards the family. Court dismissed.

LEMML WATCHES THE SUN RISE OVER STATEN ISLAND

*The sun is just streaking the sky. Madje, in a robe and slippers, unlocks the back door to get the milk. Sitting there on the porch, quietly, his knees up to his chest, is Lemml. He gently holds up the bottles of milk and cream.*

*A short scream from Madje.*

IN YIDDISH:

LEMML: Sorry Mrs. Madje. We don't want to disturb your husband.

MADJE: Oh my god, Lemml! I didn't expect— *(She takes the bottles from him)* Are you all right?

LEMML: I been better. The world spins on.

MADJE: How long have you been here?

LEMML *(Shrugs)*: I wanted to see what the sunrise was like from Staten Island.

MADJE: Come in. Come in, Lemml. I am putting on the coffee.

LEMML: No. Thank you, I do not want to step over your shvel.

MADJE: Oh Lemml. Please. Please come in.

LEMML: I might be a dybbuk. A dead soul inside a stage manager.

*(Asch appears in pants, shirt and sweater. He stands in his threshold. Lemml does not turn to him.)*

*Madje goes in, leaving the door open. A moment. Lemml watches the sun rise over Staten Island.*

*With false heartiness:)*

ASCH: Lemml! My good man! Please come in.

LEMML: I don't think I am your good man anymore, Mr. Asch.

ASCH: Well, then, may I join you?

LEMML: Please yourself.

(*Asch sits on the porch beside Lemml.*)

The time to join me was yesterday. Or the day before. That was the time to join me.

ASCH: I owe you an apology.

LEMMML: You owe me nothing. (*Beat*) The letter you wrote to the court was very beautiful. You got powerful words, Mr. Asch.

ASCH: I know you think of me as the young firebrand you saw the night we met.

Every day since the day we read it out loud, I have been under attack. —Mr. Peretz was right—the play is a stone.

LEMMML: I didn't expect you to defend this play. I expected you to defend us. Do you know, Mr. Asch, that this play has ended Mr. Schildkraut's chance at the great roles in theater? He will never get the chance on an American stage again.

ASCH: He is a giant on the stages of Europe.

LEMMML: If he stays in this country, the best he can hope for on American stages is to play the "Stage Jew."

ASCH: At least he'll make a living. None of you will be out of work in—

(*Lemml rises.*)

LEMMML: —How dare you! We are not doing your play for the money! I could make as much wid' my sewing!

Why did you agree to those cuts? You cut the love between those two girls. There's only sex left!

(*Madje appears with coffee.*)

ASCH: I told Harry and Rudolph to do what they want. It's my play!

MADJE: And mine. It's my play too.

LEMMML: Excuse me, Mrs., but the play belongs to the people who labor in it! And the audience who put aside the time to be there in person!

ASCH: The truth is—I never checked the cuts. I can barely read English. I can barely speak! A writer of world literature—

I couldn't walk into that court, I couldn't walk into that court—in front of all those American reporters—they would laugh at me! Can you imagine if I opened my mouth? I would sound just like you.

IN ENGLISH:

LEMMML: I am done being in a country that laughs at the way I speak. They say America is free? What do you know here is free? All over Europe we did this play with no Cossacks shutting us down. Berlin, Moscow, Odessa—everywhere there is theater! You don't have the money for a ticket? Tickets over there cost less than a cup of tea. Then you dress up nice in your best coat and maybe you stand up in the second gallery, but you can say to your grandchildren: "I saw the great Rudolph Schildkraut in Sholem Asch's *The God of Vengeance!*"

I am leaving this country.

ASCH: Oh, no no no please— MADJE: Lemml, the places you still care for have changed . . .

LEMMML: —You have washed your hands clean of this tailor from Balut! Who doesn't stand up for the name on his title page? I am taking the manuscript in Yiddish wid me.

(*Geshray*) Mr. Asch! Your play it changed my life—

ASCH: Lemml: Listen, wait—

MADJE: Wait, Lemml —

LEMMML: I am going home.

A BLINK IN TIME

*Lemml starts his return back to Poland.*

*As Lemml continues his trek (a long, heavy, slow journey), the audience becomes a well-fed American audience in the Catskills. We would never know there's a war going on thousands of miles away. As our songbirds warble:*

1938, STATEN ISLAND: SHOLEM ASCH IN HIS STUDY

SELECTED WORKS OF SHOLEM ASCH:

A SHTETL  
WITH THE CURRENT  
THE MESSIANIC ERA  
THE GOD OF VENGEANCE  
SABBATAI ZEVI  
UNCLE MOSES  
MOTKE THE THIEF  
KIDDUSH HA-SHEM  
BEFORE THE DELUGE  
THE SAYER OF PSALMS  
THE NAZARENE  
THE APOSTLE  
MARY  
EAST RIVER  
THE PROPHET

*Lemml returns home. Asch types furiously.*

1938, GROSSINGER'S CATSKILLS RESORT:

THE BAGELMAN SISTERS

"BEI MIR BIST DU SHEYN"

*Chana, a Bagelman Sister, sings "Bei Mir Bist Du Sheyn":*

CHANA:

Of all the boys I've known and I've known some  
Until I first met you I was lonesome  
And when you came in sight, dear, my heart grew light  
And this old world seemed new to me.

*(Halina, a Bagelman Sister, sings:)*

HALINA:

You're really swell I have to admit you  
Deserve expressions that really fit you  
And so I've racked my brain, hoping to explain  
All the things that you do to me.

*(Halina and Chana sing:)*

HALINA AND CHANA:

Bei mir bist du sheyn, please let me explain,  
Bei mir bist du sheyn, means that you're grand  
Bei mir bist du sheyn, again I'll explain  
It means you're the fairest in the land.

I could say, "Bella, Bella," even say, "Voonderbar,"  
Each language only helps me tell you how grand you are!

1939: NAKHMEN REHEARSES

NAKHMEN: I would like to speak to the French Ambassador.

*(He practices his French:)*

Pardonnez-moi: Je voudrais parler à l'ambassadeur.

*(Beat. Take two:)*

Pardonnez-moi: Je voudrais parler à l'ambassadeur.

*(Nervous, Nakhmen combs his hair, sits, and waits.)*

THE ARARAT THEATRE TROUPE, KRAKOWA STREET

*Halina sings:*

HALINA:

Kh'vel dir zogn, dir glaykh tzu hern  
Az du zolst mir libe derklern  
Ven du redst mit di oygn  
Volt ikh mit dir gefloygn  
Vi di vilst, s'art mikh nit.

THE FRENCH EMBASSY IN POLAND

NAKHMEN: Excuse me, do you speak Yiddish?

CHANA *(Sings):*

Ven du host a bisele seykh  
Un ven du vaytzt dayn  
kindershn shmeykhl

NAKHMEN:

Hebrew? Polish? Un peu?  
I would like to talk to the  
ambassador. I'm sure he's

Vendu bist vild vi an  
Amerikaner  
Bist afle a Galitsianer  
Zog ikh: dos art mikh nit.

HALINA *(Sings):*

Bei mir bist du sheyn,  
Bei mir hos tu kheyn,  
Bei mir bist du eyner oyf  
der velt.  
Bei mir bist du eyner oyf  
der velt.  
Bei mir bist du eyner oyf  
der velt.  
Bei mir bist du eyner oyf  
der velt.

busy. He will want to make  
time for me. I am a Yiddish  
writer well-known through-  
out Europe . . . I come from  
Warsaw. Yes. Varsovie.  
What? Do I know Sholem  
Asch. *(Irritated)* Of course!  
I gave him notes in the  
salon during the first  
reading of *The God of—*  
would you please ask if  
I might talk to the—

1939-1941: LETTERS FROM POLAND

*Asch is still typing furiously. The troupe stands behind him.*

VERA: Dear Madje, dear Sholem: We opened *The God of Ven-  
geance* last night to thunderous applause!

CHANA: Thank you so much for the opening night care  
package!—

HALINA: Thank you so much for the new book, I love your  
novels!

NAKHMEN: Pardonnez-moi: Je voudrais parler à l'ambassadeur!

OTTO: The authorities are cramming in Jews from Germany  
into every spare inch of space.

NAKHMEN: Peut-être avez-vous entendu parler de moi! Sholem  
Asch has said that I was an inspiration for—

VERA: —Dear Sholem: You must tell your wife, my dearest friend in all the world, that I feel rich! I have a warm coat and a little food.

NAKHMEN (*Cheerfully*): Mais oui! Sholem Asch! Sholem!

OTTO: The authorities have walled us into the old Balut district to the north.

HALINA: I can still see the city park across the street!

NAKHMEN: Sholem Asch est un ami proche!

CHANA: We are still performing *The God of Vengeance* in all kinds of spaces:

VERA: basements,

HALINA: cafés,

CHANA: the lobby of the old children's hospital—

OTTO: The authorities forbid us to perform plays!

VERA: Good-bye Shakespeare!

CHANA: Chekhov!

HALINA: George Bernard Shaw!—

OTTO: Songs, dances, skits only six nights a week! Nakhmen is learning French.

NAKHMEN: Il n'y a plus de visas?!

HALINA: Oh Mrs. Asch, I most of all want to lie in the grass again!—

CHANA: —To smell the grass!

VERA: Nakhmen is learning Spanish!

NAKHMEN: ¡Españolas damas son la más bella—por favor! ¿La embajada está cerrada?

OTTO: Nakhmen is learning Chinese!

NAKHMEN: Qing! Qing!—búyào guān dàmén! I have been waiting for three days in a very long line. —Please! Do not close the gates before I—

(*A beat.*)

My dear Asch, it has been a long time since we read your brilliant little play in the living room. A lot of Yiddish

water has flowed over the Polish dam. It is hard for me to ask you: The authorities have confiscated our passports. Is there any way you might put in a word to the consulate to make an exception for me?

(*Asch rips out the page in his typewriter and puts in a new sheet. He types:*)

ASCH: Lemml, I hope I may still call myself your friend.

My letters to you have all been "returned to sender." If you get this, will you please respond?

A BLINK IN TIME

*The troupe enters a dusty space.*

LEMML: All right, people! This will make a stage!

(*The lights grow stronger. The troupe organizes some jumbled benches. They carry on suitcases. They work. In the corner of the attic, they find a horsehair sofa with its guts spilling out.*)

CHANA: Lemml, can we use this?

LEMML: Mrs. Gitla won't mind. Chana, this will be the sitting room . . . Halina, over here the stairs . . .

VERA: Here's the curtain for Miss Manke's place of business.

LEMML: Yes! Vera, excellent.

MENDEL: Let's hang the lamps! Matches? Lemml?

LEMML: Mendel! Don't waste a single match.

(*Avram begins to sweep.*)

Avram, let me do that. You get ready.