

The Lord's Prayer, Jewish-Style

Obol'ianinov, the prison warden, ordered everyone to sing the Lord's Prayer and "Lord Save Us" after the count, and the whole prison sang. Loud and clear. And when those in the Jewish Tower wanted to talk their way out of it, saying, we Jews don't know Russian prayers, the reply was a shout that brooked no objection, reinforced by a cascade of choice curses. "Oh, bull! Tell it to your mother! Kikes should know the prayers better than Christians..."

So the Jewish Tower sang. Half-heartedly at first, and then better and better every day. And, ultimately, it produced such a beautiful choir that the guards lingered at their posts, listening. Even Obol'ianinov himself, with no small amount of pride, said to his sidekick the superintendent, "How do you like our kikes, Mitty-boy? Quite something, the kike tower! A job well done."

But the Jewish Tower came up with a clever plan. There were maybe 35 to 40 people locked up in the Jewish Tower, all packed together in one round cell; except for A. Grinfeld and M. Kornfeld, who were political prisoners, and Boris Reiman the Odessan who considered himself an anarchist, the others were common criminals with short sentences, troops from the convict's company, hotheads, daredevils: Iankel Roshkes, Ios'ka Ruf, Idel' Soifer, A. Kitsis, and the Wanderer (that's a street nickname, I don't remember his last name). The Wanderer may have been a cantor even, or some such thing.

Even before Obol'ianinov's time, the Wanderer would surround himself with hoodlums, mostly Russians who had no sense of the words themselves, and with inimitable humor, hilariously, artfully grimacing, he would belt out:

I'm a good Hasid I am
Came from Lakhmerishki
No sweets in my pocket
Oy-vey

Or a sing-along with the refrain:

Yikes shame-o-shame, shame-lame
Yikes shame-o-shame, shame-lame
Shame, maim, shame, maim, blame, blame

Everyone would fall to the floor laughing. Often when the singers would sing their songs, they worked themselves up to dancing, and then you only had to close your eyes to forget the prison walls and feel like you're at a Jewish wedding. Only the sound of the shackles didn't harmonize.

So it was on the Wanderer's initiative that, after a headcount, the Jews asked Obol'ianinov, "Your Honor, would you allow us to sing the evening prayer in our language? We Jews have our own Lord's Prayer. And after that we will sing 'Lord Save Us.' Because otherwise it's a sin, the Lord will punish us. It's true that for the Tsar we must sing in Russian. But the Lord's Prayer in Russian is forbidden to us by our law."

Obol'ianinov must have liked their idea. His kikes will be first to sing their own prayer. "All right, go ahead, let me hear it."

The Wanderer had meantime managed to conduct several secret rehearsals with his choir before this big reveal. He must be commended for rising to the occasion. Imagine our surprise when, during the evening service, we suddenly heard Jewish prayer. The Wanderer was wailing passionately, louder than everyone else.

And the other voices did not disappoint, either. To God Almighty himself they all bellowed... the most elaborate curses that only extensive experience in criminal terminology could provide!!!

They cursed the Tsar, the Tsarina, God, the Virgin Mary... And they didn't forget Obol'ianinov. He was overcome, spellbound by the beautiful melody. When they were through with the audition, he gave his permission. "All right, you can sing the Lord's Prayer in your language. But you better sing it nice and loud for me."

The very next day he was able to confirm that his demands were satisfied. The prisoners sang their Jewish curses so ardently and so forcefully that they were probably heard far beyond the prison walls. For those of us prisoners who grasped the irony of Obol'ianinov's achievement – "in my prison even the kikes pray, and how!" – the Jewish Tower's prayer after the daily headcount smoothed the day's harshness and made us smile.

Another curious incident connected to the Jewish Tower is worth mentioning here.

It was close to the Jewish Easter in 1911 and, as in previous years, representatives from the city's Jewish community and the prisoners' families began petitioning the prison warden to let the Jews eat their own food during the holidays, to use a separate kitchen and a common cell, to let the cantor come to the prison, and to allow wine for the rituals and the celebratory visits with family members. For these negotiations the rabbi or his assistant or some such eminence was invited to the prison.

Obol'ianinov arranged the guest's visit with the Jewish Tower for the evening headcount, wanting to show off the prison discipline and the beautiful Jewish choir, which sang a "Jewish" prayer only at *his* prison.

He was hoping to make a positive impression, since the newspapers had been reporting that he didn't let prisoners so much as draw a breath.

To surprise his Jewish guest, Obol'ianinov lingered with him in the corridor while the assistant warden conducted the headcount. After the headcount, an especially sharp command "To prayer!" resounded and... the whole cell began to pray. Loud and clear. It's hard to imagine how the guest must have felt in that moment. It's hard to imagine, but, based on how quickly the color drained from his face, Obol'ianinov figured he was so captivated he couldn't say a word, or that the Jewish guest's heart stood still in religious ecstasy at the melodic sounds of our Jewish "prayer."

As soon as the last words of the "prayer" rang out, he rushed his guest into the communal cell to show off his singers.

"Wonderful, excellent work!" Obol'ianinov beamed, feeling paternal.

"Atcher-service-yer-honor!" The Tower barked back.

The prisoners went half-dead with fear at the sudden sight of the Jewish guest. They had shouted to overcome the chill creeping up their backs. Who was he? You could see every mind working. If the guest was a "bitch," a spy, Obol'ianinov would surely prescribe a horrible punishment!... Leave us to rot in solitary, flog us with rods. The thought was bone-chilling.

Our apprehension only grew when Obol'ianinov turned to his guest. "What do you think? They're good, right? And what a job it was to discipline them to this level! I tended to them constantly. Didn't sleep night or day. When my children require anything, I immediately provide for them." And, giving his guest no opportunity to respond, Obol'ianinov, rather overflowing with a rush of gratitude, surprised the entire cell. "In return, I will allow a half-bottle of wine per person for Passover. Here's this representative from the city, petitioning me to allow you to celebrate the holiday according to your beliefs. Well, I'll allow it. Let your Jews know that this here is not a prison but a synagogue! Jews rest here and pray for their sins. Well, I dare say, as you yourself heard."

"Oh yes," the guest managed, still somewhat stunned.

The weight lifted off everyone's hearts when they felt that the storm had passed.

The guest left, having secured the warden's full agreement to fulfill requests to conduct the Jewish holiday according to ritual.

Most of the Jewish prisoners lived in the Tower. The federal prisoners were allowed to come to the Tower for prayers and other rites. This excluded the politicals, from whom Obol'ianinov expected a special petition. So, for example, walking around the prison during the headcount before Jewish holidays, he would stop in a political prisoner's cell and ask him, "Don't you believe in God? Won't you go to the Jewish Tower for the holiday?"

He received the same reply each time: "We don't believe, we won't go!"