

9 The Prize

I was 12 years old and had been going to Hebrew school for about three years. It was the spring of 1940, the country was still in the depression and my mother and I were still on relief. My father had died in 1931 when I was 3 years old, and he had left no money. Somehow, my mother managed to see to it that we had food on the table and a roof over our heads.

We lived in a two room apartment on Fox Street in the Bronx; our rent was \$25 a month. The landlord, Mr. Gordon, had asked for \$30 but agreed to \$25, rather than leave the apartment vacant. My Hebrew school was in the basement of the Hungarian synagogue a block away. It was called the Fox Street Shul, but its real name was Congregation Beth David Agudath Achim. My mother had arranged with the synagogue for me to attend class for a token payment of twenty-five cents a week,

The main sanctuary of the synagogue was large and impressive, and whenever I entered, I felt that I was in a sacred place. The endless rows of polished oak pews. The ark with its embroidered red velvet cover behind which were the Torah scrolls, and the “bima” or raised platform, enclosed by a brass railing, with an ornate table upon which the Torah was placed. What impressed me most was the ceiling: a surprisingly realistic blue sky with clouds and stars.

Unfortunately, our Hebrew school classes were held in the dingy basement. There were three classrooms, but only one was used, since there was only one teacher: Mr. Zinder. He taught all the classes from first year through “last”, and after class, as the boys approached 13, he would prepare them individually for their Bar Mitzvah. Classes were an hour a day Monday through Thursday and on Sunday. We learned to read and write Hebrew, to recite the prayers, and given a smattering of Jewish history and the holidays.

The moment I looked forward to with greatest anticipation was when Mr. Zinder would distribute the round blue and white boxes which were used to collect money for the Jewish National Fund, Kerem Kayemes L'yisrael. Each student was given a box and a handful of blue felt flowers or later, small blue and white pins. We were instructed to give the flower or pin to anyone making a “large” contribution, which at the time meant ten cents or more. Before the boxes were distributed, Mr. Zinder explained that the money was to be used to purchase land in Palestine for a Jewish homeland. We were also shown films about the brave Jewish pioneers who were transforming the desert into a garden. I felt a personal responsibility to raise money for such an important cause, but if more motivation was needed, Mr. Zinder announced that prizes would be awarded to the three students who collected the most money.

This was my fourth year as a Jewish National Fund collector. The year before, I had come in second, and had been given a dip pen as my prize. This year, I vowed to win first prize which had always been an Ingersol pocket watch, known as the Ingersol Buck because it sold for one dollar.

As soon as the boxes were distributed, I started to make the rounds of the apartment houses in my neighborhood. It was vital that I got there before anyone else, so as not to be told "I gave already." I would knock on the door or ring the bell. "Who is it?" I would be asked. "Please help the Jewish National Fund," I would reply. Sometimes I would be told "Not interested," but most of the time my neighbors, who had very little themselves, would open the door, rummage about for a few cents, drop them into the box and smile at the earnest boyckik and perhaps remark, "A leibn oif dein cop" (literally, "a life on your head.")

The following morning, I would rush down to the Longwood Avenue subway station to catch the rush hour crowd going to work. Then I would rush off to school. I wanted to ride the subway after school, going from car to car calling out "Please help the Jewish National Fund," but my mother would not let me. She was afraid that someone would take the box from me. Nevertheless, I was back at the subway entrance when the rush hour crowd returned in the evening. And I would go to all the neighborhood stores, approaching customers as well as storekeepers. I really worked the neighborhood.

The day finally came when we turned in the boxes. Before they were returned, we would check each other's boxes for weight, and turn them upside down to see if there was more silver than copper. Mr. Zinder had appointed a committee to assist him in cutting open the boxes and counting their contents. The results would be announced the next day.

I was breathless with anticipation. And then Mr. Zinder announced the winners. I had collected the most money for the Jewish National Fund in my Hebrew School! I was to receive the first prize. My efforts were to be rewarded. It was the most exciting event of my young life. I was to receive the Ingersol Buck, my first watch!

All the classes were gathered for the presentations. When Mr. Zinder called me, I was bursting with pride. He congratulated me. He shook my hand. And then he presented me with a dollar bill. I was shocked. Where was the watch? He apologized that he did not have time to buy the watch, but knew that I would be happy with this substitute prize. Not at all! If I brought it home, my mother would most likely use it for food or rent. I wanted the watch.

When I left the Hebrew school, rather than relishing my triumph, I felt cheated and disappointed. Suddenly, the idea occurred to me to go to the jewelry store on the corner of Westchester and Prospect Avenue and buy the watch myself. Stricken with guilt, I did it. I came home, a little later than usual because of the detour, and with mixed feelings because of my deception, I announced to my mother that I had raised the most money, won first prize, and showed her the watch. She was very proud of me. But I always felt a little funny about that watch.