

THE PRIZE

I was 12 years old and had been going to Hebrew School for three years. It was located in the basement of the Hungarian shul down the block, which was also called the Fox Street Shul. However, its real name was Congregation Beth David Agudath Achim. I believe we paid tuition of twenty-five cents a week. It was 1939 in the Bronx, the depression, and we were on relief.

Though the main sanctuary of the synagogue was very impressive: a large auditorium with a balcony for the women; a beautiful carved ark with an embroidered red velvet cover, and a blue painted ceiling with white clouds and stars, the Hebrew classes were held in the dingy basement. There were three classrooms, but only one was used because there was only one teacher: Mr. Zinder. He taught all the classes from first year through Bar Mitzvah, and as the boys approached 13, he would prepare them for Bar Mitzvah, working with them on the prayers, their Haftorah, and their speech. Classes were an hour a day, Monday through Thursday, and on Sunday when Mr. Zinder would teach Yiddish and tell us stories. We learned to read and write Hebrew, to translate Genesis, we were taught the prayers from the siddur, and we learned about the Jewish holidays.

The high point for me was that special day each spring when Mr. Zinder would distribute the blue and white boxes (or pushkes) to collect money for the Jewish National Fund, Keren Kayemes L'Yisroal. The boxes were round, constructed of cardboard, and had a metal bottom and top which had a slot. Each student was given a box and a handful of blue flowers or buttons. We were instructed to give a flower or a button to those who made large contributions, which at that time meant anyone who gave you ten cents or more. In the late 30's, the usual contribution was a few pennies. I was always excited when I saw "silver" being placed in the slot, and I would present the flower or button to the generous contributor with a heartfelt "Thank you very much!"

Mr. Zinder had explained to us that the money we raised was to be used to purchase land in Palestine for a Jewish homeland. We were shown films about the brave chalutzim--pioneers--who were turning the desert into a garden and who were surrounded by hostile forces. I felt deeply that I had a personal responsibility to raise as much money as I could for such an important cause. But if this was not motivation enough, Mr. Zinder announced that prizes would be awarded to the three students who brought in the most money.

I had been involved in collecting money for the Jewish National Fund for each of the three years that I had been in Hebrew School. The year before, I came in second and was given a dip pen with a picture of the Cave of Machpela. This year I vowed to win first prize which was always an Ingersol pocket watch, know 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, trying to get to them before the other kids. I went from door to door (which I later learned was both Yiddish and Hebrew for "generation to generation"). I would knock on the door, or ring the bell. Most people would ask, "Who is it?" and I would reply, "Please help the Jewish National Fund." Occasionally, I would

be told from behind the door, "not interested" or "I gave already" which I knew couldn't be true because the boxes had just been distributed. Most of the time, my neighbors would open the door, rummage about for a few cents, drop them into the box, and smile. A few would pat me on the head and say something like "a leibn oif dein cup" (literally "a life on your head") or "git kint" (good child). The first coins always sounded the loudest. As the box filled, the dull clink was music to my ears.

The following morning, I would rush down to the Longwood Avenue subway entrance to catch the rush hour crowd. Most would be in too much of a hurry, but there were enough givers to make this effort worthwhile. Then I would rush off to school. I wanted to go into the subway and work my way up and down the aisles of the subway cars, calling out "Please Help the Jewish National Fund!", but my mother would not let me. She was afraid that someone might grab the box away from me, and that I might get hurt. But I was back at the subway entrance when the rush hour crowd returned in the evening, and I went to all the neighborhood stores, approaching customers as well as storekeepers. Each night, I would feel the box getting heavier. When my mother wasn't looking, I would turn the box upside down, take a butter knife, slip it into the slot and maneuver it to remove some of the coins which I would immediately put back, overcome with guilt.

The day finally came when we had to return the boxes to Mr. Zinder. Before we turned in our boxes, we would check each other's for weight, and for silver; I felt fairly confident as I compared what I had collected to the others. Our names were written on the boxes, and Mr. Zinder appointed a committee to assist him in cutting open the boxes and counting their contents. The results would be announced the following day.

The next day, the results were posted. I had collected the most money in my Hebrew school! I was to receive the first prize! My efforts were to be rewarded. My heart was pounding in anticipation. I don't remember ever looking forward to anything with as much excitement. I had won the watch!

When Mr. Zinder called me up to make the presentation, I was bursting with pride. He congratulated me; he shook my hand, and he handed me a one dollar bill. I was shocked and deeply disappointed. Where was the watch? He apologized that he did not have time to buy the watch, but he was sure I would be happy with the first prize that he had just handed me. Absolutely not! What am I supposed to do with a dollar? If I brought it home, my mother would use it to buy food or put it to the rent. I wanted that watch!

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, which, though stricken with guilt, is what I did. I came home, a little later than usual, and announced to my mother that I had raised the most money for the Jewish National Fund and won first prize. I showed her the watch. She was very proud of me. But I always felt a little funny about that watch.