
Sketches of Immigrant Life:

The Fence

Solomon Ary

translated from the Yiddish

by Sacvan Bercovitch and Rachael Ary-De Rozza

Solomon Ary came to Canada in 1930, with seven cents in his pockets, and seven words of English. As he and his wife were starting a family in Canada in the 1940's, Ary's remaining family in Bialystock, Poland perished in the Holocaust. At age sixty-five, he began to write.

Ary's stories tell of characters like Zanvl the shammi and Shaike the gangster, of exorcisms and dybbuks, of Jewish life in pre-Holocaust Europe. They also tell of the struggle through the Depression, of left-wing politics and of the rich ethnic life in the working class neighborhoods of Montreal.

THE RACHEL STREET MARKET TOOK UP A WHOLE BLOCK BETWEEN ST. LAWRENCE AND ST. DOMINIQUE STREETS. EVERY MORNING, IN THAT SUMMER AND FALL OF 1938, FARMERS CAME FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE with fresh fruits and vegetables.

I lived just north of the market, on St. Dominique Street. The flat next door had been empty for over a year, but the landlord hardly came by. It wasn't even locked.

One summer morning, as I sat on my balcony, a stocky man in his thirties walked up and tried the door. He saw me looking at him and called out, "Is this place for rent? Are you the landlord?"

"No," I replied. "He doesn't come by often—I don't know how much he wants for it."

He took off his hat, and stroked his pale yellow hair.

"As it is, right now, I'm not working anyway. But that's all right—I'm going to move in."

"Good luck," I told him.

He smiled and patted his little moustache. "May I ask your name, sir?"

"Ary," I answered.

"Well, Mr. Ary, I will bring my wife and children to live here. If they ever cause you any trouble, just talk to me about it. My name is Soudet."

I raised my hand in greeting. "Nice to meet you."

Before noon, an old truck parked on the street, and M. Soudet's wife and eight children climbed out. They threw piles of clothing onto the porch, carried a table, chairs, and several beds inside, and went about getting settled in their new flat.

Late in the afternoon, Mme. Soudet came out to look around. She was a very heavy woman, with a pretty face, dark hair and large blue eyes. She and all the children walked off towards Rachel Market, to see what the farmers would do with the vegetables and fruit at the end of the day.

A huge truck carrying live chickens pulled up at the corner, and the driver got out and went into a butcher shop. The Soudet children went to look at the chickens crowded into wooden crates. The chickens poked their heads through the spaces, squawking and cackling, and the Soudets stared back at them.

"I can see the eggs in there," said Jacques, one of the older boys. "Go get us a pail," he told one of the little ones. "We'll have an omelette tonight." Putting their skinny arms into the crates, they collected the eggs, and went home. The big boys, Jacques, Fernand, and Emil came back when the market closed for the day. They watched the farmers cover their stands with tarpaulins and tie them down. When the farmers left and the butcher shops closed, the Soudet boys carefully slipped their bony arms under the tarpaulins and came home with their shirts full.

So the family managed at least to get enough to eat on most days. They received a small unemployment check from the government, and as for other necessities such as meat, beer, clothing, and some money for rent, Mme. Soudet entertained certain callers who paid in cash for her company.

At that time I was doing all right for my family. I was a painting contractor, and many of my clients were quite well off. I did volunteer work for Jewish welfare groups, collecting clothing to donate to needy families, and I

included the Soudets in my deliveries. This pleased M. and Mme. Soudet very well, and we remained on friendly terms.

My landlord, Jacob Bikelson, had the ground floor of our building, and the Soudets were on the ground floor of the building next to us. I lived with my family on the third story, and could look down on the backyards below. On hot summer days I'd watch as Bikelson peered through the holes of the fence into the Soudet's yard where the children, even the grown girls, ran about naked and sprayed each other with water to cool off. When they noticed him, they'd turn the hose on him and he would run back into his house, cursing those "shameless goyim!"

Besides his own children, M. Soudet had a large family of rabbits which ran loose in the backyard. The rabbits had dug elaborate tunnels in and around the huge heap of vegetable leaves and refuse, to which the Soudets added something every day, from their gleanings at the Rachel Market.

A couple of months later when the weather started to get chilly, M. Soudet came over to me and said:

"Mr. Ary, you have been a good neighbor. I thank you for the clothes you've brought us, and I might mention that if you ever come across any bicycles or wagons, we can use those too. But I really came to ask you this: The winter's coming on, and I need wood to heat the house. Do you know where to get some?"

"I don't know where to get it for nothing, if that's what you mean," I answered.

Next day, when I came home, Soudet and his two older boys, were cutting away at their front porch with saws and an axe. Seeing the look on my face, he explained:

"What do we need this front porch for? I see lots of houses without one. I told you I'd think of something." He chopped away at the bannisters. "It occurs to me that we can do without the back porch too. What d'you think, Mr. Ary?"

"Why not?" I said.

"Boys," said their father, "after we stack this wood inside, we go to work on the back. Get a move on."

M. Soudet said that they would cut up only the railings and the planks from the back porch since he needed the rafters for a special reason.

"As soon as it's cold enough," he said, "I'll slaughter the rabbits. There are fifteen of them, at last count. They'll have to be skinned and hung on strings from the rafters, so the cats can't get at them."

When the day came, the sky was clouding over. I looked down on the ceremony below. M. Soudet came out in his yard and bellowed, "Fernand! Bring me a stool! Jacques—the sharp knife! Emil—get me a rabbit!" He sat himself down on the stool, and Emil handed him the rabbit. M. Soudet tucked it firmly between his knees, holding the long ears with his left hand, while in his right hand he had the knife. With one smooth stroke, he slit the rabbit from throat to tail. Then he flayed it, and gave the skin to Jacques, telling him to nail it to the fence. The dark spots of blood were covered with fresh earth, and the rabbit carcass was hung by the hind legs from the ceiling rafters, over where the porch had been.

Over the next week, all the remaining rabbits came to the same bloody end, but I no longer wanted to watch. It was, as always, a long, cold winter.

The Soudet children were a restless bunch. When spring came, they laid some long wooden planks against the sides of the sheds and crawled up onto the surrounding buildings. Sometimes they found a way into open windows on the upper stories of markets or stores where goods were kept. They brought home all sorts of things, scurrying over the rooftops at night.

One day M. Soudet was talking over the fence to my landlord, Bikelson, and he grew philosophical.

"I think you're a good man, Mr. Bikelson. I don't care if you are a Jew. I am a Frenchman, and I say that we can be friends. What do we need a fence between us for? Let's take it down, and have no more divisions between us. What do you say?"

Bikelson said, "If you do the work and clean out the whole yard, it's okay with me."

So they agreed, and Soudet and his sons took down the fence and cleared the trash. The yard was neat and pleasant.

The weather was getting warm. Baylah, the landlord's wife, took a stool and a bowl of potatoes, and sat outside under the trees to peel them. Bikelson was sipping tea with lemon in the kitchen, when he heard a loud shriek.

"There's a big dead rat out here!"

"Calm yourself. There are dead rats in the world. So what?"

And Bikelson took his bedraggled old broom and swept the rat over to the Soudets' part of the yard. Then, he and his wife went into their house.

Fernand had seen this through his window, and in a moment, he was out the back door with a broom and swept the rat back to the other side.

"Look at that!" hissed Baylah. "They've put it near our place!"

Bikelson went back with his broom and gingerly began to push the dead rat toward the Soudets', when he was met halfway by Jacques and Fernand. Jacques put the Soudets' broom against the rat and said to the old man, "That's your rat."

"It's not!" argued the landlord. "No rats come to my house. I have a cat."

"I don't care about your cat, but we saw you push that rat over here. Now, you better take it back." With one quick stroke, Jacques shoved the broom under the dead rat and flung it to the door of Bikelson's shed. The old man turned away, muttering, scooped up the rat with a shovel, and threw it in the garbage can. He laid a board over the can, and placed a large stone on it. He glared at the Soudets. "Bastards, good-for-nothing!" he cursed in Yiddish.

"Don't start up with them," warned his wife, "come inside."

This had happened a week before the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, the Festival of Harvest, when small huts are constructed out of light wood, with fresh cornstalks or palm fronds as a roof cover. Bikelson had taken some planks off the roof of his shed, and over the opening laid pine branches and cornstalks gathered from the farmers at the Rachel Market.

A table and benches were placed inside the shed for the Sukkot supper. The Bikelsons had invited some relatives to join them, and everyone was enjoying the holiday meal.

On the next roof, the Soudet boys were up to some night-business. The little children had climbed up to watch the excitement. One of the youngsters saw the Bikelsons' shed roof covered with greenery, and went closer to look it over. Crouching beside a chimney, he was surprised to hear singing coming from under the branches. He became so curious that he crawled on top of the shed and looked inside.

Suddenly the whole thing gave way, and the astonished boy fell down on the middle of the table, into the noodle pudding. Food flew in all directions, the boy began to howl, everyone was rushing about, shouting, wailing.

The uproar was so loud that the Soudets came running with sticks and pieces of lead pipe—why, exactly, they didn't know yet. But when M. Soudet saw that his boy had fallen through the sukkah, he understood, and began to shout: "What kind of trap did you make so my boy would fall into it?"

Old Bikelson had had enough.

"What are your boys doing on the roof like wild animals? Get off my property! We'll build the fence back again, and that will settle things once and for all!"

The next week, new wood was bought, and with the Soudets on one side and Bikelson on the other, the fence was put up anew, without a word spoken between them.

A month later, M. Soudet got his job back as a streetcar conductor. He had been unemployed for a year. He was so happy, he forgot himself, and when he met Bikelson on the street in front of his flat, he said, "Good morning, Mr. Bikelson!" in a jovial voice.

The old man was surprised, but responded with a smile, "Bonjour, M. Soudet."



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