

Mother's Father: A Special Man

By Max Trachtman ©1979

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Laizer Mendi Spector was born in Stavisht about 1812 and died about 1896 aged 84. He was a tall and very imposing man; but with all that, he was as soft and meek as a little kitten. He was never angry, never used harsh words to anyone, and was always kind and understanding.

When my father (David Trachtman) moved in with him after marrying mother (Sarah Spector), Laizer Mendi was in his sixties and didn't have a tooth in his mouth. Poverty reigned supreme, as was quite common in eastern Europe at that time. As always, there was not too much to eat. He would cut up a few slices of stale bread, soak them in water for awhile, and this was his brunch. In the evening, he would repeat the same procedure, but often enough, he would have some borsht instead of water.

Among the Jewish people it was customary for the bride's father to give the groom a dowry. This is still practiced in many areas. From the earliest days in eastern Europe, up to the end of the 19th century, there was another way of giving a dowry. The bride's father would give the son-in-law anywhere from two to five years of room and board, known as kest. That would give the young man a chance to learn a business, if he had one, or else try to help him get into one thing or another. If the young husband was not successful at anything he would just have to get along as best he could. However, a rich father who had an only daughter could give the son-in-law lifetime room and board, providing he was a scholar. In Jewish tradition, learning is very important, and the greatest thing once can do is Talmudic study. At the other end of the pole, the very poor also promised the groom lifetime room and board. My grandfather, Laizer Mendi, told my father, "As long as I'm alive, you can stay with me and share my worldly goods." It was very generous on his part, but frankly, he had little or nothing to lose.

My father accepted the deal, knowing full well that food was not too plentiful, something he was quite used to. The reason father went for the deal was mainly the girl who was quite nice and efficient in every respect. After marrying mother and living with his father-in-law, he realized though there was enough room for a sack of straw for a mattress, food was in very, very short supply. At times he was really hungry. So after a while of this sort of life, he decided that he did not have to depend upon an old man to starve. As much as he revered him and loved him, he decided to take his wife, leave, and be on his own.

Father was a self-respecting individual and could starve in his own right without depending on his father-in-law. Laizer Mendi was not very happy to see such a fine son-in-law leave, but that is life, and he wished them both well.

Laizer Mendi was not crestfallen by his children's departure because he had a business to manage. He catered to snuffers. At that time, smoking was not as popular as it developed in later years. Men's pastime was, therefore, snuffing instead of smoking. The tobacco factory was some distance away, and as the cost of going to the factory was quite high, therefore, merchants, travellers, and agents would plead with him to let them get his few pounds of snuff. They felt honored to do something for Laizer Mendi. He had a patent on mixing the stuff. He would add some mint drops and water to the mixture – however, the important thing was the consistency of the snuff. It could not be too dry or powdery or too moist or sticky, and he knew how to make it just right.

This business was operated on the honor system. After getting the pot of snuff ready for sale, he would put it on the table, and people would just knock on the door and walk right in without waiting for an answer. They would go over to the table and fill up their snuff boxes. Some of these boxes held less than half an ounce and others would hold two ounces or more; but that did not matter. The price was the same for all – half a kopek (penny). More often than not, the man would fill up his box and say he would pay next Tuesday or Sunday. But the old man knew that they were all good and fine people. No one would ever cheat or in any way try to get away without paying.

That was only one side of Laizer Mendi's life – the life of a practical hard business man. The other side of him was the exact opposite. His spiritual, ethical, and sensitive life was the talk of the district.

He played the clarinet and was the Kapellmeister of his band. He had a fiddler and a drummer, and together they produced heavenly music. Every Saturday night, they would go to the Rabbi's house where a number of townspeople would gather; and between the herring and the borsht, they would play and entertain the folks. The Rabbi would tell them that their music was divine and gave them a sort of heavenly feeling. And who knew music better than the old Rabbi?

Whenever there was a wedding in town, they would bring in musicians from the big town. But Laizer Mendi did not mind. In fact, he was glad that these interlopers had the chance to make a night's pay. He did not have that problem, of course. He had a going snuff business which took care of all his needs and comforts of life. At that time, the families of the bride and groom did not have to pay the musicians. They operated on a piece-time-basis. And here is how it worked. The band would sit at a table and on the table was a plate. As the first guest arrived, the leader would call out "welcome" and "mazel tov" to the groom's grandfather and they would play a few bars. Then the guest would go over to the table and drop a coin or two, depending on his ability or closeness to the principals. As the guests arrived, the procedure was repeated until everyone

was there. Then followed the ceremony. After that there were several numbers for free, no charge. The men and women all danced separately. If the room was large enough, they had circles, one of men, one of women. However, the bride danced with all the men. They took a large kerchief and folded it diagonally. The bride held one end and the male dancer held the other – and that’s how every male danced with the bride.

There was also the ceremony of cutting the bride’s hair, which was done under the canopy. Then she was presented with a wig which she wore the rest of her life. She was not to appear bareheaded to the opposite sex, but had to wear either a kerchief or the wig. At this point in the ceremony, the bride became a woman (just like a boy becomes a man at thirteen).

Then followed the dinner – after that, more dancing. And now a guest would ask the musicians to play a kozatzka or a kamarsky dance or a sher (a square dance) and put a couple of coins in the plate. The square dance was unlike the kind we see here, a barn dance with a caller. Instead, everyone in the circle told everyone else what to do, and nobody knew which way to turn. Each one danced his own way. As long as people kept dropping coins in the plate the band kept on playing. When it was all over the band leader would count out the money. Generally there would be about ten or fifteen rubles. In case of a rich wedding, there could be twenty or twenty-five rubles.

The only weddings Laizer Mendi’s kapelle played in was for a poor or orphaned girl where the guests were poor and not very numerous. At such weddings, Laizer Mendi’s band really showed their talents. After the wedding, he would count the money (which came to about three or four rubles) put it into a kerchief, and hand it over to the bride as a wedding gift from the band.

He could have divided the money with his friends. His one-third share would have given him a fine Sabbath meal with chicken, wine, kugel, and all the rest – but that was not like Laizer Mendi. He felt that the young couple could use that money to much better advantage than just food and drink.

That was my grandfather, Laizer Mendi. That’s why he was so honored and loved by all who knew him.