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LIFE IN THE KUSTENDIL GHETTO

QUAINT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BULGARIAN JEWS

Tenacity with Which They Cling to the Tribal Observances Brought from Spain at the Time of the Eviction by Torquemada—The Ceremonies Usheping in the Sabbath—A Young Hebrew Skeptic

By ALBERT SONNICHSEN

(Special Correspondence of The Evening Post.)

KUSTENDIL, Bulgaria, May 15.—The town is long, narrow, thick in the middle, and wedged in between the river and the high cliff called Hizarluk. In winter, when the sun is low to the southward, the ghetto almost exactly defined by the shadow of Hizarluk, a large, dark blot out of the middle. In the center an old, crumbling mosque shoots its minaret up into the sunlight. About it, in widening semicircles, like rows of seats in an auditorium, stand the low-roofed houses of what was once the Turkish, but is now the Jewish quarter. From the top of Hizarluk you see that the streets were intended to run around the mosque in concentric circles, but when you get down centric circles, but when you get down centric circles, but when you get down centric circles...

Before I came here I heard Kustendil referred to by the foreigners in Sofia as a Jew nest. The Spanish Jews are perhaps better represented here than in any other town of Bulgaria. But the Jewish quarter is interesting to see; it is picturesque, because it is old, and the people live in it exactly as they lived centuries back. It is unexpectedly clean, for the hot sulphur waters gushing out from the bowels of the cliff wash through yards and streets, carrying refuse down to the river, and leaving behind a wholesome, if not a pleasant, smell.

INSIDE THE JEWISH QUARTER. At first the streets are confusing, because they seem mere chance crevices between high walls of unadorned brick, topped with red tiles. In the walls are huge wooden gates. In daytime they are open, and you walk inside the walls and find they are large quadrangles, enclosing groups of four or five houses each, all facing a central yard or garden, usually planted with fruit trees. In the middle is a wooden trough in the ground, into which pours the hot sulphur water, overflowing into a small rivulet which twists its way out under the walls of the stockade somewhere to join the main stream in the street.

In the trough the housewife does her Friday morning's washing. At all sorts of unexpected moments a puff of hot sulphur steams up into your face from the holes in the ground, indicating more rivers covered by flat stones. Above rises the ragged face of Hizarluk, spotted here and there by vivid green.

Usually the verandas in front of the houses, the yards, and the streets are swarming with brown-himbed, noisy children. Interspersed with knots of bare-armed, gorilla women. On Saturdays they sit in benches outside the gates, their hats done up in high knots, profusely decorated with cheap, massive jewelry, so weighed down by brass that they can hardly walk. Toward evening the men become visible, the old men in last century's costumes, baggy trousers, sandals, some in long cloaks trimmed with sheep's skin or furs, some in red robes, some in fur caps, long-bearded and shaggy-browed all. Some are of the very red complexion of the Jews, hanging down over greasy, flat noses. They are usually taller and more robust of build than the Jews beyond the Danube, for since Torquemada drove them out of Spain four centuries ago, they have lived on fairly good terms with their environment, too good, perhaps, for their intellectual development.

The younger men dress much like the Bulgarians, in semi-European clothes, and the inevitable sheep's-skin cap. The old men are still of the Turks, the young men are imitating from the atmosphere of freedom a desire to be more like their neighbors. They speak Bulgarian more fluently, they read Bulgarian papers, and, by reading the signs above their shops, you can see that some have even Bulgarianized their names; Abrahamoff, Israeloff, and there is Jesus Davidoff. In features it is easy to distinguish them from the Bulgarians, although the prominent nose is rare. They are even of a different type from the Russian or German Jews; more delicate of features and ruddier. Occasionally you see a face among them, especially among the boys, that is strikingly beautiful in mould and delicate coloring.

A JEWISH PATRIARCH. From the first I heard of an old man, among them, it was one I had heard of; he was somewhat of a heretic. He had a son who wrote books in Spanish, but gained a substantial livelihood by making and repairing shoes. I made the son's acquaintance by having him mend my shoes one day while I waited, after which he presented me with an autograph copy of one of his books, a pamphlet really, which as far as I can make out, for it is printed in Hebrew characters, goes to prove that every Spanish Jew in the Balkan peninsula is the worst kind of an idiot. I gathered this from extracts he read to me.

The result of this acquaintance was the invitation from his father to visit him, which I gladly accepted. I found an old man, a fox on his venerable gray head, seated cross-legged on a cushioned bench, so old that he could no longer walk, but mentally bright and active. Without the usual inquiries into my past he took me off at once; first into a discussion on the Spanish language, then into theology and finally brought up into philosophy. That has been our subject, or his rather, ever since. It is his own particular system, too, and differs from any other that ever existed. From the pinnacle of his philosophy he looks down with contempt on Jews and Christians alike, they being as so many idols to him. He is rather disposed in favor of the Protestants, although he points out symptoms of mild imbecility among them, too.

I visit him often and we have become good friends. He considers me quite rational; why, I don't know, for I have never expressed an opinion to him. But outside his own family I am his only visitor, for he is as intolerant of persons as he is of orthodox religions. He is lonely, for when I come I can see how he brightens up with pleasant anticipation of the discussion he is going to have with me. His bookcase is beside him, and he reaches out his hand for his volumes, many of them in manuscript written by himself. From them he reads me extracts, smiling and winking humorously when he has driven a point home. Then comes the final test of all, when he reaches out for an old red leather-bound volume of yellow, thumbed pages; his invincible authority, the words of Rabbi Meir, the latest news from the war, and they discussed Oyam's recent victory with much satisfaction.

Later some hymns were sung, and then we all retired, the other families to their own houses. The big gate had been closed and heavily barred.

SOME STORIES OF MY PETS

A FOX TERRIER AND A CANARY WITH POINTS IN COMMON

Dogs That Were Notoriously Fickle in Their Affections, and Cats That Deserved the Title of Wotan the Wanderer—An Argument to Prove That No Two Animals of the Same Species Are Exactly Alike in Their Traits of Character—Dogs That Are Optimists by Nature

By GERALDINE ANTHONY

We human beings have the habit of generalizing glibly about our higher domestic animals, conceding to each class certain copy-book attributes. So we assume that a dog is necessarily loyal, and that a cat attaches itself to one person to the exclusion of all others. The Lord's blessing upon all Jews, and upon us specially. All the men drank after him, one by one, each offering a similar toast. Then we all broke and ate an egg.

About ten minutes of general conversation followed on commonplace topics, till the women brought in the supper. First came a huge meat pie to each table, and then the father of the family had out it, they began eating from the one dish, with their bare fingers. A half-lamb, the fore part, stuffed with rice, came next. Later followed bread and fried pumpkin.

Supper finished, grace was said, the hands washed, and conversation followed. My friend had introduced me as a Jewish student in the Sofia University, from Salonica; so I excited no curiosity. The talk was mostly of the latest news from the war, and they discussed Oyam's recent victory with much satisfaction.

Later some hymns were sung, and then we all retired, the other families to their own houses. The big gate had been closed and heavily barred.

The men all slept in one room, on the floor. As we rolled ourselves up in blankets, I heard the old man grumbling that so much had been put in them, for they must burn until exhausted. No Jew could extinguish them.

The day's tramp gave me a sound night's sleep. The splashing of water awoke me in the morning. As I opened my eyes, the old man was sitting up, while his wife held before him a basin of water. Into this he dipped each hand three times, then, drying them, got up, dressed, and began his morning prayers, and these were parts of his prayers.

"Thank Thee, Great God, Adonai, that Thou didst return me my soul after the night, and didst hold it safe for me while I slept.

"Thank Thee that Thou didst make me a Jew, and not a 'gay' (Gentile), and that Thou didst make me a man, and not a woman, but didst fashion me to Thy will."

As he dropped out these prayers, he yawned, rolled a cigarette, and kicked the cat out of his way. Prayers over, we drank a cup of Turkish coffee, then, all the community together, started for the morning services in the synagogue.

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LIKE VIRGINIA

"BEFO' DE WAH"

LIFE ON THE PLANTATIONS IN JAMAICA TO-DAY

By WILLIAM THORP

Readers of "Tom Cringle's Log" must have wished that they could have lived in Jamaica in the spacious days of Paul Gold and Aaron Bangs, and held high festival with governors and judges and bishops and admirals on the "great house" of a sugar plantation which, in those distant days, produced a revenue sufficient to make the Creole heiresses the first prizes in the English matrimonial market.

The sugar plantations are no longer a source of great wealth, owing to the competition of the European beet product. Once, when you said a man was a sugar planter in Jamaica, you meant that he was a magnate. Now, the term implies that he is an unfortunate wretch who lies awake at nights thinking about the mortgages on his property. Even Aaron Bangs's plantation—for he was a real man, and his house and life towards the spot where the robber is helping himself uninvited to the millet and rape seed. He executes a little side-step, spreads his wings, lowers his head, and suddenly bounces at the mouse with a vigorous peep. The gravel crunches on the newspaper carpet of the cage. Patsie squeals, the mouse squeaks, and by this time I have vider scrambles away, while Patsie, still intelligent, shrieks his tiny call of defiance after him.

Some dogs are optimists by nature, others are pessimists. Leicester Square, familiarly known as Benny, a beautiful creature greyhound, with whom I was very intimate one summer, always looked on the dark side of life. He was an unlucky dog, prone to get into trouble, and so inclined to self pity that you could reduce him from a tolerably happy mood to dismal wails, simply by addressing him in sympathetic tones, as "What ails you, Benny?"

Yet, as you wander through the deserted streets, you feel that once St. Jago de la Vega was indeed a city. The huge houses, now empty and tumbling to pieces, have an air of aristocracy about them, to which those in Kingston, the modern capital, have no pretension.

"Cho, shi!" says the old negro who conducts you through the vast halls of the abandoned "King's House," where former governors of Jamaica lived and held high revel, "all de old booker (white gentlemen) dem gone, sah. De young ones, dem no born! Dere was money in de old days, an' dem spend it free. Dem dance ober de night, sah—'an' dem drink—land, sah! how dem did drink!"

The prisoner of the times that have been told stories of Lucullan feasts of jerked hog and black cat, turtle soup, and old Madeira. He conjures up pictures of the wicked old times when stiles-de-camp used to ride alligators through the streets, when admirals of the blue gave balls to the brown girls of the town, when vice in every shape and form was more reputable, if not more fashionable, than it is at present.

But it is all a memory. There is not a single bottle of the old Madeira extant. Nobody ever remembers the Hell Fire Club, and the oldest inhabitant of the town cannot tell you how to compound the famous Bath punch. Nevertheless, the life of the white planter in Jamaica is fully as pleasant to-day as it was in the time of Aaron Bangs. It is very much like the life on the plantations of Virginia and other Southern States in the days before the war, barring, of course, the slavery of the blacks.

I have visited at many plantation houses in which the host and hostess, the colored "nana," and the swarm of faithful, merry servants all seemed as if they had been resurrected from the old South of ante-bellum days. Posts and novelists who deplore the passing of that social order should take the short sea trip to Jamaica, and they will find that the old Southern life is being lived in all its glory on hundreds of plantations there.

Many of these Jamaican planters belong to the oldest and noblest British families. Just as the old Southern did, their ancestors who emigrated to Jamaica were probably friends, in the old country, of the "gentlemen adventurers" who built up the colony of Virginia. The plantations and the family plate and the family pride have been handed down, perhaps, for more than a couple of hundred years. Such a life as that which Thackeray has described in the opening chapters of "The Virginians" is still lived to-day, in much the same fashion on many Jamaican plantations. There is the same generous hospitality, the same pride, the same self-reliance for dependents, the same free, open air, rollicking life. There are a thousand points of resemblance, but perhaps the closest is the likeness of the West Indian "nana" to the old Southern "mammy."

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