

## 1. Out of the Dumpster

The phone rang at midnight. That wasn't unusual: Older Jews often waited until the rates went down before phoning me about their Yiddish books. But tonight I had just returned from a long collection trip, it was snowing outside, our house was cold, the phone was in the kitchen, and I had no intention of crawling out from under the covers to answer it.

*Brinnnnng! Brinnnnng!*

My girlfriend, Laura Nelson, covered my ears. "It can wait," she hushed.

Apparently it couldn't. Five, ten, fifteen rings and finally my housemate, Scott Bolotin, went bounding downstairs to answer it himself. Thirty seconds later he was pounding on my bedroom door. "Aaron! Quick! Get up! It's for you! It sounds really important this time!"

I wrapped myself in a blanket and stumbled to the phone.

"Aaron, is that you?" I recognized the voice at once: It was Sheva Zucker, a young woman who had taught me Yiddish at a summer program in New York four years before. "I'm sorry to call so late," she said, "but this is an emergency! There are thousands of Yiddish books in a garbage Dumpster on Sixteenth Street and it looks like it's going to rain. How soon can you be here?"

There was only one train a day from Northampton, Massachusetts, near where I lived, to New York City, but fortuitously it came through at 2 A.M. If I hurried I could make it. I phoned my old college friend Roger Mummert in New York and told him to expect me at 6:45. Laura stuffed a sleeping bag, work gloves, and a loaf of bread into my rucksack. Scott raided our communal food kitty and the *tsedoke* jar, the shared charity fund we kept hidden in the freezer, and handed me a paper bag filled with \$60 in loose bills and change. All I had to do was figure out how to get to the train station, eight miles away.

The roads were too slippery to go by bike. The local cab company was closed for the night. “What about your pickup?” Scott asked. He meant my ’63 Ford, a vehicle so unroadworthy, so full of rust and holes, it had stood abandoned under a pine tree in the backyard since failing the state inspection six months before. But there was no other choice. Scott, Laura, and I rushed outside and brushed off the snow. I pulled out the choke, turned the key, and somehow the old engine shuddered to life. With a lot of pushing we managed to rock it out of the ruts where it had frozen in place. I plastered a clump of snow and pine needles to the windshield to cover the expired inspection sticker and made it to the train station with ten minutes to spare.

“*LAAAADIES AND GENTLEMENNNN*, the station stop is Pennsylvania Station, New York City. Please watch your step while leaving the train. *Pennnnnnnn* Station . . .” I was out the door and running through the station before the conductor could finish. On Eighth Avenue I looked up and noticed the inscription chiseled on the post office across the street: “Neither Rain Nor Snow Nor Heat Nor Gloom of Night Stays These Couriers from the Swift Completion of Their Appointed Rounds.” The sky was dark and spitting sleet. The clock read 6:37. I hailed a cab and picked up Roger, and together we raced over to Sixth and Sixteenth to find the Dumpster.

It wasn't hard to see. Standing on the street, the size of a tractor-trailer, it was literally overflowing with Yiddish books. The volumes at the top were already wet. A few dozen lay splayed on the street, run over by passing cars. The sleet had turned to rain, which showed no sign of letting up anytime soon.

Roger and I climbed into the Dumpster, where a few minutes later we were joined by Sheva and her friend Eric Byron, the young man who had discovered the scene the night before. By this point they had managed to figure out where the books came from. It seems an old Yiddish organization had once occupied offices in a nearby building. As their membership dwindled they could no longer afford the rent, so they moved out, consigning their large Yiddish library to a basement storeroom for safekeeping. Now the building was being made over into condos. When workmen found the forgotten books in the cellar, they began hauling them out to the Dumpster. It was only last night, when the pile got high enough for books to spill over the sides, that Eric noticed them and phoned Sheva, who in turn phoned me.

There was no time to lose. Roger went to the nearest pay phone and called the Dumpster company; their number was emblazoned on the side. They agreed not to pick up the bin until evening. He also called every friend the four of us could think of, looking for reinforcements. Meanwhile I was on the adjacent phone, trying to scare up a truck. After several calls I found a U-Haul dealer on Eleventh Avenue willing to rent without a credit card—none of us had one—provided we could come up with a cash deposit of \$350.

For a motley crew like ours, \$350 was a fortune, but luckily Sheva had money that she was saving to pay her taxes. As soon as the bank branch opened, she made the withdrawal. While Roger and Eric stayed with the books, Sheva and I took a cab over to Eleventh Avenue—with a Yiddish-speaking cab driver, no less!—and rented a twenty-four-foot truck, the biggest they had. By the time we made it back, a half dozen

people, all under the age of twenty-five, had responded to Roger's call and were huddled on the corner, ready to help. I backed up to the Dumpster, turned on the emergency flashers, and then organized a "bucket brigade" so we could pass books into the truck. It was raining hard now, and within minutes all of us were soaked. Worse still, our clothes were turning colors: red, yellow, blue, and green, splotted by the book covers' dyes running in the rain.

At about 9:30, in response to an urgent phone call, our board member, Sidney Berg, arrived from Long Island with enough cash to reimburse Sheva. He also brought his handyman, Joe, a seasoned worker who seemed to double our speed single-handedly. We stayed in that Dumpster all day, racing the rain for every book. Many people stopped to watch. Some shrugged; others cried. A reporter for the *New York Times*, a young black woman in the process of converting to Judaism, told me it was the saddest sight she'd ever seen. Another reporter, for one of the tabloids, was less sympathetic. "I don't get it," he yelled up from under his umbrella. "I mean, these books are in *Yiddish*. Who's gonna read 'em? What is this for you kids, some kind of nostalgia trip?"

Shivering, half numb with fatigue and cold, I doubt I managed much of a response. And it probably didn't matter—the question was rhetorical, his stereotypes about Yiddish set long since. We continued working until dark. By that time our volunteers had gone home, leaving just Joe, Roger, and me in the Dumpster, with Sidney Berg, under an umbrella, standing vigil on the street. All told, we had saved almost five thousand volumes; the rest, probably another three thousand, were soaked beyond any hope of salvage, floating in a fetid, dye-stained pool at the bottom of the Dumpster. Roger and I said good-bye to Joe and Sidney, climbed into the cab of the U-Haul, turned the key . . . and nothing. The emergency flashers, blinking since morning, had drained the battery, and the truck wouldn't start.

I might have dissolved into tears right then and there had I not

spied a gas station across the street. The burly mechanic on duty wasn't much help. "I ain't gonna leave the station to go work in the middle of no street," he said. "I'll tow you over here if you want, but that's gonna cost ya."

"How much?"

"Hundred bucks for the tow and five bucks to charge the battery."

"How about if we bring the battery to you?"

"In that case just five bucks. But how you gonna get that battery over here?"

After what we had been through that day, I was sure we could find a way. I asked the attendant if we could borrow a wrench, but he said it was against the rules. I handed him a soggy five-dollar bill and the rules changed. Roger and I walked back across the street, managed to disconnect the cables and lift the battery out of the truck. It was a heavy-duty truck battery, weighing a good fifty pounds. Since Roger is considerably taller than I, the battery listed precipitously as we walked. By the time we put it down on the oily floor of the garage, I realized the acid had leaked out and burned a hole right through my wet canvas parka.

We waited for the battery to charge, then drove back to Roger's apartment. I took a hot bath, ate supper, drank four cups of hot tea with honey, and fell sound asleep. At two o'clock the next afternoon I was back in Massachusetts, where a large crew of volunteers was waiting for me. Without a functional elevator it took us the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening to pass five thousand books from the back of the truck, up the stairs, and into our second-story loft, where we spread them on pallets to dry.

What had we saved? Almost two-thirds were "new": unread publishers' remainders printed in the 1930s and 1940s, including works on Zionist theory, history, memoirs, and at least five hundred copies of a large-format Yiddish translation of the Torah. The rest came from the

organization's library: a solid assortment of Yiddish titles, most published in New York. Almost all of these books ended up in libraries or in the hands of students around the world.

Before I went home that night I returned the U-Haul and retrieved my unregistered pickup from the Northampton train station. Then I collapsed. For the next three days I remained in bed, my temperature spiking to 104. As I lay there, drifting in and out of fevered sleep, my thoughts turned to the tabloid reporter in the rain. *Why was I doing this? Was it really just a matter of nostalgia? What did I hope to accomplish? And how had it all begun?*