



A HOUSE WITH SEVEN WINDOWS ¹

Kadia Molodowsky



The story of Kadia Molodowsky's proud, strong heroine is played out against the background of the Khibat Tsion period. A mid-19th century movement, it embraced and expressed the age-old dream of Messianic redemption and the desire to “normalize” Jewish life through a return to, and settlement of the ancestral land of Israel.

The drive towards self-realization was accelerated by the Russian pogroms of the early 1880's and widespread European anti-Semitism, resulting in the First Aliyah. Rosh Pina, settled by First Aliyah pioneers in 1882, was the first “modern” Jew-

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ish colony in the Galilee. Its symbolic name, "chief of all cornerstones," is derived from Psalms 118:22, which is recited regularly in synagogue.

BASHKE WAS THE ONLY GIRL in Grodno county who could sit a horse as well as any lord. Her father was a wealthy tenant farmer who rented fields and meadows from the lord of the manor and kept a hundred head of cattle.

When she rode out to nearby Brisk, it was in a chaise, no less, drawn by two fine horses. Yankl, her coachman, sat on the upholstered seat, holding the red-tasseled whip, as straight and as proud as if he were coachman to the daughters of the czar. He would polish his boots for half an hour before driving out with Bashke.

Bashke's blue eyes and small, upturned chin possessed a stubborn

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beauty that seemed to be teasing the whole wide world: "Well, who will outdo me?" On meeting her in the woods, the squire always found topics for conversation. He would stop his carriage to ask, "Where are you off to, Bashke? How is it you're so pretty, Bashke?" And once, "It would well become you, Bashke, to be a noblewoman." Bashke's eyes flashed, and the stubborn little chin seemed to challenge as she answered, "It becomes me just as well, my lord, to be the daughter of Mendi Shapiro."

The two coachmen, Vasil and Yankl, sat stiffly, neither uttering a word to the other. Yankl's broad back was clearly taunting Vasil: "You may be driving the squire, but I'm driving Bashke."

In the district, talk and speculation. "Whom will such a Bashke marry?" She married a young lumber merchant, a

scholar, and she loved him. In Brisk,⁴ where she had moved with her husband, Bashke ran her house with great generosity: she had taken Yanki and the chaise with her and never went to town on foot except on *Shabes*. On *Shabes*, Bashke could be seen walking to *shul* or visiting her husband's family. When she stepped out with her husband, Reb Iser Paperno, it was all substance and status: she was Bashke Shapiro and he, a golden scion of Brisk already shaping his own rich future.

There were always guests at Bashke's table: merchants conducting business with her husband, emissaries soliciting for a *yeshive*, visiting rabbis, preachers, paupers and random travellers. Bashke greeted every stranger with respect. In the city her house was renowned; Jews called it "Jerusalem."

Once a Warsaw merchant came⁵ to Iser Paperno on business. Friday evening, after they had concluded the *Shabes* songs, he told about a newly-formed association of Jews in Warsaw that was buying property in the land of Israel and emigrating to build a city there. Bashke's eyes brightened with an inner flame. "What type of Jews are they?" "Jews like all other Jews," answered the merchant. "My brother-in-law is one of them. He's going with his wife and children." "How old is he?" asked Bashke. "He's twenty-eight and has four children."

Bashke served tea with cherry syrup and cookies. As the merchant prepared to leave, she said to him, "You've brought us glad tidings; may they come to fruition." Her husband, Reb Iser, gave her a puzzled glance but out of respect added, "And may there always be good tidings among Jews."

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The business transaction with the Warsaw merchant was highly successful. In one year Iser Paperno doubled his worth but he took no joy in it. Bashke had been transformed. She frequently alluded to the group that was purchasing land in Israel.

One Saturday night, immediately after sundown, Bashke lit the lamps as if it were a holiday and sat down to write a letter to the group. The next morning she went off in the chaise to have it promptly mailed by Yakev Rabinovitch, the postmaster.

Yakev Rabjuovitch knew all the town's secrets. When he was curious about the contents of any letter, he'd open it, read it, reseal it and then mail it; his curiosity, God forbid, harmed no one. He read Bashke's letter as well. It pleased him greatly that Jews were buy-

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ing land in Israel. "Just imagine! They'll overtake the Messiah – no joke!"

Within two weeks there was talk in Brisk that the Papernos were buying land in Israel. "The rich! What do they have to lose?" Then a rumour spread that the Papernos were leaving for the land of Israel. No-one had the nerve to ask either Iser or Bashke about it, but they fell upon Yankl the coachman like flies. "Are they really buying? Are they really going?" Yank either knew nothing or was feigning ignorance. "No business of mine! If the master goes, I'll drive the horses."

A year passed. The town simmered like a stew. "Reb Iser doesn't want to go, but Bashke – steel and iron!" Everyone was curious as to who would prevail: Iser or Bashke?

Many of the town's families earned their livelihood from Reb Iser's lum-

ber business: the agents, the book-⁸keepers, the brokers, the dray men and the watchmen. These, the stronger faction, were united in their belief that for Bashke this was a delusion that would pass, with God's help, as do the caprices of all rich women. The second faction, neighbours and relatives, said that if Bashke was caught up in the idea of building a city in the land of Israel, she would build a city. "Bashke is Bashke."

One sunny day before *Peysekh* Bashke went to Warsaw, not by coach like the merchants, but by train like her husband, Reb Iser Paperno. When she arrived at the train station in her chaise, driven by Yanki, the town's coachmen had already congregated to see whether she really would set foot on the train. Even those who had no passengers had cracked their whips and headed for the train station.

When Bashke came back from War-⁹saw, the secret was out. She had purchased land in Israel. Reb Iser Paperno would remain in Brisk and Bashke was "making *alie*." They started speaking of her emigration to the Land of Israel as "she is ascending."

After *Peysekh*, Reb Iser Paperno and Bashke went to the rabbi. They stayed there from after evening prayers until late. A decision regarding the children had to be made. Reb Iser was prepared to deed the purchased land for a *yeshive* and to pledge that he would send his oldest son to study there after his *bar mitzve*. Bashke argued that Jews were going there to build a city and she wanted to be among them with her children.

Reb Iser's mother burst into the rabbi's study. The prosperous Eydl Paperno, wrapped in a shawl, wailed,

“Rabbi, they’re taking my children from me!”

“I’m not, God forbid, leading them into idolatry,” Bashke answered her. She rose from her chair and offered, “Sit, *Shviger*.” Bashke remained standing. Her blue eyes were suffused with light and quietly she said, “Who will accuse me, God forbid, of leading my children into evil ways?” No-one replied.

The Papernos’ house and large courtyard were cluttered as before a wedding. Crates stood braced with iron strapping. There was a pile of hay in the middle of the yard, and Yank carried sacks stuffed full into the house. Dishes were being packed for meat, dairy and *pareve*, for *Peysekh* and for the whole year round; pots, pans, linens and bedding.

Reb Iser Paperno kept working at his business as if nothing were happening at home. His staff came in, he checked

accounts with them, gave them letters and sent messages.

Neighbours commented more with glances than with words. “God help her; and him, the poor unfortunate, may God truly help, staying here alone! A saint! He’s letting her take the children.”

The crates were already loaded on one wagon, the bedding and food stuff – dried bread and cookies, cheeses and smoked meats and schnapps – on another. The children sat there, the older a boy ten years of age, the younger a little girl of four.

Reb Iser stood beside the wagon with the children. His eyes were wide open but he looked like a blind man who doesn’t see the light. Beside him, almost shoulder to shoulder, stood Yankl the coachman, confused and flushed like someone who’d just come out of a fight.

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“We’re going now,” said Bashke quietly, as if pleading. Yankl didn’t move. “Yankl!” Bashke called, “Yankl!” And when Yankl, his senses numb and disobedient, did not respond, Bashke looked around, pressed her lips together and said quietly, “The horses will obey me too.” She got into the wagon, sat down on the driver’s box and pulled the reins. Leaning down from the box, she said, “Iser, may we be blessed with joy in our children, Iser!” and she drove out of the courtyard.

Through their windows neighbours could see Bashke herself driving the wagon with her children. They pinched their cheeks and covered their faces with their hands. “God protect her, such courage!” Some ran out and shouted after her, “May you succeed! May you arrive safely!”

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As the wagon went down the street, Yankl came to. For the first time in his life he had not obeyed Bashke. Tearing himself from his place, he ran after the wagon as if possessed, calling, “Mistress! Bashke!”

In Rosh Pina, Bashke Paperno’s house stands with its seven windows. The courtyard is enclosed in tall eucalyptus trees and it is known as “Bashke’s Courtyard.”

Her grandchildren and great-grandchildren with blue eyes and up-tilted chins refuse to sell or rebuild the house. If a wall sags, they repair it, so that it may continue to look as it did when Bashke built it.

TRANSLATED BY ETHEL RAICUS