

Our Yiddish Club Prepares to Visit Chelm

by Philip "Fishl" Kutner

Not long ago the subject of our heritage came up at Our Yiddish Club Meeting. Some of us brought in a letter that we had in Yiddish from an older relative. One thing led to another, and we decided that we would like to trace our roots.

As we delved deeper and into our backgrounds it seemed to lead us to a common town—Chelm. "Hey, let us visit the home of our ancestors and learn more about our family ties." It was the words of **Nar**. So we shall tell you the story of our visit to Chelm through **Nar's** eyes—he will be our narrator.

"Where is Chelm," said **Heshy the retired Chocolate Maker**? No one knew exactly, so they decided that for the next meeting they would find out. (**Narrator**) Chelm is 40 miles S.E. of Lublin in Poland, and near the Bug River and across to Ukraine. Belarus is a short distance northeast.

"If we are going to visit Chelm, what else do we need to know, and what preparation do we need to make" asked **Pincus the Pickle Maker**?

What is the land like around Chelm mumbled **Perele the Pearl Peddler**? (**Narrator**) North and East of Chelm are marshes and peat bogs. Chelm is also the name of a province. One of three on the Eastern border

What does the name Chelm mean blurted **Benny the Beer Brewer**? (**Narrator**) Chelm means *mountain* in Old Polish, for there is a mountain in the center of town. (150 ft)

"What do we need to take along" asked **Fayvl the Fire Fighter**?

"I remember that my grandfather belonged to the Chelmer Branch of the Workmen's Circle in New York," interjected **Tova the Teacher**, "They even had a landsmanshaft"

"Where shall we stay in Chelm" came from someone in the back of the room? We need to have a place to eat and to sleep. It was **Leybl the Librarian**.

"Naturally there are probably no hotels in Chelm. Besides it would be too expensive," responded **Gitl the Gardener**. "We'll stay in a Bread and Breakfast," she interjected.

"There is a Polish National Tourist Office in Hoboken, NJ (201-420-9910). Maybe we can get information from them" said **Danny the Doctor**.

"Are there any sites to see in Chelm," asked **Rokhl the Raykhe**? She then proceeded to answer her own question. "There are famous underground chalk tunnels winding around 40 feet under ground."

Mendel the Computer Maven volunteered to look online and see what he could learn about Chelm. "Maybe I could take my laptop along, and we could e-mail back home," added Mendel.

Nar the Narrator whispered, "Maybe Chelm doesn't have electricity, and then he let out a little chuckle.

With all these questions came the realization that there was much to do and learn before the club could visit Chelm. There was general agreement that each member would go home and ask his or her spouse if he or she wanted to go along—that is, all except **Pincus and Perele**. You see—they are man and wife.

And so the Yiddish Club meeting closed. We had our usual coffee or tea and **Bobe the Baker's** home-baked bobke.

We may never know exactly what happened when each member of the Yiddish Club went home and told his wife or she told her husband. But we do know that each member did get the approval, for the entries in the journal show that all members of the club did go on the trip.

But that is getting ahead of the story. There was much research and preparation to be done by the next meeting. It was only a month away. There was the matter of the passport. Not everyone had an updated one.

Of course there were many other matters to handle. What clothes would they need to take along with them? This was especially important to the women, for they did not want to embarrass or to be embarrassed by the Chelmer women.

(**Narrator**) What do you call a person from Chelm? Is he a Chelmer, Chelmite, Chelmist, Chelmitian or Chelman? This brings up still another problem. If he is a Chelman then that is sexist. A policeman is now a law enforcement officer, a fireman a fire fighter—a Chelman would be a Chelm Person. Actually, in Chelm they call themselves Chelmers.

So, we leave our Yiddish Club members to research and prepare. We shall visit them next month as they make their final arrangements, say their goodbyes, and set off on their journey to Chelm.