

# Chelm Has a Duel

by Philip Fishl Kutner

Jews fighting among themselves—who ever heard of such a thing? Questioning, disagreeing, arguing, debating, raising one's voice, questioning the legality of your birth all are part of Jewish culture. But to raise your hand and strike another Jew, that just does not happen—especially in Chelm. So how is it possible that Chelm had a duel?

Actually the confrontation occurred between two wagon masters, one a Lubliner and the other a Chelmer. It all began one spring day on the two-lane highway between Chelm and Lublin. I say highway, but it actually was a deeply rutted, dirt road. In the springtime the higher side of the highway was barely passable, but the lower side was completely out of the question.

It seems that the weekly stagecoaches met midway between the two cities at a particularly muddy and rutty location. Immediately the two wagon-masters got down, and as they walked toward each other, they shouted for the other to back up—all the way to their hometowns.

Naturally neither one was willing to accommodate the other. They argued so long that the sun finally came out, the water receded and the other lane of the road became passable. However, this is only the beginning of the story. Both wagon-masters felt they had to uphold the honor of their city. They agreed that only a duel to the death would salve the honor of their respective hometowns.

After much further conversations between the two men, their seconds and even their thirds, it was decided to leave the details to the Chelmer Gaon, the acknowledged wisest rabbi in all of Europe, if not in the whole Jewish world.

Before we go further, you must hear a little about the 2 would-be duelers. And what they expected of the Chelmer Gaon.

The Lubliner came from a dynasty of wagon-masters going back many generations. He was 6'6" tall, built as strong as a wine barrel and weighed 260 pounds. The Chelmer was 5'5", a full foot shorter, and weighed almost 140 pounds. He had been a yeshive bokher, but was not adept at his studies. His father apprenticed him to an older Chelmer wagon-master.

Word soon spread about the confrontation and the upcoming meeting with the Chelmer Gaon. The day of the meeting arrived, and the Gaon's

courtyard was packed with townspeople and reporters from the Chelmer Chadoshnik and the Lubliner Linke.

## At the Gaon's Court

Inside, the matter before the Gaon proceeded in an orderly and genteel manner. Being in the presence of this great man had a calming effect on those at the session.

After each side eloquently elaborated on the merits of their case, the Gaon asked for a glass of shnaps, cleared his throat and began reciting his decision in a sing-song manner.

Whereas each of the two parties feels he is right, whereas the honor of each city is at stake, a duel is a befitting way to settle the matter. However, whereas there is a discrepancy in the size and strength of each party, the duel must be fair. Whereas the two men are bible-reading men, then the bible duel of slingshots will be used. Whereas the stronger and heavier man has an advantage, there needs to be a balance on the size of the slingshot. The stronger man will have a small slingshot and the weaker man a large slingshot. The Gaon ended by saying that his men would bring the slingshots and missiles to the battle-site. The date set was January 9, 1919--1919.

The day arrived, and the weather was cold and damp. It was at the exact spot of the confrontation on the Lublin-Chelm Highway. Each combatant was dressed warmly and awaited the arrival of the Gaon's coach with the weapons.

Shortly the coach arrived. The slings and slingshots were given to the two men and they were told to face back-to-back, wait for the signal, take 10 paces, turn and stretch their sling and let the slingshot go.

The Gaon gave the Lubliner a small sling knowing that the stretch would break the sling and the shot would not be propelled. On the other side, the Gaon gave the weaker man such a heavy slingshot that he could not stretch the sling. When both wagon-masters realized the folly of the situation they ran towards each other and embraced.

Today, if any of *Der Bay's* readers visit the site of the Chelm-Lublin duel, they will find that this two-lane highway has been paved. There is an inn and a plaque with the date and names of the combatants. Please write us of your visit there.