

# Mayn Shtetele Chelm

by Philip Fishl Kutner

What if there would not have been the khurbn, shoah, Holocaust?

What if there would not have been monsters in daytshland overrunning, decimating, torturing, and cremating?

What if my people were allowed to live their normal, anti-semitic, corralled, highly taxed, quota-ridden lives?

What if He wrote a different history?

Last night I dreamed of Mayn Shtetele Chelm—and all of the other shtetelekh no longer there. Neither Mom nor Pop came from Chelm or even Belz—but from towns much like Chelm or Belz.

While we were fortunate that mom and pop came to America before the Great Depression, we boys never saw our real shtetele.

What if everything had been different, would my shtetele have a telephone in each shtibele?

Would each heym have a garadzh?

Would the older teenage boys and girls on shabes be strolling and speaking our mame-loshn?

When one is confronted with the harsh, stark and naked truth of the event that makes the many older Jewish misfortunes look like a speck in the great Sahara Desert—how can one play the game of, *What If?*

But just suppose one could what if—*What If?*

Only a Dreamer can what if, but if this storyteller closed his eyes and just imagined a *What If* scene in Mayn Shtetele Khelm. What would life be like for our Sholom Aleichem's Tevye and his mishpokhe in 2005?

**Tekhterl, nem mayn hant un lomir geyn shpatsirn in mayn dreml in dem hayntik—mayn shtetele khelm.**

All of the narishe kinder and all of their narishe eltern un zeyde-bobe are busy with narishkaytn—that is, their daily tasks in their homes, in zeyere kromen, baym taykh in shul un in der Chelmer Yeshiva. Yes the Gaon of Chelm is the principal of the Chelmer Yeshiva.

What is going on in the Yeshiva today? Why did the Gaon call a lererins meeting? Why was there such a buzz at lunch in the Yeshiva Kafeteria? Why were the kustodians kleaning and skrubbing to have the Chelm Yeshiva look spotless like a shpitol?

Didn't you hear the news? It was in the Khelmer Freiheit. It was on the radio station WNAR. Yes, Fishl is coming to town. Imagine all the way from Amerike—no, not Amerike—Kelifornye.

What would happen if the barimter redaktor Fishl fun *Der Bay* asked a question of a Chelmer Yeshive bokherin and she could not answer the question correctly?

You see, in modern day Chelm things have changed. It is not like the olden days. We are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yes the Gaon of Chelm is a froy, a mame mit ire eygene kinderlekh.

Let us not waste time. Let us go down to the train station and meet Fishl as his train pulls into the station and all of the children are carrying their fons and the blare of the shofars from the Chelm Yeshiva Orchestra plays, Mayn Shtetele Chelm.

As Fishl steps off the train, he trips and falls. He was so surprised that, for a moment, he did not see the pothole. It was not what Fishl expected. When he awoke, he was in the shpitol and a khelmer krankshvester was taking care of him.

It was the headlines in the Khelmer Freiheit. It was on the radio station WNAR. Luckily it was not a major health problem—just a concussion.

Soon Fishl left the khelmer shpitol and toured the Yeshiva. All of the meydelekh were called to the auditorium for an assembly, and Fishl selected several from the audience for questioning. Every question Fishl asked was answered perfectly.

The next morning the barimter redator Fishl fun *Der Bay* would leave and write glowing reports about the Chelmer Yeshiva.

Our story is not over, for everyone still could not get over the embarrassment of having Fishl fall because of the nasty pothole at the train station.

After much deliberation di kluge khelme gaon came up with a solution. "The reason Fishl fell was because there was a pothole. But if there was a tepl-lokh, there would not have been a problem—and Fishl would not have fallen."

If you visit Chelm today, you will find at the site of the still existing pothole at the train station a large granite monument inscribed with—Vu der barimter redaktor, Fishl fun *Der Bay*, hot gefaln.

