

MOYSHE LEVIN

## *A Memorial by the River*<sup>3</sup>

The Vilenke flows next to Vilna's Old Town. It's a narrow, torrential little river. On its way to town, it passes through flowery meadows, muddy hillocks, and blue-hued forests, before its fresh water and the city's quiet, decrepit streets mingle side by side.

There is a memorial on an empty lot next to the river that all of Vilna's inhabitants, Jews, Poles, Lithuanians and Karaites, hold in high esteem. They gaze warmly up at the monument, which is composed of several fine stones and is adorned with flowers.

But whom does it honour?

Not a celebrity or some other distinguished personality. Rather, the monument honours a child: the twelve-year-old Polish boy Mieczysław Dordzik. The children of Vilna love this monument more than anyone else. It was erected, after all, for one of their own! And how many monuments are there in the world honouring just children?

The children of Vilna play around the monument, just as they do elsewhere in town. They sing and they dance in order to brighten the mood of the stone-cold monument. And whenever a group of friends from out of town comes for a visit, the children of Vilna press them:



WILNO. Pomnik Mieczysława Dordzika.

The memorial to Mieczysław Dordzik by the Vilenke River. Postcard, Wilno, 1936-1939.

3 Moyshe Levin, *A denkmol baym taykhl*, Warsaw: Kinderfraynd, 1937.

‘Have you seen the monument by the river?’

‘What monument?’

‘The monument in honour of Mieczysław Dordzik! Come, we must show you!’

And they proudly bring their guests to the spot next to Sophianikes (as the street is called), and point excitedly as they approach. When they arrive, they caress the monument as one might a most precious possession.

It all took place on 23 April 1931.

Winter was nearing its end. Spring pursued winter with its warm, light breezes, refreshing in the sun overhead. The sky shone between small, luminous, dove-like clouds. Like a responsible landlady, spring initiated its seasonal cleaning by sending beams of light down to Earth. Fragrant drizzle filled the evenings. It’s no wonder the snow got the message that it was finally time to go. Winter had proven to be harsh. There was still a mountain of snow outside.

First, the snow melted from the riverbanks. The water broke into the neighbouring woods, awakening the snows that were still dormant in the cool shade of the tall evergreen trees. Then the snowmelt expanded to nearby fields. Hundreds and then thousands of little streams and brooks flowed in the direction of the river. The birds, with a celebratory chirp, flew overhead, sniffing out nature’s pleasing bounty. All the while, they looked for a new treat to peck: a worm, a crust of bread, a rotten nut, or even a woodchip with which they could build a nest.

And there in the distance was the Vilenke River.

Over time, the Vilenke had prepared itself to welcome spring’s bounty.

One night, when the ice broke away, it dragged stones down the mountain, washing away muddy earth, and dispersed it all into the riverbed. Then the flow tore the stones from the sediment and built a group of ten eddies: let them rest comfortably there! The river was ready for its seasonal visitor, the excess water from the snowmelt.

Two metres of melted snow flowed into the river. Gathering momentum, its waves started to slap at the riverbanks like fluttering wings. Unconcerned, the gruff Vilenke inquired:

‘So, are you done for the season?’

The spring floods answered: ‘We’ll be bringing just a bit more snowmelt from the fields.’

More waters gushed in the next day, adding another three metres to the river, until it began to creep beyond its bed.

‘What’s happening!’ cried the Vilenke, its waves rustling angrily. ‘Isn’t this enough water?!’

The floodwaters responded again: ‘We have to gather a little more snow from the forest. Dear rivulet, you cannot imagine the severity of this past winter. Piles of snow fell upon us, and now its melt pursues us as if driven by a whip!’

The waters flowed another day, and the river finally lost patience! It frothed and boiled into a true ocean.

‘Hey!’ the river yelled to the floodwaters. ‘I’m already beyond capacity! Flow to the devil and be done with it!’

The narrow stream overflowed its banks.

Just beyond the tallest bank of the river was a row of small wooden houses in the poorest quarter of Vilna. Poor folk lived in their dark, smoky rooms: market traders, coachmen, and the jobless. The narrow streets and courtyards were dirty, with cracked sidewalks and missing cobblestones. Hungry cats meowed, rummaging in mounds of garbage that were scattered throughout. The only pleasure in this neighbourhood was the river. It brought the cheerless area to life, and brought them greetings from sunnier places, from forests, from mountains, and from meadows.

Of course, the children loved the little river like a dear friend. During the summer months, water rose over their knees in the shallow river. On hot days, they paddled about as if in a little boat while fish swam by. They let loose paper boats, and bet on whose boat would overtake the other, or even make it all the way to the Viliye, the city’s main river.

But, to understand the river during summertime was not to understand the true nature of the river in times of flood.

Seven-year-old Khatskele sat by the window. The window was still fully ‘dressed’, even though winter was coming to an end. The putty with which Khatskele’s mother had glued shut a crack last winter was hard and firm. The panes were small, and covered with soot from a broken stove that smoked the entire year. Nobody was home. Khatskele’s mother was at the market with her little basket

of oranges, and she wouldn't be home any time soon. Khatskele crawled on to the windowsill, and wiped a pane with his sleeve to gaze upon his beloved river. He was proud! What a majestic river, what rushing waters! The whole sky could take in its reflection in its waters. He wanted to go out on the water in a big ship that could reach a place called America, which his mother was in the habit of telling him about.

A weeping willow floated by lengthwise, its white roots up in the air. Several wooden beams followed, along with a washtub and a straw roof. The current carried them along in an enormous rush. Khatskele heard some laughing from outside, and saw a dog on a big beam trying to swim upstream. It scrambled with its paws, and frequently lost its balance. The dog wanted to jump to the bank, but it was too frightened, so it barked at the world.

Part of a village upstream was swept away by the raging waters, which were now carrying pieces of homes downriver.

Outside, by the river, a curious crowd assembled. The poor neighbourhood residents ran around helplessly and despondently. Then a deafening sound made it known that two more houses were being pulled into the stream. The crowd was overcome with fear.

'Quickly!' someone cried. 'Every second is precious!'

Cries and laments came from the poor neighbourhood residents who had formed into a crowd. They grabbed their belongings from their homes, and gathered on a square at a distance from the flooding river.

Twelve-year-old Mieczysław Dordzik stood on the edge of the river. His bright, kind eyes looked out at the raging stream from across the river. Having surveyed the height of the water, he understood that bathing here now would not be the pleasure it was during the summer. He was a good swimmer, proficient at the front crawl, which came to him as naturally as football, but he would much rather kick a ball around than go for a swim in this mess. He turned around and caught sight of a person in the street carrying furniture from a house. He was reminded of his own home: the floods had not yet arrived at his neighborhood, but the landlady had just evicted him and his parents. He took pity on these residents beside the river whom he had seen scurrying with their furniture.

Mietek approached the river, and looked for a long stick. He tried to pull a small piece of wood from the river, which floated past him, ownerless.

Meanwhile, Khatskele was bored of sitting by the window. The commotion on the streets told him that something unusual was happening. He feared that all the children in the city were out having fun, and that they would tease him, like one might make fun of a heavy sleeper, if he missed out. He told himself he needed to hurry. But what is a child to do if his mother has pronounced that he must stay home, and locked the door from the outside? He crawled down from the windowsill, took the poker from the kitchen, ran to the door, and tried to prise it open. The latch stopped him in his tracks, and the door would not open further. He started to cry. A passer-by overheard him, and discovered little Khatskele locked behind the door.

‘Why are you crying, little boy?’

‘I want to get out,’ pleaded Khatskele, as he gazed out at the street.

‘And where do you want to go?’

‘To the river ...’

‘You mustn’t!’ the man said, and tried to close the door on Khatskele. But the child had already managed to squeeze through and, at last, he was finally free, like the river! He ran towards it, running carefree through empty fields to the bushes behind them by the riverbank. This was his favourite summertime spot, where he swam in the little river, and caught fish in a bucket. He would meet up with his friends here, and everyone would see him.

Old Dvoyre hastened away from the market with her baskets of oranges. She had sold just a few, and the money would barely suffice to make a midday meal for Khatskele. But there would be no lunch break today. Like all residents of Sophianikes, she thought of the floodwaters lurking around the corner. Although her little house was higher up the road, and the waters were still far from it, word on the street was that there was still a mountain of snow in the fields, and that if it happened to rain overnight, they would have to leave at a moment’s notice. They prepared to move, but the landlord would not let his tenants out of the courtyard before they had paid their rent. Dvoyre ran, her heart beating like a hammer, all the way home.

‘Damn! The door is open and nobody is home!’

‘Khatskele!’ she called out.

Only the faint noise of the gushing river answered her. She understood that the little brat had been unable to sit patiently inside, and escaped! She

had dreams for his studies and a long life, so she rushed outside and called desperately after him.

‘Khatskele!’

There was no answer from the assembled crowd. Her mother’s heart cried out sorrowfully. How would she find him?

Khatskele walked among the bushes where the water was already overflowing its banks. He attempted to crawl on to the hill next to the river. He wanted to sit himself down in a place from where he could survey the scene, and from where everyone would see him too. Only then did he notice that the earth under his feet was soft. He slipped off and ...

The crowd on the street let out a cry, pointing at the hill.

‘What happened?’ the voices cried.

Others offered a panicked response: ‘A child has fallen into the river!’

‘Help! Khatskele!’ Dvoyre shouted from behind the crowd. She shoved at them, and stood by the shore. Between the white waves, she saw a red spot and a deep blue spot bobbing in and out of the waters. Khatskele’s little coat was red, and his shirt was dark blue.

‘Help!’ Dvoyre called out. ‘That’s my son! Save him!’

Only one person rose from the crowd, twelve-year-old Mieczysław Dordzik. He threw off his jacket and his hat, tossing both carelessly to the ground. He was already in the river before the crowd managed to turn around. He swam quickly and decisively towards the spot where the little boy was beginning to disappear under the water. The waves rushed around him from all sides, like a flock of birds. Mietek parted them and swam quickly. On the shoreline, terrified women hid their eyes with their hands.

The crowd called out to Mietek: ‘Swim back! You can’t rescue him!’

‘Call the Fire Department! The police!’

‘Don’t try to be a hero! Swim back!’

But Mietek, with little hands like oars, drove away the water, dove, and looked for the drowning child under the waves. It seemed as though he had miraculously taken control of the flow, when suddenly he was imprisoned by an eddy. He could not move from his place. He was stuck. He could barely gather a breath. The water foamed around him, boiled, and turned into a whirlpool. Mietek tried to rip himself free only once, like a sick bird, and then disappeared under the water, in the same place where Khatskele had gone under.

So goes the story of the memorial by the river. The municipal government erected the monument, to which all residents of the city donated wholeheartedly. Religious differences had no effect on their generosity.

These days, the river holds its breath for a moment whenever it flows past the monument. It is embarrassed of the sin it committed in the spring of 1931. It quietly splashes its clear waters on the monument so that nobody should see. From time to time, a silver fish leaps out from under the waves, its scales shimmering for a moment in the air, and, at the height of its arc, it looks straight at the monument with its golden eyes.

*Translated by* JUSTIN CAMMY  
(with the collaboration of TEDDY SCHNEIDER)

## Glossary

*Savich Hospital*: a municipal hospital located on Bakszta Street (Bokšto gatvė). Prostitutes would have been forcibly taken there for tests in order to get a certificate of clean health.

*Durkhhoyf* (literally Through-Yard or Passageway): one of the most wretched locales in the traditional Jewish quarter of Vilna, the centre of its trade in old clothes. Fruit and vegetable peddlers, most of them impoverished old women, also worked in its hovels and gutters. One entered the Durkhhoyf from either Jewish Street or Butchers Street, two sides of the triangle marking the perimeters of the 17th-century Jewish ghetto.

*Endek* (also *Endecja*): a Polish nationalist party responsible for inciting anti-Jewish feelings and demonstrations, boycotts of Jewish businesses, and attacks against Jewish property and persons.