

Markish and I had, of course, attended Zhenya's funeral and been terribly shaken by the extent of Mikhoels's grief. During the cremation ceremony Mikhoels, with a gesture only he would be capable of, drew up the convulsively clutching fingers of his right hand to his tightly clenched lips. Somehow, it was more horrible than a wail would have been, or the sight of the tears of a weeping man. The scene remained engraved in my memory as the ultimate expression of the pain and suffering of the human soul.

Some time later, at the premiere of Mikhoel's *King Lear*, there on the stage was the same poignant expression of grief that had so affected Markish and me at Zhenya's funeral—only this time it was not his wife's body lying before Mikhoels, but the body of Cordelia lying before her father, Lear. I looked at Markish. He nodded sadly; he too had recognized the scene. I could see his consternation over this transposition and the trouble it caused in his soul. Poets and actors—even great actors—are probably fashioned out of different material. . . . Be that as it may, Mikhoels's portrayal of Lear created a sensation. The critics hailed him as the "best Lear of the century." And this was due in no small measure to the Cordelia death scene.

The relationship that existed between these two giants of Russian Jewry is characterized by an incident that took place at the beginning of 1939. At *Pravda's* request, Markish had written an antifascist article for the paper and sent it off to the editors. The morning of the day before it was to appear, the telephone rang. As it was the time of day when Markish was always at work and would not take calls, I took the receiver off the hook and immediately heard the excited voice of Mikhoels.

"Where's Markish?"

Learning that it was the "old man," Markish took the call.

Ten minutes later, he came out of his study. "I'm off to the theater," he said. "The old man wants to see me. . . . In an hour and a half, he has to deliver a speech at a meeting and he needs my help."

An hour and a half later, Markish telephoned.

"Turn on the radio; the old man's going to speak now."

I turned it on. To my astonishment, Mikhoels was reading Markish's *Pravda* article. He hadn't yet finished when the phone rang again. Not surprisingly, *Pravda* was calling.

"Where's Markish? What has he done? Why, Mikhoels has been reading Markish's article at the meeting, and it's already been printed in the paper! The very same article!"

The article was, indeed, a remarkable one, and it was carried in the world press under Mikhoels's signature.

Later, when I told Markish about the phone call from *Pravda*, he took it in stride. "That's a lot of nonsense," he said smiling mischievously. "You heard yourself what a marvelous job the old man did!"

That evening Mikhoels was playing *Lear*. We never missed a performance if we were in Moscow, but this time we went more to see Mikhoels backstage.

Mikhoels was still on stage when we got to his dressing room—we could hear Lear's soliloquy over the theater's loudspeaker system. Finally, the door opened and he rushed toward us, pointing to a stack of telegrams on the table.

"Just take a look! They're all congratulations on my speech today! It's so awkward. I don't know what to do."

Markish was beaming; he was genuinely happy about having helped him out.

Relations between Markish and Mikhoels were not, however, always so cordial. There was much in the character of the "old man" that rubbed Markish the wrong way. They had vehement arguments and would all but throw chairs at each other. They both had hot tempers and each one of them felt, of course, that only he was in the right. Markish was not a particularly tolerant man, and since he would be the last to make any concessions, their quarrels would go on a long time.

One of Markish's most serious run-ins with Mikhoels occurred during the war, in Tashkent, where the Yiddish Theater had been evacuated. Mikhoels

was so occupied with public affairs that rehearsals often took place in his absence. The theater was then rehearsing Markish's play *An Eye for an Eye*. Without the "old man's" firm hand, the actors grew increasingly undisciplined and rehearsals were slipshod affairs; if the actors fumbled Markish's text, they simply improvised. I had written Markish about the situation. He was then serving in the Black Sea fleet, but during one of his missions, Markish succeeded in altering his itinerary and showed up unexpectedly in Tashkent for the dress rehearsal of *An Eye for an Eye*, one day before the premiere.

Markish came away depressed.

"I had a run-in with the old man," he said. "I am responsible for what I write and I won't have anybody tinkering with my text!"

I learned afterward that Markish had raked Mikhoels over the coals and refused to hear any explanations. The next day he boycotted the premiere and left for the front without even saying good-bye to Mikhoels. Their quarrel was to last for a long time. Anastasya Pototskaya (whom Mikhoels married after the death of Zhenya Levitas) and I tried as best we could to patch things up, but without success. It was not until the end of the war that our husbands put aside their differences.