

Dankere

Dankere is a town in Latvia located between Riga and Dvinsk on the border of three provinces -- Vitebsk, Livland [Livonia], and, across the river, Courland. It was not without truth when it was said that when a cock crowed in Dankere it was heard in three provinces. Dankere had three names: Glazmanka, in Russian; Trentelberg, in German; Dankere, in Yiddish. Since we were so close to Courland and Livland our language was "Germanized" [considered unacceptable as a cultivated Yiddish]. Although our poverty was no less than that in other Lithuanian towns, our way of life was different. I would characterize it as a polished poverty, as, for instance, the manner in which we were wont to tidy up the house when expecting a doctor to come. The language, in addition to Yiddish, was Lithuanian and also a little German. Relations between Jew and gentile were friendly. We did not experience any anti-Semitism, perhaps also because the Lithuanian was not fanatically religious. When the peddlers would make their round to the outlying villages, the peasants welcomed them with open arms and gave them food and lodging.

Dankere was not outstanding for its great scholars or distinguished personalities as there were in other towns of Lithuania and Poland. There was a Talmud Torah supported by the city, attended by the poorest children of the town. In one large room, at a long table there sat many children, many of them in tattered clothes, hungry and barefoot, all taught by one *melamed*. Small wonder that the pupils who learned at the Talmud Torah left as ignorant persons who could hardly read Hebrew. There was no yeshiva in Dankere. In the houses of study, however there were yeshiva students, stemming mostly from Lithuania, who boarded at various homes and studied by themselves.

As in other places, we, too, had a "fire brigade" which, truth to tell, had little to do with fires, nor was it much of a brigade. In the market place, near the church, there was a hut that looked like a burial chapel, near which

stood a few water-barrels on wheels, a couple of hoses and a few ladders. Due to the fact that a fire in Dankere was a rarity, the equipment just stood there. If sometimes there was a fire, everybody suddenly became a fire fighter. True, later on the "fire brigade" turned into a respectable modern group donning regulation cockades and brass buttons.

Class played a great role in Dankere. For instance, it was unheard of for a daughter of rich parents to be seen socializing with a son of a craftsman, or vice-versa; or for a rich man to chat with someone not his equal. Consistent segregation reigned. It is worthy of note that in the first few years of the Zionist movement in Dankere the membership there did not include a single laborer or a youth of the town's poorer class. The few Zionists were well-to-do young people who considered it demeaning to mix with the tramps.

This wall of class distinction lasted till the beginning of the century, when signs of the coming revolution were felt and brought about a change in the life of the Jews in Dankere.

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Life was hard, very hard in Dankere. The very rich man, as everywhere, enjoyed all good things. The middle-class somehow managed to survive. The great mass of Jews struggled to eke out enough for daily sustenance and never had enough for the Sabbath or for a holiday. It often seemed to me that the piety in the town was a result of the poverty; because the poorer the Jew, the more religious he was. It was as though the synagogue and study house were places of refuge, havens where they could for a short while forget the need and oppression in their lives. And when I read about the idyllic portrayals of shtetl life, it evokes from me a bitter laugh; this idyll where people went around half starved, where need and poverty spewed frugality from hearth and home, and all of life was hard and gray. To call such a life idyllic is nothing but bitter mockery.

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