

Shalom Aleichem's *Mottel, the Cantor's Son* said "Hurrah, I'm an orphan", but experience proves otherwise: With the death of my father, a heavy burden fell on my older brothers who were still at home. The eldest had to go to teach in a remote Arab village, living in terrible isolation and difficult conditions in order to earn some money to support the family. He remembered that experience till his dying day. The second oldest had to discontinue his University studies. This was the beginning of a period of tension at home: less joy, more worry, and more effort on my part, a child of seven, not to cause unnecessary expenses. This concern accompanied the whole of my childhood: my trousers must not wear out, my eyeglasses must not break so that they will not have to buy me new clothes. The situation did not improve in Israel either. We lived with my brother Tuvia in Tel Aviv, where I grew up. Our oldest brother was far away, in Mexico. The oldest son has a natural status with its concomitant rights and duties which nobody questions, but once he is not there and the birthright passes to another, tensions arise.

I was never hit or slapped by my parents. Perhaps, as the child of their old age I was spoiled more than usual. On the other hand, there was an accepted signal between my mother and myself – when I did not behave properly (if, for example, I put out my hand to take a chocolate without first saying "No thank-you, I don't want any") I would receive a hidden pinch from her. It was agreed that this was between the two of us, no outsider must ever know. This was part of the educational creed, "Spare the pinch, spoil the child". The pinch was a sort of signal that I had stepped over the limit; Mother would carry on talking with her friends as though nothing had happened, while I would swallow the pain and continue with my own affairs as if nothing had occurred.

Mother was the intellectual of the family, despite her interrupted schooling. She went to school until the age of fifteen, a not inconsiderable period for a girl at the turn of the century. After this she continued studying alone. She read and wrote a great deal. She loved writing letters and I have a few of these still. She wrote in French of course. In our circles they would speak Arabic, write French and pray in Hebrew. They also 'philosophized' in Hebrew. Their sayings and mottos were basically Hebrew, spiced with Arabic or Ladino. Mother read until her last days, using a magnifying glass. She always followed what was happening in the world. She read books and newspapers, and argued excitedly on every question and event. Stories held a special place in her world. I well remember her telling the stories but do not recall the stories themselves. When she visited me at the Kibbutz and told her tales, I was so involved in my own world of the present and future, in improving the flock of sheep, in the social and cultural problems of the Kibbutz, that I always said "Yes, yes, I hear you" but never actually listened to what she was saying. Today this makes me weep.

My parents were married through a *Shadchan* (professional matchmaker), as was my sister Julia who was married in Aleppo. My other sister, Adina, married in Israel, without a *Shadchan*. She met her husband at the youth movement in Tel Aviv. As an alert child, I was to an extent involved in the matchmaking process of my older sister, and I have even described this in one of my stories. I listened carefully to everything the Matchmaker said, and took part in the family discussions. It was exciting, and instructive.

Matchmaking is an institution endowed with enormous wisdom. I began thinking about this wisdom very much later, after having passed through the various stages of rebellion and estrangement. Only once I grew up and achieved a certain degree of maturity did I begin to understand. I do not recommend readopting the method but it is important to understand that it was not the product of stupidity or backwardness.

