Siegfried Kapper

# Tales of the Prague Ghetto

Translated by Jordan Finkin

**Tales of the Prague Ghetto**

**Siegfried Kapper**

---

Translated from the German by Jordan Finkin
Afterword by Jindřich Toman

Translated from Siegfried Kapper, *Prager Ghettosagen*, Prag: Jakob B. Brandeis, 1896 (Jüdische Universal-Bibliothek, 38)

Published by Charles University, Karolinum Press
Ovocný trh 5/560, Prague 1, Czech Republic
Cover and graphic design by Zdeněk Ziegler
Cover illustration from L. Jeřábek, *Der alte Prager Judenfriedhof*, Prague 1903
Typesetting by Karolinum Press
First English edition

Cataloging-in Publication Data is available from the National Library of the Czech Republic



ISBN 978-80-246-4946-7 (pdf)
ISBN 978-80-246-4947-4 (epub)
ISBN 978-80-246-4948-1 (mobi)
ISBN 978-80-246-4945-0 (pbk)

Charles University
Karolinum Press

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Siegfried (Salomon) Kapper** (1821–1879) was a Czech-Jewish writer, scholar, and folklorist. He earned his medical degree in Vienna in 1847 and took part in the revolutionary movements of 1848 in that city, being elected to the Austrian parliament. That year he published a collection of poetry (*Befreite Lieder*), giving voice to that revolutionary spirit. While a student, he advocated strongly for Jewish emancipation and was sympathetic to Czech national aspirations. He notably published poetry in Czech (*České Listy*) as well as German, and he translated Bohemian and Moravian folksongs into German.

Kapper traveled through Central and Eastern Europe, developing an interest in the local cultures. He practiced medicine in several Bohemian towns before settling in Prague in 1867. There he became a civic and cultural figure, serving on various committees and giving lectures on literature and on Slavic culture. He translated collections of Serbian and other Balkan folklore, and penned popular travelogs of his journeys through Southeastern Europe.

Kapper's interest in Jewish matters never waned. The stories he wrote about the Jews of Prague (collected posthumously as *Prager Ghettosagen*) display both his intimate connection to Jewish themes and his intense interest in folkloristics. As a testament to the significance of his impact on Czech Jewish life, in 1920 the prominent association of Czech Jewish academics—Spolek Českých Akademiků Židů (Society of Czech Academic Jews)—changed its name to Akademický Spolek Kapper (Kapper Academic Society), and a year later published a collection of his writings.

Kapper died of tuberculosis in Pisa in 1879.

## GENENDA: FROM PRAGUE GHETTO'S OLDEN DAYS

The moon emerged from the thick clouds right above Braník's monstrous limestone outcrops, scattering its magical light in a thousand glittering stars over the gently flowing waves of the Moldau. A profound silence lay over the waters and the surrounding landscape, broken only by the monotonous, rhythmic stroking of oars.

A skiff had set off from the shore by Braník and was gliding slowly and peacefully down the wide river.

The boy at the oars sang a pious hymn in long-held notes. Zerah stared at the floor of the skiff in front of him, lost in thought, as Golda leaned against the side of the little craft. She gazed down into the dark, mysterious depths as she toyed with a willow twig in the waves as if trying to fish those fleeting, glimmering little stars out of the water—stars which seemed to emerge from the deep to dance their moonlit roundelay on the softly rippling waves.

"My child, I promised to tell you the story of Genenda!" old Zerah broke the silence. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes! do tell it, Grandfather," Golda replied, pulling the willow twig out of the water and turning to face her grandfather.

"Come then, my child," he continued, urging the girl closer to him. "Come, sit on the bottom of the boat, over here, by me. It's not safe to sit near the edge, you might get dizzy. Good. Now I can start!"

Golda sat down on the floor of the boat, beside her grandfather, and lay her black locks on his knee, watching him with her large, dark eyes and listening attentively with expectant anticipation.

Zerah began: In the year 1040, the banks of this river were still hemmed with reeds from time immemorial, and dark, ancient forests stretched off over mountains

and plains on either side. There was still little arable land and few fertile pastures, and there were neither villages nor farms to be seen scattered through the valleys to the right and left as they are today. Yet even then the proud Vyšehrad[1] loomed over those sharp rocks. Now you can only see the decaying walls and half-crumbled towers where princes once sat with their advisors deliberating over the welfare of the people, passing judgment on what was right and what was wrong. Even then our forefathers dwelt here in this land, with their houses and communities, and made their living honestly by the fruits of their labor according to the laws of the Book. They were still few in number and they did not yet live all together in their own quarter of the city, segregated from the other faith, separated by walls and gates. In the shelter of the prince's castle, at the foot of the Vyšehrad stood their few houses made of unbaked bricks and roofed with straw, relying on one another in pious community, pleasing to God.

In one of these houses, closer to the shore than the rest, lived Rabbi Baruch, known as the Chazan, or Cantor.[2] God had blessed him above so many others with the gift of song, and his understanding of string music exceeded anyone else at that time. Both became a rich source of profit for him. The whole week long he would wander the country with his songsters and his fiddle, enlivening the festivities of the noblemen in their castles and the burghers in their marketplaces. They paid him handsomely, for wherever he went good cheer followed, and wherever he brandished his bow hearts did not fail to rejoice.

However, on Friday evenings and on the Sabbath and holidays he stood before the Holy Ark, his singers at his side. He prayed with them out of a large Siddur,[3] singing Psalms, chanting the weekly Torah portion, and leading the congregation in their prayers. When the service came to an end, he returned with his singers to his house by the shore

to spend his Sabbath rest in quiet domesticity, to pray from God's word, to nourish his soul and strengthen it for the week's worldly pursuits.

In the doorway Genenda would be waiting for him, the last of his darling children; the others, two sons and two daughters, had all been laid to rest a year ago. And shortly thereafter he had gone to bury their mother as well. Genenda was the only one left to him. She went out to meet him and greeted him with all her childlike sweetness, "Good Sabbath!" He kissed her, lay his hands on her head, and recited the blessing of the four Matriarchs over her. He then went inside where the table was spread with wine and cakes, all prepared for him and his singers. On the reading stand in the window nook his Talmud lay open so he could continue reading without having to leaf through to find the place he had stopped the previous Sabbath. All this Genenda had done to please her father. She would spend the whole day with him; for him she was the soul of the Sabbath.

He was content and lived happily like few other Jews. For he had achieved what a man requires to be happy: a sufficient living and a person who loves him and who deserves to be loved, his child.

One Sabbath—the Sabbath before Purim—shortly before the time for Minchah,[4] a stranger opened the door of his house.

Rabbi Baruch rose respectfully from his chair as the young man had very refined features, an elegant bearing, and looked much like the young nobility of the country. Rabbi Baruch noticed, however, that before entering the house this stranger touched the mezuzah,[5] his lips moving faintly as if he were praying. He then approached the Rabbi cheerfully. Rabbi Baruch recognized a son of Israel and extended his hand in welcome, "Is it well with you?"

The stranger answered, "Very well!"