

“Holy Reb Velvele, the Brave  
Wolf from Zbaraz” by Jiří  
Mordechai Langer, 1937

*Translated from Czech by Denisa Glacova*



## Translator's Introduction

The life of Jiří Mordechai Langer<sup>1</sup> (1894–1943) was impacted by two crucial journeys. In 1913, when he was only nineteen years old, Langer left his family in Prague and set out to Belz in Eastern Galicia to get a taste of the Hasidic life. In Belz, he changed into a different person—he turned into a Hasid. As the Hasidic influence in the Prague Jewish community was minimal until World War I (1914–18),<sup>2</sup> Langer has often been viewed as an eccentric figure, “the Dreamer of the Ghetto”<sup>3</sup> or “an enormous cockroach” from *The Metamorphosis* by his good friend Kafka.<sup>4</sup>

In 1939, Langer, who sympathized with the Zionist ideology, escaped the threat of Nazism to Mandate Palestine. It took him approximately six months to reach his final destination. He spent a freezing winter on board a ship in the waters of the frozen Danube River. As most of Langer's luggage was occupied by hundreds of books—his most precious possessions—he was not prepared for such harsh conditions. The voyage ruined his already weakened health, and he died in Tel Aviv a few years later.

Both these journeys are closely connected to the Hasidic tale “Holy Reb Velvele, the Brave Wolf from Zbaraz,” which was originally published in *Kalendář česko-židovský* (Czech-Jewish calendar) in Prague in 1937–38. The work reflects one Langer's greatest sources of inspiration—Hasidism—born from his stay among the Belz Hasidim. His interest in Hasidism is evident in the diverse genres that make up his oeuvre, including poetry, folk literature, and essays that

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<sup>1</sup> Langer used many names for his writing, including his Czech name, Jiří; his German name, Georg(o); his Hebrew name, Mordechai Dov; and various combinations of these.

<sup>2</sup> “The first documented appearance of Hasidism in Bohemia occurs after 1914, when refugees from Galicia—among them the entourage of the Belzer Rebbe—streamed into the country.” See Kieval, *Languages of Community*, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Langer, “My Brother Jiří,” xiv. Up until now, one of the main sources on Langer's life is a short memoir written by his older brother František Langer. The text “Můj bratr Jiří” was first published in Czech in 1959 as a foreword to Jiří's book *Devět bran: Chasidů tajemství*; in 1963, it was also included in František's book *Byli a bylo*.

<sup>4</sup> Langer, “Můj bratr Jiří,” xvii.

employ Freudian psychoanalysis. He is especially known for his collection of Hasidic tales *Devět bran: Chasidů tajemství* (Czech: Nine gates: Hasidic mysteries; Prague, 1937); his poetry with homoerotic and Kabbalistic motifs *Piyutim ve-shirei yedidut* (Hebrew: Odes and poems of friendship/love; Prague, 1929) and *Me'at tsori* (Hebrew: A little balm; Tel Aviv, 1943); and his psychoanalytic study *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (German: The eroticism of Kabbalah; Prague, 1923).

The story about holy Reb Velvele was supposed to serve as a teaser for Langer's second book of Hasidic tales. Unfortunately, as a result of his escape to Palestine and deteriorating health, his Czech readers have never been able to set out on another journey with Langer among his Hasidim—his second book of Hasidic tales was never published.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this excerpt has remained a solitary proof of Langer's unfulfilled intention to immerse his Czech readers anew in the Hasidic world.

Before you have a chance to read about the deeds of the holy Reb Velvele, let me just mention that the English translation of the text posed several challenges. I aimed to maintain Langer's lively and kind writing, full of diminutives that are typical for the Czech language, his style of an illusionary *skaz*, a narrative mode imitating a spontaneous talk,<sup>6</sup> and his rhymed prose in the second half of the tale. My gratitude goes to Kelsie Ehalt, who was very helpful in providing feedback and ideas for rhymes included in my translation.

## Works Cited

- Kieval, Hillel J. *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Langer, František. *Byli a bylo*. Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1963.
- . "Můj bratr Jiří." In *Devět bran: Chasidů tajemství*, by Jiří Langer. Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1959.

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<sup>5</sup> Langer published several additional Hasidic tales in Hebrew newspapers in Palestine, but he did not publish texts in Czech again.

<sup>6</sup> Langer's attempt to create an illusion of *skaz* is first analyzed by Ondřej Pavlík in "Anyone Can Be a Narrator."

- . “My Brother Jiří.” In *Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries*, by Jiří Langer, vii–xxxi. New York: David McKay, 1961.
- Pavlík, Ondřej. “Anyone Can Be a Narrator: Possibilities of Hasidic Storytelling in the Work of Jiří Mordechaj Langer.” *Slovo a Smysl: Časopis pro Mezioborová Studia* 19, no. 39 (2022): 95–106.



## “Holy Reb Velvele, the Brave Wolf from Zbarazh”

“A beautiful woman, a nice home, and nice clothes are brightening one’s mind.” It is written this way in our holy Talmud, so it certainly must be the truth of truths. But I do not know how they cherished all of this in Zbarazh, at holy Reb Velvele’s.

Their home, for example, did not abound with luxury. Perhaps, just a clock hung on the wall by the window. That was all. The entire pride of Reb Velvele’s house. In fact, a clock is not that much of a luxury. Everyone, almost everyone, has precisely the same in their dwelling. How could we know when it is time to pray or when our dear housewives should light the Shabbat candles on Friday afternoon if the clock would not tell us? No, even for us, although we’re just mere little Hasidim, a clock is not a luxury. They are of the same necessity in our life as is the prayer book or the four fringes on our *leib-tzidakel*—I mean, on our scapular. But we are all real Rothschilds compared to the holy Reb Velvele of Zbarazh. The clock was a pure treasure for him. So poor was he.

Once upon an evening, the holy Reb Velvele is sitting at home. He is sitting quietly. And the dear Hasidim are also sitting quietly. They don’t even peep, so as not to—God forbid—disturb the saint deep in contemplation. It is quiet, nice and quiet, in the tiny dim room; only the clock on the wall by the window is ticking and ticking. And in this evening’s atmosphere, a thief is walking in the street. He is marching briskly, not looking left or right. Indeed, it’s as if he doesn’t take an interest in anything today. Yet he still stops by the window of the holy Reb Velvele. He is standing here, not moving. He is probably also deep in contemplation. But as the dear thief stands here, lost in his contemplation, he can hear how inside, behind the open window, Velvele’s clock is ticking so nicely. He can’t hear anything else, nor can he see anything. Even those in the tiny room disappeared. The darkness engulfed them.

—*Aha*, he thinks, *no one’s home!*—

He tucks himself into the wall and reaches there. I mean, to the window. For he had a hankering for the clock that was ticking so nicely. But the thief’s trade is not easy. Even a thief must eat his bread by the sweat of his brow. And if, ad exemplum, our thief was

stretched on a rack, he couldn't get more stretched out than when he was reaching out to Velvele's clock that was ticking so nicely. He is stretching out to reach it, stretching out, nearly tearing his ligaments. The clock is almost within reach of his hand, but, no matter what, he cannot grasp it.

And the holy Reb Velvele sees everything, and his holy heart is filling with sorrow.

What did the holy Reb Velvele do?

The holy Reb Velvele got up soundlessly, crouched by the wall, and pushed the dear clock gently to the sinful hand. After which he turned back to the Hasidim and, under his breath, explained to them:

“So that the dear saint wouldn't have to struggle and toil so much outside!”

Saint?—Well, the thief who is already running away happily with the dear clock that was ticking so nicely. The holy Reb Velvele of Zbarazh called every person a “dear saint.” He also called the irredeemable sinners this, and he was so consistent that he even once said to an especially heartless scoundrel, “Dear saint, aren't you a great rascal!”

The holy Reb Velvele generally had some tough luck with thieves. His poor small house attracted their dark souls, as a lamp beckons mayflies in the evening. Yet the dear mayflies get their delicate wings burned by the lamp. But no thief has ever had his wings burned in the house of the holy Reb Velvele. Once, for example, the holy Reb Velvele came back home and saw that he had been burgled. The small cup with *tzimmes*—I mean with preserves—is gone. So the holy Reb Velvele started to chase the dear thieves and fortunately found them.

“Saints, hey, saints,” he was calling on them from afar, “when you eat the *tzimmes*, please, don't forget to say a blessing to our Lord God that he created such great things!”

It never crossed his mind, even in his dreams, that he could demand his own possession back from the thieves. He did not own anything anyway! Everything we have is from our God, and everything belongs to Him. This is why the holy Reb Velvele was also proclaiming out loud every evening, “If I own something—I am



relinquishing it now. May it be dirt by the road! It also doesn't belong to anyone, and everyone can pick up as much as their heart desires." Upon saying this, he began falling asleep peacefully. He knew that no one could take anything from him now. After all, he has not owned anything anyway; he relinquished everything. This is how dear wise Velvele took precautions against theft night after night.

Reb Velvele was one of five sons of the holy Reb Michel of Zlotshov. We call them the "Five Books of Moses." Such great saints they were, these holy brothers. Five books of Moses in the flesh!

Once, one of the brothers called on Velvele. Velvele was looking for odds and ends to treat his dear brother generously. But try to go on a wild goose chase without a goose! Yet, after all, dear Velvele sniffed out, with God's help, a chunk of bread somewhere; he set the table— and here he is already with a small cup of water to wash his brother's hands, since it is a great deed as is known to all. But this brother of Velvele's was also a saint, and a great one. And if Velvele served God through poverty, his brother would through *fortune*. The dear brother looks at the table and sees Velvele's salt cellar. Did I say salt cellar?—No, Velvele's salt cellar was not an ordinary one. He, the wealthy brother, had a beautiful salt cellar on his table at home, a peculiar one made from precious glass and incised. Hasidim came from far and near to look at it when someone brought it to him all the way from the distant Bohemian land. And on holidays, his table was adorned with a salt cellar made of pure crystal. But gazing at Velvele's salt cellar, his gems couldn't compare to it! It was striking, much more striking. Actually, it was not even a salt cellar. It was a shard. A broken wooden spoon without a handle. That was Velvele's salt cellar. A saltuary.

"What a great saint is this our Velvele," his brother is pondering quietly. "He lives in grinding poverty, yet he can still serve God so faithfully! Who am I compared to him? I am not even worthy to be the heel of his shoe . . ."

Velvele sees his brother, lost in thought, staring at his salt cellar, almost enviously. He didn't even notice that Velvele had been standing above him with a cup of water to wash his hands for half an hour. The dear brother is watching and watching Velvele's salt cellar; he cannot take his eyes off it.

Velvele quivered. And he says, “Dearest brother, please, take my salt cellar. Quickly, take it! I would be happy to give it to you . . . Just that you, for God’s sake, do not sin here against the tenth commandment: You shall not covet . . . anything that is your neighbor’s!”

The holy Reb Velvele called everyone “dear saint,” but once, actually, he did not. It was in Lviv. He had just arrived from Lublin and all of Lviv came to meet him to welcome him. Even the mayor of the holy community of Lviv and with him, of course, all of the Lviv notables. As the holy Reb Velvele was already so renowned back then. But the holy Reb Velvele didn’t quite acknowledge anyone; especially not the notables. Until he suddenly approached one of the community elders. He looked into the elder’s face and commenced:

—Once, there were two brothers. Wealthy and poor. The destitution of his brother the wealthy one couldn’t ignore, hence he advised him to get down to trading and gave him a thousand ducats. This brother promised him, but without a contract, that the initial sum he will return if the business doesn’t crash and burn. And indeed, as the true holy scholars say, everything is up to chance. It means that the stance of a rich man is looking down at a pauper, but tomorrow, the wheel will veer, toward a different direction one will be steered—and whoop! the rich will lose all his gear, and the poor man who was still down yesterday rises up today and shouts joyfully, as today he is the one who looks scornfully at the one who is down, and this is how it goes round and round. Oh gosh, so many turns in a day! But no, the world is not in disarray. For God, who created both the work and holy days, gave law and order to everything under the sun. Hence, you, whose faith of the heart grows stronger, do not despair! Let the whole world turn like a spinning wheel, always trust in God, the Lord of Lords, and heed the following words.

The affluent brother, though, as you, son, can probably guess, has since gone to seed and become moneyless. But the poor one was thriving now—and very curiously—the gold hidden in his chest was growing furiously. One time, the impoverished brother visited to ask and implore for his gelt. Yet their encounter did not go well. The upstart scowled at his brother and slammed the door—farewell. Thrown back on begging, the poor barely scratched a living, until he died withering without any care and a roof over his head. But

the rich got diabetes and dropped dead. So after they died, they approached the heavenly tribunal side by side. The heavenly judges decided justly. When they counted their deeds and weighed them carefully, they condemned and expelled the rich brusquely but let the poor go to paradise freely. The poor one in disgrace, but with his heart in the right place, started to claim that he cannot enter paradise without an aim, since peace he cannot gain without his beloved brother. (Here, one must mention the holy Reb Velvele, out of good manners, who is recounting this story, as well as one of the Lviv elders marveling at its glory.)

And now, hark, dear coreligionists, the verdict of the heavenly judges. May the brothers be as strangers reborn! The poor, begging again, remains an object of scorn, while the rich one will sit at home in his prime. But they'll have no idea at the same time that they already were on the earth. So wandering about after their rebirth, they didn't know the path out to redemption; they were not aware how to reach a debt exemption and just correction. One night, the rich's star of salvation appeared above the town. Today at midnight, drained from roaming around, a beggar knocked at his door, yet it did not cross his mind that the rich can be one of his kind. So unaware was the rich, who refused to give any bread to a man who was, near his house the next morning, dead.

And here is our elder of the community, who, with his own ears, has an opportunity to hear Reb Velvele's wise words. His calmness is gone as it begins to dawn on him and his face is deathly pale as he recalls eerie things in detail. (He was trembling with fright when the beggar knocked on his door at night!) And here is the dear rich bending down, kissing ardently Reb Velvele's hands now, shedding tears bitterly, and pleading for God's mercy sincerely, he is determined to live austerely as he is recollecting eternal salvation. And here he is standing, quickly handing out his property to all saints and holy men, without further demanding. He is, of course, also not leaving out all scribes, rewarding them plentifully, as they can write on paper skillfully. And so he also found salvation in less than a year, and the brothers' souls appeared in the garden of paradise side by side. We will meet them there someday, our time is slowly closing in, anyway.

AMEN