

Philip J. Davis

THE



YARMULKA OF

Dr. JANOVICZ



Marguerite Doreau

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The events recorded in this story occurred over a period of some months. In writing them up , I have compressed events time-wise.

Some years back, when I had a one semester sabbatical , my wife and I sublet an apartment in Manhattan, in the West 80's just off Columbus Avenue. Coming and going from the Columbia Library where I was doing some research, I would meet a man from time to time who lived next door. At first we exchanged a slight nod. As the days passed, the nod grew stronger. Ultimately, we introduced ourselves, he as Lucius Moladur, a retired antique and art dealer, and I as an academic historian with a special interest in 15th Century European legends.

"Ah, you are a historian ? Good. Come to my house some day, any day. We'll have a schnapps and I'll tell you some history. "

Mr. Moladur -- I always called him that -- was a short man, perhaps in his mid seventies, and he spoke with a noticeable New York intonation and phraseology. In what I write now, I'll try to capture his speech only occasionally.

The day finally arrived -- a national holiday -- when the Library was closed , my wife was off to Orbach's Basement on 14th Street, and I had an afternoon free. I knocked on Mr. Moladur's door. He opened it, bid me come in, and I entered a living room that was piled high with all manner of books, lamps, stuffed animals and *objets d'art*. It was clear to me that if Mr. Moladur had been married and had children, it was long in the past. Much more significantly I noticed a number of oil paintings on the walls and though I am not an art buff, I immediately identified one of them as a Raoul Dufy seascape.

" An original Dufy ?"

" You've got it, boychick."

Curious, I asked "What's it worth ?"

"If I were to put it up for sale, I'd say between a quarter of a million and a half a million.'

In the midst of his rich debris or his treasure trove, I noticed on a small hat rack of the sort that one sees in haberdashers, a large, somewhat beaten up, faded black cylindrical yarmulka with a gold trim. It seemed to be placed in a position of honor in what might be described as a stage setting created by having arranged small *objets* around it.

"Is that a special object ? " I asked Mr. Moladur.

"That, my boy, is the Yarmulka of Dr. Janowicz."

Then he added, in case his meaning wasn't clear, "His yarmulka. His ritual cap."

I nodded. "This Dr. Janowicz was an orthodox Jew ?"

"A Jew he was, soitenly. But orthodox ? I doubt it very much."

" So, tell me, Mr. Moladur, who is or was this Dr. Janowicz ?"

"You've never heard of Dr. Janowicz ? I forgive you already. Dr. Janowicz was my dentist. Sixty Third Street and Ninth Avenue. "

"He wasn't orthodox, but he wore this yarmulka while he was drilling and pulling teeth ? "

"No. No. You've got it wrong. He inherited the yarmulka. Maybe from his father. My sister never told me. "

"Your sister ?"

"Of course, my sister, Who else should tell me ? Dr. Janowicz was also my brother-in -law."

My head began to reel from all these connections and cross connections. I could hardly have foreseen that these connections would intensify. I could see that Mr. Moladur was getting a bit tired or bored and though what I considered to be the mystery of the yarmulka was far from solved, I said good bye and that I'd come back another day. "For more history," I added.

A few days after this interview, my wife and I had to go back home to look after this and that and it was some weeks before we were back in our sublet apartment in Manhattan. Contact with Mr. Moladur was immediately reinstated when one afternoon my wife met him on the sidewalk. Putting aside what I'd been doing, I knocked on his door.

"She's a doll, you know," Mr. Moladur opined.

"Who?"

"Your wife."

"I know. I've always thought so myself. But I see you still have the Yarmulka of Dr. Janowicz. I pointed to the little display against the wall.

"Of course. Who should have it if not me? After all the trouble I went through to get it. And it cost me \$260.!"

"\$260 just for a little skullcap?"

"You told me you are a historian so let me tell you some history. After my sister, the dentist's wife died, her son Amos, my nephew, took all her antique furniture and silverware and dishes and everything from the closets, and called in an auction house and put all this property up for sale. I asked Amos 'You kept back the Yarmulka of your father, I suppose?'

My nephew Amos looked confused. 'Everything went,' he told me. A yarmulka? What does it matter? Such a small thing.' He gave a price: 'It wouldn't go for 19 cents.' "

"A small thing with large consequences," I interrupted Mr. Moladur's history.

Mr. Moladur ignored my appreciative remark. "To Amos it didn't matter. But to me it mattered." He went on, "A month later, my sister's property was put in auction by Lochinvar, Ltd., Madison and 73rd St. Thieves. Take my word for it. Of course, I went. They gave out a printed program. On that day, it was one of several lots: 'Estate of Dr. and Mrs. Janowicz' was the way it was listed. Aha! 'Item No. 46. One black cylindrical cap with gold trim.'

Finally, the auctioneer, I should know his name, but I don't; a new man; probably a greenhorn in the business, offered No. 46, and suggested a reserve price of \$20. This is not usually done. But maybe with such a small item who knows

A man sitting in the back yelled out '\$21.' I immediately jumped to \$25. The man went to \$26. I jumped to \$50 and the man went to \$51. A 'plus one-nik' in my business we call such a person. Who this man was, sitting in the back, I didn't recognize him immediately. What did he know about the yarmulka? In the end, I suppose this plus one-nik got tired and I outbid him at \$260. So sold! With money, I can be generous. After those thieves Lochinvar, Ltd., take off their 50%, the rest will go to my nephew Amos. Big deal. When I went up to get my property, the man who tried to outbid me came up. A mysterious stranger? Not at all. He was my second cousin Lou from Garden City, Long Island. How many years I hadn't seen him? Twenty, thirty? Probably at Sam's funeral.

How was Lou my second cousin? I'll explain to you so you'll understand, you're a historian. With first cousins you have a grandfather in common. With second cousins you have a great grandfather in common. Kapeesh?"

I was slow to associate the names with the degree of relatedness. "Sam? I inquired. "Who was Sam?"

"Sam? Lou's brother, of course. So when Lou came up to me, I said to Lou 'If I may make myself Mr. Nosey, what business is it of yours with the Yarmulka of Dr. Janowicz? There are maybe

twenty dollar gold pieces sewed into the lining ? ' My second cousin Lou did not take this lying down. ' Nosey ? So tell me what skin is it off your nose that the yarmulka interests me ?' And he turned around and marched off. "

"A family quarrel," I ventured. " Division of property?"

" You'd better say so. In spades a family quarrel.

A week or so passed before I knocked on Mr. Moladur's door. We shared a schnapps; then another one. I could see he was in a talkative mood. I went over to the yarmulka and fingered it. He made no objection.

" My grandfather's grandfather," said Mr. Moladur, came from Psosk in Hungary. When I was a boy, my grandfather told me that his grandfather was known as the wonder-working Psosker Rov. And with this yarmulka, which my sister inherited and that she gave to her husband Dr. Janowicz was the yarmulka the Psoker Rov made a miracle with. Shall I tell you ?

The Psosker Rov was walking long a muddy street and a child was playing in the street. In those days why shouldn't a child play in the street ? Suddenly, from nowhere, a man on a horse, a Hussar, rode into the street. Fast. Wild. Does a Hussar ever look where he's going ? My grandfather's grandfather, quickly ripped off his yarmulka and threw it into the street before the child. Just as quickly the Hussar stopped, got off his horse, yelled at my grandfather's grandfather for dishonoring him by throwing some trash into his path. Trash the Hussar called the yarmulka. My sister told me all this. Believe it or not by Ripley, as they used to say on the radio. Are you old enough to remember Ripley ?"

This was the last I heard on the subject from Mr. Moladur. My sublet was up and besides it was time to get back home and into my teaching assignments. From what Mr. Moladur told me it was easy to connect the dots. To his sister and his brother-in-law and even to his second cousin, the yarmulka had become a sacred and magic object; a talisman. There is something universal in human nature that creates and believes in the irrational and endows special objects with

special powers. And as Niels Bohr said of the horseshoe over his door, it may bring luck whether you believe it or not.

the end



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