

Stefano Massini



SOMETHING ABOUT THE LEHMANS

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*“We walk along the sheer ridge
where History becomes Legend
and News dwindles into Myth.
We don't look for truth in fairy tales,
nor do we look for it in dreams.
And while all human beings can one day say
they were born, they lived, they died,
not all can say they've become a metaphor.
Transformation is everything.”*

BOOK ONE
THREE BROTHERS

Chapter One
Luftmensch

Son of a cattle dealer
circumcised Jew
with just one suitcase
standing stock-still
like a telegraph pole
on jetty number four at New York harbour
Thank God for having arrived:

Baruch HaShem!

Thank God for having left:

Baruch HaShem!

Thank God for being here, now, at last,
in America:

Baruch HaShem!

Baruch HaShem!

Baruch HaShem!

Children shouting
porters weighed down with luggage
screeching of iron and squeaking pulleys
in the midst of it all
he
standing still
straight off the boat
wearing his best shoes
never yet worn
kept in store for the moment "*when I reach America.*"

And now this is it.

The moment "*when I reach America*"
is writ large on a cast-iron clock

high up there
on the tower of New York harbour:
seven twenty-five in the morning.

He takes a pencil from his pocket
and on the edge of a scrap of paper
notes down the seven and the twenty-five
just long enough to see
his hand is shaking
maybe the excitement
or maybe the fact that
after a month and a half at sea
standing on dry land
– “*huh! Stop swaying!*” –
feels strange.

Eight kilos lost
in the month-and-a-half at sea.
A thick beard
thicker than the rabbi's
grown, untrimmed
in forty-five days of up and down
between hammock berth bridge
bridge berth hammock.
Left Le Havre teetotal
landed at New York an expert drinker
trained to recognize at the first sip
brandy from rum
gin from cognac
Italian wine and Irish beer.
Left Le Havre knowing nothing about cards
landed at New York champion of gaming and dice.
Left shy, reserved, pensive
landed convinced he knew the world:
French irony
Spanish jollity
the gushing pride of Italian cabin boys.
Left with America fixed in his head

landed now with America in front of him
but not just in his thoughts: before his eyes.
Baruch HaShem!

Seen from close up
on this cold September morning
seen standing stock-still
like a telegraph pole
on jetty number four at New York harbour
America seemed more like a carillon:
for every window that opened
there was one that closed;
for every handcart that turned a corner
there was one that appeared at the other;
for every customer that got up from a table
there was one that sat down
“even before it was all laid,” he thought
and for a moment
– inside that head that had been waiting for months to see it – America
the real America
was no more nor less than a flea circus
in no way impressive
indeed, if anything, comic.
Amusing.

It was at that moment
that someone took hold of his arm.
It was a port official
dark uniform
grey whiskers, wearing a large hat.
On a register he was writing
names and numbers of those landing
asking simple questions and in basic English:
“Where do you come from?”
“Rimpar.”
“Rimpar?” Where is Rimpar?”
“Bayern: Germany.”
“And your name?”

"Heyum Lehmann."
"I don't understand. Name?"
"Heyum..."
"What is Heyum?"
"My name is... Hey... Henry!"
"Henry, ok! And your surname?"
"Lehmann..."
"Lehman!" Henry Lehman!"
"Henry Lehman."
"Ok, Henry Lehman:
welcome in America.
And good luck!"
And he stamped it:
11 September 1844
gave him a pat on the shoulder
and went off to stop another.

Henry Lehman looked about him:
the ship from which he'd come ashore – the *Burgundy* –
looked like a sleeping giant.
But another ship was manoeuvring into port
ready to unload at jetty number four
another 149 like him:
maybe Jews
maybe Germans
maybe wearing their best shoes
and with just one suitcase
they too catch themselves trembling
partly out of excitement
partly because of the dry land
partly because America
– the real America –
seen from up close
like a gigantic carillon
has a certain effect.

He took a deep breath
gripped his suitcase

and with a swift step
– though still not knowing where to go –
he entered
he too
the carillon
called America.

Chapter two

Gefilte fish

Rabbi Kassowitz

– so Henry had been told –
is not the best acquaintance
you might hope to make
after a 45-day crossing,
having just set foot
on the other side of the Atlantic.

Partly because he has
a decidedly irritating sneer
fixed on his face
glued to his lips
as if he felt a deep-down contempt
for anyone who came to speak to him.
And then there are his eyes:
how can you avoid feeling uneasy
when faced with a stubborn old man
swamped in his dark suit
whose only sign of life comes from that pair of squinting,
anarchic, crazed eyes
that are always glancing elsewhere
unpredictably
bouncing like billiard balls unpredictably
and though never stopping to look at you
they never miss a detail?

*“Prepare yourself: go to Rab Kassowitz
it’s always an experience.
You’ll regret you’ve been,
but you cannot not go,
so gather up courage and knock that door.”*

That’s what Henry Lehman has been told
by German Jewish friends
who’ve been here in New York for a while,
for such a while that they know the streets
and they talk a weird language
where Yiddish gets mixed up with English,
they say *frau darling* to the girls
and children go asking for *der ice-cream*.

Henry Lehman
son of a cattle dealer
hasn’t been in America even for three days
but pretends to understand everything
and even forces himself to say *yes*
when German Jewish friends
grin and ask if he can feel
the stench of New York on his clothing:
*“Remember, Henry: at first we all smelt it.
Then one day you stop sniffing it,
you no longer notice it,
and then you can really say
you’ve arrived in America,
and that you’re really here.”*

Yes.

Henry nods.

Yes.

Henry smiles.

Yes, yes.

Henry, in fact, can feel the stench of New York

all over him:

a nauseous blend of fodder, smoke and every kind of mould,

so that, to the nostrils at least,

this New York so much anticipated

seems worse than his father's cattle shed,

down in Germany, at Rimpar, Bavaria.

Yes.

But in the letter he has sent home

– the first from American soil –

Henry hasn't mentioned the stench.

He has talked about German Jewish friends

of course

and how kindly

they had given him a bed, for several days

offering him a splendid fish ball soup

made with leftovers from their fish stall,

seeing that they too are in the business

yes sir

but fish with fins, bones and scales.

"And are you earning well?"

asked Henry, not mincing words,

just like that, to get some idea

to begin to understand

seeing that he's come to America for the money

and he would have to start somewhere.

His German Jewish friends
laughed at him
since nobody in New York
goes without earning something
– not even beggars:
*“With food there’s always money to be made,
people, Henry, are always hungry.”*

“And so? What brings good money?”
he asked them
amid the crates of cod and barrels of herrings,
where the stench of New York
is fairly hard to beat.
*“But what questions you ask.
Money is made from what you cannot not buy.”*

They’re clever folk, his German friends:
money is made from what you cannot not buy...
that’s pretty good advice after all.
For it’s true that if you don’t eat, you die.
But honestly, can a Lehman
who has left his father’s cattle sheds
come all the way to America
to trade here, too, in animals,
whether fish, chickens, ducks or cattle?
Change, Henry, change.
But choosing something that *you cannot not buy*.
This is the point.

There.

And while Henry is thinking what to do
his German friends give him a bed to sleep in
and fish balls in broth for supper,
always fish
to keep exceptional economy.

Yet Henry doesn't want to abuse the hospitality.
Just enough time to work things out.
Just enough time to get his legs back
his legs are sluggish
incredibly sluggish
for after having been so long at sea
 hammock berth bridge
 bridge berth hammock
it's not so simple
to order your lower limbs
– the locomotive division –
to get back on the trot,
all the more if this carillon called America
has ten thousand streets,
not like Rimpar where those are the only streets
and you count them on the fingers of one hand.

That's right. Legs.
But this isn't the only point.
If only.
To live in America, to live properly,
you need something else.
You need to turn a key in a lock,
you need to push open a door.

And all three – key, lock and door –
are found not in New York
but inside your brain.

That's why – they told him amid the cod and the herrings –
whoever comes ashore
sometime or other
sooner or later
needs Rab Kassowitz:
he knows.

And we're not talking about Scriptures, or Prophets,
which for a rabbi is normal:

Rab Kassowitz
is famous for being an oracle
for those who have sailed *from there to here*,
for those who come from Europe
for transoceanic Jews
for the sons of cattle dealers
or, well
in other words
for immigrants.

*"You see, Henry: anyone coming to America
is looking for something not even he knows.*

We've all been there.

*That old rabbi, for all his squinting eyes,
manages to look where you cannot see,
and to tell you where you'll be in this other life.*

Take my word: go and find him."

And once again Henry said yes.

He arrived at eight in the morning,
clutching in his right hand a pretty decent example of a fish
a gift for the old man,
but having thought long about it
he concluded that to arrive holding a large fish
didn't give a particularly respectable impression,
so that he slipped the creature into a hedge
for the shameless joy of the New York cats
and after a deep breath he knocked the door.
Yes.

It was a November day,
with an icy chill, like down there in Bavaria,
and a vague hint of snow.
As he waited, Henry brushed the first flakes from his hat.
He was wearing his best shoes,
those he had kept aside for the moment "*when I reach America*":
he thought it was maybe a good idea to wear them again
for this strange visit
in which – he felt –
he'd really see America face to face,
for all it was, immense and boundless,
and would hold it in the palm of his hand.
He sincerely hoped so.
For until now he felt he was in a mist.

He was so wrapped in these thoughts
that he didn't hear the click of the door handle,
nor the voice coming almost from another world
that told him the door was already open.

The wait, in short,
lasted some while,
enough to irritate the old man,
causing him eventually to shout from inside
an eloquent "*I am waiting.*"

And Henry went in.

Rab Kassowitz
was sitting at the far end of the black room,
on a black wooden chair
all at one in its many angles,
as if he were almost a geographic sum of cheekbones, knees, elbows
and parched wrinkles.

The son of a cattle dealer
asked and did not obtain
express permission to step forward.
When he asked
– and with the greatest deference –
he was simply told: "*Stop there: I want to look at you.*"
which was followed by a whirl of pupils.

Yet Henry Lehman didn't flinch.
He stood stock-still like a telegraph pole
remained ten steps away,
holding his hat,
in an eternal silence
contemplating
how in that book-filled room

the stench of New York seemed concentrated
overpowering
and for a moment
inhaling fodder, smoke and every kind of mould
he thought he might even faint.

Fortunately he didn't have time.
For stronger than the smell
was finding himself
suddenly
the subject of a cruel laugh,
which coming at the end of long observation
seemed most offensive
and more than that: an insult.
"You find me amusing, rav?"

"I laugh because I see a little fish."

Henry Lehman
couldn't work out there and then
whether this phrase was a rabbinical metaphor
or whether the old man
really was insulting him
for the aroma of sardines and bream that he was spreading in the air.
And he would certainly have opted for the second explanation
if the rabbi hadn't
fortunately
added to his opening words:
*"I laugh because I see a little fish
that flaps its tail out of water:"*

*it has flipped itself out
and claims it wants a taste of America.”*

And so
not without some relief
Henry could proudly reply:
“That little fish, I would say, has no lack of courage.”

“Or has no lack of idiocy.”

“Should I go back home?”

“It depends what you mean by home.”

“A fish lives in the sea.”

“No. You’re annoying, how foolish you are: I could turn you out.”

“I don’t understand.”

*“You don’t understand because you’re reasoning too much,
and by reasoning you lose your way
you’re foolish because you’re sharp,
and sharpness is a curse.
You’re behaving like someone who hasn’t had food for three days,
but before eating
he asks what dishes, what spices, what sauces,
whether the tablecloths, cutlery, glasses are right
– in short
before having decided everything*

they find him lying dead with hunger.”

“Help me.”

*“Quite simply: a fish lives in water,
and water is not just to be found in the sea.”*

“And so?”

*“And so, out of water you die,
in water you live. And that’s the end of it.”*

“And so, I’m not cut out for America?”

“It depends what you mean by America.”

“America is dry land.”

“And that’s a fact.”

“You say I’m a fish.”

“And that’s a second fact.”

“The fish is not made for land, but for water.”

“Third and last fact.”

“And what do you expect me to do?”

*“It’s a good question,
so good that I offer it to you:
ask yourself.”*

*“A fish doesn’t ask questions, rabbi:
a fish knows only how to swim.”*

*“And now we’re beginning to reason:
a fish knows only how to swim,
it cannot pretend it can walk.
Our fish might then be an idiot
not for wanting a taste of America,
but for wanting to do it out of water! Baruch HaShem!
If the fish – which has reached New York from the immense sea –
then makes its way from that sea into a river,
and from the river into a canal,
and from the river into a lake,
and from the lake into a pond,
then I ask you:
wouldn’t that fish in fact manage
to get around the length and breadth of America?
Nothing’s stopping him: water flows everywhere.
The fish only has to remember he lives in water,
and if he leaves it, simply, he dies.”*

“Yes, Rab Kassowitz, but my water, what exactly could it be?”

*“Didn’t you say a fish doesn’t ask questions?
Enough. You’ve exhausted all the attention you deserve.
Now leave me in peace:*

*I have little time left before I die
and you have taken a part of it free of charge.”*

*“With respect, indeed: I’d like to leave you a few dollars,
for your Temple...”*

*“Fish don’t have wallets,
with money they’d sink to the bottom. Out!”*

*“One last question, rabbi, I beg you:
America is vast,
where do you suggest I go?”*

“Where you can swim.”

And with these words
Henry Lehman
found himself back on the street
confused and pensive more than ever
with the only certainty that rabbis never speak clearly
learning from their Superior One
who instead of explaining himself
sets bushes on fire, *and it’s for you to understand.*

Meanwhile
an exceptional storm had gathered over New York.
But in all honesty, could a Lehman
who had left the pines of Bavaria,
come all this way to America
to end up shovelling snow?
Change, Henry, change.

So this at least was clear:
wherever he went
– and he didn't know exactly where –
there would certainly have to be
plenty of warmth
plenty of light
plenty of sun.

And with this idea revolving in his head,
cursing the American winter,
he buttoned his jacket up to the neck:
after all, a man needs to keep himself covered,
just as much as he needs food.
Yes.