

SHALOM ALTSICHER

On November 29, 1955, I found myself seated in the New Woodward auditorium and anxiously awaiting the presentation, "The World of Shalom Altsicher." The program consisted of three separate stories:

1. "A Tale of Chelm"
2. "Bontche Schweig"
3. "The High School (Gymnasium)"

First may I say that it is so seldom that we in Cincinnati have the opportunity to see such wonderful Jewish humor (that of the "old country" spirit) that almost anything done would have been received warmly. The humor was there --- the professional ability to present it was not. The evening started with Mendele, the bookseller, pushing a cart full of books down the middle aisle of the auditorium and warming up the audience by asking "Does anyone want to buy a book about Chelm?" This was the lead into the first play, "A Tale of Chelm." I must say Mendele played his part wonderfully by sifting into his chatter many delightful and humorous Yiddish stories. But from this point on the rest of the evening left much to be desired. "A Tale of Chelm" dealt with a melamed (teacher), his wife Rikkele, and the acquisition of a female goat. The story revolves around the fact that the melamed has to go to another town to purchase a goat and midway between Chelm and this other town is an inn and a mischievous innkeeper. The innkeeper switches a billy goat for the female goat and the Melamed's wife makes her husband return the goat. On the way back to return the goat, the switch is made again at the inn. The woman who sold the goat to the melamed proceeds to milk it, and the melamed is at a complete loss for words. Therefore before he returns home he demands a document bearing a rabbi's signature and stating that the goat he bought was a female. Once again on his way home, the melamed stops at the

inn where the billy goat switch is made. On presentation of the goat to his wife, Rikkele calls him a fool and declares that the goat is not a female. At this outburst the melamed shows the document bearing a rabbi's signature to prove the goat's gender is female. To settle the problem they go to the rabbi in Chelm, who is reputed to be the wisest man in the city. After much meditation the rabbi finally comes up with this conclusion: When a person brings a goat into Chelm, by some powers unknown to man, a she-goat becomes a he-goat and vice-versa. A typical Chelm ending. Of the three stories this one was the best produced.

The wonderful story of "Bontche Schweig" followed and was a complete disappointment. This story deals with the wretched, humble, helpless, Ghetto Jew, who through his whole life never once complained and finally ascends to heaven." The wonderfully written summation of his life on earth was ineffectively given by the defending angel. Its ineffectiveness was mainly due to inaudibility. (Yours truly was seated in the third to last row.) All the words went to the ceiling; few reached the ears of the audience. This was most terribly felt at the end of the play where the point of dramatic irony has been built up to its apex. Bontche Schweig is told by the tribunal court of heaven that he may have anything he desires and he answers "May I possibly have hot fells for breakfast each morning?" A marvelous ending. It's a shame no one heard it.

The final story, "The High School" dealt with the trouble of a Jewish boy getting into a high school. After two years of tutoring and traveling, the boy Moishe is finally accepted into a high school. However, on the