THE SEA IN RADZIN

*The Lord spoke to Moses and said, Speak to the Children of Israel in these words: They must make tassels on the corners of their garments, they and their children's children. Into this tassel thou shall work a blue (tekhelet) thread, and whenever you see this in the tassel, you shall remember all the Lord's commands and obey them, and not go into your wanton*

*ways led astray by your own hearts and eyes...*

*Numbers 15, 38*

A disciple asked the Rabbi of Radzin

why tekhelet, of all colors, why blue?

And Gershon Chanoch Leiner, who knew

the commentaries, spoke: In the time

when the people of Israel could still

fulfill what the Lord said to Moses,

Rabbi Meir, he of blessed memory,

said tekhelet is like unto the sea,

and the sea to the sky, and the sky

to sapphire, and sapphire, the Throne

of Glory of the Lord of Israel.

The rabbi thought - if only tekhelet

were found, it would speed the coming

of the Messiah. He dreamt of a shell,

its color like unto the sea, as it

is said, in the shape of a fish. Rabbi

Gershon Chanoch Leiner, who knew French,

German and Russian, and how the blood

changed color in a man, who built a mill

with machinery of his own invention,

searched in the books of the gentiles

for snails that come every seven years,

as the Talmud says. The Radzin Rabbi

taught himself Italian, and set off

to the distant sea, for Naples.

Hot in their black caftans, the nine

men of Radzin and their Rebbe walked

the shore of a small island at the end

of the Western sea. The rabbi offered

a bounty for sea-snails' dark blood,

was brought cuttlefish by the sailors.

Gershon Chanoch Leiner, holy in his

task, looked at the cephalopod, said:

Wise one, you are a woman, as it is

said, you are Moses' shell. He dipped

one white strand of his tassels into

the ink, and it was dyed, blue-black,

like the evening sky over the sea.

But the color faded, not yet tekhelet.

The Chasidim of Radzin had lost their

rabbi to the books he ordered brought

from Warsaw. Had not Maimonides and

Rashi too told of chemicals to bring

the blue out, in accord with dyer's

craft? He put the cuttlefish' black

sacs of ink, caked dry after their

long journey, into a very thick vat,

added iron filings and snow-white

potash. To his disciples, the blaze

outside and within was as the fires

of hell; fused, encrustation filtered,

the whitish essence, boiled into wool

turns to tekhelet in wintry Radzin.

The flour mill soon went bankrupt, but

the dye-works of the Radzin Chasidim

spread sealed blue threads over the Pale

of the Settlement. The rabbi, now old,

was plagued by profane dreams — eyes

of cuttlefish, bullock's blood treated

with iron and potash, a green bottle

with a label, Prussian Blue. Unable

to wake, Gershon Chanoch Leiner, dreamed

on, of a sailor on a ship, a sailor

dipping his hand into the wine dark sea,

a snail in his hand, the tanned sailor

drawing in sure strokes a pattern,

the Maltese cross, on his shirt, turning

to the sun, the tekhelet of the sky;

the cross turning yellow, green, purple,

the eyes of a cuttlefish, the Throne.