

JEWES IN TRANSITION

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Chapter II The Scholar Becomes a Merchant

AN EAST EUROPEAN whose early years were spent in study of Hebraic literature and lore, of Orthodox tradition, comes to Minneapolis. He discovers a new way of life, retaining nevertheless his deep love for the traditional ideas and practices. He finds taxing the problem of rearing his children as Jews. His daughter, typical of the other children in the family, works out certain compromises in the religious pattern of her life. The grandson feels a greater sense of security in his Jewishness than his parents did. The tradition of family love and loyalty is retained through the three generations.

MORDECAI, SON OF JONAH

I was born in the town of Vidukla in the province of Kovno, Lithuania, in the year 1869. My father was the owner of a tailoring shop. I recall that he employed about fifteen people in his shop. It was pretty large as a business for those days. I still remember the excitement of all of the townspeople on the day he brought a Singer sewing machine into the town. My father was about thirty-five years old when I was born.

There were about two hundred families in this town. I think that it was an all-Jewish community. The Gentiles lived on the outskirts of the town. Now it may be that the reason I think that it was an all-Jewish city is because we all lived in Jewish neighborhoods, the Jews lived all together, and I do not recall ever seeing Gentile neighbors. In our town Jews and Gentiles did not mix socially, although on occasion business was done with them.

The synagogue was in the very center of the town. All the weddings of the community took place in the courtyard of

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the synagogue. There were about two or three hundred seats in that synagogue. We also had a bes hamidrash (house of study). There were always at least a dozen people about in this bes hamidrash learning the Gemarah (part of the Talmud). There was also a public bathhouse in the middle of the town. We had no such thing as a bath in our own homes.

My father possessed what for those days could be regarded as average Jewish learning. He could "learn" a chapter of Mishnayos (a portion of the Talmud) very well. Each Sabbath he studied the portion of the week that was to be read in the synagogue very carefully. He was regarded as a fine Jew.

My mother was a very pious Orthodox Jewish woman. She came from a little town near Tavrig in Lithuania. In her manner of conducting herself, she was certainly no different from all the other Jewish women of that time. She wore a sheitel (wig) in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law. Of course, all the other Jewish women of our town wore sheitels too. She knew how to recite her prayers by heart. The women of the community learned their prayers especially well from a man of the synagogue who would recite aloud the prayers for all the women in the women's gallery of the synagogue. As they listened they learned the prayers, and inasmuch as they all attended the synagogue, they learned them especially well. My mother never had any special lessons in Hebrew, but that was no different from most of the other Jewish women. It simply was not expected of them. My mother could speak Polish and Lithuanian, but not Russian. There were not many Russians in our territory.

The people in our town, whom I still remember, were engaged in various businesses. They were carpenters, butchers, bakers, innkeepers, purchasers of wood, wheat, dry goods, and a few were millers.

I had but one brother and no sisters. I did have another brother who was two years older than I am, but he died as a result of an accident. One day he swallowed a plum pit and it

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stuck in his throat. There was no doctor in town, so he could not be saved.

My older brother was a real Hebrew scholar. I did not see much of him because he left our town as a youth and studied at the university at Vilna. He also attended the yeshivoh (academy of higher Jewish learning) in Vilna. He acquired a certificate as a teacher. In those days that was regarded as a very great honor. Few Jewish boys were able to qualify. I did not really get to see or know my brother until I was about thirteen years old because he was away so much of the time. I was the only child at home.

I started my Hebrew education at the age of five when I went to a cheder. My teacher was Shmuel the Melamed (Samuel the Teacher). I recall that he lived about ten blocks away from our home. I studied with him until I was seven years old. This school had sessions which lasted from eight o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon. I would then come home for supper. Then I would go back to school at night for a couple of hours. I always took my lantern with me at night to light the way. I used to have bread and syrup for lunch. My mother would give me a penny to buy some syrup, and I took the bread from home. When I was seven I already knew the five books of Moses together with the main commentary on the Bible by Rashi, and I had just begun to study the Talmud. When I reached that point I was regarded as an advanced student, and so I went to another cheder where I studied for two more years. I was then nine years old and I returned to my old teacher, Shmuel the Melamed, because my parents and I regarded him as such a good teacher. We used to study together at five o'clock in the morning. I used to sleep in his room in order to be there on time for these lessons. I studied with him until I was ten years old. Then I learned to write Yiddish. Most of the time I spent in studying by myself in the synagogue with other boys of our community.

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When I was about eleven and a half years old. I had a talk with one of my boy friends about our studies. We decided that we weren't learning enough under those conditions, so we decided to leave Vidukla and go to the town of Rishane, where we were sure we would receive better instruction. I didn't even tell my parents about my decision. We told the driver who took us to Rishane to tell our parents where we had gone and that we intended to study in the Chasid's Klose (the Study of the Pious One). When we came to the town, we met the rabbi and paid a tuition fee of twelve dollars for the season. This meant that we could study from September through March, or from the high holy days up to the Passover festival. I remember that I used to sleep on a bench in the synagogue. I bought a gunny sack and filled it with straw which I picked up around the town. This was my bed. I lived this way until I was thirteen years old.

I was Bar Mitzvah (confirmed) at thirteen like all other Jewish boys. They didn't make a fuss over Bar Mitzvah in those days like they do today. I prepared my own Talmudic discourse for the occasion. My parents' friends were invited to my home after services, and it was a happy day for us all. After my Bar Mitzvah I went back to Rishane and remained there until I was fourteen and a half. I decided that there was still a better yeshivoh in Kovno, and I decided to go to this large city. I came to the city of Kovno on a Friday afternoon.

I know that I did not ask for or receive advice from either my father or my mother as to whether or not I should go to study in Kovno. I figured that I knew what I had to do if I was to advance in my learning. The other boys and I received our meals at the homes of the various Jewish townspeople free of charge. I ate in a different home each day. I remember that on the Friday afternoon when my friend and I arrived in Kovno, we came to the synagogue and there Rabbi Isaac Elchanan, the great rabbi of that city, whose name came to be known all over the world because of his piety and learning, came over to

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us and asked us if we had any place to stay over the Sabbath. When we replied in the negative, he took the other boy to his home and arranged for someone to take me to his home. There were, I think, about five yeshivos in the town.

I studied with Rabbi Zalman Charif, that is, Zalman "the sharp" or highly learned person. Rabbi Zalman Charif gave me an admission test, and after listening to me he received me into his class. During the first few weeks we slept in the old bes hamidrash (house of study). I gave the shamos (beadle) five rubles, and he arranged for us to eat at various homes for all days of the week but one. On that day we sat in the public soup kitchen. I studied in Kovno until I was seventeen years of age. After that I studied by myself. Shortly after I was seventeen I went on to the great city of Vilna. Most of the yeshivos were very crowded, and so we studied in a suburb of the city under Rabbi Joseph. Our meals here too were arranged for by the shamos. I went home to Vidukla to see my parents at the time of the high holy days. Of course, during all this time I used to write to my parents, and they would send me money with which to buy the few things that I needed.

About that time there was a government order that all the boys in the yeshivos had to have passports. I didn't have one. When the government inspectors came, I would hide somewhere until they had gone. That, however, did not disturb me very much because I wanted so to study in Vilna. I also had the chance to hear the greatest cantors in the world in the synagogues there. After a time, however, I became worried about the matter of the passport, so I decided to go back to my home town to find out what I could do about getting one. The army might at any time have picked me up and forced me to serve. So I became very much afraid to be seen out in public in those days.

My older brother, whom I had hardly known and seldom seen, had come to America, to the city of Minneapolis. A member of my family had come to America sometime before and

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had sent a ticket for my brother to come here. My brother was an up-to-date person. He just could not stand life in the small European towns. At that time just about everybody I knew was going to America. So I decided to write to my brother, and after a time he sent me a ticket to come to America. He purchased the ticket on credit and told me that I was to pay him back for it. That I did after I earned my first few dollars here. My parents and I talked the matter over carefully, and they finally agreed to let me go to America. I paid ten rubles as a bribe to someone to get me over the border without a passport. The Prussian border was about ten miles from my home town. I was then free. I went to Memel, then to Hamburg, and on to Berlin and Havre. From there I sailed to New York, and I arrived here in 1888.

One of my relatives came to America with me. I remember that in the few days that we were in New York, we were on a wagon together and someone threw rotten tomatoes at us because we were foreigners.

We were both anxious to go to Minneapolis. We got on a train and rode as far as Buffalo. From Buffalo we took the boat to Duluth, and we were on the Great Lakes for three and one-half weeks. My brother, who was in Minneapolis, could not imagine what had happened to us.

About three weeks before the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashonah, in 1888, I arrived here. I recall that it was on a Thursday of that week, and we all sat down to decide what was to be done with us, how we were to earn a living, and where we were to stay. Some of my relatives who had provided the ticket for my brother's transportation to Minneapolis permitted me to stay with them, although their home consisted of only two rooms.

There were about two hundred Jews at that time who lived on the North Side. Of course, there was the South Side Jewish community, which was older, and the German Jewish community, which I did not know at all.

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On my first Sabbath I went to the synagogue which was located on Sixth Avenue North and Second Street. It was upstairs over a grocery store and was called the Ohel Jacob Synagogue (Tent of Jacob). This synagogue was Orthodox in every respect and was very much like the synagogues I knew in Europe. The pulpit was in the center of the room, and there were wooden benches around it. There was a table in the rear of the room where we used to learn and learn the Talmud. I remember how happy I was to be called up to the Torah on my first Sabbath there. There were about twenty people present at this service.

On Monday of the next week, my friend and I went to look for work on Washington Avenue and Fourth Avenue North. I saw a crowd of people standing around, and I could tell they were trying to get jobs. I got into the crowd, and I too got a job using a shovel, working for the railroad lowering some tracks. I got a dollar and a half a day.

You can well imagine how hard it was for me to work with that shovel. I hardly knew what one was. I certainly had never had one in my hands before. I worked at that job for about three weeks. I was proud because I had made, what was to me, a lot of money. I then bought shoes, a suit, and a hat, all on credit. I remember paying ten dollars down for these things.

When I came here, I didn't have to change my ways very much from what they were in the old country. The Ohel Jacob Synagogue had its minyan (public service) for Rosh Hashonah at the Turner Hall, on Fifth and Washington Avenue. All the peddlers in town came to this service. We had a chazan (one who chants the liturgy). Services were very much the same as I knew them as a boy.

I got other jobs, after my railroad experience. I worked in a lumber yard at night. I worked there for a month, lowering lumber on trucks.

The peddling business attracted me. One of the Jewish men in town had a peddler's supply house. He gave my relative and me about seventy-five dollars' worth of goods with a canvas bag

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and a box which we were to tie onto our chests, for notions. The whole thing must have weighed nearly seventy-five pounds. We were taken out to the Shakopee road and left there. Thus we began our peddling career. I didn't know any English. I talked as best I could, and I walked and walked.

I remember the first Shabbas (Sabbath) I was out in the country. I knew a Jewish family lived there. I tried to get them to take me in over Shabbas, but they laughed at me. He said he couldn't afford to do it. I went along the road two miles and came to another house. There I found another Jewish man, who was nice to me and took me in over Shabbas.

But after that, when I couldn't get a place to stay over Shabbas, I began to peddle on Shabbas. I peddled on foot until January first of 1889. I made about a hundred and fifty dollars' profit. I then went to the ticket agent and paid for my ticket, which my brother had secured for me. I also got tickets for my parents as well as for my brother's wife and his children. I ran up a debt of about four hundred dollars. My brother was also peddling, but we did not travel together very much. I kept up the peddling business for about five years. During all that time I davened (prayed) regularly. I wore my tefillin (phylacteries). I never ate any meat because I didn't want to violate the dietary laws.

I guess the reason for my observance of so many of our customs was because I was so alone. I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be part of something. I didn't want to lose my identity.

I remember that a great number of the other Jewish peddlers did eat meat away from home. That always surprised me.

When I was in the country peddling, of course, I could do no studying, but when I was back in Minneapolis, I would go to shule (synagogue) on Shabbas.

In 1893 I decided to remain in town, so I began to peddle apples. My parents had come here in 1890. I bought some furniture from one of the Jewish merchants and set up a home on

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Fifth Avenue and Washington North. I supported my parents. I also had to support my brother and his family because my brother just didn't make much. My brother became ill too, and that made matters worse. He was too refined for that kind of life, I guess. He couldn't stand it. He was a scholar. He became ill, and he died a short time later.

After I made a few dollars, I decided to open a grocery store. It was very small, but I was able to get along fairly well. Many people from the South Side would place their orders with me, and I established a fairly decent business.

In 1896 I married my wife. She had lived in Minneapolis for some time. She came of good Orthodox stock. We were married on Rosh Hodesh Tammuz (the first day of the Hebrew month Tammuz), in the bride's home. Rabbi Jaffe of the Ohel Jacob Synagogue officiated. A chazan was also there. His name was Golling. It was a strictly Orthodox wedding. We fasted before the chupa (wedding canopy) on the day of the wedding. We were married on a Friday.

We lived upstairs of the grocery store which I operated on Washington Avenue North. At first we had two rooms in back of the grocery; then we rented five rooms upstairs. I had saved up three hundred dollars when I got married. We kept no budget. But we had enough to eat and for clothes.

Seven children were born there. My wife never went to a hospital when any of the children were about to be born. The same doctor was there for all those children.

During those years my grocery store was always closed on Shabbas. But I went to the market to purchase goods for the store on Shabbas. My wife did a lot of the work in the grocery store. We had a horse and wagon for delivery of our merchandise. We lived there above the grocery until 1906.

My boys went to cheder. It was a private cheder in a man's home. They were taught how to read Hebrew, also how to translate the five books of Moses. It was an old-fashioned cheder, like in the old country. I didn't send the girls. They studied privately.

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My boys used to go to shule with me, even to the Selichos services at five o'clock in the morning. The girls didn't go to cheder because it wasn't the style to send girls. Girls didn't study Hebrew in those days.

I think I was a good father. My children minded me. They had to mind me, that's all. I gave them everything they wanted in good and bad times. Even when times were very hard, they got everything.

In 1906 I started buying damaged or unclaimed freight from the railroads. My brother-in-law and I decided to come together as partners. We opened a store at Sixth and Hennepin. We worked the business up very nicely. Then we went into the wholesale end of the business. Things were very good.

Of course we kept the dietary laws at this time. But our place of business was open on Shabbas, although I used to go to the synagogue every Shabbas and come down to the business after the service was over.

Before I started in the grocery business, I used to study Gemarah after 6 p.m. in the shule with several other people. I always liked it. I wore a little beard, a goatee, in those days. I shaved it off on my first trip to New York, where I went on business. I did so because people used to laugh at me. They just weren't wearing any kind of beard.

I never studied English at any kind of school. I had just enough time to earn as much as I could for my family. I had many debts to pay. Besides in those early days they didn't have any Americanization classes for me. I had applied for my citizenship papers about the second year after I arrived here. I became a citizen as soon as possible. I was proud that I served on the jury many times.

We finally moved to another house. I had purchased two houses. I rented out one and we lived in the other. Three more children were born there. The business prospered. We had a cottage at one of the lakes not far from Minneapolis, and in the summer time the whole family went out there, that is, my wife

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and the girls. The boys were either going to school or working during the summers. Of course, all the children went to public school and then to high school. Three of the children went on to the university. Two of my daughters became school teachers. Another daughter became a social worker. Three sons went to the university. One graduated from law school; another became a doctor. The other boys were interested in my business.

Although I studied Talmud at the Ohel Jacob Shule, I was never what you might call a member there. I joined the Fourth Street Shule to which Rabbi Silber came later. That synagogue became the Kenesseth Israel Synagogue later. I kept on my studies of Gemarah whenever the time permitted until I started doing such a large business in 1928 that I just couldn't spare the time any more.

My oldest son was Bar Mitzvah at the Kenesseth Israel Synagogue. He knew Chumosh with Rashi (the five books of Moses with commentary). He never went to the Talmud Torah (the modern Hebrew school). He studied with a private teacher. He recited the haftorah (the prophetic portion of the week) and delivered a speech before the congregation, and then I invited the whole congregation to come home with me for kiddush (sanctification of the wine) and refreshments. I remember that I was angry because my mother-in-law took it on herself to invite her friends to that Bar Mitzvah. They took too much authority. I was active in the Kenesseth Israel Synagogue. Later I became president of that synagogue and was in office for thirteen years.

I think that I gave liberally to all causes, certainly to all the visiting rabbis from overseas. They all used to come to see me after they came to town.

When my other sons became Bar Mitzvah, I didn't make quite as much of a celebration over it as I did for my first son. We made a b'rocho (blessing over the wine) in shule and that was all.

For a time we had a room fixed up in the newer house into which we had moved, for study. It was the children's study

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room. I engaged a private teacher, and he taught the boys as well as the girls Hebrew. Later my younger sons went to the Talmud Torah.

One of my sons was quite a businessman in his own right when he was only ten years old. After school he got a job selling candy in a theater. He would come home very late. He received many lickings for doing that, but he just went on. Nothing could stop him.

My home was always strictly Jewish even though I didn't keep Shabbas because of the business. At home Friday night, the beginning of Shabbas, was always special. There was special food. Everyone dressed up for Shabbas. It was fine. Friday night was always family night at our home. Even through all these years, all the children gather with us for Shabbas dinner and to hear kiddush.

Some people may think that I have changed over the years because I do not do things the same as I used to. I didn't really change. I was always doing the things that were done by everybody else in my neighborhood or the people I knew. I followed the majority, that's all. When I was president of the shule, I went with the crowd. I didn't even in those days believe everything the older folks did. Of course, I have always observed the dietary laws. That's simply because I'm used to it. Let my children do what they want. If you stop to question everything, it's just no good.

In the early days no one asked the reason for every religious question they followed or were supposed to follow. People used to say, "You mustn't ask," so we didn't ask. We just had faith—that was enough. You can't learn faith. Today people want to know the reason for everything. That's why it's no good.

People growing up in this country are living more American lives. The old folks are dying off. This generation isn't any worse from the point of view of the way it lives than the earlier generation. Today they go to schools and universities and they

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just know more. Children do what they think is right when their parents die.

I think that the old type of synagogue, the Orthodox synagogue as I knew it, just isn't good for young people. They need the newer type of modern synagogue. Otherwise they just won't come at all. Not so many years ago we wouldn't think of kindling the lights in our home on Shabbas because it was against Jewish law. We used to have a Gentile turn off the lights for us. Today the whole world has changed and everybody, I think, thinks nothing of turning on lights on Shabbas.

Another thing that has changed is the establishment of Talmud Torahs. Maybe it's better that there are such modern institutions. Time will tell if our young people are better Jews because of them. I think that it's a good thing that there are Sunday schools for our children today. The synagogue should be what I tried to make the Kenesseth Israel Synagogue, the second home for the people.

There are ever so many changes in the lives of this generation from the way it was in the past. Formerly everybody spoke Yiddish. Today our children certainly don't speak it as a regular thing. They have almost forgotten it. In the early days in this community, many women wore sheitels (wigs) in accordance with the practice of shaving off the bride's hair before marriage. Today no one wears such a thing. Formerly everyone prayed every day, or at least most people did when I first came here. Today they just don't. I remember that when one of my sons was attending university, I found out that he hadn't been praying in the mornings, and I slapped him because of it. We used to call our children by their Hebrew and Yiddish names. That stopped when the teachers in the public schools actually gave our children American names. In early days here we used to make the motzi (grace before meals) at every meal. My children don't practice that. Another change I can think of is that when there was a circumcision ceremony, we would have the mohel (a Jewish person skilled in the rite of circumcision) perform the

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ceremony. Today I think that most people have regular doctors. People used to come to shule in early days to give their daughters and sons names in the presence of the congregation. I think that few people do these things today.

I can think of other changes too. In our early days here funeral services were conducted for practically all but the very finest, pious people in their homes. A eulogy was never delivered except for the very righteous. Today everyone gets a eulogy and some very unworthy people are even brought into synagogues for their funeral services. Maybe, though, it's better this way.

Yahrtzeiten (observances of the anniversary of death of members of one's family) were always observed. Everyone observed it. Today ever so many people either forget it or have someone else say kaddish for them. There used to be no embalming. Today practically all bodies are embalmed, even though it's against Jewish law. And they bring flowers to funerals today, another custom that was forbidden. Today every young Jew seems to like sports. In the early days that certainly wasn't true. In fact we got rid of a rabbi here because he used to like to ice skate and ride horseback. People weren't used to those things in their rabbis, although there was really nothing wrong. We used to have study groups in the synagogues of 50 or 60 people right here in Minneapolis. Tell me where they are today?

Not so many years ago children listened to their parents. There was real discipline. Today parents are relegated to an inferior position by their children. In the early days people entertained by visiting with their friends or playing a friendly game of cards. Today they spend so much for entertainment, and they don't enjoy the same kind of entertainment we did. I don't think that many people keep kashrus (the dietary laws) today the way we used to in the early days.

Of course there were freethinkers in those early days as well as today. They were the people who came over from Europe trying to rid themselves of their Jewishness as quickly as possible. But they were only a small group.

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I think that most of the differences of which I am talking are due to the influence of American schools. The children would go to school, listen to the teacher, and then wonder why the home wasn't like the teacher said. First they would wonder, then they would try to make it that way.

Despite all these changes, I do not think that Judaism is dying in America. I think that Orthodoxy is losing ground very quickly, but I think that the Conservative movement is helping to keep Jewish life up very nicely.

Of course, my children are all grown. Practically all of them are married and have their own families and homes. They do things differently from the way my wife and I did them. But I think that they're not such bad Jews, everything considered. They're also good Americans.

HANNAH, DAUGHTER OF MORDECAI

I am one of a large family of children. I was born in the home of my parents, which was located above a grocery store owned by my parents. I guess that it was still not considered safe to bear children in a hospital. The fears of the older generation with respect to the danger of dying, if brought into a public institution like a hospital, were still very great. Certainly my mother never thought of bearing children in a hospital and would have refused to do so had her physician suggested it. I was born just before the turn of the century.

As I have indicated, my father owned a small grocery store. The store was located in the heart of the Jewish neighborhood, on Washington Avenue North just off Fifth Street. My father would see to the buying and would take care of the deliveries. His customers were located in various sections of the city and practically all of them were Jewish. My mother was a very important member of the firm. She spent a great deal of her time in the store, waiting on the trade and taking care of the books and, I suppose, making small talk, which was a very important matter. Storekeepers in those days knew all about the personal