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MY
HOMETOWN

BY

ZVI SCHARFSTEIN

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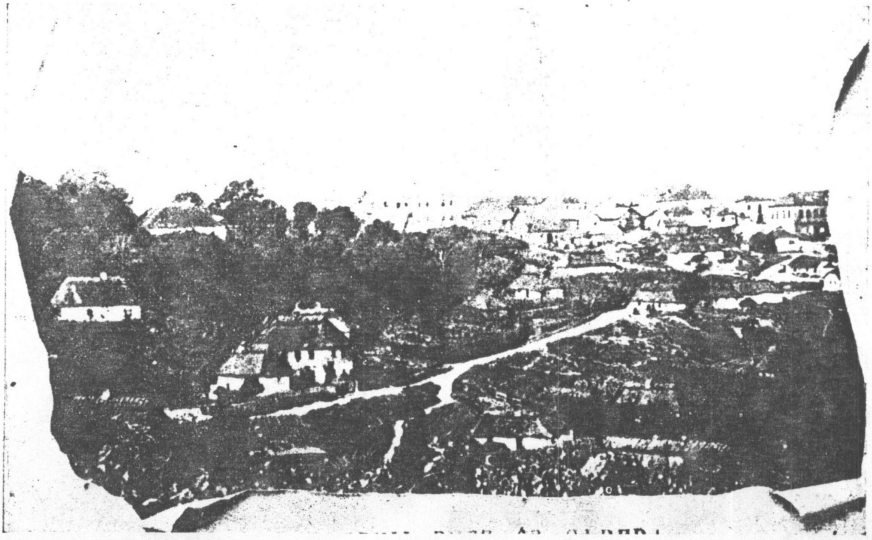






BOYS' SCHOOL

this boy looks like Uncle Max's son Bert, It might have been Max. (Braunstein) — just a guess



A VIEW OF THE TOWN FROM THE NORTH

this did not come out very clear

DUNOVITZ, MY HOMETOWN

by

ZVI SCHARFSTEIN

The cocks, perched at dawn on the back fences of the Gentiles' suburbs, lustily announced that the night was gone. Their crowing penetrated into my room, but did not succeed in rousing me from my slumber. I could not bestir myself so early after a night of darkness, for I was not yet sober. I was drunk, not on wine, but on the books I had pored over until long past midnight. And when I finally stretched out on my bed, I fell into a deep, deep sleep. Nor did I awaken early after one moonlit night I remember. I had been long returning from my stroll with friends down the road that leads from the "new city" out into the country, to the green fields.

We were a gay crowd. When we would get to our meeting place, in the midst of large green fields and beautiful new-ploughed earth, we would feel the spirit of freedom upon us. We would discuss the new book that had just been published, the latest article that had appeared in the literary review. Together we would moon aloud about the large cities, the cultural centers; we would dream of our future and of what we would do. And there were times when a joy would descend

upon us, though we did not know from where; our laughter, re-echoing through the stillness of the night, would frighten the sleeping birds. We drank deep of the brimming cup of the joys of youth and friendship, of the shining hopes beckoning to us from the distance. We were always sorry to cut the thread of our sweet woven visions and to take leave of each other. Only very late, at the first yawn heard from the tired one among us, did we emerge from our world of dreams and reluctantly disperse to our respective homes.

When the factory whistles blew, long, screeching, imperative whistles in rapid succession, to remind the sleepy-heads of their day's obligations – only then would I awaken, with a startled confusion. Sometimes in the spring and summer, when the cold did not deter, I would get out of bed and open the door of my room, which faced into the street, to catch a glimpse of the market-place in its morning garb. The cool fresh air would pour over me deliciously. I would put my head out the door, gaze into the distance, and the world would be revealed to me in all its purity and peace. Is this the same market I saw only yesterday? Is this the place where the wagons creaked past, raising columns of dust, the horses leaving their droppings? Is this the same teeming market where dealers and idlers rush and bustle, bargain and haggle, quarrel and make up, rave and rant, and joke all day? What has happened to the hubbub and to the milling crowds of the market square? In the early hours of the morning it was a thing of dignity in its aloneness, lovely in its freshness, washed clean and covered with the night's dew; cool refreshing winds swayed the green branches of the trees in

the nearby gardens of the Catholic Church. The world was tranquil and fast in the toils of dreaming.

In the distance, from out of the bluish haze of daybreak, the only figure to be seen was an occasional shadowy, sleep-heavy laborer, carrying his bundle of food and plodding slowly towards the "new city", where the factories were. The footsteps of the receding figure echoed faintly and faded away into silence. The figure disappeared into the mist; the market took on again the splendor of its isolation. My sympathies quickened, then, for the worker who had to start his day so early. And I would hurry back to my warm bed and pull the covers up over my head. It would not take very long before I was asleep again – and how delicious were those extra hours of morning sleep!

II

Where did those morning whistles come from?

From the textile mills of our town, some fifty in number, most of them German-owned.

That our town should have become the center of this industry, supplying the needs of all of Russia, was something of a mystery. Dunovitz did not boast any special attribute that might have attracted industrialists. It was small, with a population of 15,000, the large majority of which was Jewish; the minorities were Poles, Ukrainians and Germans. The railway station was some sixty miles away, so that the traveler to the villages of our district was hurtled about in an ordinary wagon or

a carriage from the station. Most of the streets of the town were unpaved, and on rainy days they turned into muddy pools; the wagons would get stuck in the mud up to their axles, and it was all the horses could do to pull them out. The raw materials needed for spinning were not available in the vicinity, and had to be brought from far. How, despite all these drawbacks, did our little town manage to achieve a place of honor?

Documents have been found in the annals of the district that indicate that at the beginning of the 19th century, during the reign of Alexander the First, the first German weavers settled in our town. It will be remembered that it was Alexander the First who signed the Holy Alliance with Austria and Prussia — the treaty unifying the Christian peoples against Moslem Turkey. These ties of friendship opened up Russia to the Germans; a vast new territory, a country of peasants, innocent of industry. The Germans began to emigrate to Russia, where they found ample opportunity for livelihood and enterprise.

One day — our fathers retold us what they had heard from their own fathers — there appeared in our village a number of large covered wagons harnessed to powerful dogs. The wagons stopped at the market-place, and from them descended men who spoke a very strange tongue indeed, not unlike "ivreh teitsh". Our curious villagers, peering into the wagons, saw not only household effects but also hand-looms. While the weavers and their families settled alongside their wagons and began to prepare their meal, a few of the townsfolk went along to the nobleman of the town to give him the news of the arrival of these strange visitors. The

latter was interested and promptly suggested to the strangers that they take up their residence in the village and follow their trade there, promising his personal assistance. It was this single incident that caused the development of the forsaken little village in agricultural Podolia, and its transformation into the center of an important industry, its merchandise sold far and wide throughout all of Greater Russia.

In the course of time the workshops grew and expanded. When the owners began bringing large, steam-driven machines from Germany, the sleeping hamlet woke up and became a town of commerce, a thriving, bustling town. I saw the difference between Dunovitz and other places. When at times I had occasion to pass through the neighbouring villages, I would see the face of poverty and smell boredom in the air. Everything was wrapped in lethargy and a great pall of ennui was upon the people. I saw the near-empty streets and market, and upon the benches of an occasional shack a few men and women slouched, idleness-weary, their eyes seeking something, anything, of interest to seize upon. Here and there a tired conversation would take place to the accompaniment of much yawning. Quarrels and fights were a commonplace in these villages. They served to dispel the depressing tedium of life.

Such was not the case with our town. It, too, was not noisy, but life and movement flowed through it. Large were the numbers of those who came to buy and sell, and many were the inhabitants who traveled about the country. Most of the people in the streets had purpose and destination in their comings and goings. Our village also boasted an upper class who did not

count their pennies, whose dress was elegant, whose tables served the choicest of foods. The Jews of our town had sources of income additional to the accepted sources in the Pale of Settlement. They supplied the German producer with wool from Bessarabia, the Crimea, the Caucasus, and even from abroad, from distant Australia. They brought jute fibre from Nijni-Novgorod, dyes from Latvia and Germany. At the railway station in Proskurov, heavy freight wagons were loaded up and horse-drawn to our village. And the Jews of our town were also traveling salesmen who traversed the length and breadth of Russia, city by city, province by province, selling the merchandise either as agents for the factory or independently. They penetrated even into the vast interior of Russia, as far as frozen Siberia. True, a visitor to our town was readily recognized to be a stranger, but nobody paid any attention to him, nor was the stranger the topic of idle conversation, nor was he expected, as in other villages, to reveal faraway and unknown things.

Contact with the cities of this immense land enlarged the horizons of our town's intellectuals, increasing the scope of their activity and making them more broad-minded. Our folks were no longer so particular about religious observances, nor did they insist on retaining outmoded customs. Our businessman and agents wore modern or semi-modern clothes, wore stiff or soft hats in accordance with changing fashion, and sported pince-nez complete with black silk ribbon. They read the daily papers and the weeklies, mostly in Hebrew, but also in Russian, and they knew what was going on in the world. In their travels they met with the leaders

of the Jewish communities of Russia and talked with them. In this wise our travelers and merchants were influenced by the social movements that were then spreading throughout our world. And when they returned from their trips they would preach the new ideas they had brought back with them.

Not a single one of the youth of our town had to fight for the privilege of education, whether it be Hebrew or secular – it did not occur to anyone to interfere. Reading Mapu or Smolenskin, the reader was not obliged to hide away in the attic with his book. Newspapers and books were available, and the parents, too, welcomed them. Even the rabbi of the town, whose two sons were among the "enlightened", did not forbid his children to read the new literature, nor did anybody protest to him for permitting his son to "go astray." We had Hebrew teachers; we also had secular tutors who prepared the boys for their "gymnasium" entrance examinations. There was scarcely a youth among us, son of the well-to-do and son of the educated alike, who did not read the modern Hebrew literature. A lad with side-curls and dressed in long robes was almost not to be found.

And when Zionism spread in Russia, our town served as the center for the entire area, and let its voice be heard in the press at every opportunity and on any controversial subject that arose. It built up so fine a reputation that the leaders of the Zionist Movement set it up as an example to other towns and villages, so much so that it came to be known as the "Jerusalem of Podolia."

III

There were two parts to our town, the old and the new. The new town spread out on either side of the main road which connected the country seat in Proskorov with Kamenetz-Podolsk, the central town of the district. On this highway, long, according to our limited concepts, was the Greek Orthodox Church. From its large garden surrounded by a high stone wall, the overhanging branches of its trees gave shade to the passers-by in the hot summer days. In the new town there was a special quarter, a little apart from the others. There the factories and the homes of their German owners were situated. The Russian officials and the rich and prominent Jews lived in the houses on either side of the main road. The market was in the old town. There, too, were the businesses and living quarters of the ordinary folk, the shopkeepers, grain merchants, artisans and agents.* Only a very few of the upper and middle classes lived in the old part of town.

The German colony in those days was outstanding in its beauty. The buildings, most of them single-storeyed, were not large, but they were solidly built. Their whitewashed fronts glistened against the surrounding

* In issue No. 114, of 1900, of "Hazefirah", correspondence from our town was published which included the following figures "according to the latest count": 5,000 Jewish families; 800 of the men were artisans, 200 shop-keepers, 296 grain merchants, 200 cloth merchants and the balance pedlars and petty traders. By this count, the number of Jews in our town at that period amounted to close on 20.000.

green of the shrubbery and fruit trees. An atmosphere of tranquility prevailed, that of people secure and firmly rooted. Each house stood alone, on its own plot of ground, with its own garden of colorful flower beds and borders, and its own wide, comfortable benches. Through the polished window panes, transparent curtains could be seen. A pleasant stillness. If you chanced to be there towards evening, after the factories had closed for the day, the stillness would engulf you completely. At times the strains of a piano could be heard from one of the houses. At times a boy or girl would be seen riding a bicycle, a vehicle not to be found among the other residents of our town.

As I would wander through those quiet streets of the German colony, the image of the old town would intrude itself upon my consciousness, the houses crowding in upon each other, the crooked walls that seemed always about to crumble, the narrow dirty alleys, the large, dusty, treeless empty lots, without a flower, without a blade of grass, and I would be consumed by a deep envy. In those days we did not yet know the Germans as we know them today. They were exceedingly polite; that and their external appearance impressed us mightily.

And it was not only that they were so scrubbed and clean. Their community life was so well organized. They had a public garden where they gathered on holidays and summer evenings to spend their time. During these celebrations, we children would stand outside the fence and watch the goings-on inside in wonder. We saw husky men sitting with their broad-shouldered, large-bosomed wives, at heavy oak tables; with the utmost

concentration, they consumed large quantities of fat sausages, guzzled beer from outsize earthen mugs, sang, danced, and revelled, enjoying the flesh-pots of their world. What Jewish family man would ever dream of going out of an evening to forget his woes and sit with his wife drinking beer or wine and raising his voice in song?

The larger Jewish community had practically no public or communal property, except for the synagogue and the Beth Hamidrash (House of Study), and even these were neglected. Although we boasted many an educated man in the community, and not a few honored merchants among them, these did not have much influence on the organization of the community. The communal consciousness of most of the townsfolk was dormant. The official community leaders were the Elders of the Houses of Study, themselves products of the Exile, provincial in outlook, without vision, without courage, and completely lacking in anything like independent spirit. The Jewish community reaped quite a considerable income from the meat tax; but it was in part frittered away and in part deposited to the credit of the government treasury, without benefit to the community.*

*This was he general trend in all the towns of Russia, within the Jewish communities. In our town in 1905, the balance of taxes remaining in the government treasury was 11,315 roubles; in nearby Yarmolintz, 23,232 roubles; in the tiny village Arinin, 14,725, roubles; in our district town, Kamenetz-Podolsk, 96,602 roubles. That same year, in the districts of Podolia, Vohlin and Kiev, the tax balances reached the tremendous sum of 1,508,278 roubles. At the same time, the impoverished teachers of the Talmud Torahs would go the rounds of the homes every Friday to collect what they could as "salary", and the destitute sick lay neglected in the filthy "Hekdesh" (poor-house) without any kind of supervision.

See C.B. Weinselbaum's article on this in *Vestnik of Obrazovania*, September 15, 1912.

Every year the Synagogue officials were invited to a meeting to consult and to discuss the needs of the town. These meetings were held in the presence of the Chief of Police. On those occasions the officials recalled their pitiful needs: the leaking roof of the prayer house, the broken fence, the crumbling wall of the Beth Midrash. The amounts earmarked for such maintenance were microscopic indeed. And then the Chief of Police would propose budgeting handsome sums for general expenditures, which had nothing to do with the specific and urgent needs of the Jewish community, like the laying of new roads, erection of public privies, etc. Nobody paid any attention to the real problems of the community, such as the education of the children of the poor, or the care of the destitute sick. The Rabbis of the town—and in my day there were three—scarcely earned their livelihood, and had to resort to additional efforts on the side to make an extra coin; these sources of income were meagre enough, but bountiful in the shame and indignity they imposed — the sale of yeast, and the acceptance of small gifts from the rich on holidays such as Purim and Channukah. The institutions of charity were on the lowest of levels. The school for poor children excelled only in disorder, and the sick charity-cases lay in filth, without proper food or medical attention. And communal representatives, most of whom knew scarcely a word of proper Russian and could not make themselves understood in the official language, sat dumb before the government official, fearfully nodding their heads and not daring to object to any of his suggestions.

But little by little, with the penetration of the national idea, social awareness awakened, and criticism was increasingly heard against the communal official and the town's leading personalities for their neglect of the charitable and welfare institutions.

Gradually the young people began to organize charity functions, speeches, musical evenings, and sometimes even a play, usually the creation of a local author. One evening a large audience gathered in the hall of the volunteer fire brigade to see an amateur production in Yiddish. The curtain went up on an interesting sight:

On stage were to be seen the walls of a house in ruins, its open doors about to fall off their hinges and its windows broken. On the floor of the house and outside it were piles of garbage. Inside the house were old metal beds, rusty and broken, with torn mattresses shedding their straw stuffing. Sick people were lying on the mattresses, the hair of their heads and beards unkempt, their tattered shirts revealing the naked bodies underneath. From them all came a jumble of moans, mutterings and sighs of misery, the curses of embittered souls.

"Woe is me!" one began, " How great is my pain! A fire is eating at my vitals! It is three days now since the doctor came to see me! I shall lie here in my grief until I expire! May the same fate befall the Red Gabbai!"

"Alas and alack!" cried another opposite him, turning over in his pain. "I haven't eaten a thing since yesterday! Just look at me, a mere bag of bones I am! The privileged officials eat delicacies and grow fat, and us they leave here to die of hunger!"

And a third jumped up from his bed in terror, shouting bitterly: "Rats! Rats! They're running all over my bed! They're eating chunks of my flesh! Get out of here, rats! Get out of here and go to the houses of the officials and grind their bones in your ugly teeth!"

While the sick were still lamenting about their aches and pains, and raining curses down upon the heads of the officials, a crowd came in, poor beggars, deformed and ugly – a lame man limping along on his crutch, a blind man feeling his way with a cane, a one-armed man whose empty sleeve flapped and dangled, a wizened little man, and a hunchback whose hump was large and heavy, and with their entrance the noise and confusion increased beyond measure.

The groans and shouts of the sick on stage mingled with the laughter of the audience that grew louder until the very walls of the building shook.

The following day the town was a seething caldron! Everybody was talking about the leaders of the town, everybody complaining and demanding reforms. But a few weeks went by and the storm subsided. The harsh criticism was forgotten. New problems cropped up to distract the people, and the world went on in its old indifferent way. The filth was not cleaned up, the rations were not improved, the doctor remained sitting at home in comfort and did not bother about visiting the non-paying sick. And as for the squalor and poverty of the poor-house, Mendele Mocher Seforim wrote: "Beggars and sick ones! This shall be your bed, and this shall be the heavenly gate through which your souls pass!"

IV

One of the signs of the awakening in my town was the founding of the volunteer fire brigade. The establishment of such a company seems to us, today, living in Western Europe and in the United States, to be a most ordinary thing, an organization without which no town can exist, a normal civilian institution requiring no special mention. But fifty-five years ago, in the little towns of Russia, this was innovation indeed. Fires were frequent then. The houses were built of wood, the roofs were made of wooden shingles or even thatched with straw. In the summer heat, a single spark was sufficient to cause a large conflagration.

When a fire broke out as a result of a damaged chimney or some other cause, the flames would leap from roof to roof unchecked, and sometimes within a few hours whole streets of houses would be consumed. And the "burned-out" ones remained destitute, having lost everything, without a home, a stitch of clothing, or a crust of bread. More often than not, they had not a soul to whom to turn. They would then be obliged to take up the staff of the wanderer and roam from town to town, from village to village, knocking at doors and begging alms. The groups of such people Mendele Mocher Seforim writes about are not figments of his imagination; he actually met them, armed with documents signed by their Rabbi authorizing them to do their house-to-house begging. Pick up any issue of the "Hatzefirah" or "Hamelitz" of fifty years ago and you will see that there was hardly a town that did not report a devastating fire. Every fire brought ruin to tens of families.

The fires usually broke out at night. I quake with fear even now when I recall the terrifying sight of those blazing fires. The church bells would waken me as they pealed out their message of danger. Each note would echo the loud throbbing of my heart. Looking out, I would see the skies reddened by the licking tongues of fire and our dark alley-ways bright with the dazzling light of the flames. In the street confusion reigned. Those who lived in the houses that were burning all stood outside, dishevelled, in snatched meagre clothing, because the fire had broken out suddenly during the night, awakening them and chasing them hurriedly outdoors. Here stands a man, a fur or blanket over his nightshirt, and a woman next to him, a heavy shawl around her shoulders and over her night-gown, both of them wringing their hands and wailing aloud. A woman comes running, her eyes staring with fear, clutching a screaming baby in her arms. She runs here and there, looking for the house of an acquaintance, a place of refuge for her tiny daughter. A little girl, pale, frightened and shivering, leads her little brother by the hand, dragging him forcibly towards the new city, while he falters, looking backward, seeking his father and mother, weeping bitterly. A waggoner, standing upright in his wagon, is whipping his horses towards the center of town, where the well is, to fill his barrel with water. The townsfolk, the practical ones among them, carry pails of water and run to the fire. In the market-place is a jumble of household goods, clothing, and overturned pots and pans, that were rescued at random from the flaming houses. In front of these piles of furniture and clothes the mem-

bers of the families stand crying helplessly, their friends, as helpless as they, consoling them.

And as they stand and watch, a new burst of flame thrusts out and catches the roof of an adjacent house, the fierce brightness increases, a new shouting begins, and the fear heightens. The sight of the devouring fire, the flying sparks borne right and left, the walls crumbling noisily, fire-brands burning, the flames lighting the faces with a strange light; the scurrying of the unfortunate ones, the weeping and wailing of the women and children; the miserable appearance of the water-bearers, pouring thin, ineffectual streams of water into the flames of the fire rising ever higher with gigantic force to consume everything – all this instilled terror into the hearts of the people. The world has stumbled from its ordered course and has sunk back to the original chaos before the Creation! And there is nobody to rescue it!

The firemen's company of the German colony had complete equipment: long wagons, ladders, large rubber hoses, tremendous water barrels, axes, and wrecking apparatus. The men were well trained in fire-fighting, for from time to time fire drills were organized for them. When they put on their uniforms and steel helmets, and when they threw the strong jets of water from their large hoses, our fear lessened.

But, when fire broke out in the Jewish quarter, and the church bells rang out their warning, the German fireman would discuss whether it was worth their while to go out. They would procrastinate until they were begged to come and save the burning houses. And when they finally condescended to leave the fire station, taking their equipment with them, and arrived at the scene

of the fire, they went about the business unhurriedly, as if they were pleased at the loss of Jewish property. The townsfolk saw this and complained about their malice, but there was nobody to talk to.

At long last the youth of Dunovitz were shaken out of their lethargy. One young man, Chaim Hirsch Visotzky, became their leader, and they organized a new fire brigade. It included the husky fellows, one of the butchers, the tailors, the cobblers, muscular chaps who were not afraid of work or danger. They also added to their numbers a few Ukrainian fellows. From the town's coffers they set up a roomy fire-house, bought all the necessary equipment, and began to train in the art of fire-fighting. From then on the Jews were released from the "favors" of the Germans. The Jewish physician, Dr. Marmor, spearheaded the successful effort to earmark the sum of 3,000 roubles annually from the meat tax for the maintenance of the station and other expenses of the company. The large hall in the fire station also served for public meetings and communal functions.

This new fire brigade made a profound impression, and not in our town alone. The whole district looked upon it as upon the harbinger of a new spirit, as a revolt against passivity. "Hatzefirah" published an article on the young men who placidly watch the sweat and labor of their fathers being eaten up by flames and do nothing about it. One of the learned men of our town, Mordechai Rosen (who later emigrated to New York and wrote articles in "Hadoar" on the events in Russia at the beginning of the Bolshevik regime), heatedly replied to this contention:

"Had the author but seen the wonderful enthusiasm of our young men on that evening when the first fire broke out after the establishment of the firemen's company, when they donned their new outfits for the first time and did their work with diligence and zeal! He would not have mocked at them nor would he have said that our young men are ashamed to learn how to climb ladders. If he had only seen how the sons of our wealthy families climb and scamper up on to the three-storey houses easily and without fear..."

("Hatzefirah", No. 127,)

This fire brigade was the first step toward reform in the communal affairs of the town. The Zionists, particularly the younger men among them, began to devote themselves to improving the educational set-up. But this is a special chapter, a proud chapter in the annals of our town, and deserves a detailed discussion.

V

Besides the merchants and agents who dealt in the supply of raw materials to the factories and in the distribution of cloth to the cities and towns of Russia, our townsfolk were mostly engaged in commerce and the trades. The commerce was for the most part petty. Except for some twenty or twenty-five large or fairly large stores, the shops were small and poor; most of them were no more than wooden booths set up in the market-place. The capital invested in these businesses

was small indeed, some two, three hundred roubles, and even these paltry sums represented goods taken on loan. There were other tradesmen who resembled pedlars more than shop-keepers. They kept their stocks at home, taking them out every morning and displaying them on stalls in the market, and, at the close of day, stuffing their wares back into sacks and baskets and taking them home for the night.

On most week-days these tiny shops were practically empty, the customers few and far between. The shop-keepers would sit idly in front of their shops. Neighbors, agents and idlers wandering about would come up to pass the time of day in chatter; and when the conversation would falter and die out, the yawns would return.

Such an atmosphere of idleness was most conducive to gossip, to discussing the private affairs of neighbors: who was doing well in business and who was on the verge of bankruptcy; who was honest in his business dealings and whose scales were false; who was fortunate in the marriage contracted for his daughter, and who married off his daughter to a fool or a ne'er-do-well; who was too mean and miserly to do a good turn, and who was a spendthrift, wasting his money on luxuries or on sending his wife to watering places.

But there was one day in the week that was full of activity, that everybody waited for — market day. On that day the farmers of the entire district gathered to sell their produce and livestock. Having made their sales and gotten cash, they spread out throughout the town, among the shops, to buy whatever they needed. This day differed from all the other days of the week.

The tradespeople would get up at dawn, run to the synagogue or mumble their prayers at home, and hurry out to market. The women, too, got up early and woke up the children, instructing them what to eat and what to take to "Heder" since they, too, were going to market and would not be back until evening. The shops opened early and the shop-keepers waited impatiently for customers.

On such a day I used to love to get up early and roam around town, to see the market and the crowds and bustle. There were two markets in our town. The one, opposite our house, was for all kinds of grains, the other, in a large square surrounded by buildings, was for the sale of livestock, small and large, that is horses, sheep, rams, calves, cows, goats.

The market opposite our house soon became crowded with wagons standing in close rows. Beside each wagon stood the farmer with his whip under his arm; his wife in a colored kerchief sat in the wagon. The Jews and Jewesses of town walked about, approaching each wagon to examine it and see what it offered for sale. One fingered the rye in the sack, taking up a handful of the grain the better to see it in the sunlight and to make sure it was clean of chaff. Another opened wide the mouth of a sack to see whether the potatoes were not rotted. One woman would take a chicken from the hands of the farmer's wife, hold it aloft in her left hand and feel it with her right to see how fat it was. Another examined the eggs in a basket to make sure their size was satisfactory. The negotiations were conducted with much heat and earnestness on the part of the Jewish buyers, with oaths and curses, with much hand clapping

and back slapping; and, on the part of the seller, by many hesitations. And the noise was deafening. The horses neighed, the roosters crowed, the geese cackled, the cattle bellowed, and the pigs grunted.

Boys and youths roamed about among the wagons. They would come up behind a horse with fear and trembling, gingerly stroke its back, stretch a cautious hand towards its tail and quickly pull out a long hair or two for violin bow strings. The farmers and the customers alike both chased the rascals away, warning them of the danger of the horses's hoof. And indeed an unpleasant incident occured. A horse was standing in its stall, placidly chewing its oats, when suddenly it raised one of its mighty hooves and kicked. The child ran for his life!

There comes a farmer striding back from the government store where he bought the bottle of whisky he is carrying. He breaks open the bottle by knocking its neck against the wagon-wheel, raises the jagged bottle to his lips and guzzles down a hearty swallow. His face screws up in a grimace, and he wipes his wet mustaches on his sleeve.

To buy a hat or boots or fur, or even a cheap lamp, the farmer always brought along with him a whole group of "experts", his wife, his brother and sister, his uncle and uncle's friend, his neighbor and his buddy. The farmer's attitude toward the Jew, whether buyer or seller, was always one of suspicion. He must always be on guard, and all his wary friends and relatives were along to help him. When such a group came to make a purchase in the winter time, their combined volume was tremendous in the little shop. Every one of them

wore a heavy sheepskin coat, the fur inside, over all his other clothes. A farmer so dressed was broader than he was tall, round as a barrel. A group of four or five such peasants took up all the space of the tiny shop, leaving no room to move in. They all begin to feel the materials, to drape them dress-wise over themselves, examining them inside out, finding imperfections, looking in every corner, asking prices, offering less than half. They listen carefully and suspiciously to the shop-keeper, give him arguments, insult him to his face. They leave, going to two or three other shops to see whether they can do better elsewhere, and, as a rule, finally come back to the first shop to buy the disputed article.

While these negotiations are going on, the members of the party of experts throw searching glances here and there, in the hope that the shop-keeper's attention will be distracted for a moment so that they may snatch a little something into their pockets, unseen. For this reason the shop-keeper's wife, his son and his daughter are always on hand in the shop on market-day, to watch the customers and their friends with eagle eyes.

In the meantime, the shop-keeper is busy lauding his merchandise, swears that his price is rock-bottom and final, and heartily slaps the hand of the farmer as an indication that the transaction hns been completed satisfactorily. The next step is for the farmer to open his purse; but he falters, he reconsiders, and the more the shop-keeper eggs him on, the greater grows his suspicion. And when he finally takes out the purse that hangs around his neck, hidden under his shirt, to pay the price of the bought article, his hands tremble, he hems and haws, he finds it as difficult to part with his

money as if with life itself. The bargaining over an item valued at a rouble or two was likely to take hours. The shop-keeper's voice was hoarse, and the palm of his hand was red and painful from all the hearty slaps. By the end of the eagerly awaited market day, the shop-keeper returned home listlessly, exhausted in body and spirit.

Among the petty shop-keepers the competition was bitter. It was, literally, a fight over a crust of bread. A farmer seen in the market, walking about among the booths, was the signal for every shop-keeper, or his wife, to stand in front of his booth or shop and desperately try to attract the potential customer. They talked to him, they grabbed his lapels and tried to drag him in; they brought out their goods and swore on their honor that they would give him the best possible bargains, even without profit to themselves. Sometimes they found it necessary to warn him against their cheating competitors.

And when it comes to competition, if the truth be told, the power of the woman was greater than that of the man. The "weaker sex" is expert in talk, in repetition, in devising curses and expletives. Two shop-keepers' wives, neighbours, both of them pulling at a single customer – of course it ends in a fight And in a few moments they will have forgotten its very origin and will have gotten down to the business of a quarrel for quarrel's sake, looking for all the would like two fighting cocks. The other neighbors hear and settle down to enjoy themselves at the "free show". Besides the spicy language with which they goad on the two opponents, they also disclose the shame of each of them, reminding her of the sins of her youth, of the sins of her pa-

rents and ancestors, of the misbehavior of her sons and daughters. Long hidden family secrets now become public property. It even happens that the women proceed from words to deeds, pulling each other's hair, slapping and scratching, in a frenzy to inflict pain and shame. The onlookers, no longer able to contain themselves, rush up and pull the women apart by force to prevent them from really harming each other. But the hate engendered by competition remains as strong as ever, and when the "combatants" chance upon each other thereafter, they throw daggers of loathing at each other.

Because of the dreadful economic situation – even in our relatively thriving town the number of public charges was very large – the competition was great and there was little peace and friendliness. There were some 300 agents who bought grain from the farmers and sold it at paltry profit to the wholesalers, who in turn exported the wheat and rye and barley.

On market days, the farmer would bring his wagon into town laden with grains, vegetables, fruits, chickens, geese, ducks and eggs. The wagons came in a steady stream. The middlemen awaited them in market and asked of each as he arrived: What did you bring? How much is that? And the farmer wrinkled his brow, laboriously considered the matter in silence, and found it hard to decide what to ask for his produce. He preferred to wait until a second and third customer appeared and made him offers. But the agents were eager to get at the produce first. So the keener ones among them went out of town to meet the farmer on the highway and buy his grain even before he got to town. When this began, others decided to best their rivals. They got up

earlier still and went out farther, to be the first to meet the farmer, each trying to outdo his colleague. The farmer, seeing this rush, was convinced that the Jews were anxious to buy his grain at half price. And as the buyer raised his offered price, so the farmer's suspicion of his motives increased, until he finally chased the buyer away and drove on to market to see what he could get there. And if on the way the jobber did succeed in buying a sack of rye or some other grain, he would lift the sack onto his shoulder and trudge back, carrying it himself to the wholesaler, selling it to him at a profit of no more than a few coins.

VI

Most of the men in our town were artisans, in all fields. Tailors specializing in men's clothes and others in women's clothes; shoemakers and cobblers; carpenters and cabinet makers; furriers; hatters; coopers, tinsmiths and blacksmiths; house painters, signmakers; watchmakers and jewellers; bakers of bread and bagel, makers of preserves; and any and every other trade for which there was the slightest demand. Many were craftsmen, but few qualified as artists in their chosen fields, for they had not properly mastered them. Every artisan had his apprentices, but from the very beginning of the apprenticeship they served two masters: the artisan and his wife. They carried the laden shopping basket from market, they swept the floor, they carried out the pails of slop, and did all the other chores about the

house, important in themselves but by no means conducive to the mastery of a trade. Their teachers and instructors, too, were not in the category of Bezalel Ben Uri, nor did their work rise to a truly craftsmanlike level.

The demand for fine work was not particularly great. It was not appreciated, nor could it be paid for. Only the wealthy demanded becoming and well-made clothes. The ordinary customer, comprising the majority, scoffed at this and failed to see anything extraordinary in the absence of style. The important thing was "tachlis" – utilitarianism: a coat was made in order to cover the body's nudity and to keep it warm in cold weather; shoes were sewn in order to protect the feet from hurt. So what does it matter if a garment is too big?

My father had a hat factory. One of his workers, Notteh by name, was a young man who had his meals with us and lived in our house. This fellow was very particular about his dress. His jacket was always immaculate and pressed. Before he went to sleep he would smooth his trousers and carefully hang them up. When he went out he would always prepare his toilette carefully. He was an object of amusement: Look how that fellow's all dressed up! And what if his pants were wrinkled? What's he knocking himself out for?

The artisans' apprentices were considered the gay blades of town. Very few of them learned their fathers' trades, ignoring the injunction, "The fathers deeds shall be an example to their sons." Most of them went into other fields on purpose, for, are not other pastures greener? They knew exactly the future that awaited them. And because they knew that as soon as they reached

man's estate and got married, they would suffer poverty they decided to enjoy life for as long as possible. And so, from all the workshops voices were lifted in laughter and song; the apprentices sang religious and secular songs, songs of love and songs of satire. They told each other stories. And they laughed day in day out.

VII

These apprentices did not aspire to greatness; their path was cut out for them. The sons of the middle class — that was an entirely different matter. They studied, a few in the Beth Midrash (House of Study), where they specialized in Talmud; but most of them studied secular subjects at home. They read the modern Hebrew literature and they studied Russian and other regular elementary subjects either with private tutors or by themselves. They spent much of their time in long walks and in talk. Seldom did they prepare for any specific profession, such as pharmacy, medicine or law; mostly they studied for the sake of study, because it was the thing to do — the son of a well-to-do family was supposed to be educated.

When the fellow reached the marrying age, the professional match-makers would come with fitting propositions to his parents. When the deal was completed, the bridegroom would collect a few hundred roubles and be assured of food and sustenance for a year or more, depending on his standing, until such time as he would find his own way in life. When he married the girl, the

young man would deposit the dowry with some "safe" person and receive accumulated interest. But the months of honeymoon passed quickly. The father-in-law had made his promises on the basis of the belief that "The Lord who gives life will also provide bread," and waited for a miracle. The miracle never happened, and the proverb was never fulfilled. And the young couple became a burden on the harried parents of the bride.

In the first days after the wedding, the learned young man was well turned out, his clothes well cared for, his hair brushed and neat. He would go to the Beth Midrash, meet his friends, spend the day with them in theological and philosophical discussion, and return of an evening to his prepared meal. His parents-in-law would treat him with honor, hiding from him their straitened circumstances and keeping their troubles to themselves. But such worries do not remain hidden forever and sooner or later the day comes when they must be revealed. Sighs and complaints against the hard times overflow from the heart and penetrate the consciousness of the groom. The food, in the beginning so lavishly served him, now begins to deteriorate in quantity and quality. And eventually the time comes when the hint is thrown out — in subtle or outspoken manner — that the couple has overstayed its welcome, that it is time they quit living at the parents' expense. The groom is then obliged to face the serious problem of what to do. There are precious few alternatives from which to choose: to withdraw his capital from safe investment and transfer it to a petty agent or broker at a high interest, and to lose, for who can tell whether he will ever get his investment back; to become a part-

ner to a merchant in need of capital, and to lose. All the roads were beset with risks and led to loss. The result was that one more was added to the community who prayed with concentration: O Lord, Thou who dost succor the poor, help me!

A number of the wealthy citizens earned their livelihood, in whole or in part, from usury. They would lend small sums, from fifty roubles to a few hundred, to each according to his worth, and the borrower undertook to return the amount plus interest in weekly instalments, completing the repayment of his debt in the course of a year. Every Friday afternoon, men and women, boys and girls, would stream towards the money-lender's house to bring him the weekly payment. The money-lender would sit in comfort at his table, count the notes and coins with concentration, as if he were performing a holy task, and check and list the amounts in his ledger. These rich men, the money-lenders, usually became misers, as a result of their handling the interest-coins. They held on to their dinars like rats, and there were those who deprived even themselves of the essentials of life. There was one such who, although not among the wealthiest of the money-lenders, nevertheless carried his miserliness to such utter perfection, and yet he was not very successful; his body let him down, and he died of starvation.

VIII

On the whole, there was a goodly amount of neighborliness and friendliness. The people met daily in the

synagogue and in the Beth Midrash and would spend an hour or two in talk on current events, in reporting to each other on local and world happenings. In the winter, neighbors would visit with each other over a glass of tea; visits would be returned between neighbors and relatives on the Sabbath and on holidays. Hannukah was the time for family parties, when the lady of the house would make batches of potato pancakes, and bring up the best cherry wine from the cellar; and the invited and self-invited guests would gather round the long table in the brightly lit dining room, eating and drinking, and listening to the recital of anecdotes or to wonder tales of the Hassidim. The pancakes were brought on in lavish quantities and disappeared as fast; spirits soared and the feeling of friendly well-being spread to embrace all.

There was an established custom of mutual aid among the women. Every well-to-do housewife would buy braces of geese in the winter, fatten them up and, when the time came, get the shochet to come and slaughter them. Then her neighbors would come in, gather in her kitchen and, sitting in a row, would help pluck the geese, accompanying themselves with a steady stream of light chatter. After all the feathers were plucked and all the geese skinned (so that their fat could be rendered down for use in Passover cooking and the like), each neighbor would get a goose to take home with her, for no housewife could use that much poultry during the following week or two. And when the neighbor's turn came to slaughter her geese, she would return the favor. In this manner a group of neighbors ate goose for weeks on end.

In my youth, around 1895, community reading became popular, thanks to the folk writer, Shalom Aleichem, who brought joy into the drab lives of the Jews. About that time monologues and short stories began to appear in cheap booklets, which sold for about five kopeks each. These thin booklets were distributed in tens of thousands. I remember that they used to be delivered to my father's shop in bundles of hundreds. The demand for them was tremendous and in no time at all they would all be sold. They would be read aloud in the home before a circle of friends, who were constantly bursting out in delighted laughter at each joke, typical discussion, juicy expression, argument of a sharp-tongued woman, or tall tales of a man addicted to flights of fancy. The audience enjoyed these folk tales and took the author to their hearts.

They were particularly fond of those stories taken directly from their own lives, from the reality they knew so well — the description of the modern Menachem Mendel, the bewildered, imprudent chaser of rainbows, who was never discouraged by all the disappointments in the world, who always bounded back in his incorrigible optimism, whose dreams never faded, and who at the slightest hint of an enterprise that might spell a bit of profit, was off again in flights of fancy, his head in the clouds, rushing straight into a new disappointment. Or the absent-minded shodchan (match-maker) who works hard at making matches between bride and groom but who, in his absent-mindedness, forgets to ascertain which family has the daughter and which the son. As a result, he arranges a meeting at a designated inn between two girls; the exasperation, indignation and

wrath that result and the farcical humor of the situation delight the readers. Or the conversation of the life insurance agent who is traveling by train and tries to talk a fellow passenger into buying insurance; the latter agrees readily that there is nothing quite as important and secure as insurance, until finally it becomes clear that they are both insurance agents, that each was hoping to sell insurance to the next one, each looking forward to the commission from the sale, until they disclosed their mutual error. — All these vignettes amused the people, but also educated them. What the moral of each tale did not succeed in putting across, the laughter it evoked did. The uprooting of all these Don Quixotes, who weave the fabric of their lives from the spider webs of vain, wishful dreams, brought home to the readers the awareness of the emptiness of their lives, the flimsiness of their position, and served as an incentive to self-evaluation. Shalom Aleichem's stories did much to awaken the people to a true realization of their status in all its shortcomings.

IX

The routine of life in our town was highly ordered. All its inhabitants were regimented to one tradition. They followed the trodden path and complied with the accepted customs with little variation. The year was divided into weeks, the weeks into days, and the loveliest day of all was the Sabbath, the day of pleasures, and therefore all the ordinary days of the week were inci-

dental. When the housewife went to market, even as early in the week as Tuesday, she bought her chicken or goose only for the Sabbath. The Jew is not an epicure nor a glutton to indulge in poultry on an ordinary weekday – cheap mutton is good enough, and the choice poultry is to be kept for the Sabbath, the Day of Joys. The fish-monger would entice the woman by wafting a fat, quivering carp before her, and she would enjoy looking at it and anticipating its goodness when finally prepared for the Friday night meal, after the Sabbath had been ushered in. Five days of the week were spent in work and sweat, in the worries of providing for the family, in the great turmoil of making a living. But these grey, joyless days, with their aggravations and burdens, would in themselves not have been worth living, had it not been for the Sabbath. These days were but in preparation for the great day, the Sabbath!

On Thursday night, late, when everybody in the house was asleep, the woman was still up and working, kneading the dough, baking the Sabbath halah and cakes. By Friday the sweet aroma of the Sabbath was already in evidence. Friday lunch was no more than a snack, left-overs, or the inexpensive parts of the cuts of meat, such as spleen and liver in gravy, a bit of vegetables and a piece of bread, no more.

By Friday noon the voice of the shamash could already be heard as he strode through the market and the streets of town announcing, "Jews, off to the Baths!", as a sign that the ovens had been lit, the kettles filled with boiling water, and the bath-house filled with steam. Immediately the men would emerge, their little sons in tow, a bundle of fresh linens under their arm,

and go down towards the bath-house. Two or three hours later they would return, their faces beaming, side-curls dripping, the white of their clean shirts shining against their black clothes. Neighbors would stroll along, talking together about various matters, Torah, life, Chassidism. They would part and each turn in to his own home, where his wife had a glass of boiling hot tea waiting for him, with little salty savories. The head of the house would sit down to his tea with real enjoyment and would recite the Song of Songs. Then it would be time to put on his Sabbath garb and prepare to go to the synagogue to usher in the Sabbath.

The entire household was deep in the preparations toward this day. When the children returned from Heder, earlier on this day than on others, the mother would bathe them, wash their heads, and dress them in clean clothes; they felt like little princes and dared not go outside to play lest they get their clothes dirty. They waited impatiently until their father took them by the hand and led them to synagogue. Only the girls, who need not attend synagogue, congregated in their cliques, each one with her newly plaited braid and her freshly ironed dress, whispering and exchanging confidences; their carefree laughter could be heard from afar.

For the youth, the height of their Sabbath joy was going for a walk on Friday night after supper. On moonlit nights the young men and girls would go out to the highway, all dressed up, the men, each one with his shining white collar, his eye-drawing colorful silk tie, his hair neatly combed, his pince-nez carefully perched on his nose, and his modern hat at a jaunty angle on his head; and each one of the girls, hair washed and

combed, shiny white silk shirt-waist, and a delicate whiff of perfume about her. They walk along in groups of threes and fours and fives, meeting friends and greeting each other, conversing easily and happily. Their talk inevitably leads to literature and philosophy; if the group is male only, they will discuss the latest poem, story or article to have appeared in the literary magazine "Hashiloah"; if girls have joined the group, the talk turns to Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dosteyevsky, or to Gorki and the other modern authors who introduce new types and open up whole new worlds to them.

The Friday night walk was secondary only to the long excursion that took place the following day, on Saturday towards evening, when the highway was black with people. This time not only the youth went out, but the adults too, the men with their wives; everybody who still had a spark of life in him turned out on Saturday. Harrassed merchants and shop-keepers, scarcely earning a living, workshop apprentices, seamstresses who sit day after day bent over their machines and needles, cooks and servants who suffer abuse at the hands of their mistresses – everybody cast off his daily worries, lost the worried wrinkles that creased his brow, dispelled the cloud of sadness usually lurking in the eye, and walked out carefree for this one day, with friendliness in his heart, conscious of the goodness of life.

A youngster who had grown up and for the first time put on an ironed shirt and a stiff white collar and loud silk tie, would look about him furtively to see whether anybody had noticed him and his costume and thereby know that he was now grown to man's estate,

ready to take his proper place among the adults. The young girl approaching maturity, her hair washed and braided in one long braid tied with a ribbon, with fluttering heart watches the young passers-by out of the corner of her eye, wondering who of the young men will pay attention to her; every glance thrown her way gives her a delicious little thrill. Young newly-weds walk along together, proudly showing off their new clothes. The older and settled conservative citizens stroll along and speak of civic matters and the commercial situation.

The strollers grow in number, one stream up and one stream down, elbows practically touching as they pass, and each one feels that he is part of a whole, that he belongs, that the community is large and he has a place in it; he is at peace in his world.

The younger generation did not differentiate too closely between the holy day and the week-day, nor were they convinced that the days of the week were nothing more than a leading-up to the Sabbath. They were eager to enjoy themselves at the slightest opportunity.

A new baker came to Dunovitz and opened a shop in the new part of town. It was a shop chock full of sweetmeats the like of which were to be found only in the metropolis, cakes made of layer upon layer of chocolate, covered with beaten egg-white, topped by a strawberry or cherry. There were youngsters who came there every evening to eat the delicacies and enjoy themselves. They came almost secretly. First of all, it was wasteful; secondly, how could they be sure that the dietary laws were strictly followed? They came in



BOYS'. SCHOOL

Tabobita uuosa



GIRLS' SCHOOL FOUNDED IN 1902,
THE FOUNDER AND TEACHER SONIA WURSTATMAN, SITTING IN THE MIDDLE.

Міська школа, заснована в 1902 р.
Засновник і вчителька Соня Вурстатман, сидить в середині



ABRAHAM TEIBER'S HOUS, AT THE NEW QUARTER

Будинок Авраама Тайбера у новому кварталі

usually at twilight, and from there would go off on their long walk beyond the city limits, sometimes boys and girls together. Their parents did not object; they closed their eyes and saw no wickedness, as long as the son kept the tacit condition that he walk out with the daughters of respected families befitting himself, his family and station. Of a cold, snowy day, a gang of us would rent a sleigh drawn by powerful horses in beautiful harness and go out for an hour's drive along the ice-bound highway; the cold is brisk and invigorating; we sing and laugh and shout with sheer well-being.

In this manner were old and new blended. The old order still ruled and determined the life of our community, but at its threshold stood the new, which would steal its way into the home and find its place. There was no great objection, hence there was also no defiance and no revolt. The youngsters get along well with their parents, use their teffilin and say their prayers, attend synagogue services on the Sabbath and on holidays, and follow all the customs of Israel, even those that are important only in the eyes of women and ignoramuses. But, with going through the required motions of these traditional ceremonies, the young man is amused rather than inspired by religious fervor. To him it is only a gesture. Parents see their sons studying non-religious subjects and reading secular books, shortening their clothes and their side-curls, sometimes even going so far as to completely shave off their side-curls and beards, going out walking with girls; and they offer no objection. These are but signs of the times, the demands of a changing world. In fact, they think, secular education and its concomitants are necessarily characteristic of the new

generation; knowledge of the Russian language is necessary to life and commerce; and the son who has mastered the new education thereby bestows honor upon his parents.

X

On the whole the residents of our town were typical Galut ("Exile") Jews in their physical appearance, especialiy the middle-aged and the old folk, stooped and skinny, shuffling weakly as they walked. There were two major reasons for this: most of them spent their time in their shops and homes, studying, or sitting constantly and sewing or cobbling shoes, or selling their various goods, with practically no opportunity for physical exercise or fresh air. Sport was unknown. In my day the child went out to play competitive games with his friends. ("Stick and Peg" was a popular game), to swim in the river in the summer and skate on the ice in winter. But during the youth of our elders, play was a crime, a shameful waste of time. When a Jew saw a child at play, he felt it his duty to reprimand him: "You are old enough to be studying; why are you wasting your time in nonsense?"

From the time the child, at the age of eight or nine, began to study Gemara, all the grown-ups took it upon themselves to supervise and discipline him. This concerted public opinion had its effect upon the child, and he began to feel guilty about his natural desire to play; so he played and took care that no adult saw him at it.

And as he grew older, he became increasingly serious-minded, increasingly aware of his duty to concern himself only with study and worthwhile pursuits. And then he would marry and his troubles would begin. His face would become prematurely wrinkled with care, his harried brain would be constantly awhirl with the daily problem of finding a source of livelihood. The young groom would bend under the yoke of his economic difficulties, and in a short time poverty and domestic worry would leave their indelible stamp upon his face and back, and turn him into an old man.

In spite of all this, the youngsters were well developed. The desire for life won out. The good mother watched carefully over her son and daughter, saw to it that they ate well, encouraged friendships which made their life pleasant, full of play and laughter and even revelling. And then the son would reach his twentieth year, the dread year of crisis which harrassed the strong, handsome fellow. For at twenty-one he had to do military service, unless he was an only son, or weakly or deformed and unfit for war. There were few only sons; in those days people were not interested in birth control. And sons were considered a blessing rather than a curse; blessed was the mother who had many sons.

But when it came to being drafted, that was a different matter. And this was understandable: they served for three years, during which period sons were torn from their mothers and homes, from their studies, from their businesses, from their preparations for life itself. Why should the young man serve the Russian Army? For loyalty to the Crown? — in gratitude for the innumerable decrees issued against Israel by the vicious

regime? Because of the Pale of Settlement imposed on them, the limited professions and trades open to Jews, the numerus clausus in the schools? And what will the Jewish youth do in the army? He will be among the sons of peasants and farmers, confirmed anti-Semites who will maltreat him and subject him to vicious officers. And the matter of kosher food was also a problem. To defile themselves by eating pork and other abominations – parents and sons alike were revolted at the prospect.

And so, both parents and sons sought ways to escape the service. And the ways were various: A few months before they were due to be drafted, the boys would get together and "fast". They would eat very little and what they did eat was chosen with an eye to those foods that cause diarrhea. They slept little, sitting up nights on end in the Beth Midrash or in each other's homes, keeping awake so as to lose weight. After a few weeks of this routine of mortification and castigation of the body, the boys grew pale as death, emaciated and weak and unsteady on their feet. But such a fellow was not permanently disqualified; he was examined and given a year's extension; at the end of the second year he was examined again and again given a year's extension. Only after the third year, if they were convinced that he was indeed in a hopelessly weakened condition, only then was he finally dismissed. During these three years the young man continued to punish and abuse his body until his health was completely impaired for the rest of his life. He was freed from military service but with a ruined stomach, forever more a candidate for all kinds of nervous disorders. Such a "lucky" one took a wife and, a

ruined hulk of humanity, entered upon the battle for existence.

But far worse off were those who disfigured themselves to evade service. There were experts who knew how to inflict injury upon a well person. There was a poison that was inserted into the eye, causing a kind of cataract which gave rise to blindness. There was a strong poison inserted in the ear and the tympanic membrane was pierced, causing infection and dripping. Hearing was impaired, and the slightest breeze was enough to bring about inflammation of the ear. There were those who had their leg broken at the thigh and they would be lame forever after. Others would have the "specialist" cut the sinews of the arm and re-tie them to the joint so that the arm could not be extended. There were army candidates who were given certain concoctions to drink which made their skin yellow and their eyes green, and inflicted all sorts of other illnesses and disfigurements. Of course the "specialists" swore that the inficted injury or imposed illness was but temporary, that the infection would disappear in short order, that full sight or hearing would be restored, that the broken leg bone would mend, the muscles of the arm would stretch and return to their normal functioning, the green eye and yellow skin would turn back to their normal healthy colors; but not always did these promises come true. I knew many such unfortunate ones. A teacher's son whose arm was thus shortened and never mended, had perforce to become a teacher himself; a relative of mine whose ear had been "treated" never regained his full hearing.

The military medicos and the members of the draft boards knew all about these methods of evasion, but they received their brides and closed their eyes to them. For the most part those who were pressed into service were the sons of artisans and poor folk who did not fear the service. There were also follows from the working classes who ordinarily did hard physical labor to earn their bread, and who welcomed military service. They hoped that during their period of duty they would get enough to eat, the government would supply them with good clothes and they would be able to do as they liked in their leisure, after a day's work. But these were very few in number; most of the Jewish boys tried to get out of serving the ruthless government. And this effort led to increased numbers of invalids and men old before their time.

Living in towns, without any contact or familiarity with nature, the Jews came to be frail, frightened of every barking dog and seeing a menace in every animal. Every non-Jew living on the outskirts of town had a watchdog to keep strangers away; a Jew would not have a dog in his house, and a child who played with or patted a dog was naughty and had to be reprimanded. The Jew was therefore in a constant state of fear; when he saw a dog, he would grow pale and his heart would rise in his throat. His one thought was how to escape with his life. As a result, the farmer and peasant and even the city-dwelling Gentile looked upon the Jew as a contemptible weakling, an easy prey to torment.

Nevertheless, there were to be found among the Jews men of strength and brawn who feared nothing

and who stood up aggressively to their enemies. These were the craftsmen who wielded heavy instruments: carpenters, woodcutters, butchers, waggoners. They were accustomed to outdoor life, to the open roads; they knew how to handle a whip and how to tame horses. The butchers particularly made a name for themselves with their physical heroics. They chopped up the powerful carcasses of the cattle with their axes on the large chopping-blocks, and wielded the knife expertly, and the sight of blood did not faze them.

Sometimes rioting and pilfering from the Jewish community was expected as revenge for an argument between Jew and Gentile in the market place. The Jew might have accused the peasant of stealing and the argument led to a fist fight; or the farmer might have accused the Jew of cheating and feelings run high. That was the signal for the farmers who had gathered in the market to come to the aid of their fellow and help beat up the Jews; and the Jews of the town retreated in fear to lower their shutters and lock their shops. Then it was that the butchers left their shops, armed with their sharpened axes, every one of them imposingly muscular. And when they raised their murderous instruments above their heads, ready to do battle, the peasants suddenly decided that caution was the wiser course and dispersed. The two parties to the quarrel then submitted to the arbitration of one of the town's elders, and the Jewish community was saved from bloody attack.

Hebrew authors frequently tried to describe these butchers with bulging muscles and stout heart who thought nothing of spilling blood. In his story, "The Red

Cow", Michah Joseph Berditchevsky said, "In the very process of butchery, in the striking of butcher's axe upon the animal's slaughtered carcass to split it in two or to sever its limbs there is demonstration of a kind of brutality." But in his story this "kind of brutality" assumed the character of a great deal of actual brutality. S.L. Blank, in a tale called "Meat", also extolled the bravery and physical strength of the butchers They came to be symbolic of brute strength, these butchers of the Jewish community, and were proof of the fact that we, too, had been blessed with a measure of physical resistance and vigor.

XI

In my youth the relationship between the sexes was vastly different in our town from the present and a far cry from the American way. Nor was it like the pure idyls described by the Romanticists who speak of the past nostalgically, wrapping it in a sacred fabric of remembrance; nor even, as seen by the Realist-Romanticists, like the characters depicted by Sholem Asch and his contemporaries, who display the weaknesses of a burning lust hidden under a mantle of piety and modesty.

Family life was not based on fleeting love but rather on the tenet of duty. Most matches were arranged by parents or relatives, or by a professional match-maker, the shadchan. Sometime the parents would go to look over the prospective mate, and sometimes they would send an "investigator" to examine the groom in his knowl-

edge of Torah and theology, and the bride in her beauty and knowledge of the domestic sciences, and an appointment was set for the would-be bride and groom to meet. It also happened that this preliminary meeting was sufficient to obviate further negotiations. In the event of agreement, the bride and groom would meet in her parents' home or in a designated inn, converse, wonder about each other, and decide, if theirs was the power to decide. There were times when the young man would insist on having his way and win out; there were cases where the parents' wishes determined the final decision and the interested parties were over-ruled in their timidity — each according to his character and personality.

The criteria for evaluation were lineage and dowery. The merchant and shop-keeper enjoyed preference. The merchant and the scholar were the elite. When the choice was between a poor shop-keeper and a craftsman who earned a good living by the sweat of his brow, preference went to the shop-keeper. The son of a pedigreed family would not dare to take to wife the daughter of a craftsman. Not only were the parents of the candidates a factor in the matter of "pedigree"; investigation was also made of relatives and the relatives of relatives, practically the whole family tree.

And of course the size of the dowery was a decisive determinant. The maiden whose eyes were not beautiful, but whose father's pockets were full, had no trouble finding her betrothed. The father whose coffers were substantial easily succeeded in "buying" his daughter a well-born husband, a scholar and a learned man. Pity the daughter of a poor family; her beauty, her wit, her intelligence were of no avail where there was no money.

And this unhappy situation was actually justifiable by the economic conditions of those days.

After the wedding, the question of livelihood devoured the spirit. The husband and the wife each had his own task, his to eke out a living somehow, hers to prepare the food and conduct her household. If the husband should open a shop, they both would become slaves to it, standing on their feet day and night, just like the small Jewish shop-keepers in America. In their social and religious activities, man and wife separated. When the man went to synagogue on the Sabbath, he went alone or with his sons or his cronies, while the wife walked at a distance behind him, perhaps with a neighbor. Very rarely was a young couple seen walking together to or from the synagogue; such a couple was considered "modern."

Within the home, the outward signs of "love" so evident today were then unknown. Words of endearment so liberally exchanged by married couples even during arguments and quarrels, were never used then, even in the days of great love. They addressed each other by their first names, sometimes in diminutive form which, together with the loving tone and the soft glance, conveyed the wamth of feeling. Most of the couples lived together in peace and harmony or in routine and duty. If there were quarrels, their root was in the economic position. "Poverty is becoming to Israel," said the wise men of the Talmud, but poverty has never helped toward the success of family life. Economic need ruined the family structure.

In the rare cases where the love between man and wife was apparent and became obvious in public, they

became the objects of free-for-all gossip. Even the women would judge and ridicule. I recall the neighbors chatting in our house, telling of such couples in which the husband would rise early in the morning while his wife lazied abed, and he would serve her breakfast in bed on a prettily arranged tray. How they laughed at the duped fool of a man! At least that is how these women talked, and there is none to say how they really felt.

Divorce was practically unknown; and when it did happen, it was usually because of childlessness. For a husband to be unfaithful to his wife, for a woman to deceive her husband, such things were unheard of.

There was one travelling salesman in our town who was away most of the time, spending months on end in the large cities in the pursuit of his business. He was apparently unable to resist the temptations of the flesh and he "sinned;" he contracted the dread disease, and his very appearance bore witness to his debauchery. I once heard my mother say of him, "He has caught the French sickness." I was amazed and bewildered that this loathsome disease should have been named after that nation so famed for its culture, whose very language is studied by the daughters of the wealthy. If I would happen to catch sight of this man when he came home for the Passover holidays, I would be frightened by his looks. The hair of his eyebrows had all fallen out, his nose was flattened, his eyes bloodshot. I kept away from him as from a leper. He was as one ostracized in our town.

In my childhood young men and women did not mix easily, did not talk together and did not participate in the same activities. If a chap came to visit a friend

who happened to have a sister or two, he might eventually start talking to them. Young men and women would meet by chance in a shop or a home and steal a few words with each other. If a fellow shook hands with a girl in parting, that was an indisputable sign of modernism. Outside they were never seen together, and, if they were, it was material for the gossip-mongers.

A few years passed – a ghost of a moustache could already be seen upon my lip – and customs were undergoing change, the strictness gradually abating. The first changes took place among the domestic servants who heretofore had been enslaved day and night, 24 hours a day; now they worked all day but were free evenings. Following them, the apprentices and craftsmen began introducing changes in their way of life, meeting secretly in the evenings for their own purposes. And, finally, the students, especially those studying for a profession such as law, medicine, or pharmacy, permitted themselves social liberties that were denied to others. They openly walked out with the girls and nobody objected.

It was only at the turn of the century, when I was about 16, that love began to be a serious factor in matchmaking, albeit to the accompaniment of much hesitation, bashfulness and repeated denials. Even the couple in love would send a shadchan to their parents to "cover up." Sons and daughters of intellectual families would go out together, but always in a group and never alone. They would walk out beyond the town and only then would the couples separate and wander off alone; this was the group's secret. These walks and talks constituted the initial stages of love, beginning with subtle glances, half-spoken words, growing bolder into clearly

expressed words of tenderness and longing, compliments, sweet nothings, and the fixing of further appointments. The "duty" kiss at the end of a date, taken so for granted these days in the States, was then undreamed of.

I had a friend who was studying medicine at the "gymnasium". He lived on the first floor and above him, on the second, lived the landlady, a rich widow with two daughters. The elder was a delicate girl, slim, clear-faced, blonde and blue-eyed, good-looking and warm-hearted. When my friend would play his violin, she would sit dreamily on her porch, listening. After a bit, I would see her leaning over the porch above, and my friend from below looking up, and they would talk:

— Have you an interesting book for me to read?

— Oh, yes. Just last week I got hold of a volume of Gorki's stories. Or perhaps you would like to read the life of Leonardo da Vinci by Dmitri Mereshkovsky?

— I've wanted to read that book for a long time. Will you lend it to me?

— Gladly!

— Shall I send my little sister to get it?

— Please do.

The little sister comes down, dressed in her white apron, the required uniform of the school. "Hello!" she says to me, blushing, for I am her Hebrew teacher. My friend writes a short note, signs his name in the book, and whispers into the girl's ear: "Be careful and don't lose the note!" The girl smiles knowingly at him and says, "Sure."

They did not dare go out for a walk alone, afraid of being seen. She was a daughter of the rich, and he was

only the son of a goldsmith. True, it was clean and delicate work, but it was a craft nevertheless. After I had left Dunovitz and Russia, my friend got his doctor's degree and married his beloved. I never did find out whether her mother looked upon it as a tragedy or made peace with the idea. Perhaps his being a doctor made it easier for her to take.

Parental discipline in these matters grew more lax from year to year, but the relationships remained on the level of romance, a pleasant conversation, a word of flattery, an enchanting glance, a little note, but nothing more. The sophistication customary in America, where a 17-year old high school girl confidently tells her girl friend that there is nobody as wise as a woman of experience, was quite unknown in my day. There was, of course, the "flirt", the girl who, wanting to strike up acquaintance with a particular boy, would "accidentally" drop her handkerchief. The boy would do his duty as the gallant gentleman, rush to pick it up and hand it to the young lady with a courteous bow. The girl would thank him "from the bottom of her heart" and thus begin the conversation. But such girls were not much in evidence.

I remember a certain snowy winter's evening. I met a girl acquaintance in the street, and with her were a young man and a girl who was a stranger to me. I was introduced to the guest, a relative from the district city of Kamenitz-Podolsk who had come to visit for a few days during her school vacation. We all went off for a walk together, until we were on the outskirts of town, where we broke up into two couples, my acquaintance with the other fellow, and I with the visitor. She was full of life and overwhelming with her constant chatter,

of books and authors and of school. We walked along and our hearts drew closer. "I'm very cold, young man. Put your arm through mine and warm me!" I was startled and bashful, but I did her bidding. My heart too grew warmer and I spoke to her accordingly. She put her face near mine and whispered: "Stop talking nonsense and kiss me!" These words made a profound impression upon me and I remembered them for a long time.

Even after the rigid customs had been relaxed, the kiss never became unimportant. It was binding; it was the seal that led to the solemn apotheosis of "I do" and was therefore never permitted to become cheapened.

XII

The community of Dunovitz is an old one. According to the district archives, our town boasted 1,129 Jews as early as 1765. This count is exclusive of the neighborhood villages and small settlements that were also considered part of the community area. After the Haydamaks invaded the Ukraine, attacking the Poles and the Jews, plundering, rioting and massacring, and after the massacre of Uman in 1768, many fled, leaving only 484 Jews in our town. During the course of the years this number increased again until, in about 1900, the community had grown to approximately 5,000 families.

When the Chassidic Movement got under way, our town became an important center. Rabbi Yeshayah of Dunovitz was one of the leaders of his time, although he, along with others of his period, has long since been

forgotten. Nevertheless, these Chassidic Rabbis had great and enthusiastic followings, and their names appear in the Chassidic literature of that day: Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditschev, Reb Wolff of Zhitomir, our own Reb Yeshayah of Dunovitz, Reb Elimelech of Lizensk, and others.

In my youth the original dynamic spirit of the Chassidic Movement had already dwindled considerably, leaving only its dry shell and the faith of the masses in the miracle-working Rabbi.

My father had inherited a large collection of Chassidic literature, but he seldom read any of these books. Most of his leisure time was devoted to the reading of Hebrew newspapers and the factual, educative books on the history of the Jews and other peoples. He was particularly interested in life in far-off lands.

We had a number of Chassidic sects in our town, some of which had special Houses of Study (Beth Midrash), but these were vestiges of the previous generation. My contemporaries had become estranged from it all.

From time to time an emissary would come along to collect a sort of annual tax that the staunch Chassidim levied toward the upkeep of the Rabbi's household. Sometimes one of the pious "good" men, a "tzadik", would come to visit and the Chassidim would go out to meet him and escort him ceremoniously into town; but the enthusiasm of a generation ago was somehow missing. No longer were there the heights of ecstasy in which the horses of the tzadik's carriage were unhitched while the ardent disciples fought for the honor of harnessing themselves in their stead to pull the tzadik the



HIRSH LEIB TEIBER and HIS WIFE DEVORA



JACOB BLATT
A SHOHET (RITUAL "SLAUGHTERER")

last mile into town. Nor did the town make a joyous holiday of his arrival. Each one went about his daily tasks to eke out a living, and was scarcely touched by the event. The tzadik would be put up in the spacious home of one of the more prominent landlords. This house, during his stay, became the center of much commotion, with the steady stream of the poor and the hard-pressed who came to pour out their hearts to the tzadik and receive his blessings and the encouragement of his wise counsel.

Only once in my life did my father bring me before the tzadik. I was about ten years old at the time; more than fifty years ago that was, yet how vividly I still recall the experience! I see it all as clearly as though it had been a day ago. It was the Rabbi of Tshortkov, and many were the Jews who flocked to receive his blessing. One evening after prayers, my father put on his Sabbath cloak, took me by the arm, and led me to the house where the Rabbi was staying. The dining room which served as waiting room was crowded with men and women waiting their turn to be admitted to his presence. In the next room, the door of which was open, sat the scribe before a pile of slips of paper, holding a handsome goose quill pen with which to write out the slips. The scribe's gentle face and the long thin quill in his hand gave him an aura of holiness. He asked each one who approached in turn to state his business, and recorded it on a slip of paper.

My father and I stood before the scribe. "Name?", he asked in a whisper. My father, experienced in these matters, replied: "Berye, son of Rachel." — "Your request?" — "My eldest son is now 21." The scribe moved

his quill easily across the paper, filling it with small letters, beautiful and matching as rare pearls. I watched this man in awe as, facile and unhesitating, he wrote his magic letters upon the white surface. My father paid him his fee and we both crossed to the other side of the room. There, before a closed door, stood the "gabbai," heavy-joweled, fat and strong, his side curls long, his beard broad, who kept order among the crowd. Recognizing from my father's clothes that he was not a pauper, the "gabai" welcomed him and even thew me a gracious glance. My father slipped him a coin, which he whisked away into his capacious pocket. We stood waiting at the door until the man inside came out, and then we were ushered in.

On a large upholstered chair behind a table sat the Rabbi in silken nobility. The table lamp shed its glow upon the pallid, delicate face and the black silk of his beard. He wore a long coat of shining black silk and upon his head a "shtreimel" replete with little tails of fur. White stockings covered his feet thrust into sandals. He was a young man, and the paleness of his features, contrasting with the deep black of his beard and clothes, cast a lovely softness upon him. He extended his hand in welcome to my father, barely touching finger tips, gazed upon him for a moment, and then dropped his eyes to the note before him. He asked a number of questions, then sighed and said, "The Blessed One will help!" He turned to me, pinched my cheek and said, "Study the Torah well, my son! The Torah is our strength!" He then took a coin from a pile before him, touched it, whispered something over it, and offered it to my father. My father took it and placed a bank-note

on the table. The Rabbi blessed us and the interview was over.

For many days I was acutely conscious of the delicate touch of the Rabbi's hand upon my cheek. I kept touching with my own hand the spot that he had touched. For a long time thereafter I studied arduously at Heder, until gradually I emerged from the trance and my life, the life of a normal youngster, resumed its old routine.

On Friday nights, after supper, my father would go to the "table" of the local Rabbi, taking with him a bottle of wine as his gift. Each one brought his contribution, wine, whiskey, cakes, and the like, while the gabbai brought gefilte fish. The Rabbi ate a morsel or two and distributed the rest among the attendant Chassidim, each of them eager to get his share of the dishes made holy by the Rabbi. The Rabbi meanwhile expounded a chapter of the Torah, with subtle secret references, and the assembled listened attentively, with much pleasure and spiritual uplift. Then one of the Chassidim would start to sing, the others joining in. And as they sang they got up and danced the dance of the Chassidim, restrained and soulful. My father came home late from those evenings.

But these traditional meals no longer exuded the spirituality or the ecstasy of the original Chassidim. There was not the same degree of concentration, of hidden meaning to every sigh and movement, to each word pronounced by the Rabbi. The holiness was gone. Chassidism had become an every-day routine.

This was felt particularly during the discussions among the Chassidim themselves. When the neighbors

would gather at our house for the "melaveh malkah," the Saturday evening meal ushering out the Sabbath, the talk would turn to the golden teachings of Chassidism, to the majesty of Reb Dovidel of Talneh's grand house, and his golden chair bearing the inscription, "David, King of Israel, lives on"; to the beauty of Reb Israel of Rizhin's home, his fine carriage drawn by two pairs of mighty horses, and his instrumentalists who gladdened his heart with their playing; to tzadikim who banished evil spirits; and to the miracle-workers who cured the sick and the maimed. But in all these tales, the primary awe and innocence was lacking, and sometimes a note of doubt would creep in, even of mockery. Nevertheless, the scoffers themselves would travel long distances to visit the Rabbi and obtain his intervention and advice on urgent problems such as that of the incurable invalid, the son of draft age, or the father of a marriageable daughter. Tradition conflicted with emancipated thinking, both activating the individual at different times.

There were still a number of Chassidim of the old school in our town. One of our neighbors was a youngish man from a near-by town who had married a local girl. He was tall and gaunt from much fasting, an enthusiastic Chassid of the sort described in the literature of Peretz, Steinberg, Berditchevsky and others. Despite his extreme poverty, this young Chassid would regularly go off for weeks on end to visit the Rabbi in a distant town, without worrying about his wife. The neighbors nicknamed him the "foolish Chassid," but they also pitied him and his poor wife, who was left to starve, and would send secret gifts to the house. My mother would often

take off a portion of meat and fish from the family rations to send to the 'deserted" wife. But, although their house was next door to ours, these gifts were never sent directly to the house, lest they shame the recipient; they were sent, instead, to her father's house for her. Despite his poverty and shame, this Chassid was the happiest of men. Those out late for a stroll on Friday nights would hear his joyous voice raised in hymns of praise – would hear and smile.

Reb Baruch, the Gemorrah teacher, was another enthusiast of our town. I see him clearly before my eyes, short, snub-nosed, thin-faced, dark-skinned, his long beard reaching his knees, dressed in a long black kaftan flapping at his heels.

On Simchat Torah, returning from the special afternoon prayers at synagogue, where my father and I had also blessed the wine and eaten the special dishes of this joyous holiday, I walked along the Street of the Tailors and I was not particularly happy. As a modern, enlightened person, I felt somewhat severed from the spirit of the day; I could not dance and make merry with the others, as was the custom. They were older than I and there was no room among them for a modern youth like me. My own friends, "emancipated" as I was, also felt out of place following the traditions of the older generation. This situation caused me sadness, and there was nothing I could do about it.

As I came to one of the houses and heard singing, I drew near and found the door open. Inside there was a group of Chassidim, and the above-mentioned "melamed" was leading them in dance. Their eyes were half-closed, their heads thrown back, arm on arm in a circle,

the lustre of the dream bathing their uplifted faces, the lightness of spirituality imparting a nimble grace; the whole scene was imbued with dignity, inner peace and holiness. They seemed to me to be soaring through the air, lifted on angelic wings. I stood at, the door entranced.

The melamed opened his eyes and glanced at me. He knew I was one of the "enlightened" youth and he also understood that I would be embarrassed to throw myself into the moving circle, to permit myself to be infected with their warmth and enthusiasm. He looked at me a moment, I could not tell whether in pity or in scorn, and threw out at me, "Are you jealous of us? You 'enlightened' ones cannot know true joy!"

As I walked away, I was conscious of a hurt. It had been made abundantly clear to me that I was missing something, that the Chassid was superior to me in his faith, his conviction, his wholeness; that I was cut off from my people in its hour of joy, and a deep sadness engulfed my being.