CHAIA SONIA

A FAMILY'S ODYSSEY RUSSIAN STYLE

Don Gussow



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The Moving Story Of A Family's Odyssey Toward Survival

Don Gussow

This is a story of life and a unique pilgrimage. The saga opens in Tsarist Russia, in a Jewish quarter of Lithuania—the "*shtetl*"—shortly after the beginning of World War I. Orders have come through requiring the Jews to leave for the hinterland within twenty-four hours or face being shot. "Fire! Fire!" is the way the Jews of this shtetl describe the pandemonium that follows.

Thus, starting from the usual quiet life in the *shtetl*, this particular family group—Chaia Sonia and her three young daughters and two even younger sons—soon finds itself in a cramped box car, filled to the brim with other refugees from Lithuania and Latvia, frightened, hungry, without toilet facilities, and not knowing where they were being taken and what would happen to them.

Written like a novel in a style that has been compared with the work of Chaim Potok, the story takes the reader through five years of wanderings in various cities and towns of Russia, Poland, Germany, and the Free City of Danzig. Eventually, a rat infested converted troop ship takes them to the United States to reunite with Simche, husband and father—and with more suprises ahead.

Once you start reading this epic, you will not be able to put it aside or quickly forget it because the author tells his story full of love for dear ones long gone, and cherishing opportunities realizable only in America—the true "*goldeneh medina*."

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CHAIA SONIA

Books by Don Gussow

Chaia Sonia
Divorce—Corporate Style
The New Merger Game

For my grandsons, Adam, Seth, and Ethan.

In memory of my mother and father,
Chaia Sonia (Luria) and Simche Gussow.

All our knowledge is ourselves to know.
—Alexander Pope, 1734

People who cut themselves off entirely
from the past have no future.
—Harold Clurman,
All People Are Famous
(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1974

ONE

SHARING WAS a way of life for our entire family in the little house in Pumpian, Lithuania, where I was born in 1907, two weeks before Chanukah, the Jewish "Feast of Lights," which usually falls in December. Living in our small, one-room wooden house with its thatched roof kept us all in close harmony and there was even a measure of joy, despite the hardships of those days in a tiny town in Eastern Europe.

Life there during my childhood was quiet and leisurely, and I liked Pumpian very much. I liked the feel of my bare feet on the smooth, flattened earthen floor that was cool both in summer and winter. For warmth on cold winter afternoons and nights, we huddled as close to the huge, rough-brick oven as we could. And for light we had the soft glow of candles and our kerosene lamp. Putty, supplemented by rags, was stuffed into cracks to keep as much of the cold air as possible from coming through the two double-paned windows in the "front" of our house, which actually faced our backyard. Our one-room abode had no other window. The door of the house also faced the back yard, where Mother, with all of us helping, planted a garden and raised vegetables during the warm spring and summer months.

Here, too, each year Father built a *succah*, a kind of booth, where we celebrated Succoth, one of the many holidays that played a major role in the life of the Jewish community of Pumpian. Succoth marked the traditional Jewish harvest time, and we helped Father roof the tiny handmade wooden structure with branches and we decorated the inside with flowers, fruits, and nuts symbolic of the harvest. The *succah* and the Succoth recalled the temporary hastily erected dwellings of our ancestors in their forty

years of wandering in the desert on the way to Israel after the exodus from Egypt.

The week-long celebration started on the night of the full moon. During part of the seven-day period we prayed in the *shtetl*'s larger synagogue, or *shul*. Father along with the other men of Pumpian at such times carried the *lulav* and *esrog* (palm branch, willow, and myrtle twigs), along with a fragrant citron that looked like a big lemon. Sometimes Father would let me hold them. I was proud when he did because it was a sign that I was growing up.

Jewish life in Pumpian (Poomp*yan* was the way we pronounced the name of our *shtetl*, which was called Pumpenai in Lithuanian) centered around the synagogue and the various religious holidays. Holidays were frequent—at least one a month and sometimes several in one month. Mother and all the other Jewish mothers and wives of Pumpian were constantly involved in planning for an oncoming holiday.

The little world of Pumpian was all the world I wanted. Not so with my Father. As I realized when I became older, there was little joy for him in Pumpian during his five years there. While he must have tried, he never really managed to get in step with the slow-paced, parochial, religiously oriented life in our little community.

His boyhood had been spent in the colorful, big, sophisticated city of Kharkov, in Russia, far from tiny Pumpian. In those days Kharkov was a place to dream about. And the more he dreamed and the more he remembered, the more my father felt suffocated in the narrow, confining, ghettolike existence of the town in which his family was growing up.

His eyes were still so filled with the gaiety and the color of Kharkov that he was not aware of, nor could he sense, the special charm, the beauty, the tranquility, the warmth that was the heart and soul of Pumpian. Thus, none of us was much surprised when he jumped to his feet one day and said, "I've decided. I'm going to write my brother. I'm going to America, too."

I remember the day Father left for the United States. Mother and my sisters were busy helping him pack for the journey. Father

was very excited about going to America. He seemed so anxious to leave Pumpian that he couldn't concentrate on packing his belongings. Feeling left out in all the commotion and excitement, I busied myself trying to glue together the pieces of cardboard that only the day before had been a beautiful toy horse. Father had brought it to me several weeks earlier upon his return from one of his trips as an itinerant tailor. I was not quite five.

Father was a gifted tailor, with "golden hands," according to Mother, and our relatives in Pumpian. He could perform miracles with the needle and thread, as my imaginative mother put it.

But there was not enough work for him in little Pumpian. So, often he traveled, usually with my sister Pashke as his companion, to the various outlying farms and hamlets to offer his services as "the tailor with the golden hands." He usually left on Monday or Tuesday and returned early on Friday to spend the Sabbath with his family.

About three weeks before he was to leave for America he came home one Friday in a particularly joyous mood. It had been a good week. He found enough work to enable him to earn more than usual—more in fact than he normally made in two or three weeks of travel. As he had done well and was near Poneviez, he journeyed to the big city and went on a shopping spree, buying gifts for everybody. Trinkets of all sorts for the girls and chocolate bars and other confections for all of us. And a big, beautiful, shiny cardboard horse, with a tail, for me. It was my first toy horse, a truly magnificent animal that looked almost real.

There was another reason for my father's good mood. He had just received the papers and money for his trip to America. And in Poneviez he had made arrangements for his passage to the New World.

Now, on the day he was to leave, Father came over to me, picked me up, put his face next to mine, and tried to hug me. That beard next to my face felt scratchy and it also tickled. And what he did came as a surprise. Father had never hugged me before. As a matter of fact, he had never picked me up before. Mother always referred to Father as a "*kalte malekh*," a cold angel, someone who

behaved in a low emotional key. If Father really liked children, he kept it to himself. He scarcely played with any of us but went his own way.

Only once had I ever seen Father express any enthusiasm and that was only a few months before his departure for America. He had finished making my first suit, a labor of months, and he had me try it on. He thought the suit fit me well and even went so far as to express the opinion that I looked handsome in it. Mother agreed enthusiastically. For her it was proof positive that her husband indeed had "golden hands."

Now, on the day of his departure, I felt angry that he was leaving us. I could not understand why he would do such a thing. Mother explained that he was going to the New World to find new opportunities. As soon as he was settled and had made enough money he would send for us. But how could that explanation satisfy the uneasiness of a five year old?

Of course, in some ways I was glad that he was leaving. From now on I would have Mother all for myself. Until then I had shared her with Father. The other children? I was secretly delighted that she paid so little attention to them. She gave the job of taking care of my other sisters and my little brother, Ruvke, to Pashke. She did pay some attention to Father. Not much. But enough, I felt, to take away from the time she spent with me.

I do not recall whether I was more angry with Father for leaving or glad that now I would have more of Mother for myself. It was while I was having such thoughts that I impulsively decided to find out what was inside the beautiful horse Father had brought me a few days earlier. Before I could think much about what I was doing, I tore a small hole in it. It was dark inside the horse and I could not see much. So I tore off another piece and then another. Before long, the horse was only a mound of shredded gray cardboard.

I began to feel very sorry. And guilty. Why had I done such a thing? Why had I destroyed the beautiful horse that I loved so much? While I did not understand the complex psychology of my act, I felt terribly remorseful. Yet I also felt somewhat relieved by

what I had done. Of course, I found out that there was nothing inside the horse. The toy was made of cardboard that looked pretty and shiny on the outside and was actually rough, gray, and ugly on the inside. A shattered dream and disillusion for a child not quite five. A painful experience not easily or quickly forgotten.

"Good-bye, Chaimele," Father said, as he picked me up and, for the first time in my life, tried to kiss me.

I turned away. The tears ran down my face. I tried to speak but words did not come. I could not restrain the flood of tears.

Mother tried to calm me, explaining again that Father was going to find a better home for all of us.

"I hope he drowns on the way to America," I blurted out. Father seemed to not hear what I said, but Mother admonished me—oh, so gently.

It was a terrible thing to say and I regretted it the moment I said it. Nevertheless, having said it, I felt relieved and there was no taking the words back. For the first time I had spoken my mind. Most often I kept my thoughts, my fears, and my fantasies to myself.

Even to Mother I did not reveal my inner thoughts, although often I wanted to do just that. As for Father, none of us children had any warm contact with him, with the possible exception of Pashke, his favorite daughter and perhaps even his favorite child. Father seemed to enjoy his week-long trips away from Pumpian with her.

He was always glad to get out of Pumpian. Not that Mother's family made much of an effort to make him feel at home. He was handsome, with his red beard and dark brown mustache. He dressed like a dandy compared to the menfolk of Pumpian in their nondescript garb, and in the beginning at least he behaved in a big-city manner that was foreign to the inhabitants of the *shtetl*. Mother's parents were still alive when Father, Mother, and my three sisters arrived in Pumpian but they were not of much help in making Father feel at home there.

Grandfather Isaac Luria, short of stature with a big white beard and long, curled earlocks, was a man of God. He devoted

most of his days and nights to the reading of the Torah and Mishna and the Commentaries. He eked out a living as a *rebbe*, teacher, and scholar, rather than as a leader with a following, like most *rebbes* in those days. In the early years he conducted a *cheder* (school) for the young but as time went on he lost out to the younger Reb Isaac Alchonen, whose school I later attended. Reb Isaac Alchonen was a more aggressive teacher, who ran his *cheder* more systematically and was known as a disciplinarian who got more out of his students than did my scholarly grandfather.

I was still curious about Kharkov so one day I asked Mother where it was located and why she always mentioned it with such feeling. It was obvious that she had a particular attachment for the city but she had never explained the reasons for her deep feelings.

"Kharkov was where I met your father," she finally let out, and then proceeded to tell me the whole story.

She was only nine years old when she left Pumpian for Kharkov. I found it very difficult to believe that she had left home to face the world at such an early age. But her father, the Hebrew scholar, could not make a living in Pumpian for his family of four daughters and a son. His wife, my grandmother, made a real effort to help, but her meager earnings, from mending and knitting for widowers and children of motherless homes, were not enough to take care of the needs of the family. My grandfather was a good and learned man but his major interest was studying the holy books and he preferred to spend all his time with them rather than doing anything else. The little money he earned he used to help his son, Avrom, become a *mohel* (the religiously trained person who circumcises the newborn male in the ritual of *Brith Milah*, eight days after birth) and *shochet*, (the religiously trained, authorized slaughterer of animals according to kosher requirements). There was nothing left for the girls. Esther, the oldest, met her husband in Pumpian and remained there. The other girls left Pumpian as soon as they were able. Frieda, the second daughter, went to live with relatives in Vetka, in Russia, where she got a job as a maid and soon married the son of her employer. She then sent for the next youngest. Mother, at nine, was sent to Kharkov to live with a

cousin of her mother. She had not met her but the cousin promised Mother's parents that she would care for my mother and eventually find employment for her.

Mama became emotional as she described the scene of her departure for the big city. She did such a fine job of dramatizing the experience that this piece of drama became etched in my mind.

"I remember the day I left Pumpian. Avrom was helping me onto the wagon. The whole family was there—Mother, Father, Esther, and her husband. Everyone was sad although only Esther was actually crying. As Avrom helped me onto the wagon, he said: 'Chaia, my sister, I have a little piece of advice for you.

" 'As you travel, you will see a fork in the road. The driver will have a choice of roads—one will be the right road for him; the other will be the wrong one. A driver who knows the road well will take the right one and thus will reach his destination without getting lost. You, too, will come to a fork in the road, in the big city of Kharkov. You will have a choice of taking the right road or the wrong one. My dear sister, you will know which is the right road for you and which is the wrong road. We will all pray for you.' Then he kissed me and the wagon began to move."

Mama didn't tell me the entire story until sometime later but I found her experiences in the big city, where she had to fend for herself starting at such an early age, unique and enormously exciting. No wonder that over the years she kept telling and retelling me the incidents of her life in Kharkov. Each time the story sounded a little different but it was always dramatic and I never tired of hearing her tell it.

TWO

MOTHER WAS something of an actress and possessed a vivid imagination so that on each occasion she told of an experience she could sound as if she were feeling it for the first time. Had she had an education or at least been able to read and write, she surely would have become a short-story writer or a novelist. She was a great teller of tales, weaving one plot into another as vivid, as interesting, and as exciting as any I read in books in the years that followed.

Dramatically, she would recount for my benefit her mother's cousin's greeting on her arrival in Kharkov: "Chaiele, you are so small—and so young. What are we going to do with you? What can you do?"

"Anything," was Mother's prompt reply. "Housework. Cooking. Everything." Bashful Mother was not. In a few weeks her benefactors—the cousin's husband helped too—were able to find a job for her as a domestic in the large household of the Gussows, who operated the famous tailoring establishment of Kharkov. So famous were the Gussows that they made suits and coats for the most distinguished Gentile citizens of this lively, exciting city. They were tailors to society, including dukes, counts, and officers of the Russian imperial army.

The Gussow's house was a large, three-storied structure, with many rooms. The ground floor was given over to the shop, or factory. The family quarters occupied the first floor and part of the second. The fitting room was also located on the second floor. The rest of the second floor and the third floor were used for entertaining some of the more notable customers. Vodka was plentiful. And herring.

Head of the household was the family patriarch, Gospodin Chaim Gussow, who was to become my mother's sponsor and later my great grandfather (I was named for him). Working for him were many relatives, including his grandson Simche Gussow, who would eventually marry the lively little maid from Pumpian. Simche's father, Peter, my grandfather, a Hebrew teacher, had died at an early age and the grandparents took over the raising of Peter's family. All four of the boys became tailors. The best of the lot was Simche of the "golden hands," whose grandfather was the first to talk of this talent, later repeated by my mother.

The Gussow establishment included about a dozen master tailors and an equal number of assistants and apprentices. Managing the establishment, under the direction of Chaim, were two of his nephews, Avrom, who handled the civilian department, and Grisckha, who was in charge of the military.

At first, Simche, who was twenty and already a master tailor (he had begun working at eleven), paid absolutely no attention to the little maid from Lithuania. Handsome and strong, he was known as a ladies' man. In his volunteer fireman's uniform, which he designed and produced himself, he looked "like a general," Mother recalled.

He was Mother's idol from the very beginning. She soon made up her mind that this was the man she was going to marry. And even at that early age, when Mother made up her mind, it was not easily changed.

As she could neither write nor read, the only way she could correspond with her family in Pumpian was to have someone else write the letters for her. Patriarch Chaim took a liking to her from the start, and he became the writer of her letters. It wasn't easy to get this tall, bearded, sophisticated, well-dressed gentleman to sit down and write a letter for her. Only after some cajoling was she successful. And this was not often—but often enough. On such occasions, the two of them would sit down in the guest room on the second floor, where customers were entertained with a drink, and the child would dictate to the elderly man.

"Now, child, what do you want to tell your mother and

father this time?" Patriarch Chaim asked one afternoon as he sat at the writing table, with paper before him and his pen in hand.

Mother was eleven then. All of four feet tall and skinny.

The head of the household was startled as the little girl began to dictate: "My dear mother, I have found the man I am going to marry. Of course, he doesn't know it yet. As a matter of fact, he doesn't even know that I exist, although he works here and I see him all the time. His name is Simche Gussow. He is tall and handsome and he is twenty-two years old."

"Child, you don't mean . . . ?" Patriarch Chaim stumbled for words.

"Yes, I do, but please, Gospodin Gussow, do not tell him or anyone else. No one must know, especially Simche, or that would be the end."

"I promise you, little Chaiele girl. It will be our big secret," he said with a twinkle.

By the time Mother was fourteen, Simche had become aware of her. It was not entirely his doing. Mother made sure that he would know of her presence. She accomplished this through a series of planned incidents, somewhat on the comic side. Early each morning before the workers took up their positions, she cleaned the shop on the ground floor. On this particular morning, she dawdled, continuing to sweep and clean long after the men had gathered for their day's work. She wore a white blouse and skirt. By now she was a woman, even a little bosomy.

When Simche arrived, she observed him very carefully. As she came over to sweep near the area where Simche had just sat down, she fussed with the broom more than usual. Finally, Simche stood up to get out of her way, in an attempt to let the girl finish her chore. As he did that, she swept the area with all her might, dropping the broom on the pail, and hitting Simche with the stick of the broom. He narrowly avoided tripping.

She said she was sorry, very sorry, as she bent down to pick up the broom and pail.

He tried to assist her, bending over to pick up the broom. He could not help but take a peek at the pink-cheeked, white-skinned

girl with full breasts that were now slightly exposed as she, too, bent down.

After that, Mother made sure that Simche continued to be aware of her. She never failed to say good morning to him whenever he arrived for work. And she found many other opportunities to greet him or make small talk with him. Once in a while she even tried to be coquettish in a half-childish, half-grown-up way.

Whatever she did, it seemed for a long time to have made little impression on Simche. He was looked upon by all his relatives and friends as a good catch. But Mother neither asked nor sought anyone's help. She was going to catch him in her own way.

Then several months after the broom incident what she had hoped for happened. Simche asked her if she had ever been in the marketplace on a Saturday morning. "No," she said, "never." On the Sabbath, she added, she always went to the synagogue.

He suggested that she skip the synagogue this particular Saturday and take a walk with him to the market. "It won't be necessary to buy anything, so you wouldn't sin on the Sabbath. And the Kharkov market is a very colorful place. There's always music, and gypsies come and play and dance for a few kopeks."

She took him up on his offer after his explanation, but not without emphasizing that this was the first time that she would miss being in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

It was a Wednesday when Simche asked her to go to the market with him. From that moment until Saturday morning Mother was in fairyland. Always imaginative, she spun all sorts of fantasies in the hours and days that followed. She saw herself as a little princess walking with this handsome, tall prince, while everyone in the marketplace pointed to them: "Look at the handsome prince and princess, walking hand in hand."

She tried to busy herself in her work, but she kept falling all over herself. Her daytime fantasies were in her way. And at night she was so excited she could not sleep.

The marketplace in Kharkov toward the end of the nineteenth century, as Mother described it, was a beautiful sight. Perched on a hill were hundreds of farmers' wagons, with their

horses alongside. Girls and women, dressed in colorful Ukrainian skirts and blouses and hair ribbons, hawked their wares in sing-song language, their own version of Russian. Once in a while and for no apparent reason, a group of farmers' daughters would start to dance a kazatzka while farmers with long beards played their tuneful accordions.

Little Chaiele, now holding Simche by the arm, was thrilled. She had been in Kharkov for five years and this was the first time she had gone to the market on Saturday. Later she prayed to God and to the souls of her dear departed ancestors, beseeching them to forgive her for her absence from the synagogue on that Sabbath. But being in this wonderful market with this tall, handsome man seemed worth any punishment that she might receive for her sin.

When Simche told Chaiele that he was going to buy her a necklace she reminded him that he had promised that there would be no buying, no money-changing on the Sabbath. But when he showed her the necklace he had selected for her she became ambivalent. She said it was beautiful and she really wanted it but at the same time she was afraid of what God might do to her and him if they sinned by using money on the Sabbath. Simche tried to humor her, saying that God would understand. He purchased the necklace and put it about Chaiele's neck. They exchanged smiles.

However, as they walked away from the necklace stand, Chaiele still fretted over the "sin," telling Simche that he shouldn't have done it—buying on the Sabbath was wrong. Simche laughed and teased her about her fears, but Chaiele, who had begun her conversation with God early in her life, looked up to the sky and quietly asked the Holy One to forgive Simche the sin he had just committed. And to forgive her for accepting a present bought on the Sabbath.

THREE

BUT GOD did not forgive Simche for buying a necklace on the Sabbath, Mother claimed when she related the story of her early life. As a matter of fact, God did not forgive my father for "other sins" either, Mother said.

What were Father's "other sins"? I didn't have to ask. Mother told me and as a child I was shocked to hear what I heard. But she never treated me as a child. To her I was an interested and sympathetic listener. She turned to me in this fashion shortly after Father left for the United States. And this is probably one reason why I never considered myself a child and why I did not have a normal childhood. I was only five when I started to become Mother's listener, friend, adviser, and surrogate husband.

While Mother referred to Father's "other sins," she really only harped on one, repeating the details often and embellishing and dramatizing the incident each time she related it.

Father committed the "sin of sins" shortly after taking Mother to visit the marketplace in Kharkov on that fateful Saturday morning. He evidently took a liking to the bright, alert, fourteen-year-old girl who was beginning to blossom into womanhood. He followed up the first Saturday's outing to the marketplace by dating her every Saturday thereafter. They started out each time for a trip to the marketplace but then wound up with walks in the park nearby. Later they sat on a bench and became engrossed in small talk. As time went on, especially as summer approached and the days became warmer, the outing continued until evening.

Sitting on a bench on Saturday afternoons in the bright, warming sunlight following a visit to the marketplace and a walk, Simche and Chaiele did what normal young people do when out

on a date. They looked into each other's eyes and talked in endearing terms. Simche, the experienced man-about-town, was gentle with his much younger girl friend who, it was obvious, was now dating for the first time. As they walked he held her hand and when they sat down on a bench in the park he put his arm around her shoulder. But even these innocent gestures of affection thrilled and excited her. After all, wasn't she with the man she had decided to marry?

It was on one of these Saturday outings that Simche committed the "sin of sins," Mother explained. I will describe this "terrible sin" in full later but I can tell you now that shortly after this particular incident, Simche, now twenty-six years old, married Chaiele, who was only fifteen but growing up fast.

The wedding was an unusual one. Though it was a "*Yiddishe chasseneh*" (Jewish wedding), it went considerably beyond the normal pious ceremony that Chaiele remembered from Pumpian. Still it had its own special flavor.

The event took place at the Gussow tailoring headquarters and residence rather than in the synagogue. Originally, only the floor where Gussow customers and other guests were entertained was to be used, but before the celebration came to an end some of the guests, now in high spirits, found themselves on every other floor of the building.

The ceremony itself was conducted in the Orthodox Jewish tradition by Rabbi Moishe Ben Shmuel, a revered old rabbi, well known to the Jewish religious community of Kharkov. What if the pious rabbi did not feel entirely comfortable in the "irreligious" Gussow environment? What if the ceremony was taking place in the building that housed the tailoring establishment that catered almost exclusively to the high and mighty Kharkov Gentiles, many of whom were overt anti-Semites? Rabbi Ben Shmuel was not one to turn down an invitation from Patriarch Chaim Gussow, an old, schoolboy friend. Their families were neighbors and the boys not only grew up together but continued their friendship through the years. While the rabbi did not like to see his old classmate involved with so many *goyim*, he had a quiet, secret admiration for his

cheder friend. After all, how many Jews in Kharkov enjoyed the patronage and friendship of so important a group of Gentiles, he reasoned.

In the event of the threat of a pogrom in Kharkov, who else could come to the aid of the Jewish community but Gospodin Chaim Gussow, a friend of so many influential *goyim* in the military and social life of the city? Rabbi Moishe Ben Shmuel asked himself the question, knowing well his answer.

And so the respected old rabbi officiated at the wedding in the Gussow establishment. The ceremony was simple but dignified. Four of the workers, each a long-time friend of Simche, held the four wooden poles at the corners of the *chuppa*, or wedding canopy, made of satin and embroidered with Biblical quotations in Hebrew. The *chuppa* is symbolic of the room in the bridegroom's home to which in pre-Talmudic times the bride was escorted for consummation of the marriage.

Under the *chuppa* were the bride and groom, Simche dressed in a smartly tailored formal afternoon suit, the bride in a newly made white satin dress. Behind them stood Patriarch Chaim, also dressed up for the occasion in a formal afternoon suit. He had escorted both groom and bride. Facing the bride and groom was the gentle old rabbi in his full gray beard, wearing a black satin caftan.

In a clear, well-modulated voice, the rabbi, with a glass of red wine in his hand, intoned the traditional but shortened version of the wedding prayer. Then in a sing-song monotone he blessed the grapes of the wine. After consuming a little of the wine himself, he placed the vessel before Simche, beckoning him to do likewise, which he did, taking a much larger gulp than the old rabbi. This was followed by the ceremony of placing the ring of gold, simple and unadorned, on the bride's finger. Next came the consummation of the marriage contract, with the groom and bride, each holding the end of a white handkerchief as the rabbi intoned another prayer. The ceremony concluded with the groom breaking the wine glass with his right foot. Simche smashed the glass with one try, as if he had practiced doing so, although he had not.

Moments after the groom kissed the bride, ending the ceremony, the musicians sounded off. The music was loud and tuneful since they were a fairly large and able musical group, including two clarinet players, a flutist, a trumpeter, two cello players, three violinists, and a drummer. Toasts to the newlyweds followed in vodka and wine. The floor was cleared of furniture and dancing began. Instead of dancing in pairs, everybody joined in kazatskas. The musicians increased the tempo of the music and the groom's colleagues moved to the floor to dance the kazatska in earnest. The floor was now occupied by several groups of dancers, a few of whom were flying high and fast. The music became still louder, more vodka and wine toasts were consumed and the post-wedding reception took on the appearance of a wild and noisy party. Toasting, drinking, singing, and dancing continued until the early hours of the morning.

Eventually, while the party was still in progress, the groom and bride left for their "quarters," a room on the top floor of the tailoring establishment. By now, Father called Mother Sonia since he did not like the name "Chaia" and less the childish appellation "Chaiele." He loved the name Sonia and this is what he called her from now on while her "formal" name became Chaia Sonia.

As they walked up the stairs to their abode, Simche told his Sonia how much he loved her and she responded in kind. As they came to the threshold of the room, he picked her up in his arms and gingerly placed her on the bed.

"My dear Sonia," he said, "this is not a very big room but I hope it will please you for the moment. It won't be long before we will have more commodious accommodations."

"Being with you, my darling Simche, this room is like a palace," Sonia the bride told her beloved.

A small room or a "palace", this was to be their home until their first child, Olga, the beautiful little girl with the large, expressive, blue eyes, was born.

Early the following morning, Simche took his usual station in the tailoring establishment and Chaiele was ready to begin her normal cleaning chores but was stopped by the head of the house-

hold, who said that the beautiful bride of his favorite grandson should not be working on this day of days—the very first after the wedding.

Always at this point in the story, Mother repeated her refrain that God never forgave Father for going to the marketplace and buying on the Sabbath nor for his other sundry sins. God punished him and continued to punish him, she said, and in punishing him he also punished her.

FOUR

FOR A long time it seemed that Mother would never be blessed with a son. Both Father and Mother adored Olga or Oilke, a beautiful little baby girl. But Mother wanted a boy so much, as did Father. A year later she gave birth to Pashke, again a pretty and lovely girl. Two and a half years passed before Mother was pregnant again. Then Mainke was born, a lively child, although not as pretty as the others—but a girl again. And Mother and Father, especially Mother, had wanted a boy so much. So Mother went to the synagogue constantly, not only on the day of the Sabbath and all holy days but on Friday night as well, and she cried and beseeched God to bless her with a son.

Finally, God answered her prayers. She became pregnant and when the child was born, after a painful pregnancy and difficult birth, it was a boy. However, when she asked to see her child the midwife looked sad and said, "Later. Later." Mother fell asleep. When she awakened, the midwife returned, this time with a doctor at her side, and gave Mother the bad news. Her first son was stillborn.

It was terrible to have given birth to a dead boy, Mother said to me, adding that she cried for an entire week. She refused to eat but remained in bed and wept uncontrollably. Father was very kind, very considerate again, and patient. He pleaded with her to begin eating and to get out of bed. The next child would turn out to be a healthy boy, he reassured her.

Sure enough, shortly after she recovered she became pregnant again. And Father was right. The new baby was a boy, a healthy, lively, handsome boy. Mother went to the synagogue and

thanked God for listening to her entreaties and for answering her prayers.

This blessing was not to last, however. When Michele was only six months old he woke up late one night screaming. Mother and Father went to his side. He was having convulsions. Before the doctor came he was dead. No diagnosis, no explanation was given by the doctor. Mother needed none. She knew Michele died because God still was not ready to forgive Father for his sins.

A year later, Mother gave birth to another child—the third boy. Mother recalled that he was a beautiful child, big, with a large, round face and pink cheeks. When Hershele was almost a year old she was holding him near the window one summer afternoon when two bearded men who looked like Hassidic rabbis passed by. They stopped to look at Hershele. They marveled at his handsomeness and clear, bright expression. One of the rabbis advised her to make sure that no one gave him a *kayn aynhoreh* (evil eye).

The very next day, Hershele became ill. It was measles, but he had a very bad case of it. Complications set in and before the week was at an end, and despite the doctor's ministrations and Mother's prayers, little Hershele died. He was not destined to live, Mother said, explaining that she could not forget the two Hassidim who had warned her to guard against a *kayn aynhoreh*. To her they were angels of death, sent by God to forewarn her.

From that point on, Mother was sure that she would never have a son again, a son who was healthy, a son who would live and thrive and grow into manhood. She became so morose that Father finally lost patience with her. He would go to the marketplace by himself, get drunk, and carry on with the Ukrainian market girls and gypsies. Eventually, my parents' unhappy relations reached the point where a divorce was under consideration. They went to old Rabbi Moishe Ben Shmuel, the gentle, spiritual man who had married them.

The patient old rabbi tried to talk them out of proceeding with a divorce. He pointed to the fact that Mother and Father had three lovely daughters and promised to pray that God would bless

them with a son. The ways of God were difficult for ordinary mortals to fathom, he told them. To help him succeed with his prayers on their behalf, a program of redemption on their part was needed.

What the good rabbi recommended, Mother explained, was for Father to become a righteous, believing Jew. Visiting the marketplace on the Sabbath was out. Father would have to go to the synagogue and in the presence of the rabbi and other witnesses, take a vow that he would mend his "evil, sinful ways forthwith." This was to be followed by several days of fasting and praying as the initial steps on the way to becoming a righteous, religious, Orthodox Jew.

Father wanted no part of it. He called the rabbi's suggestions a lot of old grandmothers' tales. But Mother began to plead with him. Then she became hysterical, screaming, and calling him a murderer. He had killed their three sons, she told him. His sinful ways had done it. Then she began to cry.

Father was stunned. The good, patient rabbi quieted Mother and began to work on Father. Eventually, my father agreed to give the "conversion" a try. Mother bought him a prayer shawl and phylacteries and after he underwent the formal ritual of taking the vow in the synagogue, she made him say his prayers every morning, afternoon, and evening. Father rebelled each time he had to do it—but pray he did.

Nevertheless, he was extremely unhappy about the whole thing. His disposition changed. He felt that his friends and fellow workers were ridiculing him behind his back. At that point, Mother made a decision and she did not hesitate to tell Father what she had in mind.

"Kharkov is a Gentile city with its evil ways," she told him. "It is impossible to be a good Jew in this irreligious environment. Simche, I know that you mean well and you have tried, but I also know that you are not going to change as long as we remain in Kharkov."

"So what do you suggest?"

"We must leave Kharkov and return to the home of my birth, Pumpian. In this tiny, charming *shtetel*, it is not hard to be a

good, practicing Jew. The whole community is built around the synagogue, the Jewish holidays, and traditions. You will like it there, and my family, good religious people, will welcome you and make you comfortable."

Father got up, started walking from one end of the room to the other, and in a loud voice, almost shouting, said, "I am not leaving Kharkov. I have a fine position here and I am respected by my colleagues and friends. This is my home and this is where I remain."

It was obvious that Father was adamant and that he was not going to budge. But Mother was equally determined. So she said, "Simche, if you insist on remaining in Kharkov, I will take the children and depart for Pumpian without you."

Instead of being startled by Mother's threat, Father calmed down. "If you want to return to your place of birth," he told her, "then why don't you take the girls and go? I will provide the needed funds and I will send you enough money each week so that you can live in comfort. Then, after some months, if you are convinced that Pumpian is the place for us and that I would be able to find work in Pumpian, write me and I will come—at least for a visit to see for myself whether I could be happy in that tiny place."

Mother would have none of that. She changed her mind quickly, explaining to Father that leaving without him would mean the end of their life together. Eventually, after a series of tearful scenes on the part of Mother, Father gave in and they left his beloved Kharkov. But Father was never happy in Pumpian. He may have tried to the best of his ability to adjust to its quiet, religiously oriented life, but there was little indication that he brought real, serious effort to bear. Instead, he was always thinking and dreaming of his beloved Kharkov, of the spirited gypsy girls in the marketplace, and the camaraderie he enjoyed with his fellow workers in the Gussow establishment, the bull sessions with his colleagues and the clients.

As time went on, a tremendous change took place in this stylish, sophisticated man. The religious, semimystical environment of the small community burdened his spirit. He became

gloomy and taciturn. He rarely trimmed his one-time handsome red beard. He no longer was fastidious with his clothing. This for the tailor with "golden hands."

Under mother's constant prompting, he put on the phylacteries and prayed quietly three times a day. The phylacteries are two long leather straps worn by Orthodox males during morning prayers. On each is a very small leather box containing a tiny parchment with passages from Exodus and Deuteronomy in Hebrew.

Mother kept advising him to open his mouth so that she could hear something. Even God cannot hear when one mumbles, she admonished. He went to the synagogue both Friday night and Saturday morning, sometimes even for the afternoon service, because he felt that he should try to please Mother and demonstrate that he was serious about keeping the pledge that he had made to Rabbi Moishe Ben Shmuel. But he prayed more by rote than with feeling, belief, or real conviction. Before long, he had the appearance of a man much older than his chronological age.

While this change was taking place in her husband, Mother felt that she was accomplishing what she had set out to do—to convert Father into a religious, observing Jew so that the Almighty would forgive him for his past transgressions. When I was born, and two and a half years later my brother, Ruvke, came into the world, she began to believe that God did indeed forgive Father for his sinful ways in Kharkov. She was never quite sure of this, however, and being uncertain, she kept after Father to see that he was doing everything necessary to live the life of an observing Orthodox Jew. Even as he reluctantly obeyed her commands, Father began to think of a plan of escaping from this woman and her constant nagging religious incursions into his daily routine. No wonder he seemed refreshed when he returned from his midweek trips to the hinterland as an itinerant tailor in the company of his daughter Pashke.

But even this periodic diversion was not enough for him. And so he went off to America, leaving Mother, his loving, adoring Sonia, and their five young, growing children in Pum-

pian. He wrote frequently, simple but endearing letters, promising like a refrain in each, that "soon, very soon," he would send the needed papers and money so that we could join him in the big city of New York, which he now seemed to like as much as his beloved Kharkov.

But this was not to be, although Mother never did give up hope. At least not until that morning of the terrible "conflagration," which to the tiny Jewish community of Pumpian was as frightful as the holocaust that was later to engulf the Jewish population of Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Germany, and other parts of Europe.

FIVE

"FIRE! FIRE! Chaimele, Ruvkele, up, up! Fire! Fire! Pashke, Oilke, Mainke, get up!"

"Where is the fire, Mama?" I asked as I opened my eyes on that bleak March morning.

"Fire! Fire! It is all over the village," Mother said. "We must leave our house quickly."

I could not understand and the more I tried to get Mother to explain, the more agitated and less coherent she became. She continued to shout: "Fire! Fire!" And the more she screamed, the more her voice took on the shrill of panic and terror.

By this time I was fully awakened and utterly terrified. I was seven years old. Little Ruvkele, who was four, could not care less. He seemed to enjoy the excitement. And my sisters, Olga (or Oilke, as mother called her), the oldest at fifteen, seemed quietly sad as she woke up. Pashke, a year younger, began to shout, like Mother, "Fire! Fire! Get up and get dressed, all of you." Mainke, who was ten, thought the whole thing a great big joke.

Pashke, Mother's favorite among the girls, resembled Mother and always tried to imitate her, behaving like "a little mother" to the rest of the children. Oilke, the most beautiful of my three sisters, was introspective and moody. Her expressive big blue eyes were set in a sculptured round face, topped by short-cropped glossy black hair, She rarely spoke, preferring to communicate more with her eyes and gestures than with her mouth. I never really knew how she felt.

Mainke, the least attractive of the girls and the only light-complexioned one of the three, with a sharp nose, a large mouth,

and brown hair falling over her shoulders, was the "devil" of the family. To her almost everything was a great joke. She was a prankster who liked to carry on with her two older sisters and her two little brothers.

Mainke rushed to the window to look for evidence of the fire that had Mother so agitated. I followed her. It was difficult to see through the double-paned window, now almost totally befogged. Even when Mainke tried to clear the inside part of the window with her nightgown, we could not see much. But there seemed to be no sign of smoke or fire.

No, our little, one-room, thatched-roof home with its earthen floor was not on fire. There was no smoke, no evidence of conflagration anywhere in Pumpian. However, insofar as Mother was concerned, the entire village was on the verge of total devastation.

The year was 1915. World War I had started some months earlier and the Germans were sweeping over Lithuania. Soon the soldiers of the German imperial army with their guns and their trucks loaded with equipment were expected in Pumpian. Since the Russians did not trust the Jews, having kept them in bondage as second-class citizens for generations, orders had come through to the local officials to drive out the entire Jewish population. Not only from the little Pumpian, but from other sections of Lithuania and Latvia over which the German soldiers were now beginning to march. For the Jews, life in Pumpian would end in twenty four hours. After that any Jew who remained would be shot. This was the reason for Mother's panic. "Fire! Fire!" was the most succinct, the most graphic way she could describe the terror that gripped her that morning.

How could we leave? Where would we go? Mother did not seem to know. We dressed quickly. Mother took me by the hand, as she usually did when she was going any place, and she and I went outside. The rest were left at home in Pashke's charge.

The streets were crowded with people, many carrying bundles of clothing and other valuables in pillowcases and in packages fashioned out of bed sheets. Like Mother, many of the women

were shouting: "Fire! Fire!" Many were crying. It was bedlam. Pumpian, our little village was writhing in mass hysteria.

We ran to Tante Esther's house. Running took effort on that cold, windy March morning. While Pumpian's famous mudholes were beginning to dry, a good part of the ground was still thick with wet mud. As Mother ran, holding firmly to my hand, she kept admonishing me, "Be careful of the mudholes."

At the house of Tante Esther, oldest of Mother's three sisters and the only one then living in Pumpian, I heard more cying and hysteria. To my knowledge, Tante Esther had never laughed or smiled. She had a sad expression most of the time and I saw her cry often. She cried even when she was happy, which was a rare occasion for her. Mother said that Tante Esther carried the burdens of her entire family, the Jewish population of Pumpian, and the whole world on her shoulders. Now her tears were falling in abundance.

Mother asked Esther what to do and where to go. She felt that somehow her oldest sister, advisor, and confidant would have the needed answers. She was right. Tante Esther, as usual, had the answer. Between tears, sobs, and drying her eyes, she told Mother what to do.

"Go up to the marketplace and find a driver, one with a strong horse and a sturdy wagon to take you all to Poneviez." This was the provincial capital, from which a train would take us to the hinterland of Russia.

The Jews of Pumpian and from throughout Lithuania had no choice, Tante Esther explained. They had to leave their homeland or be slaughtered like animals. She seemed to know what she was talking about. There was authority in her voice even amidst her tears. She had already made her arrangements and she urged Mother to hurry lest she lose the opportunity to find a willing driver.

Mother wondered what payment the drivers would require for taking us to Poneviez since she had very little money. Tante Esther explained that instead of money the drivers actually preferred their passengers' personal belongings, which they consid-

ered more valuable than currency. Because of the war and the possibility that the Germans would soon take over Lithuania, inflation had started and the buying power of the Russian ruble had already begun to decline.

Tante Esther knew about slaughtering animals. She and her husband owned and operated one of Pumpian's two butchering establishments. Late in life (at twenty-eight unmarried girls were considered old maids in Pumpian) Tante Esther had married Peretz Yehudi, short, bald, fat, and ten years older than she. He was a butcher but not a very good one. He was also lazy.

Tante Esther soon realized that she would have to manage the business as well as her husband. When they opened their butcher shop, shortly after their marriage, Tante Esther made all the necessary business arrangements and it was she who ran the establishment. Uncle Peretz finally learned to cut and handle the meat. But even in this task, Tante Esther had to help. Otherwise, in the process of cutting, her clumsy husband would waste too much of the valuable meat.

Mother, holding my hand, again, rushed with me to the marketplace. I had never seen the market on the hill so crowded. Or heard so much noise. Or observed such disoriented excitement. On a normal day, the farmers, their wives, and older children would arrive in produce-laden, horse-drawn wagons and settle in their usual locations. They sold their produce directly from the wagon. Some shouted, others sang, and a few just offered their products quietly, letting the appetizing appearance of the fresh fruits, vegetables, and berries speak for itself. There was always some bargaining, of course, but not much. The farmers seemed to know what price to ask for their products and the townspeople knew what to pay. A little more haggling was in evidence toward the end of the day by the farmers who had not yet disposed of all the produce they had brought to the market. By that time, the choice products had been sold off and only a handful of townspeople remained to bargain and buy.

Mother rarely went to the marketplace at that time. That was for *shnorrers* (beggars.) Mother was no *shnorrer*. She bargained and

haggled and usually made excellent buys, but she bought only the best quality produce.

On the morning of the "fire," the marketplace took on a completely new role. The farmers were there, all right. But by themselves. Their wives and children were not with them. And their wagons were empty. They had gotten the word, and they were there to take the Jewish people to Poneviez. At a price. And the price increased as the day progressed and the number of horses and wagons became fewer and fewer.

Mother haggled with one farmer, then another. Then she stopped haggling and made a deal. Except for a few personal items, the farmer could have everything we possessed. This would include the warmest clothing, several blankets, several down-filled pillows, some trinkets, and a copper mortar and pestle.

By the time we reached our house it was midmorning. And time was crucial. The farmer had told Mother that we must hurry since it was important to start the journey promptly so that we could reach Poneviez before nightfall.

Mother explained to my sisters what we were to do, urging them to pack quickly. To Ruvke, she said that we were all going for a ride in a wagon. He welcomed the idea. While I did not understand all the implications, I was impressed with Tante Esther's statement that we had very little choice but must leave Pumpian as quickly as possible. The feeling of urgency was in the air. I was depressed about leaving, yet also ambivalent about the forthcoming trip. I was enjoying the excitement but I could not help but wonder with some anxiety about what awaited us on the road, in Poneviez and beyond.

When Mother and the girls began to load what they had packed on the wagon, which was not very large, the farmer became temperamental and scolded Mother for taking too many bundles. Three bundles were the limit, he said, if he was to drive us to Poneviez.

Mother and my sisters quickly reshuffled their belongings, converting more than a dozen packages of various sizes into three, all stuffed into sheets and pillowcases. After further haggling with

the bearded, ruddy-faced farmer, the three bundles were again reduced in size. We climbed on the wagon. Mother locked our house, gave the key to the farmer, and off we went.

Mother made sure that each of us dressed warmly. The girls wore not one but two or three dresses. And Mother placed on her own body whatever she could manage. She dressed me in two jackets, plus a large muffler, all of it topped by a coat. I could get on the wagon only with difficulty and when I finally did manage to climb aboard, I could barely sit down.

It was an open wagon and toward evening we were glad that we had dressed as warmly as we did. The weather was chilly and windy when we started out but it became even colder as the day progressed. The colder it got the more we huddled together. Eventually we managed to keep warm by covering ourselves with blankets.

As the wagon rolled along on the road to Poneviez, I thought of Father, especially during those last days before he left for America. He had promised that as soon as he was settled he would send for us. But two years had passed and still Father had not taken the needed steps for our reunion. He wrote Mother regularly, sometimes as often as once a week, and always at least one letter a month. In each monthly letter he enclosed a draft for some rubles. And in just about every letter he said that soon, very soon, he would send for us. But the necessary papers never came.

Mother must have thought of Father too, for as a wagon passed on the other side of the road, she asked our driver to slow down. As we approached the other wagon, she shouted: "Simche? Simche? Is there a man named Simche Gussow there? Simche? Simche?"

Mainke giggled, as we all looked at Mother askance.

But as another wagon passed us on the road, Mother repeated her call: "Simche? Simche? Is Simche Gussow there?" It was a cry that has remained with me throughout the years. In fact, this particular scene was to reappear in various forms in many of my later dreams.

Simche is a Hebrew name that means happiness, but there was little joy on this trip, the beginning of an odyssey that was taking us to places unknown, unplanned, and under most unusual circumstances.

I had already begun to wonder whether Father would actually keep his promise. I had a feeling that we might never see him again. This could have been an unconscious wish, since my secret thoughts about Father represented two opposite impulses. In many ways I liked him, perhaps even loved him, but he paid so little attention to me that I never did find out to what degree he really cared about me. At the same time I was very close to Mother and at moments I did not really want Father to return. I thus fantasized that he had found new interests in the big, far-off city where he now lived and had decided neither to return to Pumpian (or wherever we might be) nor to arrange for us to join him in America.

Years later, I learned that Father's brothers in New York, especially his older brother, Uncle Shleme, had kept after him to bring his family to America. Father vacillated and when pressed by my uncle, he said, "I don't want my daughters to work in New York's sweatshops." Anyway, Father was not in any of the wagons that passed us on the way to Poneviez.

We arrived in Poneviez late that night and by the time we reached the railroad station I was tired and sleepy. I had heard that Poneviez was a beautiful city but this was something I did not see for myself since it was dark when we drove through town. All I remember is the feel of the cobblestones under the wheels of the wagon as we went turning, turning, from one street to another. The bumpy ride was uncomfortable. And chilly. By the time we came to the depot I felt very cold. I found myself shivering from fear as well as cold.

Awaiting us in Poneviez was a huge mass of people and a cacophony of sounds, enveloped in the darkness of the night. As we approached the depot, the sad, tired faces of the men, women, and children crowded on the platform became more visible and the sounds increasingly louder. One could barely distinguish a few

Yiddish words above the crying and moaning. Groups of people huddled together with their bundles beside them.

Because Mother was afraid that one or more of us might get separated and lost, she advised us to hold on to each other until a train came. Holding my hand, she asked Pashke to help her keep us all together.

Where were we going? To that part of the station where the tracks were. But masses of people were there ahead of us. There was pushing and shoving as each group, each person, tried to get near the tracks.

As we edged toward the tracks, I heard the sound of a train. The moaning whistle and the *choo-choo* sound became louder as the train approached the station. When the train stopped, the shouting, cursing, and pushing increased as masses of humanity tried to get to the train. Apparently, a train had not come by for a long time and the waiting crowd after many hours had become exasperated, with a few even near panic.

Mother behaved instinctively. Instead of moving toward the tracks, she reversed her direction, warning us to move away from the station to avoid being crushed.

At first we had to do considerable pushing just to get away from the crowd. But soon, Mother found a clear, open spot and we put our bundles down and sat on them.

The mob continued the thrust toward the tracks and onto the train. There were shouts . . . "Help me get on" . . . "Mother, please, don't leave me" . . . "Where are you, my child?" . . . "Oh, God" . . . "Please help me push him into the car" . . . .

Then I heard the sound of the train again—the whistle, the *choo-choo*, the motion of the wheels, slowly at first, then faster, faster. And suddenly the long, black train was gone.

Then I heard a man cry out: "My wife and the children are on the train. Oh, my God. Dear God, what am I to do?"

Obviously, there were more separations than this one, for the crying, the shouts, and the wailing continued. Meanwhile, the crowd grew no smaller. Wagons full of frightened people continued to arrive at the depot. As one train after another came and

went, and there was a long interval between each, the mob continued to rush to board the cars. No one had any idea where they were going but every one had the urge to get inside a car of the train. The fear of being left on the platform seemed stronger than anxiety over not knowing the train's destination. While the rush to get on the train persisted, new wagonloads continued to arrive and the crowd continued to swell.

At last, Mother decided that we could not wait indefinitely, that we would move toward the tracks and get on the next train. But in the hours that followed, the "next train" just did not come.

Mother herded us all together and literally began to push us toward the tracks. She continued to hold my hand. Pashke took Ruvke in her arms; Oilke and Mainke held hands.

We pushed and we shoved and Mother continued to admonish us to remain close to each other. And as we pushed we were getting farther away from the tracks. In the darkness the black, swelling crowd began to envelop us.

Suddenly, my sister Pashke and my little brother, Ruvkele, disappeared in the huge black mass. Mother became frantic as she searched for them, shouting their names. And just as suddenly as they had disappeared, they came into view once again.

We did our best to follow Mother's plea to hold on to each other, but it was a difficult thing to do. But push we did, getting bruised in the process.

The mob grew even larger. Now we faced a new danger. As we huddled together with our pillowcase bundles, we found we were being pushed into the tracks.

Mother did her job well. As usual, she found the way to solve a particular problem. I noticed that she was talking to a huge hulk of a man whose aid she enlisted.

Mother had won him over. Especially when she learned that he was from Vilna, where he had been a yeshiva classmate of her brother, our Uncle Avrom. From now on, the tall, strong man would become our bodyguard and guardian angel, despite the fact that he had with him his own wife and what seemed like five or six children of various sizes and ages.

We joined their family group as we continued to wait for the next train. As I constantly kept looking to the left to see if it were approaching the depot, my neck began to hurt. As the minutes, which seemed more like hours, ticked off, the swelled crowd became more restless. The darkness of the night was punctuated by the crying of children and the occasional outcries of their exhausted elders.

Several times during the night I thought we heard the approach of a train. But no train appeared. It might have been the sound of a train in the distance, which turned off in another direction. Or it could have been my imagination.

Suddenly, a fast, black train, consisting of an endless number of cars rushed onto the tracks alongside the platform. As it stopped, the pushing and shoving accelerated. And shouting and crying blasted the darkness.

Each man, woman, and child on the platform had just one purpose—to get on that train. Not knowing where the train would take us made no difference. Everyone wanted to get on it.

Even as a child, I was perceptive enough to grasp the complexities of what was happening that night. And despite my great confidence in Mother's ability to take care of me and my sisters and my little brother, fear overwhelmed me. Fear, together with the mystery of the entire situation. Many questions came persistently to the surface of my mind: Why were we here in the first place? Why did we have to leave the comfort of our cherished home in Pumpian, the only home I had known until then? Most important of all, what awaited us in the dark box of the car we were now trying so hard to enter? And where would we be going once the train began to move?

My brooding quickly dissolved when I felt the big, strong hands of Mother's newly found savior grab me and push me over the crowd and into the darkness of the train. A few other children and some adults were already there. I was the first of our family inside. Then came little Ruvkele, Mainke, Oilke, and Pashke in that order. The big man kept pushing other children into the car including his own six.

"Mother! Where is Mother?" I began to cry.

I saw Mother's face in the opening of the car. The big man was trying to push her into the car. Mother was short and fat, and as big and strong as this man was, he was perspiring and his face was becoming red as he tried to lift Mother inside the tall, dark mouth of the car. Each time he thought he had her inside, his hands would give way and Mother would fall down on the platform. Once, twice, three times he tried to get her inside—without success. Finally, he enlisted the help of several men inside the car and two men on the platform. They began to heave Mother, heave and heave again, and at last she was inside, flat on her back beside me. With the help of Pashke and Mainke and others, Mother was finally able to stand up and then sit down with the rest of us near our pillowcase bundles.

Bodies kept pouring in. As the car became more crowded, it seemed smaller than when I was first pushed into it. But it was no longer as dark as it had been. The white pillowcases of the many bundles around us and the colorful dresses on some of the children and younger women brightened the inside of the car.

"No more," somebody shouted. "No more. There is no more room. We will choke to death." A man moved to close the panel and before he was successful in closing it entirely, the train began to move . . . first very slowly, then a little faster, then faster still. Then came the sound of the clanking of the wheels, and the assorted sounds of creaking and banging, rolling and turning . . . and we were off . . . in the darkness of the night. Black, dense darkness was penetrated now and then by a flicker of light from a farmhouse in the distance, a trainman's lantern at some station that the train passed swiftly by. Or from the moon on this clear, starry night as the train made a sharp turn. Then black darkness again, almost total blackness. Since there were no windows in this wooden cargo car, the darkness continued as the train moved along except for an occasional flicker of light that flashed through a crack here and there, providing a quick, passing view of the abundant human cargo all around us.

I have been on many trains since then, and on planes,

traveling a great deal, by choice, for business and pleasure. But my future travels were nothing like the imprisoned horror and the events surrounding it in the long nights, with their disturbing dreams, and the dreary days in the dark, foul-smelling boxcar.

SIX

AS THE train moved along in the darkness, our boxcar was filled to the brim with men, women, and children, wearied from their journey to Poneviez and their long wait to get aboard a train. It was now warm inside. At first it was just mildly warm, then warmer still, and before long almost uncomfortably so. Someone shouted for air, demanding that the door be opened. When nothing happed, the cry for air became louder. Finally the door was opened—just a crack. I felt a blast of cool air blowing over my head. I had never known until then how satisfying a whiff of fresh air could be. Eventually it became very cold and the door was closed.

Oh, the terrible odors that enveloped us in the black box. What did we do about such personal human needs as urinating and defecating? Since this was a cargo car, it provided no toilet facilities. Apparently, there was not a single toilet on the whole train. And it was a long train, each car filled with people, thousands of people of all ages and some obviously not in the best of health.

What did we do for a toilet? I recall the sound of footsteps—and then drip, drip, drip, as if someone were urinating. But where? It was not until the morning that I could see the traces of urination and defecation and learn how this was managed and where. But during the night, I was aware only of sounds and the strong, varied, unpleasant, at times almost sickening, odors. I lay on the floor with my head on Mother's lap as did little Ruvkele, while the girls crowded together alongside. As Mother bent over to ask me whether I was comfortable, I could feel the warmth of her large breasts, which during the first two and a half years of my life

provided me with nourishment, security, and contentment. When little Ruvkele came, I resented him and his encroachment on Mother's attention.

Mother began to wean me by putting pepper on the nipples of her breasts. I disliked the bitter taste of the milk but I would not let go of her breasts. What did Mother do then? She let Ruvkele feed from one breast, me from the other. I was displeased with this sharing, and I disliked little Ruvkele for it. Once I became very irritated and shouted at her to drown him. Mother did not reproach me and I learned to accept the new situation.

Sharing was necessary for our entire family in our little one-room house. We slept in the one room, we ate in the one room (more often than not from one bowl, with wooden spoons), and we did just about everything else in that one room except to relieve outselves. For this we used the outhouse—in the cold of winter as well as in the summer. Plumbing was not only nonexistent but unknown in Pumpian. Life was primitive, but this was the only life we knew and somehow we even managed to be happy at times.

Food in Pumpian, as in other Lithuanian *shtetls*, was simple but not necessarily limited. The two basic items of sustenance were black bread, homemade, of course, and potatoes. To add zest, the Jewish housewife concocted a variety of "sours," consisting largely of *burikes* (beets), *kroit* (cabbage), and *schav* (sour grass.) Beets combined with *russel* (homemade citric acid) were used to make the famous Lithuanian *borscht*. Cabbage, with the addition of potatoes, was made into a hearty cabbage soup. Both soups were served hot. Together with the homemade black bread, each served as lunch or dinner. During the cold winter months cabbage soup was served often, sometimes with chunks of meat. *Schav* usually replaced hot borscht in the summertime although in our house we often consumed cold *borscht* (as an alternate to *schav*) to which was added soured cream and hot boiled potatoes.

The lowly potato (or *bulba*, pronounced boolbae) played the leading role in the diet of the Lithuanian *shtetl*. It was amazing the variety of foods that Mother was able to formulate from the potato.

Her cooking genius knew no end. Plain boiled potatoes, potatoes in the skin, ovalshaped potato *latkes* (pancakes), *kugel* (potato pudding), baked potatoes, mashed potatoes with chicken fat, potato *taigechts* (another type of pudding), and potatoes in combination with cabbage, carrots, or other vegetables, potatoes with beans and meat *(cholent)*. Potatoes, in one form or another, were served twice and sometimes three times a day. Without the potato, the Jewish Lithuanian household could not have existed. Mother was in her element with it. It was as if all her creative force bore down on that lowly tuber to transform it into one tempting magical form after another.

For the Sabbath, Mother usually cooked chicken with *lokshen* (homemade noodles.) Once a month or sometimes every two or three weeks, especially during the cold winter months, Mother made her *cholent*. This was a taste delight. It consisted of beans (soaked in water overnight), flavored with herbs, and combined with chunks of beef, and cooked slowly in the oven from early Friday afternoon until noon hour on the Sabbath. The oven was a hole in the wall—literally. It was used for cooking *cholent* and providing heat in cold winter months. It served as the fireplace and the hearth of the *shtetl* household.

Cholent was made for at least two reasons: to provide a tasty, nourishing meal for the Sabbath; and to have a hot meal for the Sabbath, the day when cooking was not permitted in the Orthodox Jewish home. When chicken with *lokshen* was the Sabbath meal the pot with chicken and soup was left warming in the oven, and the cold noodles were added to the hot soup just before serving. Sometimes, also warming in the oven was a pot of *tsimmes*, a most delicious concoction of carrots, prunes, and potatoes. Since lighting a fire and cooking were not permitted, this was the way to have a warm meal for *Shabbes*.

The "*Shabbes goy*" was unknown in Pumpian and in other Lithuanian *shtetls*. This custom—of having a Gentile light and turn off the fire on the Sabbath for Orthodox Jewish families—was prevalent in large and more affluent towns with populations that mixed to a much greater extent than in Pumpian. We lived almost

completely apart from the Gentiles of our village. We had our own section of the town and they had theirs. The only contacts the Jews had with the Gentiles was when buying their produce and other items in the market on top of the hill, with the mailman who delivered our mail, and with other governmental functionaries.

Thus, aside from the *cholent*, the Sabbath repast that followed our return from the synagogue consisted of cold items such as the appetizer, usually chopped chicken liver or calves feet, and some *nosherei* (snacks.) The delight of delights among the *Shabbes nosherei* was *bubb*, a very special legume, resembling large, dry lima beans, salted and peppered and cooked to perfection.

God was ever present in Pumpian. Although the *shtetl* was small it had two synagogues. The major house of prayer was Beth Medras, the big *shul*. The big *shul* was actually not a very big edifice. In fact, it was rather small and old. But it was big in comparison with the Hassidic *shul* a few yards away. Since some of the Jews of Pumpian were Hassidim, a great deal of prayer combined with singing and dancing (among men only) went on in the small building. However, on the *Shabbes* and the various holidays, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even the Hassidim prayed in the big synagogue.

While the Lurias claimed Hassidic tradition, only a few prayed in the Hassidic synagogue or behaved like Hassidim except to sing gay Hassidic songs in Hebrew and in Yiddish on the Sabbath, usually after the *Shabbes* meal.

The marketplace up on the hill, was the center of the *shtetl*. It was laid out in the form of a hand, with five fingers, each finger leading to a different road. One finger led to the road to Pushelat, a small *dorf* or sub*shtetel*. Only about two dozen Jewish families lived there. Finger number two was the beginning of the road to Posvell, regarded by the residents of the Pumpian ghetto as an aristocratic town. For one thing, Posvell did not have the great mudholes for which Pumpian was famous. The third finger led in the direction of Vovolnik, and the Jews of Pumpian avoided this road because of the legend that gangsters and murderers lay in hiding here. Finger number four led to the widest road of all, for it

was the route to Poneviez, the large and enchanting provincial capital. Poneviez was second only to Kovne, the capital of Lithuania itself. For the Jewish resident of Pumpian, a trip to Poneviez was a dream, rarely fulfilled. The fifth finger, which the Jewish population traveled most often, was the road that led to the big *shul*.

Most of the Jewish men of Pumpian visited the *shul* almost daily. Not the main house of prayer but the lower level, which served as a kind of library, vestry, and clubhouse. Here they read the Talmud and the Mishna, held impromptu debates, stuffed snuff in their nostrils, sneezed, and exchanged the gossip of the day.

While I was too young to spend much time here, I was curious enough to take a peek once in a while or linger on the steps, attracted by the murmuring and sing-song sounds that emanated from the vestry. I can still smell the assortment of odors that oozed from the old, torn leather covers of the large volumes of the Talmud and the Mishna, intermingled with the aroma of the snuff and the sneezing. It was a dreamlike, tranquil, soothing atmosphere.

Strangely enough, my uncle Reb Avrom did not fraternize here. Instead, he studied the Talmud and the Mishna in the privacy of his home, together with his two sons. They often rose at two o'clock in the morning and read from the Talmud until seven or eight, when it was time for ablutions, to say the morning prayers, and prepare for breakfast.

Near the big *shul* was a large stone or boulder, known as Mount Sinai, around which there was curious legend, often discussed by the elders of the *shtetl*. According to the story, sometime early in the nineteenth century, the high commissioner of the area assembled all the Jewish menfolk of Pumpian and announced that unless they brought forth the man in the *shtetl* responsible for "slaughtering of a Gentile lad for Pesach" all the Jews of Pumpian would be killed. They were given five days to bring the culprit before the commissioner. After special daily prayers in the big *shul*, a man called Israel Pianski came forth and said that he would

sacrifice himself on behalf of the Jews of Pumpian. That it was God's will. The next morning he went to the commissioner and said, "I and I alone am the guilty one. None of the other Jews is involved in any way." He did not say of what he was guilty since he had committed no crime and was guilty of nothing. The commissioner and his henchmen burned the martyr in front of the big *shul*. And on this holy spot, the stone boulder was placed as a memorial. During my time, some of the older boys used the boulder to lean on in the sun on a summer day, and study the Talmud while reclining in this fashion. At times, with other boys of my age, I played hide and seek here.

Unlike Father, I felt very much a part of Pumpian. I could not imagine living any place else, despite Mother's romantic stories and her imaginative, highly pleasant descriptions of our future life in America—with Father. I liked walking on a sunny, delightfully warm Saturday afternoon (it was never hot in Pumpian) to the street with the big chestnut trees, near the Lithuanian church. I liked the feel and sound of the leaves under my bare feet and the touch of the shiny, big chestnuts in my hands. I liked the Sabbath dinner, after the pleasant walk from the *shul*. And I especially liked eating *bubb* when we returned home from our after-Sabbath dinner walk.

While Mother had her revered only brother and his family in Pumpian, in addition to Tante Esther, we spent very little time with Uncle Avrom and his family. On the other hand, we were close to Tante Esther, visiting her often, both at the butcher shop and in her home, and she in turn frequently came to our house. Tante Esther was mother's confidant and advisor. But then Tante Esther was always helping somebody. The one for whom she sacrificed most, however, was her brother, Avrom. Two other sisters, Aunt Frieda and Aunt Toibe, who were also married lived in Vetka in Russia. Their mother and father, my maternal grandparents, had died within three months of each other a year before I was born.

Tall, stately Uncle Avrom, "with the beautiful red beard," of whom I was very much in awe and more than a little afraid, was

mohel and *shochet*. As a *mohel* he circumcised the male babies eight days after birth, in the ritual called the *Brith Milah*. As the *shochet*, it was his function to slaughter animals according to kosher requisites. However, before the Jewish population of Pumpian would accept him as a *shochet*, Uncle Avrom had a most difficult time. Without the help of Tante Esther, he would not have made it.

Uncle Avrom was a highly intelligent, gifted, well-educated young man. He was also deeply pious. He was fully trained for his chosen profession in the large city of Vilna, the famous center of Talmudic learning, with many renowned Hebrew schools and yeshivas (seminaries). For centuries Vilna was the home of the most famous rabbis and seat of the most historic Orthodox synagogues. The most scholarly Jewish young men from throughout Lithuania came here to study for the rabbinate or to become a *shochet* and *mohel*.

Although Uncle Avrom completed his studies with honors and returned to his birthplace with glowing recommendations from his distinguished teachers in Vilna, the Jewish community of Pumpian refused to eat meat slaughtered by him. The reason was political rather than Uncle Avrom's competence or accreditation. Factionalism and favoritism played their roles even in a small place like Pumpian. The friends and followers of Reb Hersh Yudel, Pumpian's long-time and highly revered *shochet*, would have no part of the meat slaughtered by the interloper regardless of his family background, ability, and professional honors. Even if his name was Luria—and the Lurias were recognized as one of the most learned families in Pumpian and the surrounding areas.

The Lurias, my mother's family, had roots that went back to the fourteenth century and probably earlier. The Lurias lived in Italy, Germany, Bohemia, and eventually throughout Eastern Europe, especially in Lithuania. The name may have come from Loria, a small town near Bassano in the Vicenza region of Italy.

The Lurias were Levites whose biblical ancestors attended the *kohens*, or priests, in the days of Aaron, the first priest, and brother of Moses. The main branch of the family is believed to

have been descended from Rashi, the famous Hebrew scholar who composed the *Rashi* or commentaries to the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. The founder of the family was Solomon Spira, a son-in-law of Mattathias Treves. It was Solomon Spira's daughter Miriam (1350) and her progeny who were the precursors of the Lurias.

Among the famous early personalities in the line was Aaron Luria (1450), who was honored as a rabbinical authority. It is not known whether the kabbalist Jehiel Luria of Safed, Israel (late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries), belonged to the original Luria family, but some think he did.

The founder of the Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian branches was an earlier Jehiel Luria, who was born in Germany but who, in about 1470, moved to Bassat, Lithuania, where he served as a rabbi, raised his family, and died. His great-grandson was Solomon Luria, known as the *Maharshal* (spiritual leader). Many rabbis and Talmudic scholars followed.

It was from this learned heritage that my mother's forebears and, of course, her brother, my Uncle Avrom Luria, the *mohel* and *shochet*, came. However, even this background was not sufficient for him to overcome, on his own, the strange political factionalism of Pumpian. As a result, for many months after Uncle Avrom launched his profession as *shochet*, only members of our family and a few very close friends bought the meat slaughtered by him. But Aunt Esther continued to buy and have him slaughter her usual supply of animals, destroying the unsold portions of meat rather than give in to the town's demands that only meat slaughtered by Reb Hersh Yudel be considered for purchase and use. Her persistence paid off. Eventually, after great financial sacrifices by Aunt Esther and her husband, Uncle Peretz (who more than once had been willing to give in to the demands of Pumpian's Jewish citizens), and a shameful waste of fresh-killed beef, veal, and chicken, Uncle Avrom received acceptance and began to share the work of kosher meat slaughtering with old Reb Hersh Yudel.

On Saturdays and holidays when we did not visit Aunt

Esther or pay one of our rare visits to the house of Avrom, we often took a walk out to the edge of town. We were especially apt to go for a walk on a summer afternoon, after we had been in the big *shul* for Sabbath services and had had our Sabbath meal. Sometimes our walk took us beyond the edge of the village into the countryside, with fields of wheat that grew so tall they were over my head. Walking along, I also saw cows grazing in the meadow and old farmhouses owned by the Gentiles. For a change of scene, we often walked to the clear, flowing river surrounded by fields and the flower-filled meadows. Here, the wildflowers grew in profusion and gave off a delightful fragrance.

We often took such walks to the countryside when Father was still at home but we continued the Saturday afternoon excursions even when Father had gone to America.

Occasionally, on a holiday, Mother packed food in a bundle and she and I—just the two of us (the girls and Ruvke were usually left at home, with Pashke in charge)—walked to the meadow at the edge of the river. It was a fairly long walk from our house, but we traversed the area in leisurely fashion, with Mother holding my hand. Upon reaching the meadow it was pleasurable to lie down on the soft grass, stretch out, and inhale the enchanting odors of the myriad yellow daffodils, pink and white daisies, azaleas in shades of pale and deep rose, orange and red wild lilies, and varieties of anemones. Mother and I would gather some and I liked the velvety touch of the petals.

I remember one particularly delightful visit to the meadow in Shevueth, the feast day in the late spring that commemorates God presenting the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. The day was beautiful and sunny, sufficiently warm to enjoy being outdoors, with just enough of a wind to cool you off when you started to perspire. When Mother and I reached the meadow toward noon, the water of the river was calm, the grass was green, the trees were in bloom, and the enchanting multicolored wild anemones shimmering in the wind. Mother spread a blanket and we sat down to observe the beauty of nature around us. After a few minutes, we felt rested, and she served the food: boiled chicken with carrots,

and sponge cake for dessert. It was a most satisfying lunch, especially since I felt so hungry after the long walk.

When we finished eating, we lay down and Mother told me one of her stories. She was great at creating fanciful tales of strange people in far away places. Then Mother began to talk of her favorite subject, of the great day when Father would send us money and the papers enabling us to join him in America, the golden, blessed land. We might even find the treasured letter upon our return home. This was her most cherished desire, her endless dream.

Mother was so convincing that by the time we returned home I was full of expectations. But when the mailman, with the big worn leather bag over his shoulder passed by our house without stopping, I knew that there would be neither tickets nor the needed papers for us to journey to America.

As the train moved rapidly away from Lithuania and into the Russian hinterland, I wondered whether I would ever return to the enchanting *shtetl* of my birth. Occasionally, the train turned, sometimes so violently as to churn the human cargo in the boxcars. At every turn, the *choo-choo* sounded, sometimes in a plaintive key. Then the train slowed down slightly and the occasional screech of the wheels gave way to a pleasant hum. I fell asleep.

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SEVEN

WHEN I awakened it was morning. The door of the boxcar was now open a little. Light came into the boxcar and I could see what was happening about me. While some were still sleeping, a few snoring, there was movement all around us as people began to get up. Curious as to where we were, I asked Mother, who was now very much awake. She didn't know but guessed that we were far from Pumpian, perhaps deep in Russia. I continued to ask more questions. Particularly, I wanted to know where we were going and when the train would stop. Gently, Mother replied that she wished she knew but that she really couldn't enlighten me very much. At this point, Mainke, who also had been wide awake, chimed in, urging Mother to tell me more than she had. Mother seemed annoyed and responded, as she often did, with a question, 'What is there to tell?"

Mother's reply didn't satisfy Mainke, the talkative one, the busybody of the family, and she decided to enlighten me herself. We were headed for Siberia, deep in Russia, near the Chinese border, she began to explain. Mother tried to shut her up, saying that she really didn't know where the train was taking us. But Mainke persisted. She said that everybody in the train was talking about it, about Siberia, where it is very cold and where Russia for centuries had sent its worst, the most confirmed prisoners, to freeze, to rot, and to die.

This was the rumor among the passengers of the train. Mainke had heard it. She knew what she was talking about. While most of the passengers in our crowded car just sat in silence, a few whispered among themselves. Occasionally, a man or woman would shout at the person nearby. The conversation was in Yid-

dish and while the train moved along at a fast pace, making all kinds of noise, I could hear a word now and then.

What I heard seemed to confirm what Mainke was trying to tell me. Some of the passengers wondered aloud about what would happen to us. Not only when we reached Siberia but in the hours, the days, and perhaps weeks of traveling on the train. Nothing but despair and uncertainty in the dark, bleak boxcar? What about food? When and where were we going to get something to eat? Or would they starve us? There was now a great deal of anxiety among the passengers in our car. And prayer. "Oh, my God, what will they do to us?" was said again and again.

After several hours of such commotion, the car grew quiet once again. Almost as if someone had said, "Hush," and everyone in the car had heard and taken the command to heart. After a few moments of the strange quiet, the train slowed down, traveling slowly, then slower still, the wheels screeching as it stopped. Instantly there was a rush to the door.

Then a tall, strong-looking man moved quickly to the door and admonished the onrushing mob to stop pushing or be crushed like sheep. Opening the door wide, with several other men helping him, he told the crowd to stand back while he determined where we were and what we were supposed to do. He then jumped off the car after whispering something to two of the men who had helped him. The effect was amazing. Everyone remained where they were—as if frozen. Though a few whispered among themselves, most were quiet. Even Mother, who was not one to take commands from anyone, did not move from her spot. Instead, she advised us to wait and see what would happen.

Within a few minutes, the big man returned to the car and told us what he had learned. It seemed that we were now in Russia, although he did not know in what city. We were stopping for a short time, perhaps an hour or a bit longer. He had been instructed to tell us that we were to leave the train to take care of our personal, creature needs and that later we would receive some food. This news cheered the anxious human cargo of our boxcar.

The big man went on to explain that after the breather we were to return to continue our journey. He did not know exactly where we were going, he said, but it was his belief that we would travel deep into Russia, far from the war front. He admonished his fellow passengers to be extremely careful while they were off the train, explaining that we would be guarded by soldiers and police with guns. Anyone attempting to escape would be taking his life in his own hands. He then told the passengers that they were to leave the train slowly, carefully, and quietly. He would make sure that everyone had plenty of time to exit from the train and return in time to resume the journey.

And off they went, the men, the young, and the strong first, and then the women and the elderly. They were helped by the tall, husky man and by some of the others. Mother waited until most of the passengers were out of the car before moving toward the door.

As we got off the train, I saw that we were in a clearing but not far from many trees that looked like a forest. This was no station, and if we were near a city you could not see it from where we had stopped. Uniformed men with guns on their shoulders directed us where to go and what to do. Mother asked and was told that there were no toilet facilities but that one could take care of one's personal needs in the woods. And the uniformed men pointed to where we should go for this purpose. We did just that, as did many of the passengers. It was strange to see so many bare behinds, fat and thin. Men and women. Boys and girls.

When we returned to the spot where the train was stopped, horse-drawn carts containing big kettles of soup, hot and steamy, were parked near the train. We lined up at one and after a short wait each of us was given a piece of black bread and a metal bowl filled with cabbage-and-potato soup. I ate with great relish, as did Mother and my sisters. The soup tasted delicious. Little Ruvke did not seem to enjoy the soup but with Mother's help and her urging, "Eat, eat, or you'll get sick," he ate—without enthusiasm.

After what seemed like a long time we were finally told to return to the cars. The train was now ready to continue the journey. One by one, each of the passengers went back to his place

in our car. And once again, Mother had to be helped—actually pushed up—into the car, which was filled with a strong, chemical odor and seemed to have been swept out and cleaned.

Years later, when I read about the Nazis transporting the Jews from Germany, Poland, and the other countries occupied by the Wehrmacht, in boxcars to concentration camps, memories of my experience came flooding back. In many ways there were great similarities. We were forced to leave our homeland as were the Jews of the German-occupied lands. We were transported in boxcars like cattle, as were the Jews of the Hitler era. Nevertheless, compared with the Wehrmacht's handling of the Jews on the way to concentration camps and eventual extermination, our experience more closely resembled another painful exodus in the long history of the Diaspora.

Back in our boxcar for the rest of the journey, we felt that our situation was not pleasant. We had taken care of our creature needs and we had been fed. But now a new feeling of apprehension seemed to overwhelm the passengers. Where were we going? What would they do with us?

The train did not begin to move until a long time after we had returned to our original places in the car. Some of the passengers expressed their impatience rather loudly. Though they had no idea of where they were going—or being taken—they seemed anxious and in a hurry to get there.

At last, the train began to move, first almost at a snail's pace, then faster, faster, until at last we were going at full speed. The car door remained open and we could see the countryside that we were passing—trees, hills, grass—as the sun now shone in full brilliance. With my stomach full of soup and bread and with my head soon on my mother's lap once again, I began to doze. Eventually, lulled by the varied, rhythmic sounds of the train, I fell asleep.

I was startled awake by a booming noise. Two men were standing upright in the boxcar and exchanging curses. Soon they began to fight. It was only when one began to bleed at the mouth that they were separated. I could not understand what they were arguing about but the quarrel seemed to pertain to our destination.

One was certain it was Siberia. The other persisted in demanding proof. And, of course, there was no proof.

As the train rolled along and the day progressed, the question of where we were going became all-pervasive. New rumors were passed around. Apparently several of the younger men had not returned to the train at our last stop. They had decided to hike to the nearest city, come what might.

By now, others in our car were plotting their own "escape." There was much whispering all around us. I heard one man declare that he was getting off at the next stop, no matter where or when. But the train did not stop. It slowed down now and then but always speeded up again. It kept moving, uphill, downhill, turning, and making all kinds of sounds. But it did not stop.

Late that afternoon, when most of the passengers had quieted down from exhaustion, largely stemming from the stress of their own apprehensions, another incident disturbed the equilibrium of our human cargo.

At the other end of our car a man began to cough as I had never heard anyone cough before. At first his coughing was very loud, then each cough became a gasping struggle for breath.

I could not see what was happening, but there was a great deal of commotion as several men went to the aid of the gasping man and his alarmed wife. She started to shout for help, pleading that the door be reopened. She cried that her husband was dying, that he was gasping for breath, that he needed air.

The door of the car was soon opened, bringing in a whiff of cold air. The helpless wife now began to beg for help. "Do something. Stop the train." But the train did not stop. The sick man was stretched out on the floor. There were whispers that he had had a heart attack. As he lay motionless on the floor, those around him became quiet. Was he dying? Had he died?

Because Mother knew of my fear of death, she became concerned. She tried to shield me from seeing, from learning what was happening. Her efforts were in vain because my curiosity was now aroused. She tried to comfort me, but that was useless too. My attention was on the dying man, now quiet on the floor. The

thought came into my mind that this was a funeral car and that all of us might be doomed to die there in the boxcar. The fear of death overwhelmed me.

Death had been present in Pumpian. When a man or woman died in our *shtetl* it was an occasion for mourning throughout the entire Jewish community because of the unusual interrelationship among the residents of the ghetto. Pumpian was a small *shtetl* with a Jewish population of only some two hundred families. Thus, a kinship that went beyond blood relationship had developed among the families and individuals. Interestingly enough, the Jewish population of Pumpian was not inbred. Marriages were often arranged, usually by *shadchonim* (marriage brokers) between a young man or a girl from Pumpian with the daughter or a son of a family in a neighboring village. Besides this, when some of the young men left Pumpian to continue their Talmudic studies in Poneviez, Kovne, or Vilna, they often found brides in these cities or in nearby *shtetls*. But there was a closeness among the Jews in Pumpian that was unique.

In a world without TV or a daily newspaper, gossip was one of the major pleasures of the *shtetl*'s womenfolk. Nor were the men left out. As a matter of fact, gossip was the living, word-of-mouth substitute for the newspaper, which the Jews of Pumpian almost never saw. Even if a newspaper had been available, it would have been of little or no value to them since scarcely any of the town's Jewish women, and not all of the men could read, except the religious books in Hebrew. Many men were proficient in Yiddish, however, and could enjoy the work of writers such as Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, or an occasional copy of a Yiddish newspaper. At any rate, gossip they did, all of them. They gossiped about everything and anything. If someone were ill, they gossiped about that. Soon the entire population knew a man, woman, or child was seriously ill. Often the more gossipy (or the more imaginative) women announced premature, or even nonexistent, deaths. But when death finally did come to someone who had been ill and about whose illness many had gossiped, the news spread like wildfire, to be followed in quick order by an overall pall in the

entire community. The degree of remorse and general malaise depended on who had died and how beloved or disliked the deceased had been during his or her lifetime. Of significance, too, was the age of the person who died. If a young wife or husband died, leaving numerous orphaned children, then the crying and wailing became rampant and doleful. If a child died, the grief deepened that much more.

A funeral in Pumpian was a public or community event. At a Gentile funeral long-bearded priests, wearing colorful robes, preceded the casket, carried on the shoulders of four, six, or eight men. The priests carried banners depicting Jesus on the Cross and chanted melodious, sad arias. Banners were also carried by young boys, big and little, dressed in white robes, who also sang, harmonizing their high, often shrill, voices with the tenors and baritones of the priests. We of the Jewish community were careful not to get too close to a Gentile funeral procession. Nor to linger for more than a second as the cavalcade moved toward the big church on the street with the tall chestnut trees, at the edge of the village, a considerable distance away from the Jewish section. Behind the church was the Gentile cemetery, surrounded by chestnut trees and big elms.

A Jewish funeral was different. Instead of a black or brown shiny casket, the Jewish casket was of plain, unpainted pine wood. Partly open, it was carried by elderly and middle-aged bearded men. At a Gentile funeral the casket was sometimes placed on a horse-drawn wagon, but the Jewish casket was always borne by men, moving at a slow pace so that the mourners who followed the bier could keep up with them. The mourners also walked slowly, some helped along by friends and relatives.

No banners, no decoration of any kind ever appeared at a Jewish funeral in Pumpian. Just the mourners, men, women, and children, mostly dressed in black. There seemed to be a great deal more crying than at a Gentile funeral, which added a mournful note to the Jewish rites. It was heartrending to watch and listen to the outpouring of grief, especially from the women and children. Even as a child I shared the anguish of the mourners, especially for

the children whose father or mother was deceased. Often I had difficulty holding back tears as the procession moved toward the big *shul*, behind which our cemetery was located, or to the smaller synagogue of the Hassidim.

EIGHT

SOON IT was evening and darkness once again enveloped the boxcar. The darkness and varied rhythmic motions of the train made me drowsy once again and off to sleep I went.

When I awakened, which seemed like hours later, I felt nauseated. I was warm and perspired profusely. I tried to rouse Mother. Awakening, she was alarmed to see me sitting up. When I told her how I felt she put a hand to my forehead and I could tell by her expression that she knew that I had a fever. She sat me down on the floor and tried to make me comfortable. When I explained that I was nauseated but that I was unable to vomit, she placed a towel on the floor near me, told me to bend my head down and put my finger in my mouth. Way down in the mouth, she urged me.

I did what Mother told me to do, and then I vomited, on the towel and on the floor beyond. Mother asked me whether I felt any better. I told her that I did feel a little more comfortable. The train was speeding along and there was darkness all around me. It was now the middle of the night, with everyone asleep and an abundance of snores emanating from various directions.

Soon I became nauseated once again and once more I began to vomit. This time I did not have to put my finger in my mouth. I was a bit better then but only briefly. Soon I vomited again and again until I could vomit no more.

I was now drenched with perspiration. Mother put her hand on my forehead again, and this time she was really alarmed. Those near us were now awake and some tried to be sympathetic, but no one seemed to know what to tell Mother to do with me. Mainke woke up and upon learning of the dire situation tried to be of help, but she could do little except

speculate that in the morning the train might stop and Mother could locate a doctor.

Mother, now much perturbed, asked, "What time is it?" A man whose face I could not make out, leaned over, pulled a watch from his pocket, and peered this way and that, trying to catch a stray wisp of light to see where the hands pointed. At last, he turned to her and in a flat tone said: "Four o'clock." Mother then tried to comfort me, saying that in another hour or so, it would be light, the train would stop somewhere, and when it did she would take me off and find a doctor.

I had vomited so many times and so profusely that soon I started to retch. Mother kept wiping my forehead gently, as she continued to reassure me that soon the train would stop. We would get off, and a doctor would be found who would give me a "good medicine" to make me feel better. She covered me and promised that she would take care of me, *liebe kind*, her beloved child.

I tried to doze, but without success. Nauseated and still retching, I was very uncomfortable.

Hours later the train began to slow down, moving slower and slower until soon it came to a complete stop. The door was opened and several men jumped off to see where we had stopped. They soon returned, reporting that they had been told no one would be permitted to get off. We were not in a city, one of the men explained, and we would not remain here very long.

Mother made up her mind. She put a blanket around me, whispered something to my sisters, and, taking me in her arms, moved toward the door.

With some help, she got off the car and before I realized what was happening we were outside. She carried me in her arms while she walked over the tracks, looking carefully on all sides. Meanwhile, several oncoming trains converged and changed tracks, then proceeded in different directions. Ours was only one of many trains in the area. Several were pulling in and others going out. Mother had to be exceedingly watchful as she crossed the numerous tracks, for we could have been killed by an oncoming train. There she was, short and chunky (she was no more than five

feet tall and almost as wide as she was tall), determined, recklessly brave, crossing the tracks as trains moved in all directions.

Where was she going with a sick child, weighing at least fifty or sixty pounds, in her arms? What would happen to her other children? I was too sick to ask. Off and on I wanted to gather enough strength to ask mother what would happen to my little brother and my sisters. What would become of them if the train started up again while she was trying to find a doctor for me, and then continued on to Siberia or parts unknown? How would we know where to find them? Would we ever see them again? Was Mother willing to lose contact with her three young daughters and little Ruvkele to save me? How could a mother do this? Was her love for me so great? Was I so sick that I was dying? Did Mother think that she really had no choice? These questions went fleeting through my mind, now so stupified by the poisons of my infection, that I could not even get myself to ask Mother whether she knew where she was going, had any idea where we were or whether she would find a doctor.

Soon I was too weak even to think. Finally, the tracks were far behind us. Before us were trees, grass, and fields. Not a single house was in view.

Mother was tired and she could no longer carry me. She had suffered from a double hernia since she was seventeen and carrying me could aggravate this condition. She said nothing, however, merely stopped, put me down and rested near a tree. Meanwhile she murmured words of comfort, reassuring me that she would locate a physician who would make me feel well.

After a few minutes' rest, Mother took me in her arms again and began to walk. She must have walked a long distance, perhaps several miles, when she saw a wagon approaching us. She beckoned the driver to stop. A woman was sitting next to the man who did the driving. Mother apologized for stopping them, explaining that her child was very ill and needed a doctor.

"Can you tell me where we are and where we might locate a physician?" Mother asked in a voice that said, *please, my good people, I am in desperate need of help.*

Both looked at Mother with me in her arms. They seemed to be sympathetic and appeared to be willing to help. The man said, "You are at the edge of Gomel, a large city of White Russia. Who are you and how did you get here?"

Briefly but dramatically, Mother told him. Both the man and woman looked at her with disbelief. Finally, the woman said, "I feel for you, my dear woman, and we would like to help. There is an apothecary about a mile ahead"—she pointed out the direction—"and its owner, the pharmacist is a very nice, kindly man. I am certain he will help you. We would have offered to take you there but we are really in a hurry to make a train, so please understand."

Mother thanked them and continued to walk, still carrying me in her arms. She must have felt very tired or begun to experience pain from her hernia. She put me down, felt the lower part of her abdomen with both hands, and then sat down in the grass with me beside her for a few minutes. Then she took me by the hand and suggested that I try to walk a while. She explained that she felt exhausted. It was a warm morning and the sun was shining. I held on to Mother's hand and tried to walk but I just couldn't. Taking a long breath, she picked me up, this time placing me over her shoulder, and she resumed walking. After a time we saw houses, then a street, and within a few minutes Mother found the pharmacy. As we entered, Mother thanked God for guiding us to the drugstore, where she now felt confident we would obtain the help we needed so desperately.

The druggist, a short, friendly man with a brown beard and lively brown eyes, came from the counter, looked us over and then asked Mother, "Madam, can I help you?"

Could he help? Mother began to tell him the story of our plight and she attempted to do it in Russian, a language in which she was not particularly proficient. When the pharmacist learned that we were Jewish and that we had been driven out of Lithuania, he said that he was Jewish too and asked her to speak in Yiddish so that he could better understand what she wanted.

"I thank God in heaven that I found you. You look like a fine

Yiddisher mensh, and I know that you will help us," Mother said. "As you can see, my little boy is quite ill and I must find a physician."

Before she finished her sentence, the pharmacist came over and took a look at me. He didn't have to look long. He shook his head and said, "My dear woman, your boy is indeed ill—quite sick—and has a high fever. And you look so tired. Now, here is what I suggest you do. Rather than sending you to a doctor, I believe it will be better if you take your son to the hospital. The Gomel hospital is only a few miles from here and its staff is very efficient. I will call for a carriage to take you there. So, please sit down on the bench and make yourself and your boy as comfortable as possible."

After making the call, he returned to tell Mother that the carriage and "a good driver" would be coming in a few minutes. Mother kissed his hands and said, "You must be God's angel. How kind and helpful you are. Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Soon, we found ourselves in a beautiful carriage, with a horse, driven by a black-bearded driver. I sat next to mother, putting my head on her lap as we began the journey. Clap, clap, the carriage moved on, made one turn, then another and another, and in a few minutes we drew up before a large building. This was the hospital at Gomel and sick as I was I was keenly aware of the strong, medicinal odor as Mother hurried me inside.

NINE

I AWAKENED EARLY one morning in bed in a large room of the hospital. A starkly white, medicinally smelling room, it housed many beds in which were children of various ages. Mother was sleeping on the floor near my bed. Nurses in white uniforms walked on tiptoes. It was very quiet. I felt too weak to call Mother. As long as she was there I felt safe. I fell asleep again.

Some time later I was awakened by a smiling nurse. Mother was up and standing beside her. She smiled, too, as she looked at me. She told me that I was recovering and would be well soon. To reassure me even more, she asked the nurse for corroboration. The nurse said that the doctors and nurses were doing everything possible to help me get well.

I learned that I had scarlet fever and that I was in the children's contagious ward. It took a lot of begging and pleading on Mother's part to be allowed to remain at my side. For the next three weeks the bed in the ward was my home. And Mother remained near me almost throughout that period, never leaving me for more than a few moments at a time, and sleeping on the floor alongside my bed. She was virtually a prisoner since she could not leave the hospital or even the ward because of the contagion.

Mother told me that during the first few days and nights I was very ill. Fortunately, I slept most of the time, since I was under sedation. As the doctors and the nurses worked on me—almost around the clock for the first few days—she prayed, beseeching God to save her beloved Chaimele. Now some days later, with the fever down and the quantity of medication reduced, I was able to open my eyes, see what was happening around me, and listen to Mother tell of my illness and what had become of my sisters and

little brother. A story she was anxious to tell. And which she repeated on innumerable occasions in the months and years that followed, embellishing and dramatizing the details with the years. It was a remarkable story.

"Thank God, thank the Almighty God; he heard my prayers and you are going to recover fully," Mother said as she looked up to the ceiling, toward heaven. "I cried and I prayed and God heard my entreaties. He saved the life of my beloved Chaimele."

I asked her how long we had been in the hospital and when we would be leaving. Mother said that we had been there more than a week. She explained that the doctor in attendance said he could not tell her precisely when I would be well enough to be discharged. Perhaps in another week or possibly two. But it no longer mattered, Mother said, as long as I was out of danger and was now on the way to full recovery. Again, Mother looked up to the ceiling and thanked God for saving the life of little Chaimele.

I asked what had happened to Ruvke, Pashke, Mainke, and Oilke. Mother smiled and said that they were all well. She said that God had heard her prayers for them since she left them in his hands in that boxcar.

A miracle had occurred, she said. It was as if God had sent an angel from heaven for that particular rescue. Shortly after we reached the hospital and the doctors and nurses began to care for me, Mother had asked to talk to the physician in charge. She explained that she had left the rest of her brood on the train. She also told the doctor, who listened carefully and made notes, that she had two sisters in Vetka, which is not far from Gomel, and that if the hospital could reach one of them, she was certain that one of her sisters would do everything possible to locate the train and find the girls and Ruvke and care for them. The doctor, a kindly man, as Mother described him, promised to take the needed action.

The hospital telegraphed Aunt Frieda, the older and more affluent of Mother's two sisters in Vetka. Aunt Frieda and her husband hitched two of their best horses to their wagon (Uncle Menasha was a meat packer, who also raised his own livestock and was a dealer in horses as well) and rushed to Gomel. Unbelievably,

the train was still where we had left it. It was God's will, and God works wonders, Mother said. Because of an accident, it took two days before the train was able to resume the journey.

Mother described how Frieda and Menasha ran from car to car and from train to train calling out the names Gussow, Pashke, Oilke, Mainke, Ruvke, again and again in loud voices. Uncle Jeremiah, a big, strong man with a booming voice, shouted at the top of his voice: "Is there a Gussow family here? Oilke, Pashke, Mainke, Ruvke?"

After several hours of this, Mainke finally heard her name being called and shouted right back: "Here we are! Here we are!" and all four of them ran to the door of the car.

I asked Mother where my sisters and brother were while I was recuperating. They were in Vetka, Mother said. Oilke and Mainke were staying with Aunt Frieda while Pashke and Ruvke were with Aunt Toibe. When I could leave the hospital we would go to Vetka and make our home there.

I asked how my little brother and the girls were, and Mother reported that before the girls and Ruvke were taken to Vetka they all came to the hospital. As this was a contagious ward they were not allowed to come in. Ruvke stood in the big yard and called to Mother. When he got her attention he said that he had a few kopeks and offered them all to her to use to make Chaimele better soon.

A strong smell of medicine and sickness permeated the hospital ward. I became very much aware of this as I began to feel better and began to sit up in bed. There were boys and girls of all ages in the large room with me. Some were walking about slowly, a few were running, others were sitting up as I was, while still others were prostrate in their beds. A few made strange, sick noises. Nurses were talking, some walking on tiptoe, others at such a fast pace they seemed almost to be running.

Once in a while the doctor and his assistants would stop at my bed and examine me. Each time this happened Mother would make sure to ask the doctor how I was doing and whether I was recovering satisfactorily. The doctor would reassure both of us that I was indeed making a good recovery.

One morning, about a week after I started feeling considerably better, Mother changed her question slightly. This time she asked whether I was close to full recovery and when would I be discharged.

The chief doctor, tall, bearded, and alert, patted Mother on the shoulder and with a friendly smile, painstakingly explained that his little patient was a lucky boy. He said that I had had a very serious case of scarlet fever, but that now I was almost fully recovered. As to leaving the hospital, perhaps in another week, he said, as he moved on to another patient, with his assistants and nurses following him.

From that moment on, I could not wait to leave the hospital. In a few days I was able to get off the bed for a little while, though I felt woozy at first. Each day I left the bed a little more and walked not only that much more but more steadily to the bathroom and to look around the large, fully occupied children's ward.

Finally, the great day came. Although it was the end of April and fairly warm, Mother dressed me in a suit and coat. When we left the building she put a muffler around my neck and a cap on my head.

In the cobblestoned courtyard of the hospital a carriage awaited us. It was beautiful, with black leather on the outside and red wool lining the inside. The driver was a fat, red-cheeked, elderly man. And the gray handsome horse at the front of the carriage seemed huge.

The trip through the city of Gomel was a delightful experience. While Mother held me very close to her and kept putting the muffler about my neck as I tried to take it off, or at least loosen it, I was still able to look around and observe the changing scene as the carriage moved on.

Gomel was beautiful. It was by far the largest city I had been to until then. In Poneviez we had arrived at night and there was not much I could see. But this was a bright, sunny spring morning. I could see wide streets and boulevards. Beautiful, beautiful stores on both sides of the streets. And sidewalks. This was the first time I had seen sidewalks anywhere!

Like any "first," the experience of driving through the big, bustling city of Gomel, plus having recovered from what was obviously a life-threatening illness, provided a special thrill. I was invigorated. I no longer felt weak. I was enjoying this exciting ride and thinking new thoughts as I anticipated the experiences awaiting us at our new home in Vetka.

It is strange, too, that little things make an unforgettable impression. Seeing sidewalks for the first time was an experience I found thrilling. I expressed this excitement to Mother. She agreed that Gomel was a big and beautiful city and sidewalks were wonderful to behold for the first time—especially for an observing, sensitive lad of seven. She herself had seen sidewalks before in Kharkov, the sophisticated city in the Ukraine that had such special meaning for her.

As we rode through Gomel Mother began to compare it with Kharkov. She made sure, however, that she was not putting a damper on my excitement and enthusiasm. She said that in many ways Gomel reminded her of Kharkov—its boulevards and its enticing shops. She promised that just as soon as we got settled in Vetka we would come to Gomel for a visit and really take in its sights and experience its special delights.

At the dock in Gomel, Aunt Frieda met us to take us to Vetka. Aunt Frieda was an attractive blonde, lively and less serious than Mother, and much, much less serious than Aunt Esther, who always seemed to be on the verge of tears. She was taller than both Mother and Aunt Esther. And she was not as fat as either.

Aunt Frieda greeted us warmly. She kissed and hugged Mother and kissed me as she lifted me in her arms, telling Mother what a handsome boy she had.

Pointing to a steamer in the harbor of the river, Aunt Frieda explained that the large boat would take us to Vetka.

The boat, the first steamship I had ever seen, looked utterly beautiful. As the years went by and I traveled on a number of ships, nothing would replace the thrill of that first boat trip. The decks, the fittings, the smokestack, the cabins, the people, the entire new experience fascinated me. While I was still weak and not fully

recovered from my illness, the delight of the trip on the riverboat and the anticipation of what was to come in the days ahead, made me feel well.

Soon the captain sounded the boat's whistle, which seemed to my ears, like a tuneful, enchanting melody, and off we went. Since we were sailing on a river, we saw an enchanting, continually changing view throughout the journey. Trees, meadows, grazing cows, sheep, farm homes, and men and women working in the fields were visible on either side of the river. An hour or so after we left Gomel, Aunt Frieda brought out tea and biscuits. Mother and Aunt Esther spent the several hours of the journey talking about the years in which they had not seen each other, and plans for the immediate future.

What awaited us in Vetka? I really didn't think too much about it. I was too busy and much too excited enjoying this trip, as Ruvke and I began to wander through the steamer with Mainke chasing after us, to see that we did not get lost or into some trouble.

In about three hours we reached our destination, Vetka, our new home.

TEN

VETKA BECAME my second home. World War I had been raging on many fronts but there was no evidence of it here.

Compared with Pumpian, it was a metropolis. Vetka was not a big city, however. In fact, it was not a city at all but a sprawling town, with a population of more than five thousand compared with the several hundred in Pumpian. Being so close to the larger, sophisticated city of Gomel, deep in White Russia, Vetka was fairly lively. It boasted a musical concert now and then, as well as a traveling theater group that came and performed several times a year. And much more.

Whereas the dwellings in Pumpian were mostly wooden shacks, with earthen floors and straw-thatched roofs, Vetka had houses built of wood, brick, and stone, including a few very large buildings that looked like mansions. The streets in Vetka were paved with stones.

Vetka had no ghetto as such, although many of the lower-middle-class and poorer Jews lived near each other. The poorer Gentiles had their homes in the very same section of the town. On the other hand, in Vetka the few wealthier Jews (in Pumpian almost everyone was poor, some poorer than others) lived in fine homes, some palatial and architecturally attractive.

Vetka had several churches, each much bigger than the one in Pumpian. No brick wall surrounded any of the Vetka churches. Each was approachable and thus, of course, lacked the mystery and mysticism of the brick-walled church that rose amidst the big chestnut trees in Pumpian. Vetka's limestone synagogue was much larger than the old *shul* in Pumpian. Adjoining the main

part of the synagogue, where religious services were conducted, were several study rooms and a basement sanctuary. Here Talmudic scholars gathered, especially on the Sabbath afternoon, to read and discuss various aspects of the Gemara, the Mishna,and the first two books of the Talmud.

The Hebrew school was also housed in the synagogue building. This school had several tables and chairs instead of the long harvest-type table and benches at Reb Isaac Elchonen's school in his home in Pumpian, where I began my studies at the age of four. When I was enrolled in the yeshiva in Vetka I was given a test to determine my standing. The chief teacher, Reb Michel Margoshes, was surprised at the progress I had made at so early an age.

He expressed his surprise and delight to Mother in my presence. He told Mother that I was "a real genius," that while I was not quite seven, I knew much more than his students of ten. Mother was delighted to hear such praise for her beloved Chaimele. She was not surprised, of course, and told the rabbi that much.

I blushed. I was pleased but also a little ill at ease. As a matter of fact, I was astonished to hear such praise since I had not considered myself especially bright. The fact that I was able to acquire Hebrew and Talmudic knowledge with ease was something I took for granted. Didn't all Jewish boys, I thought.

In addition to spending most of the day at Hebrew school, I also took private lessons in Russian, one hour three times each week (arrangements for this were made by Aunt Frieda). The teacher was tall and nice looking, with a shock of wavy red-blond hair. He was friendly but he could be stern when necessary. He knew both Yiddish and Russian, although his Yiddish was a little different from the Yiddish I spoke. His enunciation was clearer and he had a much broader vocabulary, using some words that I had not heard before. In addition to teaching me the Russian language, he would tell stories about Russian history and customs. This he did in a dramatic fashion, as an actor would, so that I looked forward to the hour with him with great anticipation. I knew that I could expect something new and different each time.

After a few weeks of lessons with this exciting teacher, I felt that I was beginning to learn Russian and to add to my use of Yiddish. But he startled me one morning when he opened the lesson by saying, "From now on, Russian will be the only language we shall use." He felt that I understood enough of the language to manage in it and that this was the way to improve my comprehension. I would learn to think in Russian instead of thinking in Yiddish and then mentally translating my thoughts into Russian. He spoke in Russian now but he talked slowly and clearly, using the proper inflection so that I would have no difficulty in grasping what he had to say.

At first I found the new regime of study a little trying. I had to strain for full comprehension because I was still thinking in Yiddish. However, the teacher was as kind as he was firm and he often repeated a sentence when he realized that I did not grasp its full meaning, using simpler language at first, and then going back to the expression he used initially. He was a good and patient teacher. In less than six months I was able to read simple story books in Russian—at first the classic fairy tales (*Jack and the Beanstalk* was my favorite) and then more complex short stories for children. Before the year was at an end, I was reading books on history and geography.

I did not like our new quarters in Vetka, nor did Mother or any of my sisters. Little Ruvkele expressed our feelings succinctly when he stated: "It stinks here." We found our flat cramped and uncomfortable. And it did have an unpleasant odor. Besides, the family with whom we shared our quarters was also rather unpleasant. Clara was a widow with very little income and four daughters, ranging in age from six to twelve. Renting part of her house, she thought, would be one way to supplement her meager resources.

The scheme did not work. Clara clashed with Mother almost from the beginning. Each was aggressive and domineering. And one was not going to prevail over the other. Clara was tall and thin, with a streak of gray in her brown hair. Mother was short and fat but like Clara she moved about the house with a rapid gait. The first battle between the two took place just three weeks after we had

moved in. The crisis erupted over cooking. They shared a common kitchen.

Clara accused Mother of always cooking. There seemed to be no limit to Mother's fussing in the kitchen, Clara claimed. The result of all this cooking was that she, Clara, could not make a meal for her girls without Mother being at the stove.

That did it. Mother was livid. She began to scream. She abused Clara and called her names. She paid twenty rubles a month, much more than the dirty, stinking closet of a room was worth, Mother shouted, and now look who was attempting to prevent her from cooking a meal for her little children. Besides, what did she cook? Some kind of fancy meal? Then Mother began to cry, and as always, she cried beautifully. Forced or not, she was shedding genuine tears.

Mother's tears helped. Temporarily. For a few days everything was quiet, largely because landlady and tenant did not speak to each other. But after a week, the bickering began all over again. Mother was given an ultimatum. We had to move—"or else." "Or else" meant that Mother would no longer be able to use the oven. Legal or rabbinical action in this troubled period seemed out of the question.

Mother was now confronted with the problem of where to go. At the same time, the money from Father in America had stopped coming. With the war now in full force on all fronts, mail from the United States was practically at a standstill.

Not having heard from Father for over a month, Mother became desperate. With money borrowed from Aunt Frieda, she cabled Father. A reply came back in several days advising that both letters and money orders had been sent. Mother followed up with another cable but neither money nor letter arrived.

As the weeks passed, Mother's desperation reached a breaking point. She had to fight to use the oven even to cook a bowl of soup. And since she could no longer pay the rent, a raging battle started between her and our landlady. Obviously, we had to move. But where? And how? And with what would she pay the rent?

Aunt Toibe, Mother's other sister in Vetka, was sympathetic

but she was helpless. Her husband made barely enough for the needs of his family and they lived in a house that was less than ample for their own brood.

The situation with Aunt Frieda was different. The Tobachnicks were affluent. And they had plenty of room. Mother even offered to stay in their stable "with the horses and cows." But Uncle Menasha was adamant. His home was his castle. He did not want any intruders, especially if the intruders were his wife's family. No matter how much Aunt Frieda pleaded with him, his answer was still "No!" And in a very loud voice.

"I married you, not your family," was his final word on the subject.

He told her that he was willing to provide a small sum of money so that we could move to a new and cheaper but friendlier environment, but moving into his house was absolutely out.

The amount that Aunt Frieda was able to squeeze out of Uncle Menasha was small indeed and could barely pay the cost of moving. But Mother still could not figure out where we could go.

After searching and following up every possible lead, she finally found a place for us to stay. In return for Mother's housework, the family of Shmuel Dwornick would give us one bedroom, tiny, cramped, and windowless for the girls, while Mother, Ruvke, and I would have to sleep on the floor in the dining room. This was not much of a home but it was the only place Mother was able to locate. She had no choice but to take it.

If the accommodations were not luxurious, at least the people with whom we now lived were friendly and sympathetic. The Dwornicks were childless and they seemed to welcome the sound of children's voices in their home. Theirs was an old, very small wooden house at the edge of the town. It consisted of a dining room, kitchen, and two bedrooms, both small, but the one for my sisters was much smaller than the other.

Shmuel Dwornick was a junk dealer. With his pushcart he went from house to house to buy or pick up discarded items of iron and other metal. These he usually sold to the town's junk wholesaler, Gospodin Nicolai Rosskovsky, one of the most

affluent Jews of Vetka and its neighboring area. If our host felt really ambitious and had been successful in obtaining a particularly large and valuable collection of stuff, he would hire a horse and wagon and take his mass of junk to Gomel. There he was bound to get a higher price than he could expect from Gospodin Rosskovsky, who was known as a tightwad.

Shmuel Dwornick was short and fat, with a big round belly and a big round jovial face. He was bald, with a small gray beard and a large handlebar mustache. A jolly fellow, he wore an almost perpetual smile.

Much taller than her husband, Rachel Dwornick was spindly, pale, and painfully crippled from arthritis, which in those days was described as rheumatism. She walked with a cane, when she could walk. Some days she could not walk at all. For that reason, she welcomed the idea of having a healthy woman to help her with the housework.

On the first night in our new home with the Dwornicks, we were all very tired, with the exception of my little brother. Ruvke was not tired at all because he had taken a nap in the afternoon. The girls yawned, laughing and joking a little before they went to sleep, but very soon there was not a sound from their tiny bedroom.

When the Dwornicks left the dining–living room to go to their bedroom, Mother placed a quilt filled with down on the floor and the three of us, Mother, Ruvke, and I, lay down to sleep. The kerosene lamp was extinguished and the room was dark as we stretched out. Tired as Mother and I were, we didn't fall asleep right away. Besides, Ruvke insisted on asking all kinds of childish questions.

"Why are we sleeping on the floor? Will we ever have a bed again? Why are the girls sleeping in a bed in a separate bedroom?"

Mother was patient with him at first, answering all his questions. Of course, we would have a bed and a bedroom. And it would be soon, Mother said. As a matter of fact, we would live in a beautiful big house with many rooms. Her imagination began to work and she soon started to tell us one of her fairy tales. Suddenly,

Ruvke screamed: "Mama, Mama, something is running on me, scratching me."

Mother got a match and lit the kerosene lamp. She looked at the spot where Ruvke said he felt something running on him and scratching him, but could see nothing.

"You must be imagining, Ruvke. There is nothing on you or near you."

"But Mama, Mama, there was something. I felt it."

Mother decided to keep the kerosene lamp lit and back to our bed on the floor we went. I looked around the room and then I knew what Ruvke meant when he said he felt something running on his body. A little white mouse was emerging from a hole in the wall at the far end of the room.

"Mama, Mama," I shouted, "there is a mouse, a white mouse—over there." Startled by the noise, perhaps, the mouse ran back into the hole in the wall. At that point Mother made a decision. We would sleep on the table instead of the floor. She picked up the quilt and put it on the table, placing a chair near it, and up we went to our new bed. The table was long but it was not wide enough to accommodate the three of us. At least not very comfortably. Mother told me to get closer to her and directed Ruvke to sleep at our feet—sideways. Can you picture the three of us trying to sleep in this fashion? I have to smile when I think of it now. But it was no laughing matter then.

"Don't worry about the tiny mouse," Mother said. "She won't climb up the table. Mice like to be on the floor, and this one is so tiny. It must be a baby mouse."

"If she is a baby mouse, where are her father and mother?" Ruvke asked. "Behind the wall? Wouldn't they come out too?"

"No, they won't. The hole is too small for them. Besides, I think the little mouse is an orphan. She must have lost her mother and father and come out of the hole to look for them. So, go to sleep."

It wasn't easy to fall asleep. The table was hard, even with the quilt between it and my body. It was so narrow that I had to hold on to Mother so that I wouldn't fall off. The table was also

slippery and the quilt kept sliding off. Besides, the light was on and I was afraid that the mouse would creep up on the table. It must be a hungry mouse, especially if Mother was right and it was an orphan. The mouse would certainly take a bite of me and Ruvke, I thought before I finally fell asleep.

In the morning Mother told the Dwornicks about the mouse. Shmuel gave her a mousetrap to which she fastened a little cheese. She then placed the trap on the floor not far from the hole.

"After you trap the mouse, I will close up the hole," Shmuel told Mother.

On the next night and the one that followed we slept on the table, with the kerosene light on. It was extremely uncomfortable. On the third morning, when we awakened, Mother found the mouse in the trap. That was the end of sleeping on the table, but even with the hole now covered up and the mouse dead, I was afraid to sleep on the floor. There must be other mice behind the wall, with sharp teeth and claws that would make new holes and come out to bite us. I did not convey these thoughts to Mother, however, because I felt it best to keep them to myself.

Whether Mother knew of my fears or not, she decided that the Dwornicks' house was no place for us. If she were going to do housework, it might as well be in a bigger house and she might just as well have her family in more comfortable quarters. This is what she told Aunt Toibe when we went for a visit to her house on Saturday afternoon. Aunt Toibe agreed but could offer no suggestions as to where Mother might find a better place to work.

The next morning Mother was talking with Shmuel Dwornick about Gospodin Rosskovsky. She wanted to know what kind of man he was. Shmuel Dwornick described him as a tightwad, the stingiest man in Vetka. Rosskovsky was penurious, he explained, not because he was short of money but rather because he hated to part with any of his very substantial fortune.

Mother then asked whether Rosskovsky had a family. Shmuel told Mother that Rosskovsky's patient, kindly wife had died two years before, adding that he could never understand how this quiet, charming, and considerate woman who always seemed

to give of herself could live with the hard, niggardly man. Dwornick also told Mother that Rosskovsky had one daughter who lived with her husband and two children in Kiev. They rarely came to Vetka for a visit, and Rosskovsky was so miserly that he hardly ever went to Kiev to see his only daughter and his grandchildren. He considered the train fare too expensive.

Mother then asked, "Does Rosskovsky have a housekeeper or any kind of servants?" Shmuel Dwornick shook his head. Apparently for a long time old Boris had taken care of Rosskovsky's big yard and the stable where he stored his junk. Boris and his wife had lived in a cramped room in the attic until her death about a year earlier. Boris's wife, Gelda, whom Dwornick described as a fine, clean-looking woman, had taken care of Rosskovsky and his big house, cleaning and cooking for him without pay. Now that Gelda had passed on and Boris was old and no longer of much use, Rosskovsky had had him move out. Now old Boris lived in a shack somewhere, but still came to the Rosskovsky yard once in a while, just to see the old place. If he found things in a mess, he would organize the junk lying about in the big yard, just for old times' sake.

After she heard the story of Rosskovsky, Mother obviously had an idea. "Are you planning to deliver your pushcart full of junk to him?"

"I've been thinking of it for some days, but I've not been quite up to it. It's my back. I've been having these pains, but now I need the money and I'm going this morning, pain or no pain," he said with determination.

"Why can't I go along to help push the cart?"

Surprised and off guard, Dwornick looked at Mother askance for a moment. Then he nodded. "If you're willing to help."

Mother's brilliant idea worked better than Shmuel could ever have foreseen.

Once we moved over to the Rosskovsky mansion, living in Vetka took on a new dimension. It was a time of growing up for me. I was almost eight years old.

Mother did not have to do much selling to get old man

Rosskovsky to hire her. He had been without help for some time now and the house was neglected. He was too old and too tired to keep the large house, yard, gardens, and surrounding areas in the shape he apparently had been used to.

He told Mother that he couldn't pay her a salary. That as a matter of fact, he was not prepared to pay her anything. What he offered her was a home, living space in his big house for her and her children—that and nothing more. This was a start but Mother wanted a little more—at least food for her family. She explained to Rosskovsky that her children were not big eaters, especially the girls. Girls, she said, didn't eat much and her boys didn't have much of an appetite.

The old man looked at her cynically and then told her how she might manage the food problem for her family. Since she was to be the housekeeper and cook, he would give her a weekly allowance, but he warned her that this would be a very tight and carefully thought out stipend. However, if she were an especially able and careful shopper, she should be able to manage to feed her brood. Should she fail in her endeavor, it would be her responsibility and hers alone to find a way to supplement the small but regular weekly food allowance.

As Rosskovsky was detailing the plans for the weekly food allowance, Mother seemed to be ahead of the old man. She was beginning to figure out how to manage the tight food budget so that she could feed her family. Rosskovsky interrupted her thoughts by asking her whether she was a good cook. Her face brightened and she responded with enthusiasm that she was, indeed, an exceptionally good cook, explaining that she learned her craft in the famous Gussow household in Kharkov, where cooking was an art. Here she prepared meals fit for the czar, for nobility, and she would do the same and more for her new master. The old man seemed pleased and said that while he was not a big eater he did appreciate good food, well prepared.

Fortunately, as I've said earlier, Mother was an imaginative, innovative cook and while she obviously exaggerated and dramatized the story about being "the best cook in Kharkov," the

fact is that in the Gussow household she had learned a lot about good cooking. Old man Rosskovsky may have been a tightwad and a grouch, but he appreciated good food and Mother went all out to please him.

And pleased he was. While he had not been in the habit of praising anyone, he went out of his way to tell Mother that her *kolbasch* (Russian-style Beef Wellington) was most delightful. He went wild over her *cholent*. He also liked her *piroschkes* (triangular shaped dough filled with chopped beef, with onions and herbs), the *pitcha* (jellied calves' feet), and especially the *butterbulkes* (raisin-filled coffee cakes) that he described as truly wonderful. Mother almost humanized the sour old tightwad by way of his taste buds and stomach.

For the first time since leaving Pumpian we ate well. Actually, some of the dishes Mother made in Vetka we had never had in Pumpian. We hadn't been able to afford them and some of the ingredients were not available in the tiny, isolated Lithuanian ghetto. Mother would haggle with the farmers on market mornings in Vetka, haggle to the point of annoyance, but the end result was that she achieved bargains. She made Rosskovsky's very small weekly allowance do, and at times she did even better than that. She was able to save some money.

We lived in the attic of the big house but the quarters were comfortable. Mother, Ruvke, and I shared a fairly large room, and the girls had a pleasant room for themselves—Pashke and Mainke in one bed and Oilke in a bed alone. The house was big and there was a lot to do but the girls helped Mother with the chores, and all the fourteen or so rooms were kept spotless, which pleased the master of the house enormously.

The big house had a huge, wraparound porch with plenty of chairs, including several rockers. I found it fun to rock on the porch. The yard was big. Because the warehouse was not large enough to hold all the iron and other junk that Rosskovsky bought and stored before disposing of it to dealers in Gomel and other large cities, an overflow of material was placed in the yard. Some was out in the open, other items under tarpaulins.

I enjoyed exploring in the yard, the warehouse, and in the attic over the warehouse with Ruvke and several neighboring boys. Of course, all this was against orders from Mother, and especially Gospodin Rosskovsky.

Mother warned us that if we didn't stay out of the warehouse and stop playing with the iron junk, we could get hurt, even killed. Furthermore, should Rosskovsky find us and our friends playing with the junk in the yard and the warehouse, we would lose our precious home.

But we didn't obey Mother. One day old man Rosskovsky caught us, and as a result Mother almost lost her job and we our home. After much pleading the old man relented and gave us "one more chance."

While I missed playing in the yard, life in the months ahead was pleasant enough although not particularly eventful except for one new development. Pashke fell in love with Michel, the only son and only child of Aunt Frieda and Uncle Menasha, and this posed new threats to our life in Vetka. Uncle Menasha, strong willed and stubborn, wanted something more for his only son than to have him become involved with poor relatives.

Pashke was fifteen when we arrived in Vetka. And at fifteen she was a fully grown, attractive, sexy-looking girl. Michel, nineteen, was attracted to her immediately. It was not long before they developed a torrid love affair. They were together on every possible occasion, although Michel had little free time. As the only son and heir apparent to his father's substantial fortune, Michel was trained by his stern father to be able to "meet his responsibilities." Menasha was a hard taskmaster and educated his only son in the only way he knew, which was to drive him to the limit of his physical and mental capacities. Fortunately Michel was an exceptionally healthy young man, with a high degree of endurance, and he could take all the punishment his father persisted in handing out to him—"for his own good."

"This is no time for weaklings," Uncle Menasha said. "A man, especially a Jewish man, must be strong and he must be ready for almost any task. No one is going to do anything for

Michel, as no one did anything for me. He will have to learn to be able to take care of himself."

Michel worked alongside his father, doing everything. He took care of the animals on the farm, brought the steers and the calves for slaughter, and helped cut and process the meat. He was up at the crack of dawn and was not finished with his daily chores until late at night. His one "free" day was Saturday, the holy Sabbath. That was the day of leisure, but only until sundown. Then work started again.

On the Sabbath Michel would walk the five miles from his farm home to our place and meet with his beloved. Their greeting was something to behold.

I was fascinated by the relationship and I followed them wherever they went. Even in the large Rosskovsky house they had a hard time losing me. I was terribly curious about their doings when they were alone. By nature I was not a prankster but my curiosity over their affair made me one. I became a nuisance to them and they tried to avoid me. Nothing seemed to work. Finally, they resorted to bribery. Michel promised me several kopeks if I stopped following them. This offer was hard to resist. But my curiosity got the better of me. One Saturday afternoon I decided that I must find out what they did when they were alone. I hid under the sofa in the large living room where they usually sat. I waited a long time. At last they came into the room and sat down on the sofa. I could not see what they were doing but I heard plenty. Endearing professions of love. Promises to love each other forever and ever. *Oh*s and *ah*s. Kissing. Soon I felt embarrassed, sorry that I was eavesdropping. I never did it again.

While family members knew that Pashke and Michel were courting and that someday they intended to become husband and wife, Uncle Menasha knew nothing of the relationship for a long time. When he finally learned of it, he started a riot. How could Michel, his only son, get mixed up with a relative? A poor relative? How could he do this to him? Had he no respect for his father? He called Michel and Aunt Frieda together for a family conference. Some conference. It was a lecture rather than a discussion and

meeting of minds, according to what Michel later reported to Pashke.

Walking up and down the large sitting room, Uncle Menasha began to bellow. How could his son, his only son, get involved with poor relations, *Shnorrers*, virtual beggars? That is what he called Mother and her family—poor, cheap trash from Lithuania. He told Michel that a young man of his talents and family background could have any girl he had his eye on—the prettiest from any of the best families.

Michel protested that he was in love with Pashke and that he cared for no one else. She was the love of his life and without her life would be meaningless. His father tried to make little of Michel's mention of love, saying that if Michel needed a girl to sleep with, there were plenty of Gentiles around who were ready to provide what a man wanted. A few kopeks or trinkets and the sexy *shiksas* would provide him with plenty of excitement. This was the way a young man could take care of his natural needs.

Michel became distressed if not particularly shocked by his father's approach. He tried to control himself but found enough courage to respond that this was no way to talk about girls, especially in the same context as his beloved Pashke.

His father cut him short, "Pashke, schmashke. She is like the rest. All she really wants is the family money. A *shnorrer* (a unique Yiddish expression meaning beggar, but much more) from Lithuania, no different from the rest."

He was adamant. Michel must stop seeing Pashke, as beautiful as he thought her. Maybe it wasn't only money she wanted, she wanted Michel, too, for after all, he was a fine young man and had much to offer a girl. But if marriage was on his mind, he should concentrate on finding a girl from a family of their own financial and social status. Marrying Pashke would mean having the whole family of *shnorrers* on their hands. He didn't mind feeding an additional milking cow but he had absolutely no use for all the other nonmilking, unproductive, useless stock, he told Michel. The only way to get rid of them would be to burn down the whole damned barn.

Michel did not take his father's advice except for a short period so that the storm would quiet down. After two weeks, he resumed seeing his beloved. And while he promised love and devotion forever, he knew that he could not marry Pashke unless he left his parents and started life on his own, in another town, far from Vetka. They discussed this possibility. But it did not come to pass.

ELEVEN

VETKA WAS so much bigger than Pumpian. Yet not unlike the little ghetto of Lithuania, it had no physician. Vetka could boast several *pheltzers* and two pharmacies. Somehow, the residents of Vetka, much like those of Pumpian and other small towns and villages throughout Russia and other countries of Eastern Europe, managed to get along with their *pheltzers*, midwives, and an assortment of home remedies. For serious medical attention, a trip to the city was necessary. For those who lived in Vetka, it meant going to Gomel.

Which brings me to one particular incident. Actually, it was much more than an ordinary event. It was an occurrence of substantial psychological implication. I didn't know very much about the subject of psychology. I don't even remember having heard the word itself. But for a long time I had been doing something that in later years I learned had considerable psychological and psychosomatic meaning. And looking back at this special experience, I realize that it was not without its full share of humor. Whatever the consequences involved, the incident wasn't very funny to me. And less so, much less to Mother. This is what happened:

One very cold morning in midwinter I woke up with pains in my stomach and a feeling of nausea. Now, these symptoms in themselves were not unusual, since I had complained of stomach "pains" on a number of occasions. Not only in Vetka but even in Pumpian. I know now—and have known for a long time—that my "pains in the stomach" and nausea were actually symptoms of hypochondria, a morbid anxiety over my state of health. At a very early age I accepted Mother's description of me as a "*schwache*

kiend," a weak child. Actually, as I learned years later, I was not a weak child at all. Without being consciously aware of it, I had a practical use for my hypochondria. My symptoms were a way of getting Mother's special attention and having her do for me what I wanted her to do without making an obvious, direct request. I had found a convenient and unknowingly subtle way of accomplishing what I wished to accomplish.

As I said, on that particular cold morning in Vetka I woke up with nausea and pains in my stomach. Both seemed very real to me. I awakened Mother and told her of my distress, grimacing as I pointed to my stomach. Since I was supposed to be the weak child of the family, Mother showed her concern promptly. I could tell from the expression on her face, particularly the wrinkles on her big forehead and the sadness of her expressive eyes that she was worried.

"My darling Chaimele, you weak child, you look so pale. Are the pains in your stomach severe? Do you want to vomit? Can you vomit?"

As a reaction to her now deep concern, I began to feel worse. Perhaps I was sicker than I had thought. Before long I was in a panic. Cold as it was, I began to perspire.

"Mama," I said, "I can't breathe. I feel very sick. Help me, help me!"

Mother became panicky too. She ran to the kitchen to get her favorite medicine—a lump of sugar soaked in peppermint, a remedy that had done the trick in the past when I complained of nausea and an inability to breathe.

"Here, Chaimele, take this. It will make you feel better."

It did. The strong peppermint odor, penetrating my nostrils, was bracing and did make breathing easier. But my recovery was only temporary. As Mother sat next to me, holding my hand to feel my pulse and then touching my forehead to determine whether I had any fever, she continued to ask me how I felt. I responded to her intense display of concern about my well-being by saying that I did not feel well at all. That I felt considerable distress. In no uncertain terms, I told her that I thought that I was very, very sick

and needed some very special help. I wound up by asking, "Mother, I need a doctor. Shouldn't we go to a doctor?"

"There is no doctor in Vetka," Mother said. "Let me call the *pheltzer*."

Of course, I knew that there was no doctor in Vetka. I knew very well where there was a doctor.

"Mama, I do not want the *pheltzer*. I do not want him to put hot cups on my chest. Mama, I feel very, very sick. Only a doctor can help me."

That did it. Mother awakened Pashke, told her of my sudden illness, and asked her to watch over me while she dressed and left the house to arrange for a driver and sleigh to take us to Gomel to see a doctor.

It was a brisk, cold, windy winter day as we practically flew on the sleigh across the steel-sharp ice and the snow, over the frozen river from Vetka to Gomel. As usual, I was huddled in so much clothing that I could barely move. Mother dressed herself in equally warm garb, including numerous blouses, skirts, and sweaters. Mother and I huddled together under a heavy blanket. Over our heads she put another blanket, so that only our eyes were exposed to the cold and wind.

The horse galloped along as the sleigh traveled speedily, smoothly, and silently on its way. The horse was shod with special snow and ice shoes but the driver, who was obviously an expert in handling his horse and his sleigh, found it necessary to hold the reigns back just tightly enough and shout, "Whoa, whoa!" again and again to keep the horse moving at a uniform speed. Obviously, I no longer felt very sick since I was able to observe all this and more on what soon became a thrilling journey instead of a trip for Mother to save the life of her very sick child. It was a delightful morning and it was beautiful to watch the experienced driver do his job.

The trip to Gomel took three hours, and every minute of it was enormously exciting. I was no longer sick but I did not let Mother know how I really felt since I was beginning to have pangs of guilt. But not so much that I couldn't enjoy the trip.

We slowed down when we reached the city. Traffic was rather heavy, with many other drivers and sleighs on the boulevard. The melodious sound of "Whoa, whoa!" was like a musical chorus.

We reached the doctor's office shortly before noon. It was in a large, old, red brick house, yellowed with age. Located on a small side street, the house was several blocks from the main boulevard, near the center of the city.

We climbed out of the carriage with great difficulty. Even after Mother removed the blankets and unbundled me a bit, I felt stiff and uncomfortable. Mother told the driver to take a respite, have lunch or do whatever he wanted for about an hour or so.

As we walked up the several steps of the stoop of the charming old house, I was impressed most by the interestingly carved, heavy door. Mother banged the knocker and soon the door was opened by the attendant, a short, fat old woman. She led us through the long, dark carpeted hall to a large chamber where many patients, including an assortment of children, were sitting on sofas and chairs awaiting their turn to see the doctor.

As Mother and I removed our outer garments and sat down to wait our turn, I realized that I no longer felt sick at all. In fact, I felt rather silly waiting here in the doctor's office along with the other patients, some of whom looked genuinely ill and others quite decrepit.

What would I tell the doctor when he asked me what was the matter with me? This became my new concern, which added to my feeling of guilt. I tried to find an answer and a few occurred to me almost immediately. I would tell the doctor, as straightforwardly as I could, that I was nauseated—off and on—and that I was weak. Also, that I felt dizzy—sometimes. However, I was experiencing none of these symptoms of illness—or any others.

As I was thinking about my situation, Mother disturbed my thoughts by asking me how I felt. What could I tell her? I smiled a wan smile and told her I was feeling a little better—just a little, while inside of me I knew that I was feeling a whole lot better. I was too embarrassed to tell her that I did not feel sick at all. At that

moment my greater concern was the manner in which I would deal with the doctor. If he were a good and experienced physician, wouldn't he know that I wasn't sick, and if so what would he tell me? And most important, what would he tell Mother?

Finally, after what seemed like a long wait, our turn came. As the woman attendant ushered us into the doctor's office, I felt nervous and I could feel my heart begin to pound.

As Mother and I entered the small but neat office, the doctor, who was sitting behind a roll-top desk, stood up and greeted us. A thin, kindly looking man, with a nicely trimmed short beard, he was dressed in a three-quarter-length gray frock. Removing a pince-nez from his nose with one hand, he motioned to me to sit down in a chair near him, pointing to another chair on the side for Mother.

"Now, young man," he began in Russian, "how do you feel this fine cold morning?"

"Not too bad—just a little sick," I said. I really wanted to say that I didn't feel sick at all. But how could I explain that?

"Well, a little sick is better than to be very sick," he said with a smile. I liked him.

"What is your name?"

I told him.

"That is an interesting name. Your first name, Chaim, is Jewish. Your family name is Russian but you do not speak Russian like a Russian boy. Where do you come from?"

Mother explained.

"Oh, I see. What language do you speak, Chaim?"

"Yiddish."

"Well, I speak German, which is a little like Yiddish. *Ja? Ja?*"

Interchanging Russian with German and with Yiddish-German, we managed to converse.

As he led me into the examining room, the doctor asked Mother to wait outside.

When the doctor placed the cold metal stethoscope to my bare chest I could hear the sound of my heartbeat. I felt somewhat

nervous—perhaps more than just a little—since I was not feeling at all sick and wondered what the doctor would find and what he would say. Strange as it may sound, I now felt that it would be better if the doctor did find something wrong with me. Nothing serious, of course, but at least enough to justify the time and trouble I was giving this fine, friendly doctor.

Anyway, in the hands of the tall, commanding but gentle, friendly physician, I felt particularly safe. No matter what he would find, he would know what to do and would prescribe just the right medicine. While I had no problem breathing, I nevertheless felt that if by chance I could not breathe, he would find a way to resuscitate me. At that particular time, this doctor, even more than any previous physician, seemed to me to be the possessor of great, special, magical power. I had developed a strong feeling of confidence in doctors in the hospital in Gomel. I had been so ill there, with such a serious case of scarlet fever, that the doctors became a symbol of healing, all-knowing, veritable messengers of God. In fact, Mother had said that doctors were the servants of God, the healing messengers of the Almighty.

And this doctor who was examining me seemed like a truly fine physician who possessed all the medical knowledge, the alchemy that a well-trained, gifted, thoroughly experienced physician needed to do his work. A true healing messenger of God.

However, while I felt very comfortable and secure in this doctor's presence, I was overtaken with feelings of guilt. I was concerned not only with what the good doctor would think when he found nothing wrong with me but even what the Holy One would think of me in my attempt to fool Him as well as his healing messenger.

"Now, young man, take a deep breath," the doctor said in Russian, translating it into German to make sure that I understood. I followed his instructions, took a deep breath, then let it out, as he instructed me to do, and repeated the process.

As the doctor continued his examination, he kept uttering ohs and ahs in a pleasant sort of way, saying in Russian, then in German, "Good, very good."

After his examination was completed, the doctor told me to get dressed while he returned to the office to talk to Mother. When I entered, the doctor and Mother were conversing, about me, obviously.

"Chaimele, the doctor says that you are not terribly sick, that you will get well before long."

"No, madam, that is not exactly what I said. What I told you was that your boy is basically very sound. He is a healthy lad. He isn't sick at all." As he said that he smiled, looking at me with a kind of wink.

"He has a strong heart," the doctor continued. His lungs are in fine shape and I could discern no ailment. The only pathology I notice is a slight tension. This type of minor distress could be the result of something he ate or the aftermath of a disturbing dream, which is not unusual with children of his age. Accordingly, I am going to give him a prescription which is no more than a mild tonic. It will help to invigorate him and also ease the slight disturbance in his stomach. Have him take one teaspoonful in the morning after breakfast and another before retiring in the evening."

"In a few days, you will be fully well, my boy," the doctor said, turning to me with another smile and another wink.

To Mother he said, "You have a fine boy, madam, a bright lad with a lot of potential. You should be proud of him—a quiet, nice-looking, neat, and intelligent lad. He will grow into a fine young man."

If I did not feel sick before my visit with the good doctor, I felt really well now, totally well. It was invigorating to hear this fine physician speak so kindly of me and in such positive terms of my physical condition. Mother glowed upon hearing the doctor say such nice things about her Chaimele. At the same time, she did not take the doctor's medical evaluation of my physical condition as literally as I did because to do that would have contradicted her own assessment of me as a "*schwache kiend*" or weak child.

Thus, as we left the doctor's office, Mother looked at me endearingly and said, "I am so glad, Chaimele, that there is

nothing *seriously* the matter with you. But you are weak and I must watch over you. I hope that the medicine the doctor prescribed for you, with God's help, will make you well."

I wished Mother were not talking this way. I felt well and I fully understood what the doctor was saying. I wanted to feel healthy and strong. After all, the good doctor did say that my heart and lungs were in good shape and that I was "a healthy young man." And having seen it said with a smile and a wink in my direction, I had no difficulty in getting the message.

But while I understood what the doctor was trying to say, it was not until many years later that I learned the full significance of Mother's persistence in referring to me as "a weak child" who needed her special care and attention. Her extreme anxiety about my health could be traced to the loss of three sons, one stillborn, who preceded me, and her pathological worry and desire that I continue to live and grow into a normal young man—a survivor, which her other male children were not. Instead of reacting with annoyance, unconsciously I accepted her evaluation of my physical condition and at the same time I found ways to make use of this situation for my own benefit by "getting sick" on propitious occasions.

But I paid a price for the weak child syndrome, becoming a young hypochondriac, which caused me a full share of misery. Eventually, I was successful in overcoming the syndrome but it took enormous effort. Again, it was not until years later that I understood the full psychological implications of what Mother's overprotection and my unhealthy and often painful reactions to the abnormal influence she exerted over me. As a result of this influence, my feelings for her were ambivalent, swinging from love to strong resentment, in turn resulting in a degree of depression and melancholy in my early years.

As we reached the street after we left the doctor's office, the fresh, cold air hit my nostrils and I felt invigorated. Our sleigh and driver were ready for us, ready to take us wherever we wanted to go. The sun was shining, warming the crisp air a little and melting the snow slightly too. Mother asked our driver to take us to the main

boulevard. She thought it would be nice to take a short walk and look in the store windows. Soon, we were in the heart of a beautiful wide boulevard. I liked the sound of my rubber boots in the crisp, flattened down snow when we got out to walk about. Snow and ice on the branches of the trees formed sculptured designs reflecting the brilliance of the sun.

Mother stopped to look in the window of a jewelry store. Except for a simple, unadorned gold wedding band, she had no jewelry of any kind. Her face lit up but soon became sad as she admired the beautiful, sparkling jewels in the window.

"Someday, Chaimele, *meine kiend*, I will have jewels like these. Wait until Papa sends us money and papers for our journey to America. We will have jewels in America. Wait and see."

We stopped before a bakery and the fragrant, enticing odors drew us inside immediately. Mother bought cookies and pastry but we did not eat much of it since she said it would spoil our appetite. When we returned to our sleigh we had a picnic lunch that Mother had prepared before we left Vetka. She had taken along cooked chicken and bread, which remained fresh in the freezing open vehicle. I was hungry and I ate with relish, topping off the lunch with the pastry and cookies Mother had bought at the bakery with the delightful fragrances. Of course, I did not feel sick. I had no pain in my stomach. Nausea? None at all. As a matter of fact, I had never felt better than I did that day.

The return trip was uneventful. All bundled up and covered with a heavy woolen blanket, I dozed a good part of the way.

TWELVE

SEVERAL MONTHS after we were fully settled in the Rosskovsky mansion and Mother and the girls found themselves caught up in their household chores, Mother realized that the girls were not as busy as they should be. That was particularly true of Mainke. This fact, coupled with the accumulation of a few rubles she had managed to squeeze from the weekly marketing allowance and hide under her quilt, gave Mother an idea: Why not put the girls to work in a family business? When she had the idea fully crystallized in her mind, she called us all together for a family meeting at which she broke the news.

She explained that there was no specific objective in what the girls were doing as they helped her with the housework and sewing. Now that they were getting older and approaching womanhood, it became imperative to find some meaningful, gainful occupation for them.

We listened expectantly, mouths wide open, as Mother set the tone of her drama of the moment.

"So, I have been thinking about how to find something interesting for you, my daughters, not only interesting but profitable."

"Come, Mother, tell us what you have decided for us." Mainke chimed in, breaking the seriousness of the session.

"Have patience and I will tell you. Actually, before I came upon my idea, I tried to find jobs for each of you—or at least part-time work for you, Pashke and Mainke. But Vetka is not a big city and there is not much work around for young girls. To have you go out to do ordinary housework would embarrass my sisters here, particularly Tante Frieda."

"So what did you finally decide?" Mainke persisted.

"To open a business."

"You are not serious, Mama? A business? To start a business takes money, a lot of rubles," Mainke said, laughing.

"The kind of business I have in mind will not take a lot of money. And very, very confidentially, I have been able to save a few rubles." Mother came out with it, talking almost in a whisper.

"What kind of business do you have in mind, Mama?" Pashke asked this time.

"What I have in mind is to open a halvah store on Mogulevsky Street, near the center of town."

"Just halvah?" Mainke asked.

"Halvah and cookies and perhaps a few other confections. The cookies I can make myself here. There is no store of this kind in all of Vetka and I think it will prove to be a very good *gesheft* (business)."

Mother then made her "presentation." She explained how she had rented a store very "reasonably," a store that had not been used for almost a year and was not bringing the landlord any income.

"I was able to get it free for the first three months and for a very small amount for the next three months. After that, if we should do well, we will pay what is considered a normal rent."

"And what about the halvah? Where will you get the halvah? Do you have the money to pay for it?" Mainke asked.

"That is all arranged too. I was able to buy a few boxes of halvah with a small deposit of several rubles, with the rest to be paid as we sell the halvah to our customers." Mother did not know what buying on consignment meant but that was exactly what she did.

The idea sparked a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of the three girls, especially Mainke, who now seemed to be taken with the novelty of the project. I liked it too. And even little Ruvke thought it would be fun.

The store was tiny. But size did not seem to be important. It was located at the end of Mogulevsky Street, not too far from the

center of town. There were only a few stores on the street, none near our halvah shop. A kind of general or notions store was located several buildings away, and still farther there was an establishment that catered to women, selling blouses, underwear, hats, umbrellas, shawls, and other items.

Our halvah store was opened on a cold, late fall Tuesday morning. In accordance with tradition, Tuesday was the most auspicious day to start something—to move, to travel, and to do many other things. Monday was not considered to be a lucky day on which to begin any venture. Wednesday and Thursday were not bad days but they were not as good as Tuesday. And, of course, nothing could be initiated on Friday, on the Sabbath eve. Nor could it be done on Sunday, the Gentile Sabbath. So, Mother and her three daughters opened shop on Tuesday, the luckiest of all days.

It was an auspicious opening. The delicious aroma of newly opened boxes of fresh halvah—both vanilla and chocolate flavored—permeated the tiny store and a bit outside, inviting passers-by to come in, and the store was soon crowded. Of course, our entire family was there—that is, Aunt Frieda, Aunt Toibe and her children, and their friends and neighbors. While cash-paying customers did do some buying, there was more free sampling of the halvah and the delicious freshly baked cookies, Mother's and Oilke's handiwork. Before the day was over, the fairly small supply of halvah and cookies was practically depleted but there were only a few rubles in the till.

"Don't worry," Mother said. "It was a good start. From now on, no more free sampling to relatives and friends. I think we will have plenty of customers and good sales."

But that was not the way it was to be.

By Wednesday morning, the store was cleaned, the halvah supply replenished, the window display changed a bit, and my three sisters sat in the store waiting for customers. An hour passed and then another hour and no customers came. Mainke and Pashke began to move around the store, touching a box here, moving another box there, and then asking one another: "Where are the customers?"

"I don't know," Pashke said. "It's a nice day, cold, sunny, and crisp, white snow on the ground. Where are the customers?"

"I think I will go out and shout: Halvah! Halvah! Come and get fresh halvah!" Mainke said.

"Don't you dare, you foolish little girl!" Pashke shouted at Mainke. "Don't you even think about it."

Oilke just sat and stared.

"Eh, it's really a good idea," and with that Mainke went outside and began to shout: "Halvah! Delicious halvah! Come inside and get it."

There was no one outside and apparently no one heard her. Pashke and Oilke dragged her inside.

The clock on the wall ticked away. Now it was half past eleven. Mainke walked up and down, touching a box there, moving a box here. Pashke walked around in circles, taking a broom and beginning to sweep.

"What are you doing—sweeping? The store is clean," Mainke said.

Oilke got up and walked to the door, peering out through the glass display window. Occasionally, someone passed by. But no one entered the store.

Mainke and Pashke soon became hungry. Mainke tasted a piece of halvah.

"It really tastes good—delicious," Mainke said, taking another piece.

"Stop eating. We are here to sell, not to eat." Then Pashke tasted a piece.

"You are right, it does taste good—delicious," Pashke said, taking another piece, a bigger one this time.

Mainke joined her and ate some more. Oilke just stood looking out of the window. A passer-by stopped, looked in the window. Oilke moved away. The door opened. In came a woman. Mainke and Pashke rushed to her. "Can we help you, madam?" Pashke asked.

"The halvah looked so good in the window, and it smells so delicious."

"Try a piece." Mainke said. "It is delicious, oh, so delicious!"

The woman, chunky, middle aged, smiled and tasted a piece of the vanilla-flavored halvah.

"Oh, it *is* delicious. I'd like to buy some. How much is a quarter of a pound?"

"A quarter of a pound costs twenty kopecks. But a whole pound cost only fifty kopecks," Mainke said.

"Oh, that's too much. How much is a half pound?"

"Thirty-three kopecks."

"I'll take twenty-five kopecks' worth. And don't stint, please, when you weigh it out."

Pashke then came over and did the weighing. She was very generous—made it almost half a pound. The woman took her purchase, wrapped in a piece of newspaper, and went out smiling.

"What did you do that for? Why did you give her so much?" Mainke asked.

"Oh, it's our first customer today. Let her tell her friends what a good buy she received from us," Pashke answered.

Mainke and Pashke then ate some more halvah.

"Stop eating the halvah or there will be nothing left to sell," Oilke said, uttering her first words that morning.

"It tastes so good, and I am so hungry."

"Oh, let's stop this. Mother will soon be here with our lunch."

A half hour later Mother came, with a bowl of soup, meat, three spoons, and a piece of home-baked bread. The three girls dug in as if they had not eaten for days.

"How is business?" Mother asked.

"We had just one customer, who bought twenty-five kopecks' worth of halvah."

"What do you expect? It's only the first day. It will take time. Word has to get around, and word will get around. You'll see, there will be many customers. We will make lots of money." Mother was the perpetual optimist.

Thursday I went to the store when I was finished with Hebrew school and my Russian lesson. It was four o'clock.

"How is business?" I asked.

"A little better today. We had three customers and sold a ruble's worth of halvah. Not very much, not enough to make any money, but three customers are better than one," Pashke said.

The next day, Friday, was a good day. Six customers bought halvah. Several others were in the store but said they would buy "next week." Total sales on this day: three rubles—a real fortune. But Pashke and Mainke ate more of the halvah than they sold.

The following week saw no improvement. Not a single customer came into the store on Monday. It was snowing all day and very few people went out into the street unless they had to go for some specific reason. One customer bought a few kopecks' worth of halvah on Tuesday. And nobody came into the store on Wednesday, although the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day.

Mainke, Pashke, and even Oilke, became restless. Each in her own way and at her own particular pace began to eat the halvah and then each began to reprimand the other for doing what all of them had been doing—eating up the supplies. When I came into the store in the afternoon after school, I found Mainke and Pashke arguing.

"Mainke, you better stop eating the halvah. There won't be any left to sell."

"Nobody is coming into the store to buy. It will just get stale and gather dust."

I was very hungry and the smell of the halvah was enticing, so without even asking any of my sisters, I went to an open box and took a piece of halvah. It was delicious. I took another piece. Then Pashke stopped me.

Before the week was over, only one box of halvah was left unopened, very few customers were coming to the store, and fewer bought any halvah. Mother and my sisters conferred and regretfully decided to close shop and find jobs for the girls.

THIRTEEN

SOON THE war came to Vetka. At the beginning we merely heard rumors. The Germans would soon arrive. They had already occupied Lithuania, Latvia, and a good part of Poland and were moving across the border into Russia. The German soldiers were beasts, we heard, ruthless monsters.

What could we do? Where could we go? No one seemed to have any answers. Despair enveloped us. Then word came that the Germans had already occupied Gomel and were now crossing the river in barges on the way to Vetka. Despair was followed by resignation.

"God will come to our help as he did in the past," Mother said. She began to pray and cry, beseeching God to save and protect her children from the coming dangers. Then she made a special, prayerful appeal to the souls of her long-dead parents and other ancestors now in heaven to intercede with God on her behalf. That evening when we left the synagogue after the Sabbath services, Mother's eyes were red and swollen from her incessant crying. But she felt relieved and confident that her prayers were heard and would be given the full measure of consideration they deserved.

"God will answer our prayers. He will not forsake us. He will put his arm around the German soldiers and they will not be unkind to us. You will see, Chaimele, Ruvkele, Pashkele, Oilkele, Mainkele."

I believed her. I had good reason to. Thus far, her prayers and her assurances had proved dependable. Hadn't she, with the help of God, extricated me from the terrible illness that struck me in the boxcar on the way from Poneviez to Gomel? Hadn't

she found a home for us in Vetka when the situation seemed hopeless?

That night the war came to Vetka. The sound of heavy trucks on the cobblestoned streets. Shooting. Running. Shouting. And the moaning of the injured and dying. Although the war evoked unenthusiastic, reluctant resistance from the Russian imperial army, there was enough action so that some Russian soldiers were killed as they made their retreat, while many surrendered. Theirs was a beaten, leaderless army by this time.

We were inside the house, on the ground floor, with Gospodin Rosskovsky, Mother's employer, who seemed even more scared than we were. He was ashen pale, all the shutters closed, doors locked. Mother was praying in silence. With the approach of night the shooting became louder. A bullet hit a window of our house.

"Get on the floor and under the beds," Mother whispered. We did as she told us. Under the beds we went. For a while it was quiet. Then we heard shooting again. Running. Shouting. Falling. Then came a banging on our door.

"Don't get near the door," Mother whispered. "Make no sound." But the banging persisted. Mother then crept over to the door and asked, "Who is there? What do you want?"

"Open the door. We are Russian soldiers. Open the door or we will break in."

"Leave us alone. We are Americans. *Amerikanski*, "Mother shouted back with authority.

Then we heard the loud sound of a gun. Then more sounds of shooting, running, falling, moaning. Finally, all was quiet.

God had heard Mother's prayers. The souls of her deceased relatives had interceded convincingly on her behalf. Mother praised God for coming to our aid.

"I think we are safe now," Mother said when the quiet continued. "God is with us. He will protect us. But let us stay under the beds for a while longer. We must help God in his work."

We remained under the beds for a long time. The quiet continued and eventually I fell asleep.

When I awoke in the morning—it must have been very

early—there was great excitement. The Germans had occupied Vetka and the officer in charge of the unit had decided to make the Rosskovsky house command headquarters since it was the largest in town and located in the center of the community.

Within hours, our house was overrun with German soldiers. They moved with speed and efficiency. Before the morning was over, the place was turned into an army barracks. The large living room was converted into an office, with files, desks, and chairs. Soldiers occupied every available room, leaving one room for Rosskovsky and permitting us to remain undisturbed in our two small bedrooms in the attic.

The soldiers cleared the warehouse of the iron scrap metal and other junk and installed army cots in their place. They also cleaned out the attic over the warehouse, taking down my beloved swing, and converting both the warehouse and the attic above into barracks. Tents were placed in the large yard, making room for more soldiers. And a mobile kitchen was put up in the yard, with huge pots for cooking soup and stew.

The big surprise was the friendliness of the soldiers. The officer in charge called the entire household together and explained what was to be done. He addressed all of us, but he directed particular emphasis toward Rosskovsky and Mother. He spoke in German first, then in Russian.

"We are taking over this house for the duration of our stay here. This could be a few days, several weeks, or months. We will try not to disturb your normal life. All we ask is your patience and cooperation. We want to be your friends. If you consider us your enemy and do anything to hurt us or contrary to orders, you will be in trouble. But if you just go about your normal life and do not interfere with what we are doing, you will be secure. We want to be your friends."

At first we were terrified and did not believe what he had said, but as time went on it seemed that the officer meant to keep his word. As the days passed we became used to having so many soldiers around us. We found it exciting to be living in the Rosskovsky house and in Vetka generally.

The German soldiers, the first soldiers I had ever met, went about their business, quietly and efficiently. They bothered us very little. They were downright friendly. All this happened a long time ago but the mental picture I have of the typical German soldier in the Rosskovsky house in Vetka is of a middle-aged man, dressed in an olive khaki uniform, with a long khaki coat, forever smoking a pipe and drinking black coffee from a canteen. The expressions that I remember hearing more often than any others are "*Ja wohl*," "*Dankeschön*" and "*Bitte.*" The soldiers called me "*Junge*"—boy.

When the day was over and they had finished working, they would congregate on the big porch, some sitting in the rockers, others standing about talking and laughing. I could not quite follow what they said, but their mood was jovial. I would hang around, watching them and trying to grasp the gist of their conversation. German sounded enough like Yiddish so that I was able to understand a word or two.

They did not seem to mind my presence. In fact, one evening a heavy-set, middle-aged soldier, who was sitting in one of the rockers, smoking a big, curved pipe, called me over:

"*Junge*, come here." I went over to him. He sat me on his knee. He asked my age, told me that I was a fine *Junge*, that he had a *Junge* just like me. Then he offered me a drink of coffee from his canteen. I tried it but did not like it. The taste was so bitter. I must have grimaced to show my distaste for the cold, bitter, black coffee. He laughed and said that I did not have to drink it and that the next time he would bring me something sweet—a piece of chocolate or a bonbon, which would be more to my liking.

We children thought it fun to have the German soldiers around. In the office (converted from the large living room) several soldiers kept busy stamping an endless batch of papers with rubber stamps. A young soldier called me over on one occasion and asked me whether I would like to stamp some of the papers. When I said, "Yes," he handed me a pile of papers, a rubber stamp, and an inked pad and showed me how and where I should make the imprint. I learned quickly and enjoyed stamping until my hand got tired.

The only problem that developed during this period involved my sisters, particularly Oilke and Pashke, sixteen and fifteen, who were now pretty young women. Some of the younger soldiers began to make advances to them and Mother had to utilize all her judiciousness and firmness to keep the young soldiers away from my sisters. When everything she did failed, she sent the two girls away to Aunt Toibe's.

Mother solved her own problem with the older soldiers by making herself look as ugly and as dirty as possible. She wore an ancient, black dress, arranging her hair to look like that of an old lady. She also kept constantly busy in the kitchen or working around the house, always with a broom and a rag in her hand, keeping out of the way of the soldiers as much as possible.

Life in Vetka during the German occupation was not unpleasant at first. Before long, however, the Rosskovsky mansion, as big as it was, became overcrowded with soldiers. Within a few months, the original detachment left and a new one replaced it. Now the encampment was much larger and the house and yard became far more crowded. The new commanding officer was not as friendly as the previous one and he kept the tempo of the place on a tighter basis.

Several days after the arrival of the new unit, Mother called us together and made a tearful announcement. "Children, my heart breaks but we must leave this house. We have no place else to stay in Vetka. We cannot remain here. Gospodin Rosskovsky told me the German commandant advised him that he would require the use of the house for the 'duration,' which could be a long time."

The old man had also explained that he could no longer run his junk business and that his money was dwindling. He would soon lose the house. Besides, he was ill. He was leaving Vetka to join his daughter and family in Kiev. But he was very kind and considerate, Mother said. He had communicated with a good friend of his in Gomel, a man he had known for a long time and one with whom he had some business dealings. His friend in Gomel said that he could use a good, reliable housekeeper. There

was only one drawback. Rosskovsky's friend said he could not provide a home for the family of the housekeeper.

"Living with this man, Gospodin Menuchim Goodinsky, in his big house in Gomel are his son, daughter-in-law, and their young daughter, a girl of seven," Rosskovsky explained to Mother. "Gospodin Goodinsky is a stubborn man. He would not have his housekeeper's children share his house and mingle with his granddaughter."

"So, my children," Mother said, "I will take the job and I will find a place of shelter for you. As a matter of fact, Rosskovsky, may God bless him, has given me a few suggestions. We are leaving for Gomel tomorrow. I have received permission from the German commandant to travel to Gomel."

I hated to leave Vetka, a place we were just getting to know. Yet at the same time I was conditioning myself for the new experiences ahead. Though not without a certain amount of fear and uncertainty.

FOURTEEN

WHEN WE arrived in Gomel, the six of us crowded into a carriage to ride out to the Goodinsky estate. This time I found Gomel even more beautiful and stimulating than before, although German soldiers were now in evidence everywhere. I looked forward to exploring the "big city," with its boulevards, stores, the new German cinemas, and the interesting side streets.

Soon, we stopped before an imposing house situated on a wide street. Gospodin Menuchim Goodinsky greeted Mother when she rang the bell at the large, ornamental front door. He was tall, ruddy faced, with a well-trimmed brown mustache and brown beard with streaks of gray. A bit on the heavy side, he was neatly dressed in the style of the wealthy Europeans of the early part of the century. His gray, longish jacket-coat was worn with a vest, white shirt, a high, hard collar, and a wide tie. A heavy gold chain was stretched across the lower pockets of his vest.

"Madam Gussow?" were his first words. "Please come around to the back door and I will talk to you there."

We followed Mother around the side of the house to the back door—the servants' entrance. The back of the house was also neat and attractive and at a distance, behind a gate, I could see a big garden and an orchard with large fruit trees.

"Now, Madam Gussow, I want you to come into the house so that we can talk. But your children must remain outside. I presume you are prepared to find lodging for them. They cannot stay here, you know. I am sure that my friend Gospodin Rosskovsky made that plain to you."

Mother whispered something in Pashke's ear, told us to

remain in the back yard, and entered the big house with the neat-looking bearded gentleman.

When Mother returned about half an hour later, she explained that this would be a fine job for her, a situation that would be of value for the entire family. But she emphasized that the bearded gentleman was a stubborn man who made it very clear to her that we were not to enter the house. Should he ever find any of us inside or even loitering outside the house, she would lose her job forthwith. Finally and absolutely. She had to agree to those terms, swearing, in fact, that she would live up to the promises and conditions.

"As I swore I asked God not to believe me since I did not mean to swear, imploring the Almighty for forgiveness and explaining that I had to do it to get this job to take care of my little children," Mother said in a doleful tone. "Of course, I talked to God silently so that the master of the house could not hear me. And as I left the house, I spit three times, spitting out the falsehood of my swearing. What else could I do? I know that God will understand and forgive me this transgression."

While we were careful not to enter the house of Gospodin Goodinsky during his presence, we did get into the house, and on many occasions. Mother was not the kind who would hesitate to take calculated risks for the sake of her children. While we always had to watch our moves and guard against being discovered by the bearded gentleman, the spacious, beautiful house, its gardens, and orchards played an important part of my life in the more than a year that we remained in Gomel.

This many-chambered "mansion" had a decadent elegance about it; both its inhabitants and the general ambiance of the place breathed melancholia. And in some ways, a Gothic drama was played out in it, which, in my immaturity I could not have characterized as such, but which I sensed as I began to observe some incidents within.

In addition to the finely tailored, bearded gentleman, the occupants of the house included Gregory, his son, a smallish, thin, stooped-over, chain-smoking man in his late thirties. Greg-

ory spent most of his time playing the piano, a large, black grand in a dark corner of the huge, sparsely furnished parlor. He was sloppily dressed, in pants that seemed to be continually falling down and a torn, crumpled, collarless shirt. Over the shirt he wore a partly torn vest, in a pocket of which he kept his cigarettes and box of matches. The tunes he played were plaintive and he played the same ones over and over.

Living in the house also were Olga, Gregory's Gentile wife, and their seven-year-old daughter, Tanya. Olga was beautiful. Tall, graceful, well proportioned, with her enticing bust almost always exposed through a bizarre-looking, colorful, gown of loose-fitting soft silk, Olga never remained still for long. Slinky and catlike, with shoulder-length black hair, she spent most of her time in the parlor. She would sit down for a second or two and then begin to move around again, looking out of the window for a moment, then turning and pacing about the room like a caged jaguar. Little Tanya, or Tanishka, as they called her, was a charming little girl, with an expressive face and big, black eyes, who seemed to want to be like her mother. I liked Tanishka.

Husband and wife rarely talked to each other and when they did the "conversation" started with a whisper. A word, a pause, then a few words, then another pause, soon followed by a pouring out of unpleasant gibberish. They usually ended up shouting to one another, often both at the same time. The words were in Russian but the shouting sounded like an incomprehensible jargon. They would continue until Tanishka entered the room and started to cry.

For long periods day after day, Gregory sat at the piano, playing his arias, taking an occasional break to sip a drink from a glass on the floor near him. Olga meanwhile continued her movement about the room, a cigarette in a long holder in one hand and a drink in the other. Sometimes she would hum a tune or burst out in song as Gregory played. On such occasions, there was no talk of any kind. Then, suddenly, Olga would stop and burst out in a crying spell. While such outbreaks were rare, they were

stunningly dramatic, especially since Gregory paid no attention to her but continued to play as if he heard nothing.

I observed these scenes while standing unobtrusively at the door of the parlor. Neither seemed to be aware of me. And of course, I was there only when Mother let me know that the bearded gentleman was away on a trip outside Gomel so that there was no chance of his catching me in the house. Such scenes fascinated me. So much so that at times I found myself in a sort of trance as if I were viewing a stage play instead of seeing a piece of life in action.

Unlike her parents, Tanishka was outgoing and friendly. She smiled at me and I smiled back and before long Ruvke and I became her playmates. Hide-and-seek was our favorite game and we would chase each other from room to room in the many rooms of the big house. Sometimes we played in the gardens and the orchard. Once, I found myself alone with her in the big house in one of the smaller guest rooms on the second floor. The three of us had been playing hide-and-seek. Tanishka was hiding, and after searching all over I found her. She was standing in a corner, with her hands over her eyes. I tagged her. Then, impulsively, before I realized what I was doing, I took her in my arms and hugged her. Instead of pulling away and showing surprise, she smiled at me and nestled closer. I felt an inexplicable urge to hold her tighter, to get closer to her. Then I became frightened. I thought of the bearded gentleman and what he might do to me and Mother if he found me with his little granddaughter. That was the end of my first conscious erotic experience. I was nine. Tanishka was seven.

Mother found jobs for the girls. Oilke became a clerk in a store, Pashke a seamstress in a dress boutique, and Mainke a waitress in a tea room. The three of them shared a room over the boutique. We saw little of them, except on the Sabbath.

Mother found lodgings for Ruvke and me in a house on a side street about a mile from the big house of the bearded gentleman. We also had our meals there. I remember eating lima bean soup, with chunks of meat. It was delicious and as time went on, lima bean soup became one of my favorite foods.

The house was strange, and we soon realized that some bizarre goings-on were taking place in it. It was Ruvke, not quite seven then, who became aware of the "strange doings" before I did.

We went to sleep shortly after supper, at nine o'clock. We slept on cots in the long hall at the end of the living room. The living room was always lit up and more often than not it was filled with numerous people, usually sitting around a large, round table, talking loudly. Since I was tired and full of the good lima bean soup, light or no light, people or no people, I usually closed my eyes, sometimes putting the blanket over my head, and fell asleep almost instantly.

That was not the case with Ruvke. In the first place, he did not like lima bean soup and as a result, he ate very little, remaining hungry and awake. Besides, he never did fall asleep as quickly as I did. So, he listened, heard, and saw things I did not.

He said nothing to me of what he saw and heard until one morning, when he could hardly contain himself. As soon as we got up, Ruvke blurted out his story. He talked so quickly and excitedly that what he said made no sense. By the time we reached the big house, he had calmed down and was able to tell his story a little more coherently.

"Mama, a lot of money was spread on the table."

"What table? What money?" Mother asked.

"In the house where Chaim and I live. They were sitting around the big table and counting money which they took from boxes—piles and piles of paper money—shining new bills. Thousands. Millions."

"Now, are you telling the truth?" Mother asked Ruvke. "You are not making this up? It is not one of your crazy dreams?"

"It is true, Mama. I was not asleep. I saw. And do you know what I heard, Mama?

"I heard one man say: 'We must kill Alex. We must shoot him. He cannot be trusted. If we don't kill him, he will get us all in trouble!' "

"You really heard this kind of talk, Ruvkele?"

"Yes, Mama, I heard it. And I heard more. Another man

around the table said, 'No, not yet. Let's make sure. Let's follow him.' Then the others began to shout. Then it was quiet and another man said, 'No, we can't wait. That would be too late. Alex must be shot tomorrow.' "

"Ruvkele, my child, you are fibbing. You did not hear all this. You must have been dreaming. Tell us the truth."

"Mama, I am telling the truth. I was awake. I was hungry. I did not eat. And the bright lights. And the noise. I heard. I am telling the truth, Mama."

Mother was now visibly disturbed. Her face became flushed. She had a worried look.

"Chaimele," she said, "Ruvkele may be telling the truth. It sounds too fantastic and I can hardly believe it, but it could be true. So, I will try to find out in my own way. In the meantime, we must keep this a secret. We must not say a word to anyone."

Mother was really worried and for good reason. If what Ruvke claimed he had seen and heard was actually so, our lives could be in danger. Mother tried to be calm, but I could sense her fear and I too became worried.

That night I could not sleep. I ate very little. I was not hungry. I tried to sleep but without success. Finally, I put the blanket over my head, closed my eyes. The harder I tried to fall asleep the more awake I became. I heard the door open, the sound of feet, movement of chairs—and talk. I lay quietly, with the blanket over my head, making believe that I was alseep. What I heard in the next few minutes confirmed what Ruvke had told us. I heard the opening of boxes, the shuffling of papers, and talk about money.

Then a man asked, "How did it go with Alex?"

"We did a good job. It was easy. The double-crosser had it coming to him. Now let's forget all about him and continue with our business."

I was petrified. I was never so scared in my life. I could not wait until morning. I must have been awake for hours. I remember feeling very tired, and finally falling asleep.

Ruvke and I dressed quickly when we got up in the morning.

I started running shortly after we left the house and Ruvke followed me. I was out of breath by the time we reached the big house.

"It is true, all true, what Ruvke said," I told Mother. "I heard everything. I could not sleep."

Mother's face turned ashen pale. "Chaimele, Ruvkele, you can no longer live in that house," Mother said. "I will find another lodging for you. You will stay here all day but in the evening you must go back and behave as if you saw nothing and heard nothing. It will not be easy but you are smart little boys and you must try and keep our secret. In the meantime, I will begin to look for a new home for you. Please, my children, you must help me and God will be with us."

Since the bearded gentleman was home that day, we had to remain outside. It was a clear, brisk fall day and Ruvke and I played hide-and-seek, in the orchard behind the apple and pear trees. It was my turn to close my eyes and let Ruvke hide. As I put my hand over my eyes while leaning on an apple tree, I felt someone grab me by the shoulder. I turned around. It was the bearded gentleman.

"Stop it this minute," he said. "Get out of the orchard and never come back here or I will ask your Mother to leave too. Get out, out, at once."

We ran to Mother and told her what had happened. Instead of scolding us, she began to cry. "My children," she said as she wiped her eyes with her apron, "what can I do? There is so much room here, and yet you cannot stay here. All because of this miserable old man who has so much. The apples in the orchard will rot but you can have none of them. So, please children, take a walk down the street and when you come back you will have to sit quietly so that the old man will not be aware of you. Please be careful."

Later that day she found us new accommodations, in the same neighborhood and only a few blocks away from the old place. They were not much better but they were in a quiet house, occupied by an old widow and her married daughter and son-in-law. These were poor, simple people, who seemed to enjoy having Ruvke and me as their "boarders."

FIFTEEN

SHORTLY AFTER we had moved to Gomel, the romance between Pashke and Michel began to fade. Michel made attempts to visit Pashke in Gomel but the restraining influence of his father was too much for him. So, instead of coming to Gomel, he wrote love letters to Pashke. At first the letters came daily, then less frequently, and within a few months the end of the romance seemed near.

Thus, when Pashke met Yitzik Labrudov, she was ready for a new suitor. On that particular day she had not heard from Michel for more than six months. Yitzik, a widower from Berdichev in the Ukraine, with a young daughter of six, rushed her off her feet. In his early forties, he was an "old man" for a teen-age girl. But Yitzik was a man-about-town, suave and skilled in courting the eager, moody, naïve girl. He had money. Plenty of money to buy Pashke presents, escort her to Gomel's ballet theater, to tea rooms and cafés. And he must have made love in a way Michel never did.

"Pashke, you are dizzy," Mother said to her one day. "You are so dizzy, you don't know what you are doing. How can you give up a fine young man like Michel for such a no-good as Yitzik? And an old man at that?"

"Mother, you don't know what you're talking about. Yitzik is a fine, respectable, well-mannered man, and he loves me."

"Yitzik may have good manners. And he is suave. He knows his way with a woman. But respectable he is not. We don't really know what he is doing for a living.

"He's a businessman."

"What kind of business? He is mixed up with gangsters,

counterfeiters, and he may be one himself, for all you know. I did a little investigating."

Pashke had met Yitzik in the boardinghouse where Ruvke and I had first lived. She walked us home one evening, and stopped to talk with the people with whom we boarded. After a while, Yitzik and another man walked in. Yitzik was immediately attracted to Pashke. Before she left, he asked her for a date and she agreed to meet him.

Mother had good reason to question Yitzik's credentials. Not being bashful, she had asked him what he was doing for a living.

His answer: "Business."

"What kind of business?"

"A good business. I work hard and I make money."

But that good business could well have been counterfeiting. Mother never really found out. Yitzik and his activities remained suspect since he spent a lot of time with the "gangsters and counterfeiters" with whom Ruvke and I had lived.

But there was no reasoning with Pashke. She was really "dizzy" as Mother said, totally infatuated with Yitzik. When Michel heard about Pashke's new romance, he came to Gomel to see her. As Pashke described the scene to Mother, he rushed in like one of his father's bulls. After that confrontation, Pashke refused to see him or have anything to do with him. She was smitten by her wordly Ukrainian lover and that was that.

"I am going to marry Yitzik," she announced to Mother, and no matter how much Mother tried to dissuade her, crying and pleading with her, nothing helped. "I am going to marry Yitzik. He loves me and he can give me everything I want."

The wedding was the first in my experience. In its own way and for its time and place, it was a gala affair. But it wasn't all music and romance. It had a degree of sadness. Mother was convinced that her beloved daughter, beautiful, lovely Pashke was making a serious mistake. She went to the wedding, as we all did, but she remained sad throughout the traditional Orthodox ceremony and for a short time during the celebration that followed. She said it

was not like her own wedding, which was a very joyous occasion. Having heard her describe her own wedding on so many occasions and being witness to Pashke's wedding ceremony and festivities, I could understand what she meant. The wedding took place in the parlor of the flat where Pashke worked. It was a small and not very attractive room. The guests included some of the men and women that Ruvke and I saw at the frightening place where we had first lived, which made the occasion anxious for both of us and Mother. We left shortly after the ceremony, just after the music and dancing started.

Mother was not to see her favorite, beloved daughter—who looked so much like her and unconsciously behaved so much like her—again. Of course, she did not know it at that time. But that was the way it was to be. Pashke, the radiant bride, was only seventeen. And Mother, who to me looked like a middle-aged woman, was only thirty-five. Yet Mother was never again to see her beloved Pashke.

I did see Pashke once more and for the first time got to know her a little. It happened only a few months after the wedding, which took place in the spring. Early in July I was sent to visit Pashke in her new home in Berdichev. I stayed for two months.

The trip itself was a memorable experience. I traveled by train from Gomel to Kiev, there changed trains for Berdichev. I was not quite nine and I made the long journey all by myself. This was remarkable for a number of reasons. It was the first time that I had ever traveled alone. It was also my first separation from Mother, who until then had seemed to hover over every step I took. For the first time I sensed a degree of personal freedom that I had not known before. I was a bit concerned about traveling alone without the presence of my protective mother. Yet at the same time I felt a sense of new exhilaration and excitement. Of course, Mother had helped me get dressed, provided me with food, embraced me repeatedly, had given me detailed instructions, admonished me to be careful, and had taken me to the station. She shed voluminous tears as she said good-bye to me.

"Chaimele, write me every day. Don't forget your Mother,

who loves you more than anyone, more than anything in the world, more than life itself," she said. As the big drops of tears rolled over her cheeks, I felt a little sad, more sorry for Mother than for myself. I could not wait for the train to start. I kept waving to Mother as the train began to move.

Oh, the thoughts that I thought as the train now moved at a fast pace and the countryside unfolded. Suppose I never saw Mother again? Suppose she died during my absence from Gomel. I would be an orphan. What would I do? I would have to find a way to get to America to Father. How would I do that? Oh, no, this could not happen. Mother was a strong, healty woman, except for her double hernia. Nothing could happen to her. She knew how to take care of herself.

Supposing there was an accident on the train? Or I got lost? Or Pashke did not meet me at the station in Berdichev? What would I do? I had her address. And if I could not find her house, I could go back to Gomel and Mother. I had a ticket for my return trip as well as some money.

Soon my attention was diverted by the scenic countryside, the sound of the wheels under the train, and its occasional whistle. Then I thought about the new places and experiences that awaited me on the journey. How different this train trip was from the one we took in the boxcar from Poneviez to Gomel.

The train departed from Gomel early in the morning and was due to arrive at Kiev late in the afternoon. The Berdichev train was scheduled to leave two hours after my arrival in Kiev, leaving me not enough time to go and see anything in Kiev and too much time to linger at the railroad station. I began to worry a bit on this score. The train was already late and was destined to reach Kiev just ten minutes before the train for Berdichev was scheduled to depart.

As the train approached Kiev, the sun had begun to set, a big, round, red ball of fire behind the river, then, as we moved on, behind a red-brick factory building. More buildings along the river, mostly of red brick, came into sight as the train slowed down. The setting sun, the darkness that followed, and the mystery of

what was going on in this big, historic city of the Ukraine, and the surprises awaiting me in Berdichev made me feel a little melancholy and uneasy.

But there was no time to tarry. Once the train reached the station platform and the wheels ground to a halt, I inquired about the location and departure time of the train to Berdichev. The old station master looked at his big pocket watch and said, "Young man, you will have to run. Your train leaves in ten minutes." He gave me the track number and hurried me on my way. "It is waiting. Watch your step," he admonished.

Minutes after I found a seat, the train began to move. It was quite dark now and there was not much that I could see from the window. Even though I was tired and sleepy, I found it impossible to sleep because of my anticipation of what lay before me. The train was crowded, mostly with old people, or at least they seemed old to me. The women wore babushkas over their heads and some wore colorful blouses. Some of the men too wore similarly colorful blouses, and many of them had beards and big mustaches.

Sitting next to me was just such a man, portly, with a black beard and a big, black, handlebar mustache, over a fat, ruddy face. He looked me over but said nothing. And I had no reason to talk to him. Besides, I was slightly afraid of him. So, I just sat there quietly. I must have dozed a bit because the next thing I knew the conductor was saying, "Berdichev, B-e-r-d-i-c-h-e-v . . . " I picked up my suitcase, my coat, and hat and walked to the door. As I put my foot on the platform, I heard my name being called by a familiar voice: "Chaimele, Chaimele! Here we are." There was Pashke, and with her Mainke and a little girl whom she held by the hand. (Because Pashke's husband had been away from home a great deal, Pashke had asked Mainke to live with her—to keep her company and help with household chores. Pashke and Mainke, who never married, remained close throughout their lives.) We all got into a carriage and off we went.

The trip from the station to Pashke's house took about half an hour, although it seemed even longer. Pashke and Mainke plied me with questions, but I was too tired and too sleepy to say

more than "Yes" or "No." The little girl, sitting opposite me beside Mainke, was Mierelle, the daughter of Pashke's husband. She had a dark complexion and black hair plaited into two long black braids. She was not especially pretty and she seemed sad. Though she was only six years old, she looked and seemed much older.

Soon we stopped before a wooden gate that opened onto a small garden. Beyond the garden stood a pretty little wooden house.

It was strange to see Pashke as the mistress of her own house. Still not quite eighteen, she seemed mature and she certainly looked older than she was. However, she gave the impression of being a guest in her own house rather than the mistress of the domain. Devilish Mainke, now fourteen, seemed to be running the household, rather than her older, married sister. She was the only one who was gay and spirited. Pashke's step-daughter, like herself, appeared shy and uncomfortable. I was my usual quiet self, most of the time.

I was the only male in the house and both my sisters made a pleasing fuss over me. Pashke, the bride, was without a groom. Her husband was absent and would not return during my entire stay, which was to extend over most of the summer. This seemed a strange situation for a young bride but even stranger for a not-so-young groom. There were many questions that I wanted to ask. Did Pashke miss her lover, Michel? Was she sorry she married the "old man" instead? How was her life with him? Why wasn't he at home with her?

The last question I did ask and the answer I got was that he was away "on business." It was a rather unusual business deal in which he was involved and he could not help being away at this time, Pashke explained. He would be away until late in the fall. That was why Mainke was there. And that was why I was there. To keep her company. There was room in the house and it would be good for me to have this change, away from home and Mother, Pashke said.

What I liked best about Berdichev were its horse-drawn trolleys. Like a wagon, the trolley was completely open, with a line

of seats across the car. Two and sometimes four huge, heavy-legged horses pulled each trolley. I found the trolley depot a few blocks from Pashke's house and I rode to the center of the town. I liked the way the driver handled his team of horses as the trolley went speeding along the tracks, squeaking as it turned. And I loved the wind blowing fresh air into my nostrils.

The center of the town was teeming with people and energy. Situated about five hundred miles from Gomel, Berdichev was that much farther south, in the Ukraine, the warm, lush part of Russia. The overflowing stalls in the marketplace were filled with a profusion and variety of colorful fruit, vegetables, and flowers, many of which I had never seen before and others rarely. For example, oranges, only occasionally available in Gomel, were here in ample supply. Also such vegetables as asparagus, squash, and cauliflower, which were new to me, in addition to corn on the cob, cucumbers, peas, and stringbeans, which, while plentiful in Gomel and Vetka, seemed larger and more colorful here. There were so many stalls of flowers that I didn't try to identify the particular varieties on display, but their blazing colors in the sunlight and perfumed odors were enchanting and wondrous to behold. In other stalls, I saw great assortments of notions and trinkets, seemingly thousands upon thousands of different items.

My first trip to the center of town was with Pashke, Mainke, and little Mierelle. But later I went many times by myself. Mother never would have permitted me to do so. But Mother was not there and Pashke and Mainke did not mind my going alone. As a matter of fact, Mainke encouraged it.

I did not write Mother many letters and she complained about that. I did not want to tell her that I was going on the horse-drawn trolley to the center of the big city all by myself. After I told her about my trip, about Pashke's house and garden, and a little about Berdichev as a city, there was not much to say.

It was a great summer. A first experience. And there is nothing that compares with my "first."

Mainke had a biting sense of humor and a devil-may-care attitude toward life. She suffered from acne a good part of the time

in her earlier years, but what she lacked in physical beauty, she made up in personality. She had an attractive, engaging way about her. Spirited, full of fun, she was even a prankster at times. She laughed a lot. She was rarely moody, as were my two older sisters. She was the most charismatic of all the members of our family. She could be described as a "character." She liked to dress differently from the others—differently from anyone else, for that matter. She was inclined to be an exhibitionist. She was partial to bright shawls and she almost always wore a big, red shawl on her shoulders. She wore gaily colored skirts with a flourish. Like Pashke, she could sew but her sewing displayed a special style and creativity. Mainke was the most daring of my sisters. And completely self-educated.

Mother believed in education—all the education possible for her favorite son, Chaimele, a little less for her younger son, Ruvkele, as much as possible for her favorite daughter, Pashke, and only the bare minimum for the others. She made sure that Oilke and Mainke learned to read and write. That was enough for them.

For Pashke, as for me, she found instructors in languages, history, science, and literature. Since Pashke was musically inclined, she was also taught piano and voice. Pashke did have an excellent voice. With the proper training, she could have gone far, but a thorough musical, voice education for Jewish girls was unheard of in our social class as in our time. I will never forget some of the beautiful, moving songs Pashke sang. I was particularly enchanted with a tune that had a refrain: "The love of my heart." While neither Oilke nor Mainke had the benefit of any sort of musical education, Mainke would watch Pashke as she practiced her lessons and, since she was an excellent mimic, she tried to harmonize with her, exaggerating both the manner and tone of her older sister.

Mother did not get along with Mainke, She continually found fault with her, mostly for little, unimportant things. Except once, when a more serious situation was involved.

About a month after we had moved to Gomel, Mother

thought it would be a good idea to take a look at the place where Mainke worked and see how she was doing in her job. With my hand in hers one afternoon we walked over to the tea room where Mainke was a waitress, a job Mother had obtained for her as she had also found work for my two older sisters.

The tea room was located on a side street a few doors from the main boulevard of Gomel, almost in the heart of the city. It was a small, lively little room with about a half dozen tables, at which several men sat drinking tea. Mainke, with a colorful shawl on her shoulders, was carrying on a spirited conversation with guests at one table. She was not quite fourteen but extremely mature for her age, physically as well as psychologically. Since our visit was a surprise, she blushed and seemed to be unnerved, which was a little, unusual for her. She introduced us to the owner, a short, fat woman, who smiled perpetually.

We did not linger. As we left, Mother appeared disturbed. I could sense that she did not like what she saw and heard in the tea room. But she said nothing to me. Later she said that the tea room was not a fit place for a daughter of hers. Before she could make accusations and take needed action, however, she began a private investigation of the place—and in her own fashion. What she discovered she did not like. She learned that the tea room was a sort of hangout for men to meet girls—young girls. Some of the men who came to the place were married. They had only one thing in mind. They wanted the company of young women who were playful. I overheard all this when Mother discussed the situation with Pashke.

"Mother, I think you are imagining some awful things," Pashke said to Mother. "What you are thinking is wrong. I know Mainke, She is full of fun, a real devil. But your suspicions are without foundation."

"Pashkele, I know better. Just looking at the men in that place, at the way they ogled the girls, made me feel uneasy. I didn't like it."

During the next few months, on a number of occasions Mother tried to induce Mainke to leave her job in the tea room. By

that time she had found another situation for her, as a maid in a "respectable" household. Mainke would have none of Mother's interference. She liked her job, she was fond of the women who owned the tea room, and she resented Mother's implied accusations.

"Mother, you are letting your imagination run away with you. I am doing nothing that is wrong or of which you need be ashamed. I like it here and I am staying," she told Mother on her latest visit to the tea room. By that time, Mother was no longer welcome there.

Mother was determined. Maybe her suspicions were without foundation but even if she were wrong, still the tea room was no place for Mainke. If she were not in some sort of trouble yet, she would be before long. Since Mainke was under age, Mother would force her to leave "that place."

So, one brisk, sunny afternoon, she took me by the hand as usual, this time saying, "Chaimele, I am going to do something that I do not like to do but I have no choice. Please understand. When you are older you will know that what I am doing is right."

As we walked on the main boulevard, Mother stopped to buy me a glass of ice cream from a street vendor, the tastiest ice cream in my memory. Soft, just sweet enough, with a bouquet of vanilla, the like of which I have not tasted since. After walking a few blocks, we reached the police station. We entered and Mother asked to see one of the officers. I was told to sit on a bench in the waiting room while Mother was ushered into a private office.

It was a long wait. While it was not too difficult for me to figure out what Mother was trying to do, I could not be sure. I did not like the whole thing. I felt terribly uncomfortable sitting there and thinking all kinds of strange thoughts. Eventually, Mother and a policeman came out of the office and the three of us walked out into the street.

"Where are we going, Mother?"

"We are going to take Mainke out of that place."

I waited outside the tea room as Mother and the policeman entered the establishment. I walked up and down in front of the tea

room. I sat on the stoop of the house next door, got up, and walked again. What was taking so long? I felt terribly self-conscious. And I was so sorry for Mainke. And angry at Mother for doing what she was doing.

At last, the door of the tea room opened and there were the policeman and Mother. And behind her, Mainke. I was at Mother's side. Soon we turned the corner toward the boulevard. People began staring at us. It seemed that everybody was looking at us, wondering what the policeman was doing with the young girl, the older woman, and the little boy alongside her. Some began pointing at us.

I felt ashamed. And oh so self-conscious. I had a pretty good idea why Mother called on the police to "get Mainke out of that place" and I had the feeling that everybody on the boulevard who was staring at us knew too. Soon I fell slightly behind Mother, hoping that the onlookers would not know that I was part of the entourage on the way to the police station. Then Mother and Mainke began to argue. Soon they were shouting at each other in Yiddish.

"You shame me. You accuse me of something I have not done," Mainke screamed.

"I know what you have been doing. I know very well. Oh, God, forgive me, forgive my daughter, my own flesh and blood, to shame me so," Mother shouted back, looking up to the sky.

A crowd began to gather and the policeman ordered the onlookers to move on. At the same time, he admonished Mother and Mainke for carrying on, telling them to stop shouting at each other.

Soon we reached the police station. Once again, I was asked to sit on the hard wooden bench in the ante room while Mother, the policeman, and Mainke went into another. I waited and waited. I was jittery from anxiety. What would happen to Mainke? Would she remain in the police station? Would she be put in prison? I felt great shame.

My thoughts were broken by the arrival of Mother and Mainke who appeared before me, each now silent. The three of us

walked out, now minus the policeman. I asked Mother what had happened. She did not answer. Nor was Mainke more communicative. But I soon learned that Mainke had been given a "warning." She was not to return to that tea house, either as a visitor or worker. Should she be found in "that place," she would be arrested and in all possibility put away in prison for a long time.

SIXTEEN

ONLY ONCE more after the failure of the halvah enterprise did Mother make an attempt to go into business. That was about a year later, in Gomel, during the winter of 1916, less than a year before the October revolution. Once again, the girls had no jobs and the stipend Mother made as housekeeper for Godpodin Menuchim Goodinsky was not enough to feed and clothe her family of three growing girls and two boys. So, with part of her meager savings, she decided to rent a stand in the market and put the girls to work to sell mainly cigarettes and tobacco, plus some cigars, candy, and notions.

The tiny stand was actually an inverted wooden crate, about four feet tall by three feet wide, over which Mother threw a tablecloth. On top of that she displayed her wares—several cartons of cigarettes, a box of smoking tobacco, some snuff, and a box of cigars. Later she added a jar of candy and an open carton of shoe laces. Where she bought her merchandise I never did find out.

Opening day the weather was very cold, even with the bright sun reflecting on the white snow. Mother and each of my sisters were all dressed in several skirts, blouses, and sweaters and big, sheep-lined coats. They wore woolen gloves, with the tips of their fingers sticking out so that they could make change. Mother and my sisters took turns at the stand since it was so cold that even dressed as warmly as they were they could not be outdoors for more than an hour or two at a time.

Unlike conditions at the halvah store, business here was brisk. In a few days the entire supply of cigarettes and other products was disposed of. Mother and my sisters were gleeful. While the markup was not very high, the stand was bringing in

some profitable revenue. The merchandise was quickly replenished and that too was sold in no time at all.

Before the week was over, however, this business venture too came to an end. It seemed that the person who rented Mother the space for the stand had no right to do so. That was discovered when several of the other stand operators complained about the interlopers who were cutting into their business. The established stand operators went to the product suppliers and threatened to boycott them unless they stopped selling to Mother. This was a case of doing too well. Mother and my sisters proved to be an excellent sales crew. All did well, but Mother and Mainke really made a show of themselves hawking their merchandise. Mainke, who was a frustrated actress, attracted a great deal of attention with her approach to would-be customers:

"Great bargains in the best of cigarettes, pipe tobacco, cigars. Come right over here—the finest products at the lowest prices. Stop here first," she sang out coquettishly, at the same time going into a dance.

The merchants of the neighboring stands, mostly older men and women who found that they just could not compete with Mainke's sales technique, became both jealous and disturbed. They got together and decided to take the action that they finally did, forcing Mother and my sisters to give up a flourishing business.

Despair followed this experience. Jobs for the girls were now difficult to come by. To keep her family from starving, Mother had to do some fancy stretching of her allowance as Goodinsky housekeeper, an extremely difficult task, because of a new wave of inflation. So, once again, Mother began to talk of going to America. This business of "going to America" now became a constant refrain. I had first heard it in Pumpian, then in Vetka, now in Gomel. The more difficult our situation became, the more Mother would begin to plan our exodus to America. This was particularly true during our last year in Gomel. Matters began to worsen for us toward the end of 1916 and the situation became desperate early in 1917.

However, when Mother began to chatter once again about going to America we found it difficult to believe that we would ever actually do so. Nevertheless, she talked about it so convincingly, and because I wanted to believe it so intensely, I refused to give up hope. Moreover, I knew from past experience that if there was a way to solve a problem, Mother would find it. She always seemed to find new strength when matters appeared to be most trying. Now we were beginning to have some serious problems and Mother had to find a new way to survive.

Revolution was in the air, though we were still months away from October, 1917. The actual word "revolution" was not bandied about in public or in private. But even I, a young child, sensed that something was stirring.

It started with inflation. Again, this was a word that I had not heard mentioned, if indeed that word was known or used at all in Gomel in 1917. What we did know and of what we were very much aware was the big downward slide in the value of the ruble, plus the astronomically high cost of food and just about everything else. At first the decline was insignificant but then the ruble started to tumble at such a fast pace that soon it became almost worthless. For one thing, currency began to change. The beautiful, long-time solid Russian imperial ruble began to disappear. Suddenly it was gone, replaced by a smaller, much less attractive, new kind of ruble. Then came still another, still smaller, and still less attractive ruble. Finally, that one was replaced by the Kerensky ruble, a brownish, square—two inches by two inches—piece of paper, of inferior quality, poorly printed, and of questionable value. People carried their cheap Kerensky rubles in flimsy brown or black cardboard satchels. Before long the currency had such little value that Mother needed a sack or box filled with it to buy a loaf of bread. Because paper was so cheap and the printing so inferior, counterfeiting in Kerensky rubles flourished. Indeed, it was difficult to tell the real thing from the ersatz ruble.

As the Kerensky ruble became less valuable, products, including bread and other foodstuffs, became scarce. This was followed by unemployment. And now and then we began to hear

about men of wealth being taken away, never to be heard from again. Why? Where were they taken? What happened to them? No one really knew but it was common to hear such remarks—quietly spoken and on the sly—as: "Gospodin So and So was taken to jail in Siberia. Gospodin So and So was shot."

An intensified gloom permeated the Goodinsky mansion. Gospodin Menuchim Goodinsky, the once meticulously groomed, bearded gentleman was now a slight, unkempt, sad figure. He was depressed, nervous, stooped. One rainy late-summer day he stopped in at the kitchen (I quickly hid under the table as he walked in) and whispered something to Mother. Mother gasped and turned pale. When he left the kitchen, I came out from under the table and asked, "What happened? What did the bearded gentleman tell you?"

"Very bad news, Chaimele, my child. Gospodin Goodinsky told me that he no longer had any money with which to buy food. I could remain in the house, if I wanted, he said. But we will have to find a way to feed ourselves."

From that moment on, things worsened with each day. Gospodin Goodinsky was gone for days on end, and no one knew his whereabouts. His son, daughter-in-law, and their little daughter came and went, sometimes disappearing for days. Oilke and Mainke lost their jobs. Mother could not pay board for Ruvke and me. We all moved into the Goodinsky mansion. Now that he was so preoccupied with his problems, Goodinsky no longer seemed to care, Mother said, about our presence in the house.

The day came when there was no longer a morsel of food in the house and Mother had no money with which to buy even a loaf of bread for her family. We were all very hungry. I began to feel faint.

"Don't worry, children," Mother said, "I will go and get some food."

She left the house in the morning and had not returned by the time evening came. It was getting dark and I began to be concerned about her.

"Where could Mother be?" I asked Oilke.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Don't worry about Mother," Mainke chimed in. "She'll never get lost. She'll be here soon. And you can be sure that she'll bring us something to eat. I don't know what kind of food or where she will get it, but she will get it."

Mainke was right. Soon Mother returned, carrying what seemed to be a large, heavy bundle over her shoulders.

"Here, my children, I have brought you food," she said and began to cry. The bundle was her apron—folded to form a sack. When she untied it, there was food for all of us, all right, but not the kind we usually had for a normal repast. It consisted of slices of bread of different colors, various shades of black and brown, some buttered, some stale and very dry, pieces of sour pickles, some cheese, and a few hunks of meat. Also, a few apples and pears.

We asked no questions but partook of what Mother had brought us. When you're hungry you will eat anything, and this was better than what I later saw other people forced to eat—scraps they picked out of garbage pails. Mother stopped crying and joined us in the feast. We ate in silence. Somehow, all of us knew how Mother had gotten the food. When I started to think about it, I could visualize her stopping at one house and then another and asking for a piece of bread "to feed my poor, starving children." I now had tears in my eyes. Her anguish became my anguish and her tears my tears. I put my hands over my eyes so that Mother and my sisters would not see that I was crying.

What Mother did on that day she had to repeat day after day for days to come. She tried to find ways of getting money to buy food. She wanted to cook a warm meal for us. Finally, she resorted to taking a plate or some other piece of china from the Goodinsky mansion, finding a buyer for her merchandise or trading her treasure for vegetables. When she bought her priceless ingredients, she cooked a dinner fit for a king. Such dinners were rare and we enjoyed them in a way we had never enjoyed food before.

Meanwhile, conditions in Gomel continued to deteriorate. By now the Germans had gone. Rumor had it that "the Bolsheviks were on the way." This sounded like terror. The Mensheviks

(members of the Social Democratic party which opposed the Bolsheviks but which proved no match for them) had come and gone. Then came the Kerensky men. They were welcome. Russia was to be democratic now. What a grand design! What hope! The Kerensky takeover of Gomel proved orderly. Then came the Kerensky rubles, which in very short order became practically worthless, which in turn changed the spirit of the people. Democracy without any sense of economic stability does not work. Inflation did the Kerensky regime in.

The Bolsheviks were on the way now. Actually, they had been on the way for a long time. They planned long and well and they maneuvered—quietly, mostly unknown to the populace. Now they were ready. When word came that the Bolsheviks would soon be arriving, the mood changed once again. Where would one go now? Where would one hide? Panic was in the air. Then it happened. The Bolsheviks arrived. The true friends of the people. The real Communists. Everybody was to be a comrade. The proletariat would reign supreme. No more class distinction. No more privilege. No more poverty. Down with the capitalists. An end to the Czarists. Cheers for the common people.

Gomel was in terror. We hid under beds. We locked the doors. We heard running and shooting and the cries of the injured and the dying. We did not dare leave our shelter behind locked doors. Then it was quiet and it remained this way for a few days.

Our quiet was broken by the inevitable knocking at the door. Early one morning, several young soldiers, dressed in long khaki coats with red arm bands and rifles over their shoulders, entered the house as Mother opened the door. As on previous occasions, she tried to resist. She used the "Amerikanski" approach and all the other elements of her game plan. By now she was an experienced resister. But none of her methods worked this time. The young Bolsheviks were not impressed. And they knew how to gain entrance. When Mother shouted: "We are Amerikanski. Go away. Leave us alone," they shouted back: "Comrades, do not be afraid. We are your friends. We are the

friends of the people. So, please, open the door, madam comrade. Open the door to the army of the people. We are here to help you."

It was then that Mother went to the door, opened it, and said welcome in Russian to the young and enthusiastic revolutionists. Two of the soldiers took positions while the others went looking in each room. We remained frozen and in silence. Soon, the two soldiers who made the search came into the hall, with rifles pointing at Gospodin Goodinsky, who now looked terribly old, worn, and unkempt. We had not known that he was in the house. The soldiers had discovered several large boxes and an assortment of smaller packages, which we learned later consisted of jewelry, gold coins, and some priceless antiques. Gospodin Goodinsky's son, daughter-in-law, and their little girl were obviously not in the house. The soldiers left, taking with them Gospodin Goodinsky and his valuable cache, and saying, "Good-bye, comrades, do not be afraid. We are only after the capitalists and their hidden possessions, which now belong to the people."

We never heard from or saw the bearded gentleman again. Several days later we learned that he had been shot, along with hundreds of other "capitalists" the soldiers had rounded up in Gomel.

When things quieted down, we left the house one morning and walked to the center of the town. Soldiers with fixed bayonets were standing guard at what looked like mass graves. The "capitalists" and other "enemies of the people" found in Gomel had been summarily tried, shot, and buried en masse in the city's square. Red flags were flying over public buildings and from other structures, including some private homes. There was a new excitement in the air. We were there when the famous Russian revolution took place in October 1917. But I really had no idea of what it meant or what would follow.

A few days later, several soldiers and one civilian officer came to the one-time elegant Goodinsky mansion, where we were now the only occupants. The civilian officer, a big,

tough-looking man with a handlebar mustache, talked to Mother in quick, clipped Russian.

"Madam comrade," he began. "The Red Peoples' Army needs this big house. But you need not worry, we will find accommodations for you and your family. Plan to be moved in forty-eight hours. Today is Monday. Wednesday morning we will be here to transfer you to your new home. I hope you will understand and bear with us, madam comrade. The Peoples' Army is your friend. Good-bye."

Mother called a meeting of the family, all except for Pashke, our married sister, who was in Berdichev. Oilke and Mainke (now back with us) sat in chairs facing Mother. I was at Mother's right, Ruvke on the floor near her.

"Children, what shall we do?"

"Why are you so worried, Mother?" Mainke started the meeting going. "On Wednesday we will be given a new home. It might be satisfactory, probably not as big as this house, but who needs a house as big as this?"

"I don't like the way that man talked to us. I know that where we will be taken Wednesday will not be for us. I am afraid of what will happen to us if we remain in Gomel."

"Then what can we do, Mother?" I asked.

"We still have a choice," Mother said, "Go back to Vetka to find out what my sisters are doing and get help from them, or go to Schlutzk."

"Why Schlutzk?" Mainke asked.

"Schlutzk is where Father's mother lives. She has her own house and she has a business. She ought to be happy to see her grandchildren."

"But Mother, supposing she will not be too happy to see us? What will we do then?" Mainke asked.

"She will be happy to see us. Just leave it to me, and if she is not so pleased to welcome her grandchildren, we will go to America."

"Now, Mother, how will you go to America? You have no money; we have no passports. Father has not written to us in

several years. He does not want us in America," Mainke said.

"There is always a way, and, with God's help I will find the way. Anyway, we cannot remain here. What will we live on? I have no job. We have practically no money left. We must leave Gomel. Going to Schlutzk is a better idea than returning to Vetka."

"I am not going, Mother," Oilke said, participating in the conversation for the first time.

"What do you mean you are not going with us? What will you do here in Gomel alone?"

"I will not be alone."

"What do you mean you will not be alone? Who will you be with?"

"I have a friend, a boyfriend. He is a Comrade."

"A Bolshevik?" Mother asked, in disbelief.

"Yes, a Bolshevik, a Communist, a fine young man. We're in love. We will get married."

"Isn't that wonderful!" Mainke screamed, running over to Oilke, hugging and kissing her. "Why did you keep it a secret? Why didn't you tell us about your boyfriend? Why didn't you bring him over to meet us? How come I didn't know?"

"I couldn't tell you. He asked me to keep our relationship a secret. His own mother and father don't know about our friendship or that he is a Bolshevik. But now it is time to tell."

"So, we are going to have a wedding! But we have no money to make a wedding for you, Oilke. What can I do?" Mother pleaded with her.

"Don't worry, Mother. We don't need any money. We will just go to a rabbi's house and he will marry us, for nothing. We will also have a civil ceremony. We haven't set a date. In all probability we will get married in a few months."

"What is that? What is this civil ceremony?"

"This is the way the Communists, the Bolsheviks, will marry from now on. They will be married by a civil servant, a civil marriage performer. That is what Yakov wanted but I told him that I preferred a rabbi to marry us—in our Orthodox

tradition and for the sake of my parents, especially my mother, who is a very pious woman. Yakov said he understood and agreed, providing we also have a civil ceremony."

That was that. Oilke would not discuss it any further. Her romance was her own affair. The most beautiful of the girls, but very much of a private person, was now to be a bride. She had kept her secret well. None of us had any communication with her. But she found her man or her man had found her. In love it doesn't matter which way it is.

Mother began to make plans for the rest of us to go to Schlutzk.

"It will take a few days or a week to obtain the needed money for the trip and then to buy train tickets or locate a friendly driver with a wagon and horse to take us there," Mother explained.

In the meantime, we were to stay in the big house and await the transfer to our new quarters on Wednesday. Moving on a Wednesday worried Mother. She would have preferred that we be relocated on Tuesday, a more auspicious day, but you learned quickly not to ask the Bolsheviks for such favors.

Early Wednesday morning, a large wagon with two horses stopped before our house. Out came the driver and a man dressed in a long khaki coat with a red band on his left arm. The latter knocked at the door, which Mother now opened quickly.

"I am a member of the citizens' brigade, madam comrade. We are here to move you and your family to your new quarters. Are you packed and ready?"

When we arrived at our new home at the other side of town, Mother took one look at what was in front of us and gaped. Mainke, Ruvke, and I shared her dismay. What I saw was a wooden shambles of a house, with shattered windows and a big hole in the roof. A great deal of trash was strewn around the house. I had no idea that there was anything this bad in Gomel, this beautiful city of great homes and wide boulevards.

As bad as the outside of the broken-down house looked,

the situation inside was even worse. Broken furniture, litter of all kinds, and dirt, probably blown in through the broken windows—it was a total mess. Even more disheartening was the realization that our new home, provided for us by our "comrades," the new friends of the people, consisted of just one small, dark room in this house. A broken bed, a few nondescript chairs, and a run-down sofa with a torn cover comprised the furniture. In the corner to the left I saw a dirty-looking stove and several dishes on open shelves. This was it. It was not the kind of "residence" we had expected for the four of us when the "Comrade" said: "Don't worry, we will provide you with a new home, a place in which to live that you will find comfortable." Some home, some comfort. Seeing the mess and the dirt, I could have cried.

Quickly grasping our new, unfortunate circumstances and observing our unhappy faces, Mother tried to be reassuring.

"Coming here from the Goodinsky mansion, nothing could possibly please us. Nothing could compare with what we were fortunate to have for a home until now. This is awful, but we will have to make the most of what we have, especially since we will not remain here for long."

"But Mother, this is impossible. How can we stay here—the four of us?" I asked.

"I just explained, Chaimele. We won't be here for long. In a few days, in a week at the most, we will be on our way to Schlutzk."

Mother was reassuring, but from her expression I surmised that she herself had great difficulty believing what she was saying. Of course, Mother meant well but the fact is that we did not leave for Schlutzk in a few days. Or even a week.

And so we had no choice but to settle down in the shabby, broken-down house we shared with five other families. Some, in fact, had even larger broods than ours, including children of all ages, with each family living in one room. As we tried to adjust to our new and undesirable, unhealthy environment, things grew worse rather than better. So bad did condi-

tions become that even Mother had not foreseen what kind of disaster—a virtual living hell—faced us now. Typhus now spread very quickly, not only in Gomel but throughout Russia. I was the first of our family to become ill. Many others in the house were sick too. I had a high fever, my stomach hurt, I vomited endlessly. Mother hovered over me constantly. Then Mainke took sick, then Ruvke. Somehow, Mother continued to stay well. The typhus deaths in Gomel soon skyrocketed. Word of the death of friends and acquaintances came to us daily. With so many people sick, the doctor visited our house only once. Mother took over the job of nursing all of us, especially me, her weak child. I seemed to have had the worst case of typhus of anyone.

After weeks of sickness, all of us finally recovered. But along with the debilitating typhus had come lice. Living in one room made it difficult to have any semblance of sanitation. There was no toilet in the house, only an outhouse. Being sick, we would not go out in the street. This meant urinating and defecating in our room, often in a pan in bed. Though the smell seemed intolerable at first, eventually we got used to it. Washing and bathing proved almost an impossibility. Mother did try to wash us at first. Then a water shortage developed and soap became unobtainable. So, the lice came and took over. They crept into the crevices of our underwear. We tried to kill them, crushing them with the backs of our fingernails. Squash! Crunch! Blood poured out of the little creatures. Our blood which they had sucked. For a while, Mainke, Ruvke, and I played a game of killing the lice, counting who could kill more in a minute. Then there were just too many to kill and the game ceased to be much fun. We got used to the itching although we still continued to scratch.

The lice were soon joined by bedbugs. Somehow, they learned to live with each other. The bedbugs liked to live in the crevices of the bed and bedding. The lice preferred the crevices of underwear since it was closer to the bodies whose blood they sucked for pleasure and sustenance.

Three long months (with many weeks of living close to starvation)—not a few days or "at the most a week," after we had moved into our "new home"—Mother came running into our room with great excitement. She closed the door and then whispered, "Children, tomorrow we are leaving for Schlutzk. I have finally found a man who owns a wagon and a horse who is willing to take us there."

"Mama, Mama, how did you do it?" Ruvke asked. Mainke and I just looked at her.

"Children, don't ask. It is a long story. God is with us. Now, let us begin to pack and get ready. The wagon is coming early tomorrow morning at dawn."

Packing was a chore that did not take long. There was little to pack. We went to bed early but none of us could sleep. I had no idea what Schlutzk would be like. But it would be a new city, a new experience, with new interest. Most important of all, we would finally get out of this hell hole. Living in this terrible place, in this crowded, smelly, dark room made me forget that we were still in Gomel, the beautiful city. So, the journey to Schlutzk now presented a new opportunity, especially since Mother kept saying, "From Schlutzk we will find a way to go to America."

While Mother hardly ever mentioned Schlutzk, this city did have special meaning for our family. Father was born in Schlutzk, as were his two other brothers and two sisters. This was the original home base of my father's family. For reasons never explained, the Gussows of Schlutzk were known as the Gimpelach. That was their nickname.

As mentioned earlier, my paternal grandfather Pesach (or Peter), my father's father, died at an early age—in his mid-thirties—and since his widow, Grandmother Yente, could not support her young brood, the boys, with the exception of Shleme, the oldest, were shipped off to Kharkov where their grandfather, Chaim, had the prosperous tailoring establishment.

As the oldest son, Shleme could have been exempt from military service. However, because he was the only one who

had an education, the only one to have been a gymnasium (high school) student, which was then rare for a Jewish boy, he felt he would do better in the Czarist army than his younger brother, Simche. He was right since he did do well in the army. While a Jew could not become a commissioned officer, Shleme reached the zenith of noncommissioned status and because of his education and knowledge of Russian and several other languages, he was made an adjutant on the general's staff. It proved to be one of the great experiences of his life and he talked about it often.

It was Shleme who was the first of his family to journey to America, which he did shortly after his Army service. When he established himself in New York, he was successful in bringing his brothers and sisters to the United States. But Grandmother Yente, who later married for the second time, remained in Schlutzk. She had no particular desire to leave her birthplace. Nor did her second husband. He was a Hebrew teacher and scholar and she ran a shoe store.

SEVENTEEN

IT WAS a sunny, cold February morning when Mother awoke us, urging us to dress and quickly collect our meager belongings for the trip to Schlutzk.

Although Oilke was not planning to make the trip with us, she got up anyway and helped us get ready. Before the day was over she was going to move to the home of her boyfriend and his family. The marriage date had not been set but plans were being formulated for the ceremony to take place within a few weeks.

Mainke dressed quickly and then began to help Mother, Ruvke, and me. Within the hour we were ready with our bundles. It was only a few minutes later that the driver came for us.

Schlutzk, located in the state of Minsk, is about one hundred and fifty miles south of Gomel, but in the winter of 1918 the roads were so bad and the snow so deep that it took almost three days to complete the journey in an open wagon, with several stops along the way.

Soon after our wagon-sleigh left Gomel, with all of us bundled up and huddling together to keep warm, we entered the countryside. The country was beautiful on this bright, cold morning. It seemed white all over, with the early-morning sun playing a game with the snow-covered, leafless trees, changing colors and creating shadows. Our wagon-sleigh moved smoothly behind the two horses, which went clop, clop, occasionally sliding on particularly smooth surfaces. Because it was extremely windy and the road was very icy and slippery in spots, the driver tried hard to keep his horses in check, to slow their pace.

For most of the first day we passed farms and small villages. At last we reached Rechitse, a town where we stayed for the night.

It was dark when we arrived and it was dawn when we left. We stayed in a house belonging to people our driver knew. The four of us slept on the floor of a hallway.

When we awoke early next morning, the short, fat, cheerful woman of the house made hot tea for us. The driver joined us, hurrying us along, wanting to make an early start.

Now the drive seemed more interesting. It was not quite as cold as on the previous day and sometimes as we passed through a forest of cypress or fir trees, the white snow and ice seemed to have sculptured the tall evergreens on either side of the road.

On the second night we stayed with a family in Babruysk, an important trading center. It was a large city, almost as big as Gomel but neither as pretty nor as interesting.

Our stay there, as well as the rest of the journey, was uneventful. My mind was only on Schlutzk. What kind of city was it? Would it prove as pretty as Gomel? Was it large or was it no bigger than Vetka? And most important, what kind of reception would we get from Grandma Yente?

It was already beginning to get dark and I was lost in such thoughts when the driver announced, "Here we are. This is Schlutzk." My heart began to pound with anticipation. The driver stopped at a house to ask directions to Grandma Yente's. Soon we found our way. She lived on a very narrow, curving street without sidewalks.

When we arrived the street was deserted but minutes after our sleigh-wagon stopped in front of Grandma Yente's domicile, people began to gather around us. The house was a single-story, red-brick structure, with a store in front. A thin, pale little old woman, wearing a heavy quilted jacket over a black dress, opened the door when Mother and the driver knocked on it several times.

"What do you want? Who are you?" These were the first words I heard spoken by this scared little woman.

"I am Chaia Sonia, Simche's wife, and these are your grandchildren—Chaimele, Ruvkele, and Mainke."

"You are who?" the little old woman asked again.

Mother repeated the announcement as if she had rehearsed it, which she must have done as we traveled.

The little old lady just stood there, gaping at us. "You are Simche's family? What are you doing here in Schlutzk? I thought you were in Lithuania—some little town in Kovner Guberne. That is the last I heard from Simche. Where is Simche? Where is my son? He has never written to me. You are his family?"

"May we come in and tell you? We have had a long journey and we are cold and tired. The little boys are frozen, they are so cold . . . "

"Come in, come in," Grandma Yente finally said as she now opened the door fully. From her expression I could see that she was not pleased to see us. Mother was the first to enter, then she retreated several steps to make sure that we were following her.

"Come in. Take off your jackets and coats. Sit down and let me make some hot tea." While we were busy taking off several layers of outerwear, Grandma Yente left the room. She returned in a few minutes saying, "I have put on the kettle. You seem so cold. Have you traveled long? From far?"

"We have been traveling for almost three days—from Gomel."

"Gomel? What were you doing there?"

Mother told her—in detail.

"We heard rumors but we did not really know. You were driven out of your home in Lithuania? And where did they send you?"

Mother described our exodus from Pumpian in her best dramatic style. Then she told the story of how we got to Gomel, to Vetka, and then back again to Gomel—and finally why and how we had come there to Schlutzk.

"What could I do? Where could I take my little children? It was impossible to remain in Gomel. It was better to live in the street than in that hovel they gave us. With all that smell, all that sickness. What could I do? I went to the synagogue and

prayed and prayed and asked God to help us. God must have heard my prayers because right there in the synagogue a thought came to me: Why not go to America to join Simche?"

"Do you know where Simche is now?"

"I know—in New York, the biggest city in America."

"Does Simche write to you? Is he sending you money?"

"Simche, my good husband, had been writing me every week and sending me money at least once a month, but the letters and the money have stopped coming because of the war and the revolution. Soon, he will write us again, and he will send us money and visas so we can join him in America.

"So, you see, my dear mother-in-law," Mother continued, we are on our way to America. We are on our way to Warsaw in Poland, where Simche will send us the money and the required papers for our trip to America. And since Schlutzk is on the road to Warsaw, we thought it would be a good idea to stop and visit with you. After all, how could I leave Russia without at least meeting my mother-in-law? I know that you would be pleased to spend a few days with your grandchildren, your son Simche's children, your own flesh and blood."

"So, where will you stay in Schlutzk? And how long do you plan to be here?"

"Oh, tonight I hope you can put us up in your house. Tomorrow I will find lodgings for us. I have some money. And just as soon as I can arrange for our trip to Warsaw, we will leave."

That day did not come. Meanwhile, we began to make an adjustment to what became a prolonged stay in Schlutzk—in the cramped quarters of Grandma Yente's small house. I went to the local Hebrew school, where I continued my studies of the Talmud. I made new friends, with whom I played "buttons," pitching buttons in a hole, instead of marbles. Soon, I had a good collection of buttons. Mother also arranged with a teacher to give me lessons in German, Polish, history, and some other subjects. She did this on a barter basis, spending several hours a day cleaning the teacher's house in return for the latter's two hours of teaching. The teacher was apparently impressed with her new student. Before

long she began to talk about the possibility of entering me in the gymnasium.

Soon the war came to Schlutzk. This time it came with the Polish army. When we arrived in Schlutzk the city was in a governmental limbo. The Germans had been there, several months before we came, but they left almost immediately, marching on to the Russian hinterland. Schlutzk was near the old Polish border. During this period of World War I, the Czarist army was in disarray. While the Bolsheviks were moving to take advantage of this situation, they centralized their occupation in an area not far from Petrograd (formerly Leningrad) and Moscow. At the same time they decided to stay out of the war, letting the Czarist soldiers retreat from the onslaught of the German imperial army. It in turn was being defeated by the Western allies, of which the Polish army was now an "independent" part.

The Polish soldiers who occupied Schlutzk were different from the German brigades we had known in Vetka and Gomel, and even more different from the Russian Bolsheviks. The Polish soldiers who invaded Schlutzk were young, eager, brash. They marched into Schlutzk with bravura. They were dressed in snappy tan uniforms and tripointed caps. They moved at a fast clip, cheering and singing to the rhythm of a large brass band. We watched them from a window of Grandma Yente's house.

But no sooner did they occupy their various positions in the city than they began to tyrranize over the populace, the Gentile Russians as well as the Jews—especially the Jews. This was my first experience with overt anti-Semitism.

"*Sczid*, dirty *Sczid*," they called my grandmother, my mother, and all other Jews with whom they came in contact. "*Psa crev*" (the blood of a dog) was their favorite expletive, the worst in the Polish language. Mother locked Mainke in the smelly bedroom of Grandmother Yente's bedridden second husband to keep her from being molested by the overzealous young Polish soldiers. A good part of the time, my sister hid under the sick old man's bed. A squad of Polish soldiers tried to take over Grandmother's house but were soon discouraged by the sickening smell emanating from

the bedroom of my step-grandfather, who had suffered a new stroke and was now sicker than when we first arrived. Even more, the youthful Polish soldiers were disheartened by the smallness and obvious overcrowding of the tiny house.

In the weeks that followed, we experienced the nearest thing I've ever seen to a pogrom. A division of Polish soldiers got drunk and ran amuck. The story goes that one drunken soldier shouted, "Let's kill the Jews." The rest responded by running from house to house in the Jewish ghetto, beating up every Jew they encountered. Even before they reached our block, we had already heard screaming and wailing. Mother took over. She locked the house and placed tables and chairs near the door. Mainke climbed under the old man's bed. Mother hid Ruvke and me in the closet. With Grandma Yente at her side, Mother stood at the barricaded door with a broom in her hand. Soon there was banging at the door. Mother screamed as loud as she could: "We are Americans . . . Amerikanski . . . Leave us alone."

The banging continued for a moment or two. Now louder and clearer than ever, Mother repeated: "Don't come near us. We are Amerikanski." Soon it was quiet. But we remained locked in the house all that day and night, with Mother, broom in hand, keeping vigil at the door until early the next morning.

The Polish soldiers remained in Schlutzk for only a short time. In a few weeks, the Bolsheviks entered the town. A battle raged but it was not much of a fight. The Russians outnumbered the small detachment of Poles. Only a few of the Polish soldiers were killed, and none of the Bolsheviks. The young Polish soldiers, now minus their bravura, retreated, running as fast as they could toward the Polish border.

As the weeks and soon months passed, Grandma Yente became extremely impatient with Mother. The burden of caring for her bedridden husband, managing her shoe store, and at the same time supporting her daughter-in-law and three grandchildren was more than she could handle. Or was willing to cope with. The small house was unbelievably overcrowded, with the suffocating smell of illness throughout the house.

"Chaia Sonia this is the end," she said to Mother one morning when she seemed more distressed than ever. "When you first came here, you said that you would find lodging for yourself and your family, that you would remain here only a day or two. It has been months now, and I cannot take care of you and your children any longer. I hardly make enough to support my bedridden husband and myself. Business is very bad now and it is getting worse each day. Besides, this house is so small."

"I have been trying to find lodgings. We will move soon," Mother said, a refrain she had repeated many times.

"This is the end, Chaia Sonia. I do not believe that you have been trying to find other lodging. You must leave my little house by tomorrow or I will have no choice but to call the police to get you out."

It was obvious to Mother that Grandma Yente meant what she said, that she was now desperate and determined to get us out. Mother no longer had a choice but to deal with her new crisis.

What did Mother do? Since she had not really looked for another lodging she had found none. Besides, she had no money left. But since Mother always found a way to cope with almost any critical situation, she was able to resolve this particular problem, too. And this is the way she accomplished it.

Mother found a situation for Mainke as a house servant. This wasn't easy. She had to inquire among all her newly acquired friends and acquaintances. For herself, she located a job as a housekeeper in an inn, a decrepit run-down place, but one of the few hostelries left in Schlutzk. While the Bolsheviks, as part of the new Communist regime, moved quickly to take over and communize industry and commerce, they started with major industries, leaving the smaller private enterprises to deal with later. And since they launched their program in the big cities in the center of Russia, government takeover and communization did not take place in Schlutzk until much later.

There remained one big question. What to do with Ruvke and me?

"Woman, if you want the job, you will have to find a place

for your boys elsewhere. They cannot stay here." This was the final word from the surly owner of the inn. Mother had heard that before. But this time she knew that he meant what he said. There would be no further discussion on the subject.

As much as she hated the idea, in her new desperation Mother finally decided that her boys, including her beloved and delicate child, Chaimele, would have to be placed in the local orphanage. Temporarily.

"For only a short time, my darlings, for a very short time," she said tearfully.

So, with Ruvke and me at her side, Mother marched into the Jewish orphanage and asked to see the director. After more than an hour on a hard bench in a bleak, dark room, we were greeted by a graying, paunchy, middle-aged man who invited us into his office. When Mother explained her dire situation, he looked us over carefully and said, "I wish I could help you, but our institution is already overcrowded. With the problems brought about by the war and the great movement of people, including the separation of families, we have more children than facilities and personnel to care for them. I'd like to help you, madam, but I don't know how. We just don't have the room. I am very sorry."

"My dear and kind director, I understand what you say, but what can I do? Should I leave my children in the street? Should I drown them in the river?" She began to cry, with the tears pouring down her face and her lamentations reaching a most plaintive crescendo.

"Now, my dear woman, crying and carrying on this way will not solve the problem, will not make more room in this already terribly overcrowded building. Let me carefully examine every nook and corner, make some inquiries, and then determine what we can do. Let me assure you that we want to help you."

Mother began to kiss the director's hands, saying, "I do understand. You are a good and kind man but you must help me to take care of my children—only for a short time, a week or two, at the most a month—for soon we will be on the way to America."

"Now, madam, during the next twenty-four hours we will

try to find a way to help you. So, please return tomorrow at the same time."

When we returned to Grandma Yente's house, Mother told her that we would be moving out tomorrow. She explained what arrangements she was able to make for herself and for Mainke, and then she said, with tears in her eyes, "Mother-in-law, do you know what I have to do with my two little boys? I have to place them in an orphanage, and they are not orphans. And even to do this was not easy. The orphanage is overcrowded."

Grandmother Yente did not answer. She looked at Mother with an air of disbelief and walked away.

When we returned to the orphanage the next day, the director was more cheerful and said, "Madam, I have some good news, not the best of news, but at least we have found a solution. We are going to make room for your little boy. I do not know how we are going to do it but somehow we will have to manage. But your bigger lad will be placed in the Christian orphanage. I have talked with the director of that home, a very fine woman, and she agreed to take him."

Mother began to scream. "Place mine Chaimele, my bright, wonderful son, a student of the Talmud, in a Christian orphanage? Is that what you are saying? No, my Chaimele will not go to a Christian orphanage. I'd rather leave him in the street."

"Now, now, you must calm yourself. Before calling the Christian orphanage, I discussed the situation with our rabbi, the old and learned Rev Maishe Ben Avrom Gediliah, and he said that God, the holy one, will forgive and understand. He quoted from parts of the Torah to show that to do this in an emergency is entirely permissible."

"No, my dear director, I will not permit my Chaimele to become converted. Chaimele will not eat pork. He will not live in a house with the Cross."

"Madam, you must let me explain. Chaimele will not have to be converted, and he will not have to eat ham or pork. The director of the Christian orphanage is an understanding woman. She said that she and her associates would take good care of your

boy and she explained that they serve varieties of foods—chicken, fish, beef, vegetables, and dairy dishes. Chaimele will not have to eat from the pig."

"But he will have to eat *trayf* (not kosher) foods."

"Trayf, shmayf," the director said. "I explained to you, madam, that our rabbi said that it would be permissible. If you wish you may speak to the learned rabbi yourself. I will call him in. And let me say one more thing; the Christian orphanage is in better shape than our institution. It is not too crowded. It is clean, the rooms are much better, and their facilities are much superior to ours."

After being reassured by the old rabbi, Mother, finally, but still reluctantly, accepted the idea of placing me in the Christian shelter.

"Chaimele," she said to me, with tears in her eyes, "the good rabbi says that it is permissible in an emergency and I believe him. It breaks my heart to do this but I have no choice. Please understand, Chaimele, my child. I promise you that you will not be in the Christian home very long. Soon we will be going to America, and in the meantime, I will try to convince the owner of the inn to change his mind, to let me have you stay with me. And God, the kind and holy God, who has been with us in all our troubles, will forgive us."

And so sadly I agreed with Mother that "there is no choice" and that God would forgive us. Yet going to live in the Christian orphanage proved to be an exceptionally traumatic experience for me, a Jewish lad of nine, coming from a highly religious Orthodox family. Just thinking about it was devastating. Beyond that, it was extremely difficult for me to comprehend fully why Mother would put me in a Christian orphanage. But I tried very hard to accept the inevitable.

It was a critical moment in my life, as it was for my mother. Here I was, a Jewish child, steeped in the Orthodox tradition, a student of the Torah, facing the prospect of living in a Catholic institution, being the only Jewish boy in this strange environment. I began to have bizarre and eerie thoughts that made me terribly

fearful. At the same time, I tried not to show my deep anxiety to Mother who was herself burdened with concern for me.

EIGHTEEN

THE CATHOLIC orphanage was not far from Grandma Yente's little house—no more than a mile or two—but it might as well have been in another city. That is how different the place was from the house in the Jewish ghetto.

It was different too from the Jewish orphanage where we left Ruvke, who was not happy about being separated from us. The Catholic orphanage was much bigger; the grounds were more sprawling. It was also cleaner and it was very quiet.

Mother and I were greeted at the big iron gate of the orphanage by a nun. She was dressed in the usual long black gown worn by nuns, and a big white cap, which covered her head and a good part of her face. Only her eyes, cheeks, and mouth were visible. She had big, blue, very expressive eyes and nice lips. She smiled as she greeted us. Then she said good-bye to Mother and as she opened the gate she indicated for me to join her inside.

A painful feeling overcame me as I parted from Mother. I had an impulse to cry and a great urge to scream and refuse to leave her. But I was embarrassed to make a scene and since I was a quiet and gentle boy, I acted in kind and merely waved good-bye to Mother. Then docilely taking the hand offered me by the nun, I walked inside the gate, slowly and without a sound. When the gate closed I felt a pang in my heart.

The nun spoke to me in Russian, which I still did not know sufficiently well to express myself fully.

The nun led me through a walkway, with shrubbery and flowers on each side, and into a long, dark hall of the dark brown orphanage building. As the nun directed me through the hall, we passed a number of rooms, all of them open. I noticed a Cross in

each one. We stopped about halfway down the hall in front of a room on the left.

"This is your room," she said softly, smiling. As we entered, once again that impulse to run away overtook me. Instead, I thought of Mother crying and the old rabbi saying that God would forgive her, and I walked inside.

"You will share this nice, comfortable room with Alexander, a fine young man about your age. Oh, Alexander, Alex," she called. No one answered. "Alexander must be in the dining room. He is helping to set the tables this week. Each of our boys and girls is assigned different chores to do each week. I'll go and fetch him. Make yourself comfortable."

I looked around the room. It was small, very small, but it was immaculately clean and the sun came through the window, giving it a pleasant feeling. The room had two beds, a table, and two chairs near the window at the foot of the beds. Then I saw a wood carving of Jesus on the Cross on the wall over the table. I was stunned to see this large wooden carving. A fear of Jesus on the Cross overtook me and the impulse to run away returned but before I knew it, the nun had come back into the room with a friendly looking blond lad, a little taller than I was.

"Chaim, meet Alexander, your roommate. Alex meet Chaim. He is a fine Jewish lad who came originally from a little village in Lithuania but who had been living in Schlutzk in his grandmother's house."

"Hello, Chaim," he said. It sounded more like Kaiim, the way he pronounced it. "I am glad to meet you."

"Hello, Alexander."

"Chaim says he does not speak Russian too well. I hope you will help him, Alexander."

"What languages do you know best, Chaim?"

"Yiddish," I said. "I took lessons in Russian in Vetka and Gomel, but not for long."

"Say, you don't speak Russian badly at all. We'll do well together. We'll be friends. Is that agreeable with you?"

"Yes."

"That is a very nice way to start, Alexander. Have Chaim meet some of the other boys."

As the nun began to leave the room, she said to me, "Before you get settled in your room, you will be examined by the doctor, then you will take a bath, and you will be given your clothing, towels, and other things you will need. Alexander, show Chaim where he needs to go. Good-bye, Chaim. If you have any questions, just come and see me."

"Let's go, Chaim, I'll show you."

Alexander took me for a tour of the orphanage. We took a peek into various rooms and he introduced me to several boys who occupied them. Then a quick look into the chapel (with many Crosses), a big carving of Jesus, images of saints, and numerous flickering candles. Upstairs, downstairs, with me following Alexander, who obviously was familiar with every nook and corner of the three-story, bleak but clean building. I followed him hesitantly, although Alexander tried to be friendly, laughing and smiling.

He seemed to enjoy introducing me to other boys, doing it with gusto, always with a smile. "Eh, Paul, meet Chaim, my new roommate. He's Jewish." "Leonid, look who is with me. A new boy. He'll be in my room. I'll tell you more later."

We soon reached a supply room. After Alexander explained who I was, the woman behind the counter gave me a towel, soap, and a white gown.

The next stop was the room where I was to get washed and scrubbed. How strange! I had never been in a place like this before. Until then, taking a bath meant being washed by Mother in a big porcelain pan.

The room to which Alexander now led me was large, hot, steamy, and wet. And the sound of voices was strange, gurgling. This was the steam room. On slabs, resembling brick ovens of the kind we had in our home in Pumpian, were several boys. A man walked around with a brush and broom in his hands. Occasionally I heard a splash of water and someone would shout, "It's cold, too cold, oh, oh . . . "

"I will leave you here, Chaim," Alexander told me. "Get

undressed in that little room, and then Yaphim, the bathhouse attendant will take care of you. So long, Chaim, see you later."

Before I undressed, I hesitated. How could I walk into the bathhouse undressed? Never before had I undressed in public. And now I must do so in this strange place. I felt terribly scared and again I thought of running away—to Mother—to tell her that I just could not undress and walk naked in the bathhouse, with the strange little boys looking at me and the husky attendant doing to me whatever it was that he was to do.

Even as these thoughts came to the surface, I walked into the little room and undressed. No one paid any attention to me. When I was completely naked I stood there not knowing what came next. After a minute or two, Yaphim, the attendant, came over and said, "Come with me, young fellow." He led me to a slab. "Sit down and let the steam soak into your skin ...all over," he instructed. I sat down on the slab, which was quite warm. It felt almost too hot to sit down at first, but after a while it felt comfortable enough to sit on. The place was filled with steam so thick it was almost like a fog. My face grew wet. Then the steam enveloped my whole body. After a while sitting on the warm, wet stone slab felt rather pleasant. If this was a bath, it was quite different from the baths I had until then. I was used to the big porcelain pan filled with lukewarm water that had been heated in a pail on the oven. Mother did all that. All I had to do was step into the pan. Mother would then soap me and wash me. During the past year or so, I had begun to feel a little uncomfortable at Mother's touching my body. But I was bathed this way only once a week—on Friday nights, to be clean for the Sabbath.

Yaphim came back and asked, "How are you doing, young man? Are you enjoying your bath?"

"Yes," I said. I was enjoying it.

"Now, let me really clean you," Yaphim said as he began to scrub me with leaves at the end of a stick, with soap, and finally with the broom. It hurt at first and then my body tingled.

"Now, young man, get off the slab and stand there."

Before I knew what was happening, I felt cold water over my

head and the rest of my body as Yaphim poured a pail of cold water over me. I could hardly catch my breath. But once it was over, I felt invigorated. He handed me my towel and told me to dry myself.

Yaphim then directed me to put on the white gown, adding that he would show me where to go for my medical examination. We walked through the long, dark hallway to the very opposite end of the building, then up a set of stairs and into a white, sunlit room.

"Wait here, the doctor will soon be here," Yaphim said as he left.

I looked around. I saw a white table, several chairs, and an assortment of instruments in a glass-windowed, tall white chiffonier.

It would be good to be a doctor, a healer of sick people, I thought. But one had to do so much studying. It must be worth it though. Doctors knew so much and they helped people recover from all kinds of illnesses.

A tall, thin man with a black and gray beard and handlebar mustache, wearing a long white coat, walked into the room. He looked at me and said, "Who are you? Oh, yes, you are the Lithuanian boy, the new lad who has just come here. Let me help you." He lifted me up onto the white table.

He took a pad of white paper and a pencil from his pocket and began to write. "Your name?"

"Chaim Gussow."

"Do you have a middle name?"

"I have two—Dovid Yankel."

"So, your full name is Chaim Dovid Yankel Gussow. That sounds nice. Like a poem; it seems to rhyme. How old are you?"

"Ten. Ten and a half really."

"When was your birthday?"

"Two weeks before Chanukah."

"What is Chanukah?"

"That is a Jewish holiday."

"Do you know the exact date of your birth?"

"Two weeks before Chanukah ten years ago. That is all I know."

"What time of the year is Chanukah?"

"In the month of December, sometimes in November. It is the beginning of winter. It is cold, sometimes very cold."

"December, or November?"

"The Hebrew calendar is different. Two weeks before Chanukah is . . . "

"We'll make it December 7, since the year of your birth is 1907. That will be easy to remember. Will that suit you?"

"I think so."

"Were you ever ill?"

"Oh, yes, many times."

"Many times? Do you remember the kinds of illnesses?"

"Yes, some. Measles, typhoid, typhus, scarlet fever."

The doctor looked at me with a surprised expression.

"You had all those sicknesses?" he asked.

"Yes, and others, too." I do not recall whether I was boasting or felt embarrassed to tell him of my many illnesses, but I thought that he should know.

After a few more questions such as how many brothers and sisters I had, their approximate ages, what did my father do, were my grandparents alive, what were my favorite foods, what education I had until then, the doctor took a stethoscope from his pocket, warmed it with his hands, and then began to examine me. When he was finished, he patted me on my back, told me to get dressed, and then said, "Young man, you are in excellent health. Despite your many illnesses, you are in fine physical shape now and you will probably grow up to be a healthy, sturdy man."

After dressing, I went looking for Alexander. I found him in the yard, playing ball with several boys. I stood and watched. Soon, Alexander saw me, stopped playing ball, and called me over. He introduced me to the other boys and asked me to join them in their play. They were throwing a big rubber ball from one to the other. I had never played this kind of game before. I told Alexander that I would watch and that after I understood what they were doing, I would join them. I leaned against a fence and watched the boys throwing the ball, running, and shouting. They

seemed very good at it and I felt that I could never learn to play this game that well.

Before dinner in the large dining room, a nun led the orphanage in prayer. I sat quietly. I had never heard the prayer before—it was grace—but even if I had, I could not join them because it would have been sinful for a Jewish boy to say a Christian prayer. Instead, silently, I tried to whisper the Hebrew prayer that is said before mealtime. Except for references to Jesus and the Holy Ghost, the Christian prayer of grace is almost identical to the Jewish prayer intoned before mealtime. Once I became aware of this, I did not find it out of place to say my prayer in Hebrew while the rest of the orphanage said grace.

For dinner we had cabbage soup and ham. I was hungry and ate the soup but I did not eat the ham since the meat of the swine was forbidden to Jews. Fortunately, ham was served only twice a week and I was able to manage. When ham was the main course at dinner, I ate more bread with the soup and in that way did not go hungry. While I realized that none of the food in the orphanage was kosher, I thought of the old rabbi's admonitions and felt that God would understand. But I just could not get myself to taste ham.

I considered myself very much of a stranger during my first days in the orphanage. Yet I did not mind it too much. Alexander and the other boys were friendly enough and they tried to make me feel at home, although I knew that they were very curious about me and that they were looking me over.

It was during the night that I felt uncomfortable. After dinner, we were free to play and read. At about nine o'clock the chimes were sounded and it was time for bed. Alexander and I went to our room. I was embarrassed to get undressed but I did it quickly, putting on my night shirt even before I finished taking off my underwear. Finally, I got into my bed and under the covers. Alexander asked:

"How was your first day with us, Chaim?"

"Fine," I said.

"You will like it better tomorrow."

"Don't you go to school?"

"Of course. Today was a holiday—Good Friday. There is no school tomorrow either. And of course, there is never any school on Sunday. This Sunday will be Easter, marking the day when our Lord, Jesus Christ, rose from his grave."

"Will there be school on Monday?" I asked hesitatingly.

"No, Monday is still a holiday. School starts again on Tuesday. What class are you in?"

"I have not been going to school since we moved to Schlutzk. I had a private teacher, a friend of my grandmother's. When we lived in Gomel I was in the fourth grade."

"That is the grade I am in. I hope you'll be put in my class," Alexander said warmly.

A nun came into the room and announced that it was time to put out the lights and go to sleep.

I closed my eyes but I could not sleep. I turned and tossed and then lay on my back and opened my eyes. A streak of light was coming through the window. My eyes went immediately to the large wooden carving of Jesus on the Cross on the wall facing me near the window. Alexander was asleep and it was quiet in the room. I was scared. Tomorrow would be Easter—the day on which Jesus came out of his grave. Jesus was alive and in heaven. If he was anything like the Jewish God, he must have great powers. Surely, he did not want Jewish boys in his Christian orphanage. Besides, what did our Jewish God think of me and my Mother now? What was I doing in this Christian environment—me, an Orthodox Jewish boy who had rabbis among his ancestors? They must be in heaven too. What did they think of me? Was there one heaven for Jewish people and another, different Christian heaven?

I closed my eyes and tried not to look at Jesus on the Cross but that was even worse. In my imagination I could then see the real Jesus on the Cross bleeding. I opened my eyes and there on the wall was the wooden image of Jesus on the wooden cross. Jesus looked so real in the dark. And so big. I became terribly frightened. I put the sheet and blanket over my eyes and I tried to think about the school I would go to on Tuesday, about Mother, about Ruvke

in the Jewish orphanage, about my sisters, about my father in America. But I could not forget Jesus on the Cross, the real Jesus, bleeding on the real Cross a long time ago, far, far away. Now Jesus was on the Cross in this room with Alexander and me. I wanted to awaken Alexander and talk with him but I decided that he would not understand my fears.

Then I felt tired, very tired. The next thing I knew Jesus was off the Cross, walking in the clouds. He looked very big and as he walked in the clouds, he became bigger and bigger. Like a real giant. Then I saw a fire. Huge red flames. Stifling, choking smoke. And the flames and smoke enveloped hundreds of people, mostly old men and old women. They were trapped in the fire in a large cave. They screamed as they tried to get out, to get away from the fire and the smoke. Soon they became scarlet red from the fire, and some were now bleeding. The black smoke started to cover their bleeding wounds.

When I opened my eyes, it was still dark, but in the light that came through the window I saw that Jesus was still on the Cross. He did not move. I was terrified. I began to shiver. I tried to lie quietly. I tossed and I turned. Still the shivering did not subside. At last the dawn came. Bright streaks of light began to come through the window. On impulse I decided to leave the orphanage and find Mother. I dressed myself quickly and ran out of the room. Alexander was sound asleep.

Quietly but quickly, almost on tiptoe, I ran out of the building, into the yard, and out on the street. It was very quiet and no one seemed to be around. The sun was rising but it was a chilly morning. I stood for a minute or two trying to figure out the precise location of the inn where Mother worked. Then I started to run. I ran so fast that I was soon out of breath. When I finally came to the inn, the door was locked. I called, "Mama, Mama. It is me, Chaim. Mama, Mama."

Mother, never a sound sleeper, soon heard my call and came to the window.

"*Shah, shah,* Chaimele, I will be right down." When she came out into the street, I could see tears in her eyes. We sat down

on the stoop of the building and Mother asked me, "Chaimele, my poor child, what is the matter? Why did you run away from the orphanage?"

"I had a bad dream and I was scared."

"You poor child." She began to hug me and kiss me and comfort me. By this time I felt foolish for running away from the orphanage.

"I talked to the owner of the inn again yesterday, pleading with him to let you stay with me in my tiny cubbyhole, but he refused to change his mind."

"Mama, I want to go back. I'm not afraid any more. It is a very nice place. I have a roommate who has been very friendly. His name is Alexander."

Mother and I walked back to the orphanage. The sun was now shining quite brightly. As the town began to wake up from the night's slumber, people were beginning to walk the streets and there was also the clang of horses' hooves and the sound of the wagons' wheels. When we reached the orphanage, it was still quiet. No one was to be seen. I said good-bye to Mother who kissed me and hugged me and then began to cry.

"Chaimele, I'll come to see you tomorrow. And I'll talk to the owner of the inn again. Maybe he will relent and let you stay with me. In the meantime, make the most of it here. It will be only for a short time. Soon we'll be together again. I promise you."

I rushed through the gate. Then I walked on tiptoe till I came into my room. Alexander was still asleep. I undressed. I felt tired and drowsy and soon fell asleep.

"Hey, Chaim, wake up, wake up. It's time to get dressed and go for breakfast. Gee, you're a sound sleeper." Alexander said smiling as he awakened me.

While I never really got used to it, life in the orphanage had its pleasant moments. I liked school very much. As I learned to read Russian with greater facility I was able to enjoy the stories in the abundant supply of books. I preferred to read rather than do anything else. Alexander, who was not an avid reader, kept after me to come out and play with him and the other boys.

While Alexander and others tried hard to make me comfortable, I continued to feel like a stranger, more like a visitor, than a permanent resident. No matter how hard I tried, I just could not feel that I belonged.

Soon it was summer and plans were made to go swimming in the river. Alexander and some of the other boys looked forward to the first day's swim.

"I can hardly wait to get into the water," Alexander said. "It's great fun. You'll like it, Chaim. Do you swim?"

"Not really," I said. I was embarrassed to tell Alexander that I did not swim at all, that I had never tried to learn. Mother was fearful of water and always warned me: "Don't get near the water, Chaimele; you will drown." And she would name various boys who did drown. Of course, Mother never learned to swim herself, nor did any of my sisters. I did not know whether my father could swim or not.

During the summer we went to class only in the morning. Afternoons were given over to play periods and on one afternoon a week, the entire orphanage, both boys and girls, went for a swim in the river.

The prospect of the first swim of the season caused great excitement among the boys and girls. Some of the boys talked about their prowess as swimmers and how much better they expected to be this summer than the previous one.

Finally, the great day came. It was sunny and warm, a perfect day for swimming. We were taken to the great hall and Yaphim, who was in charge of athletics and games for the boys, explained the rules and regulations we were to follow for our swim in the river. He divided the boys' section into groups of four and put one of the four in charge of the group. Alexander was in charge of our group. Each boy of the foursome was to keep an eye on the other three boys, but it was the leader or captain of the group who was required to take a periodic count of the members of the group.

"We want you to have fun swimming but there can be no deviations from the rules. Any boy who breaks a rule will be

punished. He will not be permitted to go swimming the following week. Three infractions of rules and a boy will not be allowed to swim for the rest of the summer."

Yaphim also made the announcement that any boy who was unable to swim or wanted to improve his style could come to him for instructions and help.

Each boy was given a towel and a piece of soap and then we filed out of the great hall into groups of four in double file formation. Yaphim proceeded to lead the group to the river. Two nuns headed the groups of girls.

I went to the river with mixed emotions and a great deal of curiosity. It was a long walk. While the orphanage was near the edge of the city, the river was several miles farther from the town. The countryside was beautiful, with big, tall trees, winding roads, and fields of wildflowers.

When we reached the river, the boys' group went to the left bank, the girls to the right—about a mile away. Yaphim told us to get undressed and leave our clothing neatly in a location that we could easily identify. Then one group at a time could go in the water. In a clear voice and firm tone he said:

"Each group of four must stay together. Do not go beyond the point that the water reaches your shoulders. After you get into the water, I will swim out and watch you. You must not go out beyond the spot where I will be. If anyone needs any help, just shout for me. Each of your captains is a good swimmer and he will be there to help you too. Do not stray far from your captain. Now, let's go and have fun."

I found getting undressed painfully embarrassing. It was bad enough to get undressed in the steaming bathhouse, where visibility was not particularly good. But here we were in the open and it was a beautiful, bright, sunny day. There was not much I could do. I had to undress and I had to do it quickly. Apparently, I was not undressing fast enough because I heard Alexander's words: "Chaim, get undressed quickly. We are waiting for you."

I turned around and there were three boys near me, all

completely bare, waiting for me to undress. I rushed to undress as quickly as I could. We all ran to the water. I had a strange feeling that the three boys of our group and all the other boys of the orphanage were looking at me, right down to my penis. After all, I was different, wasn't I? My penis was circumcised; their penises were not. Obviously, they must have been curious to see mine. Didn't I take a quick look at the penises of the boys near me? Of course, I made sure that no one saw me doing it. But I did look. Surely, all of the boys of the orphanage were looking at me, observing my different, circumcised penis about which they had heard but which they had not seen before. I did not see anyone look at me directly but I felt all eyes on me. I was different. Circumcised.

Actually, I had something of a distinction. I was the first to be circumcised by my Uncle Rev Avrom, shortly after he became a *mohel* and *shochet*. As the new *mohel* of Pumpian, it was the function of Uncle Rev Avrom to circumcise newborn Jewish boys eight days after birth. I was born shortly after my uncle had returned from his studies in Vilna, the Lithuanian center of Jewish rabbinical learning. This provided the young *mohel* with a double opportunity—the honor of circumcising his sister's son and to demonstrate to the community his excellent training and proficiency in his new profession. Not only were all of our relatives invited to my circumcision but also some of Pumpian's elders and learned dignitaries so that they could see for themselves what an able *mohel* Rev Avrom was.

The young *mohel* performed his first circumcision on me with great precision, dignity, and *éclat*. He wielded his new, very sharp *mohel*'s knife with an artistic flourish, exhibiting his newly acquired skill well, despite his obvious excitement and nervousness on this most important occasion. Nobody recorded my reaction to this operation on my penis. Nor did I know that I was the first to be operated on by Rev Avrom. I learned about it when I was two and a half years old and when I witnessed the circumcision of my new baby brother, little Ruvkele, by the now experienced *mohel*, Uncle Rev Avrom.

After the ceremony, Mother said to her revered, learned brother, "Avrom, do you remember when you circumcised Chaimele, your very first circumcision?"

"How well I remember? How nervous I was," he said with a smile.

"But you did well, and in front of the elders of our village," Tante Esther remarked.

At two and a half, this knowledge, coming as a complete surprise, shocked me. I felt a little dizzy and painfully afraid of the tall, red-bearded man, who suddenly look like the Devil incarnate. From that moment on I was petrified in the presence of Uncle Rev Avrom, even with Mother near me. When I let myself think about it, I had the strange feeling that perhaps Uncle Rev Avrom never was fully satisfied with his initial effort and that he might want to try to improve on it if he had the chance. I made sure that he would not get that chance. He and I were never to be alone.

In that moment on the river bank, this thought came back to me, although fleetingly, as I felt the eyes of the Gentile orphanage boys on me. I ran into the water as quickly as I could, making sure that the water was over my navel. It was very cold but I rushed in so that my penis would be covered and the boys would no longer look at me the way I thought they did, with great curiosity.

"Look at Chaim's Jewish penis, the funny circumcised penis, rounded instead of pointy like ours—and no foreskin." This is what I thought I heard, a refrain that seemed to become louder and louder.

"Come on, Chaim, let's get further into the water, up to our shoulders, as Yaphim said," Alexander shouted as the other boys were splashing, swimming, and having fun in the water.

"Ha, we can't see the girls," one of the boys remarked. "How about swimming over near them and taking a look?"

"Don't you dare," another boy shouted back at him. "Unless you want to be imprisoned in your room for a whole week, with all privileges taken away."

"It might be worth it . . . ha ha."

Everyone else seemed to be having a great time. I tried to relax and splash in the water like the rest of the boys but I was still aware of my "difference." I found being in the water cooling and refreshing but I was much too self-conscious to enjoy myself.

In later weeks, however, I lost some of my feelings of embarrassment and strangeness. It was a fairly pleasant summer. And as Mother asked me to do, I tried hard to make most of my situation at the orphanage. The other boys were friendly, with many of them making a real effort to have me feel comfortable. This was particularly true of Alexander, a sensitive young man, who seemed to understand my problem of feeling different.

"Chaim, the boys here like you, you know," Alexander said one afternoon as we returned from a swim. "They want you to feel free and easy, to take part in all our activities."

"I know, Alexander. It is just that I feel different. As much as I try, I find it very difficult to become part of the group, but I will keep trying."

"That's good, Chaim. Keep trying. I'll do all I can to help."

I did try and as the months passed, I made a modest adjustment to life in the Catholic orphanage. For one thing, I was no longer as fearful of Jesus on the Cross in my room as I had been at the beginning. The sleep-disturbing dreams continued but they were now of less fearsome intensity than in the early months. My appetite improved and I consumed greater quantities of varieties of foods. However, I diligently refrained from eating ham or pork or anything else that obviously was not kosher.

Early one morning, at the beginning of the tenth month of my stay in the orphanage, while we were at breakfast in the dining room, I saw a woman at the window. She motioned to me. It was Mother. I stopped eating and ran out.

"What is the matter, Mama? Why are you here this early in the morning? What has happened?" I asked breathlessly, alarmed to see her.

"Nothing is wrong, Chaimele. I have important news, very, very important news . . . "

"What is it Mama? Tell me, tell me."

"We are going to America."

"To America? Have you heard from Papa?"

"Not directly. But we are going to America."

"When are we going, Mama, when?"

"Tomorrow morning, early. I have everything arranged. I must go now, but I will return later this morning to take you out of the orphanage. So, get ready. You need not tell anyone. As a matter of fact, it will be better if you do not talk about it to anyone, to no one."

When Mother left, I stood in the yard as if frozen, uncomprehending. It was as though I had just awakened from a dream. I could not believe that Mother had been here, that she said that we were going to America tomorrow morning, early. Just like that.

During the hours that followed I was in a daze. Each minute seemed so terribly long, as I waited for Mother to return. I did not go back to the dining room but walked around in the yard for a while. Then I returned to my room. Soon, we would go to class, after the other children had finished with their prayers in the chapel. I was not required to do that.

Alexander asked me, "Why did you leave the dining room in such a hurry? You did not finish your breakfast."

"I was not very hungry. I wanted to take a walk in the yard."

"That's strange. You never did that before."

I did not know what to say at that point.

"You don't feel sick, do you."

"Not anymore."

Alexander did not pursue the subject and I was glad. We went to class but my mind was not on the work. I could not concentrate on what the teacher, a nun, was saying. I liked history and normally I listened carefully and when called upon I could answer almost any question. This morning I did not seem

to hear what the teacher was saying. I hoped that she would not call on me. My mind was on Mother, on our impending trip to America. I began to see America in fantasy. The big, beautiful ship that would take us there . . . being greeted by Father, a tall handsome, bearded man, finely groomed and well dressed. The tall, majestic buildings in New York. Our attractive, comfortable new home. Soon my daydreams were punctured by the sound of a bell. It was time to move on to the next class. Mother was at the door, she took my hand, and we went to check out of the orphanage—for good. Mother had already made the arrangements. I ran over to say good-bye to Alexander.

"Alexander, I'm leaving. We are going to America to join my father."

"You're not serious? You are fooling me, but then, you don't fool."

"You're right, Alex. I'm not fooling. My Mother is taking me out of the orphanage and we're going to America, tomorrow, early tomorrow morning. Good-bye, Alex, you have been a real friend. I'll miss you, and I will remember you . . . always."

"I'll miss you too, Chaim. You have been a loyal friend, quiet, but nice and dependable. I'm glad for you. I wish I could go to America with you, but I have no father in America. My father is in heaven."

There were tears in my eyes, also in Alexander's. We embraced. I was never to see him again.

NINETEEN

THE TRIP to America started that very morning. After Mother and I left the orphanage, we headed for the Jewish orphanage to pick up Ruvke. I had not seen my younger brother for several months. He looked older, heavier, a little more serious.

"We are going to America, Ruvke," I said.

"Isn't America very far?"

"Yes, very far."

"How long will it take? How are we going? By ship?"

"It will take a long time. I don't know how long. The only way to go to America is by ship."

Ruvke would be eight and one-half in June—in just a few months. By now it was 1919, and I was almost eleven and a half. I felt like an adult.

From Ruvke's orphanage we went to the lodging house where Mother worked as housekeeper, cook, and cleaning woman. When we got there, a driver with his horse and wagon was already waiting for us. Mother gathered her belongings—two bundles wrapped in sheets, some blankets, coats, boots, and her precious *shteshel* (mortar and pestle). And off we went.

Mainke had left Schlutzk several months earlier. She had lost her job there and could not get another. She decided to go to Berdichev to join Pashke, who had written to her on a number of occasions, each time pleading with her to come and live with her. Pashke was now pregnant with her first child.

Mother cried when we left Schlutzk, wondering whether she would ever see any of her three daughters again. But she moved quickly from tears to smiles.

"Chaimele, Ruvkele, when we get to America we will send for your sisters. We will all be in America. We are Americans. Your sisters are Americans. We are all Americans."

Mother had little money, and we had neither passports nor visas. In fact, Mother did not actually know where Father lived or whether he was still alive. Nevertheless, she was full of confidence that "everything will work out just fine." We would reach America before long, with Father welcoming us with open arms in the great city of New York, which she pronounced as "Nev Yuk."

"Where are we going, that is, where are we actually traveling to before we get to America?" I asked Mother, as the driver took the reins, ordering the horse, "Whoa, whoa," and off we went.

"We are on our way to Warsaw, the capital of Poland. I made numerous inquiries during the past year, and I learned that what we must do is to get to Warsaw. There are Jewish organizations in that big city, American organizations, that help Jewish families contact their relatives in America and then make arrangements for the trip to America. I have written down the names of several such organizations, and when we arrive in Warsaw I will go to them and ask for help, to help us get to America. I have heard that several families in Schlutzk did just that and they already are in America. With God's help, our loving God in heaven, we are going to join your father."

The horse moved more briskly now and Schlutzk was soon behind us. We were now in the country. While it was spring, the trees were still bare and spots of ice and snow dotted the ground. Portions of the road were muddy. The driver directed his horse very carefully to avoid getting stuck in slush and mud. "Whoa, whoa, whoa," he kept calling, pulling and easing the reins as he saw fit. The horse obeyed him.

We passed farms, we drove through forests, then we stopped and rested, and Mother served us some food. The fresh air and the excitement of the trip were exhilarating. Mother offered some of her food to the driver who thanked her and said

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that he had brought his own. He fed the horse, then sat down for his meal. After we had eaten and rested a bit, we continued our journey.

"We want to reach Baranowitz before it gets too late at night," the driver said. "It's the first good-sized city in Poland. That's where we will stay for the night. Soon we will pass the Russian-Polish border," he explained.

"When we reach the border, will we have any trouble? What shall we do?" Mother asked the driver.

"Don't worry, madam, leave it to me. I know the officers at the border—on both sides. We are friends. I have crossed it many times. I will explain who you are and that you are on the way to America to join your husband. They don't bother women and children, especially those who are on the way to America. They look for spies and contraband and young men who try to escape serving in the Red army. Or capitalists taking out gold and jewelry. You do not have any gold or jewelry? Contraband?"

"No, my good man, nothing like that. The only gold I have is the wedding ring on my finger. The only contraband I have are the few rags, pots, and pans in the bundle. And my jewels are my two little boys."

"Then you need not worry. We will cross the border without much delay. You'll see."

And cross the border we did—soon and without delay—as our driver had promised. It was just getting dark when we reached the border station, a little house, with gates in front, set in the wilderness. Behind the tiny wooden structure were tall cypress trees. The ice crystals on the dark green cypress and other evergreen trees projected an eerie quality, reflecting on the white, hardened snow as darkness began to encompass the entire area, now in total quietude.

As we reached the border station, a uniformed man, short and fat, holding a kerosene lamp, motioned the driver to stop. They exchanged a few words, he advanced a few steps to take a look at us, and then signaled us to go on. That was all.

"You have passed the Russian border patrol. About two *viorst* (a viorst is one-seventh of a mile) from here, we will reach the Polish side of the border. Here again, the same thing will happen—we will cross without problems. I know the officers on duty there as well."

Before the driver finished his sentence, we saw another light, then a house, a bit bigger than the one at the Russian side of the border. But as the driver said, nothing much happened. A young-looking, brash, fast-moving Polish border officer stopped our wagon and exchanged some words with the driver. That was all. Off we went. In another hour or so we entered a city. It was Baranowitz. I felt so tired that I was hardly able to see where we were. All I remember is that we stopped at a house that was small. Mother, Ruvke, and I huddled on a mattress on a floor and fell asleep. I slept soundly until Mother woke me up. It was dawn, still dark, but we were ready to move on to the next stop.

We reached Bialystok late in the afternoon. I will never forget the sight, the smell, and the magnetism of that lively, curiously interesting Polish city, two hundred miles south of Schlutzk and one hundred and twenty miles from Warsaw. We were passing through the marketplace, and it was apparently closing time. I had never witnessed so much hustle and bustle—the people, the noise, the color, the pungent odors. So many people moving in all directions. So much food on display. We were to see this again the next day, with the greater excitement and enjoyment.

This was the end of the road for our driver. Bialystok was as far as he would take us. From Bialystok we could travel by train to Warsaw.

We stayed at an inn in the center of the town. It was late in the afternoon, and the three of us were tired, although Ruvke seemed ready to go out and see the sights. Mother would hear none of it. We would rest and wait until the next day for sightseeing.

The picture of Bialystok the next morning is as vivid in

my memory as if we had visited it only a few weeks ago instead of in the spring of 1919. It was a warm, sunny morning when we reached the marketplace, with its numerous stands and stores. I had never seen so many people in one location. It was infinitely more crowded than the very busy marketplace in Berdichev that I visited two years earlier. And never had I heard so much noise, so much conversation, or seen so much movement on the part of so many people. The languages were Polish and Yiddish. I knew little Polish but even the Yiddish sounded different from our Yiddish. We spoke Lithuanian Yiddish, while the Jews of Bialystok spoke Polish Yiddish.

The great mass of Eastern European Jews at that time spoke two very different and distinct dialects—*Litvishe* or *Litvak* Yiddish, our dialect, and the *Galitzianer* Yiddish (named after the area of Galicia), the language spoken by the Polish Jews. The *Galitzianer* Yiddish had a kind of twist and sounded altogether different from the Yiddish we were used to, which was a simple, direct type of language. Here is just one example: The word *good* is pronounced *"goot"* in *Litvak* Yiddish, *"gitz"* in *Galitzianer* Yiddish. However, the difference in the two dialects proved to be more complicated and involved than the difference in these two simple words.

Bialystok was a Jewish city, probably at that time the most Jewish city in Poland, if not the most Jewish city anywhere in Europe. The vendors and storekeepers in the marketplace were almost all Jews. The revolution in Russia eventually did reach Poland, but there was no awareness of this in the marketplace of Bialystok on this spring morning of 1919. Food, produce, and all sorts of other products were in vast abundance here. The vendors and storekeepers were concerned only about selling as much of their supplies as they could. And the buyers seemed to be concerned only with buying as cheaply as possible. The word was bargain—*metsieh* in Yiddish. Every vendor offered the greatest *metsieh*. Everyone seemed to engage in ferocious haggling to obtain "the best *metsieh*"—the greatest bargain.

I had heard the word before, of course, but never had I

seen it used to the extent it was used in the market of Bialystok. It was the very essence of the drama of this unusual spot at that particular time.

Bialies, the flat, hard rolls with onions, so popular today in New York, were named after Bialystok but that was not what they were called in Bialystok in the spring of 1919. They were there in abundance, however. We entered a big busy bakery, the kind of bakery I had never seen before and have not seen anywhere since then. Huge is the only word to describe it. It was a massive, square room, with a high ceiling. On each side was a long, almost endless counter on top of which was an array of baked goods that beckoned: "Eat me, eat me, eat me." The variety of rolls, *kuchen*, bagels, *bialies*, the assortment of breads, the many varieties of cakes, sweet rolls, and cookies seemed endless. Under the counters, behind glass, I saw an additional, abundant assortment of cakes, pies, and pastries. The odors that permeated the establishment were marvelous, delicious, heavenly.

"Mama, Mama, buy some *kuchen*. I'm so hungry," I finally said, and Ruvke repeated my intonation.

Without taking the time to reply, Mother pushed herself to the front of one of the four counters and began to order "*kuchen*" and other goodies. The store was crowded but mother, short, fat, and fast of motion, was able to get in front of one of the counters. She got action. The next thing I remember is eating half of a very large *kuchen*. Oh, how delicious! How marvelous! Ruvke had a quarter of the *kuchen* while Mother was munching the remaining piece. We looked at each other and smiled. Words were not necessary to express our delight. While Mother was munching on the *kuchen*, she kept pointing to other delights. Finally, she had two bags full of the most delicious baked goods. By that time, both Ruvke and I had finished our *kuchen*, and we dug in for more of the goodies. Mother did not stop us. The three of us ate and ate until we could eat no more. That was our breakfast and what a glorious breakfast it was.

When we left the bakery, with our bellies full, the fresh, cool air on this sunny morning hit my nostrils and I felt wonderful, totally alive. Happiness that spring was a belly full of delicious baked goods from the marvelous bakery in the bustling, noisy, but delightful city of Bialystok. From the bakery we went to the railroad station, where Mother bought tickets for the train scheduled to leave for Warsaw early the following morning. After several hours of walking, seeing more of Bialystok, and resting on a park bench, we walked to the center of the town, stopping at a restaurant for dinner. That was the first time I had ever eaten in a restaurant. We were greeted by a friendly, smiling, very fat woman with an apron around her who led us to a table in the far right corner of the room. She asked Mother what we would like for dinner. There was no menu, and at the time I did not know what a menu was. I did not even know what a restaurant was. Mother hesitated a moment, obviously thinking what to say or how to respond to what seemed to be a simple question. Finally, she replied:

"What do you have? What do you suggest?"

"What do we have? We have everything. I suggest the soup, a fine, hearty bean soup. Then, perhaps, the stewed *miltz* (spleen) and *lungen* (lungs), to be followed by a cup of *cave* (coffee with chicory with half hot milk and sugar) and some *lekach* (honey cake)."

Mother answered, "Fine, my good woman. We will have everything as you described."

Minutes after the jolly fat woman left, a thin little girl not much older than I, eleven or twelve, brought a basket full of bread and a bowl of sour stuff—pickles and a number of other vegetables, some of which I had never seen before. Then she proceeded to bring the rest of the dinner, and what an enjoyable repast it was.

By the time we reached our room in the inn, the three of us were sleepy and full of the Bialystok food. That night we slept soundly and long, since we had retired early. Mother awakened us practically at dawn to make sure that we would reach the

railroad station in plenty of time to catch the eight o'clock train to Warsaw.

After an uneventful trip, during which Ruvke and I kept looking out of the window and pointing to things as the train moved along, we reached Warsaw shortly after the noon hour.

We were now in the great historic capital of Poland. It was twenty years before the Nazi holocaust, and the slaughtering of six hundred thousand Jews who were herded into the highly organized, infamous Warsaw ghetto, almost like steer and lambs in pens. How many times during the past thirty-eight years since 1940 have I thought of my earlier experience in this ghetto area! Those months in 1919, the long days and longer nights in the crowded, smelly hellhole, infested with rats and disease, were among the worst in my life. But horrible as they were they added a new dimension and inexplicable strength to the sum of my experience.

I must explain that the Jewish Warsaw ghetto under the Nazis was not really the same as the ghetto in which we lived in 1919. Not much similarity, really. Yes, it was the same place. But we could have left it if we had wanted to. Not so with the Jewish population under the Nazis. Moreover, in addition to those who had made their homes there before the arrival of the German battalions, the Nazis herded into the area all other Jews they had rounded up in other parts of Warsaw, crowded the place to the brim, and then walled up the entire area, with armed Nazi guards stationed around the clock, making even a daring escape almost impossible.

Nevertheless, it became clear to us almost from the start of our residence in the 1919 Warsaw ghetto that our major task, our primary goal, would be sheer survival. That became Mother's single, overwhelming concern. She never talked about it, and I am not certain that she knew on a conscious level that her every move, every plan, was directed toward this goal.

Once we became part of the mainstream of this Jewish sector, we found ourselves trapped and the great adventure was

to get out of this trap. Again and again we came close to reaching our objective, and again and again we found ourselves mired by new encumbrances in the net forged by our poverty. I must explain that the preponderance of the poor Jews of this big and sprawling city lived in the ghetto. More affluent Jews resided in fine homes in other parts of Warsaw. However, most of the Jews in Warsaw at that time were poor. Additionally, the ghetto of 1919 included many refugees like ourselves, who came to Warsaw as a way station. From here they hoped to move on to the United States or other countries of the world where they had relatives or which they believed would be more hospitable to them than the Russian Bolsheviks or the changing governments and the people of Poland, who now were beginning to have plenty of their own problems. Under such conditions, Poland was not receptive to the inflow of Jews from other parts of Eastern Europe.

The first thing Mother did when we reached the Warsaw station and left the train was to find the office of HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). She had the name written on a piece of paper which she treasured and guarded on the entire trip. But she did not have an address. She had gotten the name from a woman in Schlutzk whose nephew and his family had made it to America through the help of HIAS, the sheltering arm of the United Jewish Appeal, then also called the Joint Distribution Committee.

As we got off the train she stopped the first likely person, a tall, neat-looking man, showed him the scrap of paper, and asked how to find "this place." He looked at the crumpled piece of paper, then shook his head and moved on. She stopped another man, then a woman, and each in turn just gave a shake of the head and walked on. These must have been Polish people who did not understand or read Russian. The next person Mother approached with her piece of paper was a uniformed guard. He was of no help either. He kept saying something to her in Polish, but Mother did not seem to understand. I thought I knew some Polish since I had taken lessons in the language in

Schlutzk and tried to listen to what the guard was telling Mother, but my "book learning" proved to be useless. I understood a word or two but none of what the guard was saying made any sense to me at all. We walked on.

"I must find a *Yiddishe mensh* (a Jewish person)," Mother decided and began to look around for one. She tried to inquire of several people, but again without success. Mother became desperate, although she tried hard not to show it. She kept smiling and saying, "Chaimele, don't worry, we will find a '*Yiddishe mensh*' who will help us. You will see. God will come to our aid."

Eventually, she found our "savior." She spotted him from the distance since he was just entering the station from the street at the very opposite end from where we were standing near our bundles. Telling Ruvke to wait near our belongings, she took me by the hand and almost ran to this man, a full-bearded, mustached, short, fat man who wore a *kapota*, the long silk coat, traditionally worn by Eastern European rabbis. When we came close to him I could see his long sideburn locks over his ears.

He was evidently in deep thought because he was startled, and he jumped when Mother grabbed him by the arm and with tears in her eyes said in Yiddish, "*Rebbe*, please, my dear *rebbe*, I need your help."

"Woman, what do you want? I am in a hurry, I must make a train."

Now crying loudly, Mother blocked him and would not let him move. "*Rebbe*, you must help me. My two little children and I are lost, I am a stranger in this big city, I do not know what to do. You must help."

"Woman, calm yourself now, calm yourself. Tell me what you want from me."

Mother showed him the piece of paper and then in Yiddish said that she was looking for the "HIAS—to help me and my children go to America."

"Oh, it is the HIAS you want? Why didn't you say that in

the first place? I know the HIAS. I know where it is. Let me write the name and address in Polish and then find a carriage for you to take you there. Have you money?"

Mother stopped crying, began to kiss the man's hands, and said that he must be an angel from heaven in disguise, surely a messenger sent by God direct to her.

"Yes, I have money, a few rubles."

"You cannot use rubles here. This is Poland, not Russia, but you can change the rubles for zlotas. Let me show you where."

In the next few minutes, the rabbi helped Mother to change her rubles for Polish zlotas, wrote out the exact name and address of HIAS in Polish, and then found a carriage and gave the driver full instructions in Polish.

TWENTY

THE HIAS office was located on the ground floor of an old four-story building, situated in a quiet street several blocks from the main thoroughfare, from which our driver turned after a long ride.

The HIAS office was crowded with people, some standing in lines and others sitting on benches. Mother, tired and excited, tried to explain the purpose of her visit to an attendant as we entered. He asked her to quiet down and repeat what she had said slowly in Yiddish, after which he would explain what she should do. She finally made herself understood and the attendant said, "Madam, sit down on the bench over there. Give me your name and in due time you will be called. We will try to help you."

Mother, Ruvke, and I sat down on the wooden bench at which the attendant had pointed and began to wait. An hour passed and our name was not called. By that time, Ruvke and I had become hungry. Mother had too, but she did not complain as Ruvke and I did. She left us on the bench and went over to the attendant.

"My poor, sick little children have not had a bite of food all day," she said. "They are very hungry. I am afraid one or both of them will faint."

"I am sorry, madam, but you see there are a lot of people here who want help and it takes time to see and speak with each of them. There is a canteen over there, where you can get a cup of soup for your boys and yourself. There is no charge."

After another hour or so, our name was finally called and we followed the attendant to a desk at which sat a middle-aged man, wearing metal-rimmed glasses. He smiled and asked Mother to sit

down on a chair at the side of his desk, with Ruvke and me leaning at each side of Mother.

After Mother told her full story—about Father being in America and about our desire to join him there and about her three daughters who remained in Russia and about some of our experiences since we had been forced to leave Pumpian—the friendly, smiling man said, "Now, madam, I must ask you a number of specific questions which will make it possible for us to trace your husband and take a long series of steps to help you to reach your goal of going to America. We will try to help you. Now, then..."

He asked Mother to give him Father's exact name, where he came from, when he had left for the United States, the city in which he now lived and worked, his age, whether she had other relatives in the United States, when she last heard from Father, did she possibly have his last address, and many other questions.

Mother was able to answer most of his questions and where she could not answer she tried to fill in with fantasy and speculation. This interview took a long time—it seemed like hours—but it was a very important step in our odyssey.

"Now, madam, do you have any funds and a place in which to live?"

"Yes, I have some money"; she cited an amount. "It is not very much but I know that when you reach my husband in America, he will send whatever money is needed. He is a good provider, a fine tailor, and he is doing well in New York. No, we have no place to go. We have just arrived in Warsaw. We know no one here. You and God are our only salvation."

The man walked away and returned in a few minutes, saying:

"I have found a place for you to stay, for a while, until we can locate something better . . . until we reach your husband and begin to make arrangements for your trip to America."

"How long do you think it will take before we can go to America?" Mother asked.

"This I do not know. It can take several weeks, perhaps some months, or maybe longer. It will depend on our success in locating

your husband, having him provide the needed funds, and the time it will take to obtain the necessary papers. Also, you will need permission of the American consul here, and clearance from the Polish authorities. It will not be easy, none of this is a simple matter, and it could take a long time. A lot of people, like yourself, want to do the same thing—go to America to join their loved ones in the New World. We do not have a big enough staff, or the money to do everything we want to do and as fast as we would like to do, but I can assure you, madam, we will do all we can to help you. You must have patience, and you must cooperate with us. Now, get your belongings, and in a few minutes the driver of one of our wagons will take you and your little ones to your new home. I hope you will be satisfied with it. It is just one room, but we will try to do better for you in a few weeks. It will cost you a hundred zlotas a week, and you will be required to pay a week in advance."

After an hour's drive in a horse-drawn caravan from which I saw little since the best I could do was take an occasional peek through the front or the back, we reached our destination. The driver helped Mother, Ruvke, and me out of the canvas-covered buslike wagon. We were now in a courtyard. A group of people, mostly young boys and girls, surrounded us, observing us in a curious sort of way. Mother discouraged them from asking questions, being afraid that the strange, unkempt looking group would molest us. The boys were bigger than Ruvke and me. They wore long black robes or caftans that were torn and disheveled. They had long, unshorn ringlets of hair over their ears. The girls looked unwashed, dressed in what resembled their grandmother's long-discarded and torn dresses, which they probably were. There were several women and an old man, all with wrinkled faces, stooped over and tired looking, who passed us by without even noticing us.

"You wait here a while," said the driver, "just a few minutes, and I will go and locate the keeper of the house to designate your own quarters. And madam," he cautioned, "you watch the wagon and your children while I am away."

The more curious of the boys and girls moved toward the caravan and several tried to look inside. Mother chased them away.

In sing-song voices, in Yiddish, they said in chorus: "Little old lady and your little boys, we're not afraid of you. You can't do anything to us. We're not afraid."

"You leave us alone, or I'll get the police after you," Mother shouted as she chased them.

"There are no policemen here . . . ha ha," they sang.

Finally one of the old, bent-over women, reprimanded them, shouting at them to stop, and they seemed to listen to her with some respect. Soon the driver returned with an old, stooped man with a broom in his hand.

"Now, madam, this man will show you where your lodging will be and I will help you with your belongings."

"Follow me, I'll show you your room," said the old man with the broom. With each of us now carrying a bundle and with the driver helping us, we followed the old man to one of the several houses in the courtyard. While it was a sunny, warm day, it was dark in the courtyard and darker still in the hall as we followed him up the steps. A big gray cat, with a mouse in her mouth, was running down the stairs but stopped as she saw us. Mother tried to shield me, hoping that I would not see the cat with the mouse since she knew that I did not like mice, and was afraid of them. I tried not to look but I looked anyway. The black little mouse in the cat's mouth was obviously dead.

We walked up one floor, then another, and then the old man who was still carrying the broom said, "This is where you will live." He opened the door with a big key from a large ring of keys he had in his pocket. Then he turned to Mother and said, "Woman, do you have one hundred zlotas to pay for the first week's lodging?"

"Yes, I have, but I would like to see our quarters first before I pay."

"Go in and see while we wait here. You can't take your children or belongings inside before you pay."

Mother went inside and returned in a few minutes. "Is this the best you have?" She asked the old man.

"It is the only thing I have. Take it or leave it." Mother looked questioningly at our driver. He merely shrugged his shoul-

ders. Mother carefully counted out one hundred zlotas, put back the purse with the rest of her precious few pieces of paper and coins, and we walked into our new home. What I saw startled me.

At the end of a long, dark hall, we entered a small room that had one unmade bed, a cot, and a broken table. At the right was a small alcove that had a black coal-burning stove and another small table. Ahead of us was a "window" without panes of glass, just an opening to the courtyard. As I moved to look down, Mother screamed, "Chaimele, Chaimele, don't go near the window. You will fall down."

I moved slowly and carefully. I looked down. We were two flights up. Mother grabbed me away from the window, and she held onto Ruvke, who, like me, was curious to find out what was beyond that windowless window.

The room was dirty. It seemed that it had not been painted or cleaned for years. The one-time white paint was now gray-black, and whatever paint was left on the walls and ceiling was peeling. Flies moved freely from the hole in the wall to the bed to the makeshift kitchen. It wasn't much but it was shelter. It was summer and Mother's characteristic optimism prevailed. "We will not be here very long. It will be just a short stopover before we set sail for America."

"Anyway, my children, we have no choice, for now," she said as we put down our belongings and the driver left us. Mother tried to be cheerful, and it helped.

"I will straighten the room the best I can, and then we will go down and take a walk in the city," she said. "Chaimele and Ruvkele, you must promise me one thing, you must hold onto me so that you will not get lost. It is a big, big city and a little boy can get lost easily. That would be the end of our life. Remember, we have not come here to stay. We are on our way to America. So please, my darling children, hold onto me and I will watch over you. We must not let go of one another, not even for a second."

The moment we walked out of the courtyard of our new home, we found ourselves in a crowd, a noisy, tumultuous mob. Men, women, and children—mostly children—were moving

about, some running and zigzagging. The buildings around us were old and nondescript. After walking for several blocks we found ourselves in a market, with men and women, mostly women, shouting their wares. The language was Yiddish, Polish Yiddish.

The sound we kept hearing above all other sounds was: "A *kalt* and a *gitz* . . . a *kalt* and a *gitz* . . . *kimt nemt* . . . a *kalt* and a *gitz*." The sound came from men, women, and boys who carried large flasks containing what looked like colored water . . . orange, pink, red, yellow...

"What is in the flasks, what are they selling? What is this '*kalt* and a *gitz*'?" we asked Mother.

"It looks like a beverage, a cold beverage. They are *Galitzianer*, poor souls, and their Yiddish is *Galitzianer farkrimte* (twisted) Yiddish. Different from our Yiddish—*Litvishe* Yiddish, the real, the refined Yiddish," Mother explained. "A *kalt* and a *gitz* means cold and good. This is the way they describe the drink, a cold, good drink."

"May we have some?" Ruvke asked.

"I'll buy one to try it. If it is good, I will get one for each of us."

Mother stopped the cleanest-looking young man who dispensed the beverage from the cleanest-looking big flask on ice.

"Let me have one," she said in *Litvishe* Yiddish. But the young man understood. He asked her, "What kind would you like?"

"Which is the best?"

"It's all good, but why don't you try this one? It will cost you a zlota a drink."

As Mother located a zlota in her purse, the young man filled a glass with the yellow beverage.

Mother tried the drink first. She smiled. It tasted good. Then she let me taste it. It was cold and it was tasty. It had a sour and sweet taste. It was refreshing. And thirst quenching. And since this was a hot day, with the sun shining brightly, it was a most pleasant beverage.

"Mama, it is good," I said.

"Let me have some, let me have some," Ruvke said, and I gave him the glass.

"Hmm, this is delicious," he said and he drank the balance that was left in the glass. Mother then bought a drink for each of us, and for the next few minutes we just stood there enjoying our beverage as if we had never enjoyed drinking anything before. Ruvke was right: It was delicious and refreshing. Good and cold . . . a *kalt* and a *gitz*.

"What kind of a drink is it?" I asked. "Citroner, cold, sweetened *citroner*. . . *lemonen*," Mother said. It was my first chilled lemon drink and it was delicious. The expression "*kalt* and *gitz*" was a beautiful, refreshing sound.

Because that turned out to be one of the very few pleasant experiences that we were to have during our stay in Warsaw, "a *kalt* and *gitz*" was a cheerful refrain that remained with me for a long time to come. I never really forgot it. Often, when I was thirsty, the expression came to mind almost instantly. As time went on, I was to taste better, more exotically flavored beverages but no drink tasted quite as good as the Warsaw lemonade on that particular sunny, spring day. And no description of any beverage could improve on the sound of "a *kalt* and a *gitz*" as it came from the lips of the hucksters of the ghetto streets of Warsaw.

Yes, we were in the Warsaw ghetto. I did not know it at that time. Nor did I know that there was such a word as ghetto, although we had lived in a ghetto most of our life. We called it the Jewish section. And this was the Jewish section of Warsaw. Until many weeks later we did not even know that there was any other sector in this big, tumultuous city.

The occasion that took us outside of the ghetto was a visit to the American embassy to apply for a visa for our impending trip to the United States. We practically lived at the offices of the HIAS. Mother's persistence for action of some sort became an annoyance to almost everyone there, including the sympathetic middle-aged man, Shmuel Berenstein, who was in charge of our case and whom we met on our first day in Warsaw.

"Madam, you don't have to keep coming to see me," he said with irritation. "Our people in New York have not located your husband as yet, but I can assure you that they will. If he is alive and resides in New York, they will find him, and as soon as they do, they will let me know, and just as soon as I receive the good news, we will advise you."

"But here it is two weeks since we came to Warsaw and we haven't heard from you."

"Two weeks is a very short time, madam, a very short time when you deal with matters of this nature. It requires several days merely to write and process a letter and then it takes a number of weeks before the letter reaches America, and then, it means more time before the investigation begins, before the needed inquiries are made. It could pass several more weeks, if we are lucky, and it could linger on for several months, but eventually we will find your husband . . . this I can assure you."

"What do we do in the meantime? We are living in such a horrible place, a dark hellhole, with rats."

"Please don't complain, madam. We are doing the best we can for you. We will try to obtain better quarters, so please have patience. We have to deal with so many families who wish to emigrate to America. We have much more to do than we are able to handle."

"I am sorry, and I understand. You are a fine man, it's just that we are so anxious."

"I sympathize with you. You are a good woman, so please bear with us."

"Is there anything I can do in the meantime to save time?"

"Yes, there is something you can do. Why don't you apply for a visa at the American embassy? Here, let me give you this form, also a letter, if you will wait a few minutes. This might save some time. Often it takes months before the American consul will act on a visa application. Just wait for the letter, and then I will give you directions on how to get to the American embassy. It is located in the main part of the city."

As we left the HIAS office and headed for the American

embassy after Shmuel Berenstein had given us detailed directions, explaining to Mother in Yiddish and writing out the address in Polish, my view of Warsaw began to change. By the time we reached the center of the city, the contrast between the Jewish section and the other part of the city was dramatically shocking. I had the feeling that we now had entered an entirely different city from the one in which we lived. In the ghetto I had felt closed in, entrapped. Outside the courtyard but still in the ghetto, we were plunged into the onrush of people, the shouts, the noise of the wagons on the cobblestoned streets, the pungent smells, the numerous gray and black cats, some dashing in or out of decrepit, dirty-looking houses. Fat cats, from eating their full share of mice. Pregnant cats. Boys with forelocks in raggedy black caftans, running, pushing, shoving, screaming in *Galizianer* Yiddish. Everyone seemed to be talking at the same time, each trying to outshout the other.

As Mother, Ruvke, and I passed a crowd of boys, one of them tried to take a swing at us. Another pointed and asked, "Eh, eh, where are you from?"

"Don't answer," Mother said as she took a wild swing in their direction, scolding them: "Leave us alone, we are not afraid of you. Get going." The girls were a little different, a little more refined but not much. Dressed in what looked like rags, their hair in pigtails, they too shouted to one another, but they laughed more, and some of them were pretty. Yet this kind of street scene seemed alive—and exciting.

A few blocks farther, the total atmosphere changed. From darkness to light. From dirty, crowded streets to quiet, clean, wide, beautiful avenues and boulevards. From noise to quiet, except for the sound of horses' hooves and the wheels of the carriages on the cobblestoned streets. Even the cobblestones were different in this section of the town. They came in different colors—dark gray, light gray, brown, purple, and some multicolored ones. And these cobblestones were clean, as if washed every day, which they probably were. The buildings were not unlike those in Gomel. They were the tallest that I had ever seen. They were six to eight

stories, clean, with not too ornate lines. Constructed of large square bricks, with cement fronts and a touch of tile here and there, in colors of brown, tan, and gray, the buildings had a feeling of being both old and new. There were flowerpots in some of the windows, and some of the buildings were surrounded by trees. It was pleasant to walk in this atmosphere.

The few people we observed in this area were well dressed, some even elegant looking. In the park nearby I saw nurses pushing carriages.

The American embassy was a four-story building facing a park. We recognized it when we saw the American flag flying from the window over the door. Shmuel Berenstein had told us to look for the flag. He had shown us a picture of it in a book.

Mother, Ruvke, and I stood for a moment or two in front of the beautiful, clean-looking embassy building and stared at the flag. This was different from any flag we had ever seen before. The red, blue, and white stars and stripes fluttered in the light breeze, alongside a large oak tree. It was different from the many red flags or red flags with hammer and sickle that seemed to appear from nowhere when the Bolshevik revolution took hold while we were in Gomel. Or the flag of Czar Nicholas of All the Russians. Or the Lithuanian flag that no one was allowed to display while Lithuania was under the Czar's regime. Or the German flag that appeared in Vetka when the German army took over. Or the Polish flag that was seen over many of the buildings in Warsaw, especially in this section of this city, which obviously was the location of many governmental offices.

As we stood watching the American flag, Mother said, "My dear children, someday this will be our flag. Isn't it beautiful?"

The uniformed guard at the door of the embassy asked Mother in Polish what she wanted. Her Polish vocabulary was very limited. Nevertheless, she tried to explain our mission. She supported her verbal explanation by showing the letter that was given her by Shmuel Berenstein. Now he understood and he directed us inside, to an office at the left. With the letter in hand, Mother, with Ruvke and me tagging along beside her, approached a man at

a desk. He greeted us in English, then in Polish. Mother explained that she knew only "a few words in Polish." Could she speak in Russian, or still better, in Yiddish? He said Yiddish would be fine since he knew German and that would be close enough.

Showing him the letter, Mother explained the reason for our visit. "We want to go to America, where my husband has been for over seven years. He is an American now, and, please, help us get there as soon as possible."

The tall, nice-looking young man smiled and, in German, told Mother, "I can understand your anxiety to join your husband in the United States. We will try to help you, but it will take time, and you must be patient." Patience was a word we would be hearing often during our stay in Warsaw, and Mother learned to cope with it—to be patient in an impatient, restless way.

"Madam, please sit down. I have some questions to ask, and we will want you to fill out some forms. We will help you with these."

Mother was delighted, overjoyed, almost in tears. "Chaimele, Ruvkele, my children, we are in America. This is America."

She was right of course. But this was to be only the beginning, just one step in a lingering process.

"My husband, Simche, is a fine man, a hard worker, a master tailor, a young and healthy man, and a good American," she told the embassy official after she answered many questions and the papers were filled out by him.

The man looked at Mother and smiled, as he and his assistant, a pretty girl, were taking down notes. Finally, he said to Mother, "Now, madam, go home, we will be in touch with Mr. Berenstein at the HIAS, and we will let you know when we can tell you something definite as to your visa request and plans for your trip to the United States. Good day, madam."

Mother thanked him again, blessed him, and tried to kiss his hands, which he would not let her do, and then we left the building. Once more we stood in front of the embassy and looked at the American flag.

"Soon, children, we will be in America, reunited with your father," Mother said once again, as we began our walk back to our shabby ghetto shelter.

Soon? When Mother said that, "soon we will be in America," it was in the summer of 1919. "Soon" began to stretch into weeks, and months, including a very cold winter. It was not until the following spring that the idea of going to America began to loom as a definite possibility. It was Mother's refusal to give up on hope, her unbelievable, dogged persistence and creative resourcefulness that eventually made things happen. Had Mother not had her very special qualities and strengths, we would have perished that winter—or who knows, perhaps have remained in the Warsaw ghetto until the Hitler holocaust some twenty-two years later.

TWENTY-ONE

THE WARSAW ghetto of 1919 included thousands upon thousands of refugees or immigrants, like us, from Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, and other Eastern European countries. With more than a million Jews packed into it, the place was unbelievably crowded, with ear-shattering noises and an assortment of smells. The cat and rat population seemed as large as that of the milling human inhabitants, with cats darting in and out of alleys and crevices where they had their fill of mice and rats, of which there seemed an endless number.

The place where we lived for almost a year consisted of a number of buildings around one of the series of courtyards which comprised the ghetto area. Each courtyard was a city unto itself.

The courtyards were fairly clean. No one threw garbage out of their windows. They ate it instead. Whatever food the residents of the Warsaw ghetto were able to obtain—buy, beg, or steal—they ate. Every scrap of it. So, there was nothing to throw out of the window. There was no broken glass because there were few windows. There were no fire escapes. If there was a fire, you did not escape. Somehow there were few fires.

Most of the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto were thin, pale, and surly looking. Many actually appeared emaciated. Only the cats were fat. They had their mice and rats. The rats and mice got their food from the ghetto sewers, from garbage that flowed in from the more affluent sections of the city. For humans, food was scarce, as were jobs. Few of the Jews in the ghetto had regular employment. Some did not know from day to day how they would earn a zlota for food and other minimal necessities. There were too many tailors, too many carpenters, too many shoemakers. But the

men, except for the very old and infirm, did not hang around the courtyards or remain in their cramped rooms to hope, to dream. Each day, at times very early in the morning, they left for the business areas of the city. Somehow, most of them had found some sort of gainful employment, doing a chore here and a chore there. In the evening they returned with bundles of food under their arms and perhaps a zlota or two in their pockets. Of course, many of the ghetto inhabitants were peddlers and hawkers. And they peddled and hawked anything that they could lay their hands on. If you owned something, it was best that you held on to it, physically. Or found an ingenious way to hide it. Otherwise, it would be gone and hawked the next day. "Finding" was the way of life in the courtyard of the ghetto. Nobody stole. Everybody found.

Women worked at least part of the day, the part of the day when they were not cooking (usually a soup or stew of some sort) or cleaning up their flats, which did not take very long. The women would leave the courtyard an hour or two later than the men. They, too, would find some sort of work. Like their men, they were able to earn something, mostly through peddling and hawking, but sometimes by working as housekeepers or housemaids for the affluent Jewish residents as well as non-Jews outside the ghetto. Sometimes they just did day work, cleaning and washing, including washing the sidewalks in front of embassies.

Since Mother caught on to the ways of the ghetto almost from the very beginning, she set up an elaborate system of safeguarding our meager belongings. Her "jewelry" which consisted of a handful of silver-plated spoons, knives, and forks, her cherished brass mortar and pestle, and a few assorted trinkets along with several pieces of nondescript wearing apparel (providing a changeover from what we were wearing) were locked in the only closet of our one-room flat with an assortment of chains, locks, and superlocks which only a magician (outside of Mother) could open.

The real problem of safeguarding our precious belongings, particularly money, became accentuated during the night. The nightmarish feeling of insecurity that someone might break in while we were asleep and steal whatever we had became a kind of

paranoia with Mother. She felt that there were enough "magicians" in the ghetto who just might find a way to break through the assortments of locks and chains, get into the closet, and take off with her few precious belongings.

The safeguarding of her few zlotas represented a special problem. But Mother was ingenious and she found a way. She sewed a very complex sort of money belt, which she attached to the belt she habitually wore around her stomach to keep her double-hernia truss in place. And so every night before going to sleep, Mother would go through the ritual of putting her paper zlotas and coins inside the money belt, which she attached to her truss belt by means of a series of hooks, clips, and ties (she had developed her own rope-type knots which only she could unknot, and which, to her chagrin, she sometimes forgot how to do).

The second part of the presleep ritual involved the safekeeping of her "silver" and "jewelry." She devised a system of attaching these things to the bottom of our down-filled quilt. So ingenious was this system that it called for the attachment of specially constructed belts and bags of strong, heavy cloth to the quilt by means of special paraphernalia. The only way her "silver" and "jewelry" could thus be taken from her (providing anyone had discovered the secret of their whereabouts) was to take her and the quilt along. That would have been a trick in itself since Mother was heavy. In that eventuality she was bound to wake us, she figured. Anyway, going to sleep took time.

In the morning, Mother went through her getting-up ritual by carefully removing her trinkets from the contraption attached to the quilt and placing them carefully, oh, so carefully, in the closet. She then double-checked her system of multiple locks and chains. Only then was she ready to put the kettle on for the morning tea and make and prepare breakfast for her two boys and herself.

Each morning she would examine her "bank" and carefully count the paper money and the coins, counting out a few pieces for the needs of the day. She would safeguard these few pieces by placing the one or two zlotas needed for the day into another of her special contraptions inside her shoes.

This security system worked beautifully. Day after day. Night after night. Until the day of the "great tragedy." The day that God had "forsaken" her, the day "God was too preoccupied with other more important matters" to look after her and her belongings. For despite her inventive way of safeguarding her precious possessions, Mother thanked God every day—at least three or four times a day at prayer time—for helping her in this great effort. Without God, all her efforts would have been in vain, she said. God looked after her and when God was too busy to do it himself, he entrusted this job to a very special guarding angel, who in turn was watched over by the souls (or spirits) of her long-dead, beloved ancestors, the Lurias, of whom there were many, most of them in heaven.

On the day of the "great tragedy," God or the guardian angel or the souls of her beloved ancestors who were assigned to keep an eye on Mother failed her. Somehow, the signals that usually worked so perfectly became entangled.

That particular day was not much different from any other day except that it was much colder than most. It was actually the coldest day that we experienced during our stay in Warsaw. And for some reason this was the day, Mother decided, it was time to go to HIAS and have a heart-to-heart talk with Shmuel Berenstein about the continued delay of our impending trip to America. Weeks and months had passed, and we were still no nearer to our goal of sailing for America than on the day we had arrived in Warsaw. And on this particular day she had lost her usual patience and composure. Her disturbed emotional condition could have contributed to the "tragedy."

Shortly after breakfast, and after Mother had gone through her ritual of securing her possessions, off we went to HIAS. Because the day was so cold, Mother decided that it would be too much for us to walk and that we would do better to take the horse-drawn trolley that passed within a few blocks of HIAS.

Of course, riding the horse-drawn trolley on this cold winter day would not be much warmer than walking since the

trolley was open. But it would be faster than walking. Bundling would keep us warm.

The trolley was very crowded. There was just one seat left, and the three of us sat in it, crowding the surly man sitting next to Mother and the fat woman sitting next to Ruvke. I was practically on Mother's lap and Ruvke on mine. But the crowding helped keep us warm, even when the two horses pulled the trolley at a fast pace. The wind hit my face, but my body was warm. Of course, we were dressed warmly in all the rags Mother could find, including a long, partly torn muffler around my neck.

Soon we reached our destination and got off the trolley to walk the two blocks to HIAS. Whereas walking the whole distance normally took about an hour and a half, the trolley ride seemed much shorter, perhaps no more than a half hour. When we entered the HIAS office, Mother was told that Shmuel Berenstein was at home ill and was not expected to return until a few days later. A woman attendant asked Mother what she could do for her.

Mother explained that it had been months since we had arrived in Warsaw and while Shmuel Berenstein, "that fine man," promised that "in a few weeks" he could have good news for her, nothing had happened.

The woman asked Mother to sit down and wait while she went to find out whatever she could about our status. She returned with a folder of papers and began to explain.

"At last we have located your husband, but it seems that we have not been able to meet and talk with him. The report says that our representative in New York is endeavoring to meet with him. You see, he goes to work very early and returns late at night. I can assure you, madam, that our representative in New York is a very competent person and she will continue to try to meet with your husband. I know she will succeed eventually."

Mother was elated that Father had finally been found, but she could not understand why they were unable to set a date to meet with him. It never occurred to her that Father might be trying to avoid meeting with the HIAS representative or that he might

have a paramour and thus stayed away all night—sometimes night after night.

"Please give me my husband's address and I will write to him. That might help to hasten things," Mother said to the woman.

"I am sorry, madam, but I am not permitted to do this. Perhaps Shmuel Berenstein will agree to this when he returns. Or he might have some other suggestions as to how you could communicate with your husband. Director Berenstein will be back at the office in a few days. Why don't you return here next week and try to see him then?"

The return trip on the horse-drawn trolley proved uneventful. It was not as crowded as it had been earlier in the morning and before long we were home. Before preparing our lunch, Mother began to remove her money belt and make herself more comfortable. As she did that, I heard a shriek. Ruvke and I ran over to her and asked in unison, "Mama, Mama, what is the matter? Are you sick?"

Mother was ashen, and tears began to roll down her cheeks. Finally she said, "It is gone . . . gone . . . God has forsaken us . . . "

"What are you talking about, Mama? What is it? Tell us," I asked.

"The money, the zlotas . . . it is all gone."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

There was no real answer, only theories. Did the surly man who sat close to Mother take it from her? He kept pushing her, she said. She recalled how that her hernia seemed to hurt and the truss appeared to be tight, but that was not unusual since she was never particularly comfortable wearing the truss for her double hernia, but sometimes she was more comfortable than at others. She had thought nothing of her discomfort at the time. But if that man were a pickpocket, he was expert in his craft. The money belt was gone, but the truss remained intact. Could she have forgotten to have put on the money belt? No, nothing else seemed to have been taken from the flat, which had not been broken into. Mother made sure

to examine the rest of her belongings. Nothing else was missing, just the money and her money belt. The sum of money was not great, but it was all she had and every zlota had been precious to her. Yes, it must have been that surly man, possibly with the help of the fat woman who sat next to Ruvke, who took the money belt with the zlotas from her. Yes, the fat woman had been crowding us too. They were quite a pair of expert pickpockets, Mother decided.

With tears in her eyes and continuing to moan, Mother served us the food. Ruvke and I were hungry and we ate our fill, but Mother ate very little. She was too upset. "Eat, eat," she kept telling us as she herself merely nibbled at a piece of bread.

What should she do now? What could she do? Report to the police? What good would that do? It would only waste time and could even get her in trouble. The money was gone. It would never return. God had forsaken her. Why? Had she sinned? How? She talked to God and prayed and then decided that since "God is good, he must have had a reason" and that "in the long run, God will not forsake me and my little children. God is good."

The big question was what could she do now? How would she obtain enough money to sustain her family? She had said that she could always sell her "jewelry" and "silver" although not for much.

"I must find some kind of work," she said.

"And I must try to find some kind of work, too," I chimed in.

"Me, too," Ruvke said.

What work—and where? What could Mother possibly do to earn a few zlotas? The ideal job for her, she reasoned out loud, would be to work as a cook in some affluent household. For some rich Jewish family in Warsaw. She said that she had heard that there were rich Jews in Warsaw.

It had to be a Jewish family because she could not work for *goyim*. She just could not handle nonkosher food. Besides, she did not know any Polish recipes and that would foreclose the possibility of working for a rich Gentile Polish family. But why not try to locate a situation with some dignitary of another country? Warsaw was a big capital city and there were representatives of many

countries here. Why not find work for some Russian representative, if not for the Russian embassy personnel? She did have some very good Russian recipes. She learned to make excellent Russian dishes during the time she worked in Kharkov. Really good *borscht*! She made very tasty *clubs* (Beef Wellington, Russian style, using veal instead of beef.) And her *kolbasch* (her own original style of Beef Wellington, with beef), was truly outstanding. Why not try to find a job in the American embassy? No, she did not know any American dishes, although she was willing to learn. Maybe the Americans would like some really good Russian food? Mother had enough ideas for job looking. But what would she do for food in the meantime?

For the immigrants in Warsaw who had exhausted their dwindling funds, HIAS had set up a soup kitchen and once a day, from eleven in the morning until two in the afternoon, the organization served soup from large steaming kettles. If you arrived later than ten in the morning, you found the lines were formidable. If you waited until two, what was left in the kettles, if anything, was a very thin soup, almost like warm water.

We knew about the soup kitchens and the lines. Mother heard about the soup kitchens from some of our neighbors and from talking to other immigrants at HIAS. That way was not for us, Mother had decided. It would be used in desperation, as a last resort.

But now, after the great tragedy, there was not much choice. Our dwindling food supply came to an end. The more Mother tried to stretch the remaining bean soup and the few eggs from which she made delicious omelettes, and the black bread and few potatoes, the faster they seemed to go. And the hungrier we became.

Mother tried to get a job as a cook, assistant cook, or even just as a kitchen helper with some affluent family. With Ruvke and me at her side, she walked to the area of Warsaw where the American embassy was located. She decided that she would ring doorbells, knock at any likely looking door, and offer her services. It did not work. With her not-too-polished Russian and very

inferior Polish, she could not get anyone to listen to her story. Then she tried German, which was really Yiddish with her own kind of twist or concept of what German should sound like. That turned out to be simply funny to the person who opened the door. Mother, of course, did not laugh. Nor did Ruvke nor I.

After knocking on about a dozen doors with no positive response and a few very negative ones, Mother became frustrated and the three of us felt particularly hungry in the bitter cold of winter. Shmuel Berenstein was still ill, and no one at the HIAS office seemed to know precisely when he would return. So, we went to the HIAS soup kitchen.

The line in the large, barely furnished hall was already long, although it was only ten in the morning and nothing would be served until noon. Over a hundred men, women, and children were in line ahead of us—mostly women and children, but there was a surprisingly large number of men. The presence of the men was especially surprising to Mother, who thought that all the men were in America by now. As we got in line, others followed, and by noon the line behind us was much larger than that in front.

A few minutes after twelve, several men, wearing large aprons, carried out huge kettles of steaming soup while a few women helpers brought trays of cut-up black bread. When everything seemed to be organized, a gargantuan man, with an enormous white apron on his big stomach made an announcement in *Galitzianer* Yiddish: "There is enough soup for all in line, so please do not push. Pick up a bowl and spoon as you approach the kettle. Take two pieces of bread—no more. If you take more or become unruly, you will not be served and will be asked to leave." Obviously, he knew from experience what could happen.

We did as he instructed, as did most of those in line near us. The soup was hot and tasted fine, especially since we were so hungry. We ate the soup, a mixture of beans, potatoes, and cabbage, and the bread with real relish.

The next day at HIAS there was still no news of any consequence from America. Shmuel Berenstein had returned and he

invited Mother into his office. He appeared pale and weak, not having fully recovered from his illness.

He said to Mother, "Madam Gussow, I know how you feel, and I sympathize with you but I must tell you that these things do take time. As my assistant told you last week and the week before that, we have located your husband. We know that he is alive and in good health. He has a position that pays him well. The only trouble is that our representative in New York has been unable to track him down for a meeting. He appears to be working late some nights and on other nights he does not seem to come home at all. Our American representative just cannot sit around all night to wait for him. However, she is not giving up. On the contrary, she is doing everything possible to reach him. Madam Gussow, of one thing you can be certain, we will do everything to hasten your departure for America. When that departure will take place I cannot foretell. You must have patience."

I looked at Mother and I saw that she seemed to be encouraged by the words of this sincere, fine man. Then she said to him: "Thank you, thank you. You are a good man and I know that I can depend on you and your organization. The trouble is that all my money is gone. What few zlotas I had are now gone, stolen, taken from me and I don't know what I can do to manage with food, with lodging from now on." Then she told him the story of the pickpockets who had stolen the money from under her truss.

Shmuel Berenstein listened to her patiently. What choice did he have? He was asking her to be patient. So, he had to be patient himself. Then he said, "I am sorry to hear of your troubles. We will help you all we can. You must go to our soup kitchen for food and we will try to find some work for you. In the meantime, we will lend you money to pay your rent. You will have a roof over your head. Now, come to see me in a few days—before the end of the week."

As we walked back to the horse-drawn trolley to take us home to the ghetto, Mother began to hum a tune.

"You're happy, Mother," I said. "This is good. I like

Shmuel Berenstein. He will find a way to get us to America soon," I told her.

"*Fun dein moil in Got's e'eren* (from your mouth in God's ears)," she said.

There was still no news from Father in America, when we made our next visit to the HIAS offices. However, Mother did get a job doing housework for a rich Jewish family that lived not far from the American embassy and also near the delightful park we had visited several days earlier. Mother was extremely pleased since now we did not have to stand in line for our daily meal. A new problem developed, however. What would she do with us while she worked during the day? We could not remain in our flat all day by ourselves. Then she had an idea. Mother's mind was quick and sharp.

"Chaimele, what I must do is to find a school for you and Ruvke. Or a Hebrew school, or both. This way you will continue with your education while I work and while we are waiting for our passage to America," Mother said. She had great plans for me insofar as education was concerned. "You have a fine mind. You can be a rabbi for sure. Or a doctor. I will go to the lengths of the earth to help to provide you with an education."

She could not locate a school that would accept us since we did not have sufficient knowledge of Polish. But she did find a Hebrew school where I could continue my studies of the Torah and the Talmud and Ruvke could take lessons in Hebrew and read the Five Books of Moses. She also found a woman who, for a small sum, would teach us Polish and German. She tried but could not find anyone who would teach us English.

We settled down to a new and more interesting life in Warsaw. Mother went to work early in the morning after serving us breakfast. Then Ruvke and I walked to the Hebrew school, where we spent all of the morning and part of the afternoon. The rest of the afternoon we studied Polish and German with our new teacher, a stout, middle-aged woman, who dressed in the same long skirt and pink blouse every day. She always looked neat.

Learning and reading the Gemara, the second section of the

Talmud, was fairly easy for me now, but studying Polish and German proved more of a task since I had to start by learning two new alphabets—the Roman for Polish, and the distinctive German letters. I was already proficient in two alphabets—Hebrew (also Yiddish which is like Hebrew with minor variations) and Russian. While my new studies were difficult, the teacher was good and very patient with me. Soon I began to make progress in both new languages.

"While I cannot teach you English, the knowledge of the Roman alphabet which we use in Polish is the same for English, and it will be of help to you when you get to America," she said.

Mother worked six days a week—every day except Saturday, our Sabbath. She also returned home early on Friday afternoon. Mother complained of the "hard work," of cleaning, washing clothes and dishes, but her complaints were tempered with thankfulness that she was able to earn enough so that we did not have to go to the soup kitchens for meals. She was particularly happy that Ruvke and I were able to attend Hebrew school. And she expressed great pride in the fact that I was taking private lessons in German and Polish.

"Chaimele, when we reach America, you will enroll in the gymnasium, after which you will study at the university. You will be a rabbi. Or a teacher. Or a doctor. You have such an outstanding, brilliant mind. All your teachers tell me how bright you are—as if I needed to be told."

As we adjusted to our new mode of living in the Warsaw ghetto, we continued to wait for the "good news." But the good news did not seem to materialize. Instead, on the next visit to HIAS, Mother received some disheartening news.

"Madam Gussow, I don't know what to say to you," Shmuel Berenstein began. "After all of these weeks and months of trying, our representative has been unable to arrange a meeting with your husband. As I told you earlier, he works all day, from early morning until the evening. Now, we find he rarely goes home. He seems to spend the nights away from his room and thus far our representative has not been able to find out

where he goes every night after work. Can you help us? Do you have any suggestions?"

Mother was in deep thought. She seemed worried. I saw deep furrows in her large brow. Then she came out with it. Mother was not in the habit of mincing her words. More often than not she would spout out what was on her mind. This was particularly true when she was under stress.

"It is possible that my husband has found a *geliebte*? A girl to love, to spend time with?"

"It is possible," Shmuel Berenstein said, "but we have no knowledge that such is the case. How long has your husband been in America, away from you?"

"Almost eight years and this is a long time for a young, healthy man to be away from a woman. A man is a man."

"Yes, madam, you are right, but our representative in America is not permitted to get involved in a personal situation like this."

"I do have a suggestion. My husband has two brothers and two sisters in America, in New York. It might be a good idea for your representative to locate one of them and to see whether a meeting could be arranged for Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning at the house of one of his brothers."

"This is a practical suggestion, Madam Gussow. Do you have an address, do you know where any of them live?"

"Oh, I have the address of my husband's older brother. His name is Shleme. I have his address with some papers in our flat. I will bring it to you."

The weeks that followed were trying for all of us, but particularly for Mother. She began to worry about Father, about his possible involvement with a *"geliebte."* This thought became all-pervasive. While she hated to believe such a possibility, she began to look at the reality of the situation. One night when Ruvke was asleep and Mother and I were still awake, she became talkative, spouting out her incantations about the worst things that could have happened to Father, fantasizing about his "carryings-on" with one *geliebte* after another. As if she wanted to exorcise herself of her evil thoughts.

"What can you expect from a healthy man, endowed with all of his sexual prowess?" she began, as if talking to herself instead of to me, her not-quite-twelve-year-old son. "Eight years without a woman? It is not possible. Not for a vigorous man with youthful ideas such as your father, to whom a woman has always been important in his life. A man like that would not hesitate to sin once again as he did earlier."

And then she launched into her often-repeated narrative of Father's "great sin" of years past, dramatizing the presentation with a generous use of invectives.

Father's "sin of sins" was perpetrated in Kharkov when he, the playboy tailor with "the golden hands," courted Mother, then the little maid in the famous Gussow tailoring establishment. He was twenty-five, handsome and vigorous. She was fourteen and short, all of five feet to his five feet, eight and a half inches. He seemed very tall to her for she had to look up to him. By now she had blossomed out as a woman, with nice lines, including a full, curved bosom.

The "sin of sins" started innocently enought on one of their Saturday dates to Kharkov's marketplace, followed by a walk to the park nearby. Sitting on a bench on that particular Saturday afternoon in the bright, warming sunlight, Simche put his arm around Chaiele's shoulder. Although startled, she made no move to stop him. His fingers soon touched her breasts, gently. She wanted to resist, but she didn't. Instead, she reacted with excitement and her breasts began to harden. Father's fingers became a little more active. At that point Chaiele became even more embarrassed, and she asked him to stop. People were watching, she said.

On the following Saturday she prepared lunch, which included chicken, *bubb* (a large, dried bean, cooked, the water drained, and salted, which made a delicious snack that somewhat resembled arbanzo beans in taste), and *butterbulkes*, which she cooked and baked herself, and she made sure to tell him of her proud achievement. This time instead of sitting on the bench, they had their repast on the grass in the park. And after they consumed the food, which Father characterized as "most delicious," they lay

back on the grass, with Father very near Mother. The experienced, virile young man began to fondle his uninitiated girlfriend. And as the previous Saturday she responded excitedly. Up to a point. Again, she asked him to stop, and once again she said that people were looking at them. It wasn't the thing to do in public, she told him.

He didn't push the issue and instead behaved very gently with her, lying beside her and whispering endearing words.

The following Saturday's outing took on a new dimension. After their walk through the marketplace and the luncheon which she had prepared and which they ate on the grass in the park, Simche suggested that they take a walk through the city. Mother liked the idea of exploring the narrow, interesting streets a short distance from the marketplace. Besides, she enjoyed being with this knowledgeable man who knew his city of Kharkov well. She trusted him and believed in him. After all, had she not decided that this was the man she was going to marry? So, like the biblical Ruth, she was perfectly willing to go wherever her man wanted her to go.

Soon they found themselves in front of a three-story building in a narrow side street. Simche stopped and then they rested by sitting on the stoop. From here on the story is a bit hazy in my memory since Mother changed the details each time she told it. The best I can remember is that Simche led little Chaiele to a flat on the top floor of that building and it was there that Father's "sin of sins" took place. Simche made love to little Chaiele in a way he had not made love to her before. She said that she tried to resist this passionate man but could not. She wanted to scream, to cry. But she did neither. It was after that experience that she thought of her brother's admonition before she had left Pumpian: "My dear sister, there will come a time when you will have a choice—of taking the right road or the wrong road . . . " She felt that in failing to resist Simche she had taken the wrong road. She had not followed the advice of her learned, revered brother who had urged her, "My dear sister, make sure to take the right road."

"Chaimele, my child," Mother said, "I did take the wrong road, but I couldn't resist the advances of that strong,

virile man who wouldn't have stopped even if I tried to push him away . . .

"Chaimele, your father may have been a sinner, but he was an honorable man and in less than a year we were married. He well may have sinned during these eight years in America, without me, his wife, probably carrying on with one girl after another. But I can't believe that he has a *geliebte* who would succeed in turning him against me, against his family. Your father is such a good and upstanding man, and he has always loved me. I can't blame him for not being an abstainer, since eight years is a very long time for a healthy man to be without a woman. But if he knew that he could have me soon, it might be different—unless he is smitten, which is not likely."

The perpetual optimist, Mother continued to hope. Her belief in the eventual success of her goal to reach the "golden" land never left her.

"You will see, Chaimele, with God's help, we will get to America. Once the HIAS representative reaches Father, explaining that we are here and ready to join him in America, he will listen and he will provide the money and the papers. Your father is a good man. He loves me and he loves his children. He will not abandon us."

Father did not abandon us, and eventually the HIAS representative did succeed in reaching him.

TWENTY-TWO

THE DAY of the "good news" finally came—the news we had been waiting for throughout the fall and cold winter. It was a sunny spring morning in 1920 when Mother rushed into my Hebrew class with unabashed shouts of joy.

"Chaimele, Chaimele, we are going to America—at last. The HIAS has finally contacted Father, and he wants us to join him in America."

I was thrilled at the thought that soon we would sail on a beautiful ship to America. However, "soon" turned out to be more days, more weeks, and more months of waiting. Not merely waiting, since now Mother had to do a lot to prepare for the journey, to get all those papers, visas, passports taken care of and then to wait for money from Father. Finally, Shmuel Berenstein joyfully relayed the really good news.

"You are going to America, Madam Gussow, you know that. But then, you always knew, so waiting from now on should not make you unhappy. You know that you and your sons will be joining your husband in America. It is now only a matter of time. Now, we have to put you on a schedule for a ship that will take you to America. Let me say that arranging passage is no easy matter. It will take time. You have learned to have patience. I know that you will continue to be patient for now you *are* on your way to America."

Days and weeks continued to pass as arrangements were being made for our passage to America. Mother, with her vivid imagination, began to picture and describe to us what our life would be like in "the golden country, *goldeneh medina*." She painted a rose-colored, multifaceted canvas. She described an

enchanting scenario. The ship that would take us to America was large, spacious, and beautifully appointed. She visualized us sitting in deck chairs, covered with woolen blankets. Stewards served us hot bouillon, tea, and cookies. And in the evening, we listened to a concert of delightful music.

Father, with a red, well-groomed beard, tall and handsome, dressed in the latest American style, met us on our arrival in New York. With a large, beautiful automobile and a chauffeur, he would take us to a most attractive and spacious house in the best section of New York. Our new home was furnished lavishly but tastefully since "your father wants the best for his family." She described a large, well-equipped kitchen, adjoining a carefully appointed dining room, followed by a large and smartly furnished sitting room. She saw Ruvke and me in a large, attractive bedroom, with a separate bed for each. And Father and Mother with an extra-large bed, and other new and attractive furniture such as dressers, chests, and comfortable chairs.

"You know, Chaimele, we might even have a maid," she said. "Father would not want me to clean the apartment—just cook. He knows that I am a very good cook."

It was more than three months after the big "news" and Mother's enchanting descriptions of the glorious journey on the beautiful ship and the amenities of our charming home in New York City, that we finally received all our papers and instructions for our trip to America. Mother was called for a "conference" with Shmuel Berenstein and his assistant. Mother did not walk. She ran, with Ruvke and me at her side as usual. Breathlessly, we entered the HIAS offices.

"Madam Gussow—at last you and your children are going to America," Shmuel Berenstein began.

"God bless you, you are a good and fine man," Mother said as she began to kiss his hands.

"Now, my assistant has your papers and she will tell you exactly what you will do, where, and when you will go. My good wishes to you."

The assistant, with a large folder of papers under her arm,

led us to another part of the large office and asked us to sit down in chairs near her desk. Then she began.

"Now, Madam Gussow, here are your papers—very precious papers which you must guard carefully. Without any of these you will not be able to get to America. Here are your passports, your visa, your exit papers, your traveling instructions." She continued to present Mother with papers and enumerate what they were, repeating her admonishment to be "very careful" and to "guard the precious papers."

"Next week, on Tuesday," she continued, "you will take a train to Danzig, the seaport of the Free State between the German-Polish border. There you will be met by our representatives and taken to the HIAS embarkation camp. You will be given comfortable but temporary accommodations until you are assigned to the ship that will take you and your sons to America. I cannot tell you how long you will be in Danzig. It could be a few days, a week, or longer. It will depend on how fast you can be processed for your passage and when space will be available for you on an American ship. While in camp, you will receive medical examinations and you will be given full instructions for the rest of your journey. Now, go home and get ready for the train for Danzig next Tuesday."

"Did my husband send us any money, and letters?" Mother asked.

"He has provided enough money for your trip. When you take the train for Danzig our representative will meet you and he will give you some additional money, enough for your needs for the journey until you reach Danzig—for food on the train and for incidentals. It will not be much money, but it will suffice. No, your husband has not forwarded any letters, but I can assure you that he is anxious to see you and his sons. Soon you will be together."

The next few days were among the most exciting we had ever experienced. Mother was overjoyed, and the fantasies that she now began to build and recite were more extravagant than ever. This was Thursday—and we just could not wait until Tuesday. When we went to bed on Monday, none of us could sleep. Mother was

telling us one American story after another. It must have been hours before I became drowsy and finally dozed off, as Mother was still talking.

It was shortly after dawn on Tuesday when Mother awakened us. Our few belongings were already packed. We dressed quickly and down the street we went to take a carriage for our short ride to the railroad station. It was a joyous, melodious ride. Mother hummed to the sound of the metal wheels, harmonizing with the drumlike clop, clop of the horse's iron-shod hooves on the cobblestoned pavements during the half-hour ride to the Warsaw railroad station. The sun had risen. It was going to be a beautiful day. What a great feeling of exultation, of enchanting anticipation. Once again, Mother began to build one magical, delightful picture after another of our trip to America. Of the arrival in New York. Of our new home. Of the many things we would be doing in the great city of New York. Ruvke asked endless questions. As usual Mother seemed to have no lack of answers. The answers—all of them—came from her vivid imagination since she did not know what the ship would look like. Or what the Danzig harbor was like. Or the embarkation camp. Or the reality that was New York. But her fantasies were captivating.

The train ride from Warsaw to Danzig took most of the morning and a part of the afternoon. How different from the trip in the boxcar when we were driven out of Pumpian and fought our way to "seats" on the floor after hours of waiting on the dark, cold platform of Poneviez, not knowing where we were going and when the train would finally come. This time, our train was clean and the car had seats and windows so that we could see the passing countryside.

Late in the afternoon when the sun began to set we arrived at Danzig. Shortly after we got off the train and collected our few bundles of belongings, a HIAS representative came over and made an announcement. "American travelers please follow me."

What a wonderful sound these few words had as they came from the mouth of the middle-aged woman. We were now "Amer-

ican travelers." She said it first in Yiddish. Then she repeated it in German, Polish, and Russian.

We followed her gladly. Soon we were lined up before a bus and told to get in "carefully and slowly. There is plenty of room for all of you." The HIAS people, fully experienced in their dealings with immigrants, knew and could appreciate their anxieties. Then the woman explained that the bus would be taking us to the embarkation camp, where we would prepare for our trip to America.

It was dark when we resumed our journey, and we could see little on the hour's drive to the camp. Soon we were on the outskirts of the city, near a body of water. Through the window came smells of coal and tar.

When we reached the camp area, we saw electric lights in the camp, a change from the gas lamps in our Warsaw flat. As we were led off the bus, we were lined up in front of a large, wooden building, and at intervals groups went inside for registration and room assignments. It was another half hour at least before our trio entered the inside of the building.

The place was large but had a makeshift appearance. It was obvious that this building and the others in the compound had been put up in a hurry for the temporary purpose of processing the thousands emigrating to America from Russia and Poland and perhaps several other, smaller adjoining Slavic countries.

After being questioned, first by a woman, then by a man, each of whom filled out paper forms for us, the man told Mother that before we could go to our assigned quarters in one of the buildings in the compound, we would have to take shower baths, the first shower in my life (for Mother and Ruvke, too, of course). Then we were to be deloused, after which we would be examined by a doctor and nurse.

It was getting late and we were tired and Mother expressed her feelings to the man. His answer: "Madam, these procedures are necessary, but I can assure you that after the bath and the delousing, you will feel much better. And you will have a clean bed."

I was twelve years old and for most of my life until then I had lived with lice on my body and in my clothing, as did Mother and Ruvke. And so did probably many, if not most, of our relatives and neighbors. Nor was it otherwise with most of our fellow immigrants.

Wherever we had lived, we were infested with body lice. Literally hundreds, if not thousands of the small but very visible and not too tiny creatures lived in the crevices of my clothing, particularly my underwear. They fed on human blood and some of them looked like tiny bubbles of blood, encased in transparent skin. My body itched and I scratched and scratched. Sometimes we would squash dozens of lice before going to sleep or upon getting up in the morning. It was fun, but it was also a bloody mess. Worst of all, no matter how many lice we killed at one time, it was futile. We never could get rid of all of them. Somehow, they always came back in droves. Lice are prolific breeders. So, while I had some fear, I welcomed the idea of being deloused. I might miss the fun of squashing the bloody little creatures, but not much.

Mother was led to a room in one direction while Ruvke and I were moved into a room in another area. There a man instructed us in Yiddish to take out of our pockets anything we considered valuable and then undress. Quietly and slowly he explained: "After you take your shower and have been medicated, you will be given new underwear and new clothes. Your clothes but not your underwear will be thoroughly deloused, cleaned, and medicated and then returned to you. Your underwear will be destroyed—burnt."

Ruvke and I did as he instructed. I removed from my pockets a few kopeks, several buttons, and a penknife, and Ruvke took whatever trinkets he wanted to keep. Then we undressed completely and followed the man who led us to the door into a standing shower. He told us what to do, actually helped us turn on the warm and cold water, as we hesitated and expressed some concern. He gave us soap and towels. Then he said, "When you are finished with your shower bath, you will leave through the other door," and he pointed. "There you will be met by a doctor's orderly, who will

medicate you, and then you will be given fresh, new underwear, and you will be examined by a doctor."

My first shower bath was absolutely wonderful. Once I adjusted the hot and cold water to the proper temperature and let the warm water run on my body, it felt marvelous. Not only was it my first shower—it was my first real bath, except for the steam bath at the orphanage in Schlutzk. Until then, Mother washed me in a bowl or I washed in the river. There was a bath on the estate where Mother worked as a housekeeper in Vetka, but we were not permitted to use it. Probably because of the lice. And of course, we could not use the bath in the mansion where Mother worked in Gomel. Again, it must have been the lice.

My body tingled. I hated to leave the shower. We dried ourselves, then put the towels around our bodies and moved to the next room. Here a man, dressed in white, awaited us. He told us to put away the towel and then smeared a liquid which had a strong medicinal odor and left a burning sensation, over our bodies, drying us afterward. Then he gave Ruvke and me each a new set of underwear, which also smelled strongly of medicine.

"Put on the underwear," he told us, "and go to the next room where a doctor will examine you."

I have often thought of this experience but particularly during the Hitler holocaust and the years that followed. As I read about the millions in the Nazi concentration camps who were marched in formation to stand in line for "shower baths" and then led into the gas chambers for extermination, I could imagine—almost feel—the choking sensation, the gasping for breath, the agony, the utter helplessness of these unfortunate people, who probably included some of our old neighbors, some of my childhood friends from Pumpian. Of course, now we were in friendly hands, and we were being processed for our trip to America. When I entered the shower room, however, I really had no idea what to expect. Or what awaited me from the shower into the other room where the man dressed in white greeted us.

Timing is so important. This was in June of 1920 but had we been in Poland—in the Warsaw ghetto in 1940, just twenty years

later, that shower room in the emigration camp could have been on the way to the gas chamber and the agony of asphyxiation. I am not a fatalist but the lesson I learned from this experience, as I reflected on it on numerous occasions (and continue to think about it), was the intrinsic value of timing, planned and unplanned. How fortunate some of us are to be at the right place at the right time, or inversely how unfortunate it is to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

And so often I think of Mother and her endless, patient persistence. If she had not prevailed in her struggle to reach her goal of going to America, if she had not possessed her indomitable spirit and strength of character to meet all exigencies head on, we might eventually have found ourselves in a false "shower room" in some concentration camp, sent to our death in the gas chambers.

After the medical examination, Ruvke and I eventually joined Mother, and we were soon assigned our quarters at the temporary camp. Our new "home" was a very large room with several rows of beds, including a number of two-tiered bunks, a few tables, and several chairs. We shared this dormitory with a number of other families. The beds were very clean, as was everything else in the room. A strong chemical odor, together with the odor of tar and coal emanating from outside the building (we were located near a coal mine), has stayed with me all these years. Sometimes I can still smell those smells.

It was in institutionalized barracks life, organized extremely efficiently. We did not really mind. Our thoughts were of that "beautiful ship" that soon would take us to America. But days soon became weeks. And now it was the beginning of summer, and some days were oppressively hot. The heat and the proximity of living with so many people caused a certain amount of bickering among the families who shared the camp quarters with us. For one thing, there was absolutely no privacy. You got up, washed, dressed, ate, moved around with people always around you. You talked. You read. You asked questions. Especially questions about America. The answers you received varied. It was fascinating to hear the different conceptions our fellow travelers had of what

awaited us in the new world. And then came evening. Lights were to be put out. And you went to sleep.

This kind of life must have been particularly uncomfortable for husband and wife, of whom there were a few. Each had only a single bed. And so bickering started.

Mother developed an urge, a compulsion to see the city of Danzig. She thought a trip to the city would be a nice healthy change for all of us. So she went to work to obtain a pass. It wasn't easy. It was almost impossible. The first answer from authorities was a loud "No". No one was permitted to leave the camp grounds. And that was that. Mother wanted to know why this was so.

"Because legally we are not residents of the city of Danzig," she was told. "We are guests in the camp area, and even getting this camp took a lot of doing on the part of HIAS. No country would provide us with a campsite for the embarkation. Fortunately, Danzig is a free state, as part of the agreement after the war, and we were able to locate here, but with restrictions. No one from camp is allowed to go to the city, or even to any area outside the camp grounds. These are regulations of the Danzig authorities."

Mother refused to take no for an answer. She began to use every possible ruse or stratagem to leave the camp grounds. She complained of being ill. But after the camp physician examined her and "found nothing seriously wrong," she created a new methodology. She needed a new truss for her double hernia. She was told that this could be taken care of in camp. She wanted to know how soon? "Just as soon as we can arrange for a truss maker to come down to camp." She said she could not wait. Waiting could mean a hernia operation. And that would complicate matters. For a while she seemed to have convinced the camp director. He began to be concerned. But after a conference with the camp physician, a truss maker, a big fat German *frau*, soon arrived. And Mother had a new truss. Which she promptly discarded since she found it much too tight and uncomfortable. Besides, there was nothing really wrong with her old truss, which was quite adequate. Anyway, she now had a new, extra truss "just in case." And for free.

Then she began to use me as a way of getting out of camp

and a visit to the city. She told the camp director that her older boy was a sickly lad, who could not stand the confinement and the assorted smells of the camp.

"My Chaimele will faint away, as he has done before, and he might die, as he almost did in Gomel," she told the director. She had tears in her eyes. And observing her I tried to help her. I tried to look sad and sick. It did not work. Then one afternoon, Mother called Ruvke and me aside and whispered, "I have a pass. We are going to Danzig."

"Mother, how did you do it? How did you manage to get a pass?" I said. When we left the camp she told me.

"We must keep this a secret. I feel a little ashamed for the way I got the pass," Mother said, smiling. "I told the director that I had to get to the city of Danzig just for a few hours, that we needed to get away from camp, and then, God forgive me, I threatened that pass or no pass, I would take my children and leave camp anyway, getting the director in trouble with the Danzig authorities. The director quieted me down and then gave me this red piece of paper, warning me to be quiet about it, to tell nobody, and to return before evening, 'before it gets dark.' "

After walking for about a mile, we stopped at the turn of a road to wait for a trolley to take us to the city. We could see the tracks and there was a sign in German and Polish which I could barely read.

Soon the trolley came. It was beautiful. This was not a horse-drawn trolley like those in which we rode in Warsaw. Or like the ones I rode in Berdichev when I visited my sister Pashke. It was electrified. And it moved rapidly. The ride was smooth except on turns. The trip took almost an hour, but it was a most wonderful ride. The countryside was enchanting on this late-summer day in 1920. Everything was green, and here and there the green was interspersed with the colors of flowers.

Soon we were in the city. Dark, old, reddish-brown buildings were visible as the trolley slowed its pace. The closer we came to the city, the more attractive and more varied the buildings became. Then we began to see people on the streets.

Mother did not know where we were going—only that she wanted to get to the center of the town. And so we traveled until the conductor announced that we had reached the "last stop." The last stop turned out to be a marketplace, near a river. It was a new, exhilarating experience to walk through this unique market, with its many stalls. Before 1914 and the war Danzig had been a German city, but as part of the armistice it was declared a "free city," located between the new border of Germany and Poland.

I had never seen such a plentiful and varied display of fruits and vegetables, not even in Bialystok. And so colorfully displayed, in such an orderly fashion. Mother wanted to buy everything within sight, but as her funds were limited she had to be highly selective. So, she bought a few oranges and a bunch of grapes, and what a great time we had eating the luscious fruit. Then we came upon stands of smoked fish. Large and small. Gold and Silver. I had never seen smoked fish before. The appetizing odor of the fish was enticing; my nostrils seemed to tingle in response. And the merchandise was displayed so handsomely. Everything looked so sparklingly clean. Mother stopped at one stand with a bountiful display of small, golden fish. Mother bought a bagful. I didn't know what kind of fish they were but they provided a marvelous taste sensation.

After we finished eating the fish, with delicious dark German bread, oranges, and grapes, we walked through the streets just beyond the market area. The old medieval city was well preserved and immaculately maintained. The old buildings, the sidewalks, and the gutters looked as if they were carefully washed and cleaned every day.

On our return, I found camp life dreary. Compared to the beauty and the freedom that we experienced during our day in the city, life in camp seemed especially confining. However, we talked and marveled over those few free and enchanting hours in Danzig for days to come. And with each day, we were approaching *The Day*, when we would sail on "that beautiful American ship" that would take us to the land of our dreams.

Then late in August, on a cool, rainy morning, we were

instructed to gather in the assembly room after breakfast. At breakfast, Mother learned that only some of the camp residents had been told to gather in this fashion. All sorts of rumors were rampant, but no one actually knew what would happen in the assembly room. Mother, with her strong optimistic streak, made a flat statement: "Chaimele, Ruvkele, do you know what they will tell us in the assembly room? That our beautiful American ship is here, and is ready to take us to America."

When the appointed hour came, we were among the first to arrive in the assembly room, which was soon filled with adults and children. It became noisy. Then a man approached a table in the middle of the room and through a megaphone made an announcement: "I have good news for you, all of you who are assembled here this morning in response to my call. All of those whose names I have before me will be sailing for America."

Before he could finish his sentence, there were shouts of joy. Many began to jump up and down while others congratulated each other on their good fortune. When the joyous noise died down a bit, the speaker continued. "Now, quiet down and listen carefully. You will be sailing to America in two days from now—on Thursday." He proceeded to outline details for the processing that would follow. It was difficult to grasp all he had to say but one thing was clear: We would sail on a big ship—he mentioned the name—on Thursday from the Danzig harbor.

Mother was so overjoyed that she had difficulty containing herself. "God has heard our prayers, at last we are going to America," she exulted.

The next two days were hectic. The excitement was contagious, but also depressing for those who had to remain and continue to wait for their ship.

TWENTY-THREE

THURSDAY MORNING we were up with the dawn, washed, dressed, and ready for the trip to the ship. We formed lines and were led onto waiting buses. There were four of them, each filled to capacity.

It was not a long trip—perhaps twenty minutes—and then we were at the harbor, where I saw a big ship. It was black and white—mostly black with white stripes on top. When we came near it, I tried to make out the name on the side of the bow. I was able to spell out the letters but I could not pronounce the name: S.S. *Susquehanna*. Flowing over it was the flag of the United States, which by now looked more beautiful than ever. I had become familiar with the Stars and Stripes during the weeks that we stayed in the camp. Here I was able to find books that dealt with the geography and the history of the United States. While I could not understand what I was reading, I was able to make out some of the words. And the pictures of scenes of New York City and other parts of the United States were enchanting to look at.

What a thrill it was to get off the bus and find our big ship with the American flag flying over it—even on this gray, rainy, late-August morning.

As we left the bus, we were lined up once again, this time by name. As we moved toward the new line, Mother was given a packet by a woman who explained what was in it and what she was to do. The packet contained our passport, which had been taken away when we entered the camp, tickets for the voyage to New York, some money, and a few other papers, the contents of which I did not grasp immediately. The processing took several hours, and

during this time my eyes were on the ship and the activity on board as well as in the vicinity.

It was just after twelve noon, when we were lined up once again, then led up a gangplank, and then down many steps to the ship's lowest deck.

The barrackslike "cabin" that we entered was large, with double bunks throughout. And soon it became crowded with several hundred men, women, and children. Fortunately for us, our assigned bunks were not too far from the entrance and near a round peephole kind of window. Ruvke and I shared the upper bunk, Mother had the lower one to herself. Sharing of bunks by children of all ages proved to be routine. This was to be our home for the next twelve days.

The S.S. *Susquehanna* was certainly not the large, beautiful ship, with a private compartment, steamer chairs, and stewards serving us in style that Mother had envisioned so many times. We were in steerage, the lowliest way of traveling by ship. Except for the bunks, we were being shipped almost like cattle. Nevertheless, being on the ship that would finally take us to America was exciting, if not comfortable. Ruvke and I wanted to explore the ship, but we were restrained by Mother. Whenever we were able to escape her presence, however, off we went.

As at the camp and to a lesser extent in Warsaw, just about anything we did or wanted to do on the ship meant that we had to stand in line first. After we were settled in our "cabin," with our few belongings underneath our bunk, word came that it was time for the midday meal. We were led up one staircase and into a large room where we were lined up in front of a long counter where men with white aprons and white caps were ready to serve food. It was cafeteria style serving. The lines on both sides of the long counter soon extended to the end of the dining room and beyond. We were in the middle. From all this line standing, I developed an almost rabid dislike of standing in line which lingered on for years.

Eventually, when our turn came, I was to taste my first American meal. It was not particularly impressive. A bowl of watery vegetable soup, several slices of meat, a few potatoes,

canned fruit, and coffee or tea. This was the first time that I had tasted canned fruit, or for that matter, canned food of any kind, and it did not please my palate. The canned foods were almost unrecognizable as the same fruits and vegetables I had been used to eating fresh, especially in Pumpian. We sat down on plain metal chairs at a small metal table. Since we were hungry, we ate everything before us, the new and not very pleasing taste notwithstanding.

Toward evening, when we were back in our bunks, the ship's whistle started to blow—low at first and then louder. Soon the big ship began to move. It was a slow and comfortable sail—throughout the night and for the next two days. After we left Danzig harbor, the ship moved slowly toward the Kiel Canal on the way to the port city of Kiel and thence to Bremen, from which we entered the Atlantic Ocean.

On the third day of our voyage we encountered a storm and many of us became sick. The smell of vomiting permeated the steerage dormitory and soon both Ruvke and I began to vomit, too. Mother became very ill and after each vomiting episode she became that much more concerned about her hernia. She was afraid that one or both of her double hernias might become strangulated. She paled, turning almost white, and called for a doctor. With so many of the passengers ill, whatever doctor or doctors and nurses were aboard must have been very busy. But while everyone seemed to be vomiting or retching all around us, no doctor or nurse made an appearance.

At last, when the storm was over and the ship steadied down to almost normal, a young doctor, dressed in white, a stethoscope around his neck, with a young, pretty nurse at his side, entered the steerage. The moment Mother saw him, she called him over. In her best dramatic manner she explained that she "almost died" in the terrible storm, that her double hernias "came out," and that she had had a very difficult time putting them back in place.

"My rupture almost strangulated," she said, "and you could have had a big operation on your hands, doctor."

He tried to tell her something, but it appeared that the only

language he knew was English. But while he did not understand what Mother was saying, he seemed to know what she tried to convey to him. Pointing, she made him examine her hernia, and he also checked her heart and lungs. Then he felt her stomach. Again, he tried to tell her something, in English, to little avail. Then he must have realized that he knew four words in German which happened to be very similar to Yiddish. He smiled broadly and said, "*Morgen gibt das gut* (tomorrow will be better)."

It was an expression he was to use in the days ahead, and each time he proclaimed it, accompanied by his very charming smile, Mother felt reassured. In the months and years ahead, "*Morgen gibt das gut*" became our favorite saying, a pleasant refrain, part of our philosophy. When anything went wrong, Mother would always say, "*Morgen gibt das gut*, Chaimele," and I knew what she meant. I have adopted that expression even to this day. When things go wrong I use it. Somehow, tomorrow is frequently better. More often than not, some problems have a way of solving themselves or just "going away."

The engaging young doctor was right. Each day seemed better than the previous day. And each day brought us a day nearer our dream—arrival in Paradise—America.

The ship was divided into three classes: steerage, bringing several hundred immigrants (mostly from Eastern Europe) to the United States; tourist; and first class. There was no second class. The tourist-class facilities were fairly large and comprised two decks above us, while the deck between us was used for our cafeteria, freight, and various ship services. Some of the tourist passengers looked at us from the bridge of their deck. Then there were the first-class passengers, located on the uppermost deck. None of these passengers bothered to look down at us, or at the passengers in the tourist class. However, I did try to look way up to the first-class area. From the little I could see, the first-class passengers were well dressed and elegant looking. I resolved then and there that the next time I crossed the ocean it would be in first-class.

As the days progressed and the waves calmed down, I be-

came restless. Ruvke and I began to move around the ship despite Mother's admonitions to stay near her.

But everytime Mother went to the toilet, Ruvke and I would break away and roam the ship. Once we found ourselves in the tourist class. Compared to our steerage quarters, what we saw in the tourist, or cabin class, as some referred to it, was like heaven. Deck chairs were there in abundance and the decks were spotlessly clean, minus the strong medicinal smell that permeated the steerage. And, of course, the passengers had private cabins instead of one huge dormitory room.

It was fun sauntering about the tourist decks and from there we tried to wander up to the first-class area. Uniformed guards behind chained entrances stopped us. By the time we returned to steerage, Mother was hysterical, screaming, "Where are my children? Where are my babies? They must have drowned." An attendant was trying to quiet her, and when she finally saw us she began to cry.

After ten days, most of the steerage passengers became restless. Irritability, mostly about little things, had reached a high point. But on the following morning, the eleventh day of our voyage, the great majority of the passengers, particularly the older people and the very young children were spent, exhausted. An unhealthy calm permeated the huge dormitory. Many were in their bunks, dozing.

When word came that we were approaching America—New York—and that within forty-eight hours, probably less, we would reach Paradise, the passengers began to awaken as from a nightmare. It was as though we had passed from the dread of night into gleaming sunshine. While just about everyone in steerage had his or her own private vision of America and especially New York City, where most were going, no one actually knew what to expect. There were few pessimists aboard. I listened to the conversations Mother had with some of our neighbors whom she had befriended, and what I heard went something like this:

"After what we've gone through in Kishinev, especially

with that terrible pogrom, no matter what we will find in America, it will be heaven. We should only get there."

"My cousin Aaron wrote me that everyone works in New York. They need more people. I just can't wait to get a job and earn my own money. And I hear that you can put some of your earnings in a bank and that it will increase by just leaving the money there. Imagine money making money while doing nothing!"

"My Uncle Yankel Shmuel who has been in America only ten years is now a rich man. He owns his own house ... like a palace, I hear, with a toilet right in the house . . . two toilets, in fact, and several rooms. He has many workers working for him in his *gescheft*, where he makes dresses."

"Did you say a toilet in the house, not outside?" an elderly man asked.

"Yes, not one but two toilets in the house—not outside."

"All that dirt and smell and flies . . . right in the house?"

"There is no dirt, or smell, or flies. Like magic, everything is washed down, and everything is clean . . . like magic."

The man who asked the question just shook his head in wonder.

Then word came that, "Tomorrow—early tomorrow morning, we will be in America, in New York."

We went to bed late that night. I could not sleep, except to doze now and then. It must have been about three or four o'clock in the morning, when Mother awakened, got up, and shouted with a new joy in her voice: "Chaimele, Ruvkele, we're in heaven, in paradise." Mother then led us to the small porthole. Our ship was no longer moving and from the porthole I could see millions of flickering lights coming from the earth and reaching into the sky. Everything else was shrouded in darkness, except for an endless flutter of blazing lights in the dark sky, like flames in the wind. Interspersed with the flickering lights were printed, moving words. It was a fascinating scene—a scene that seemed unreal to a lad a little more than twelve, who

until then had lived largely with kerosene and candle lights.

"Mama, Mama, what are these brilliant lights and moving words doing in the sky?" I asked in amazement.

"Paradise, heaven, my son," Mother answered.

Enthralled, I continued to gaze through the porthole. Others had awakened and rushed to the portholes. Shouts of joy rang through the dormitory. As I continued to look through the porthole, I observed the mingling of the myriad of lights with the oncoming lighting of the sky from the rising sun, a scene so enchanting that it touched the very marrow of my bones. Then coming into view from the distance was the famous lady, the Statue of Liberty. Several men and women began to cry. It was morning, and we were in the harbor of New York.

Through megaphones, attendants announced that a team of medical and health inspectors would soon arrive to inspect the ship and its passengers. Following that, several smaller boats would take us to Ellis Island for processing and a reunion with waiting relatives.

The medical and health inspection was brief. Only a few of the authorities came down for a quick look at us and our quarters. The principal function of the immigration and health officials who come aboard was to check the cabin and first-class passengers, who did not have to go to Ellis Island. Instead, they disembarked directly in Manhattan.

By nine in the morning, several small boats had come alongside our ship and one by one we were led onto them. Now I saw the New York skyline for the first time, the sun on this crisp early September morning shining gloriously on the tall buildings of Manhattan. It was a dramatic scene to behold, even in 1920 when the buildings were neither as numerous nor as impressive as those of today. Ships and tugs were all around us in the harbor as our small boat moved on, now and then heaving a bit as a tug passed near us at high speed.

Soon we were at Ellis Island, an immense group of red brick and gray stone buildings. Uniformed guides directed us to a hall where we were told that we could leave our baggage and

other belongings. Mother would have none of that so we carried our bundles to a floor above into a larger hall, already crowded with immigrants from other ships. Here there were long lines and an admixture of languages and intonations as we moved slowly from one table to another, from one cubbyhole to the next for examinations and interviews, part of the processing of the mass of drab-looking immigrants before they were to join their waiting relatives.

For some reason, the line that a guide led us to was not as long as the others. Perhaps it was the beginning of a new grouping for the passengers from our ship. At any rate, within an hour or so, Mother, Ruvke, and I were examined by a doctor and a nurse. We observed inoculations and injections being given to the immigrants in front of us. The very thought of a needle being stuck in my arm (or in any other part of my anatomy) made me feel faint. Fortunately, my fears were baseless since for some unexplained reason I was passed over as my turn came for injection and inoculation. Perhaps it was the result of the general confusion in evidence in that huge chamber.

Thus, quicker than expected, we were finished with our processing at Ellis Island. The dreaded delays—said to be at times for days—that some of our more worry-prone fellow immigrants had warned of did not occur. Now the anticipation of seeing Father came to the forefront of my mind. To be followed by physically stepping forth on the ground that was New York, the United States of America, the paradise Mother had promised and described in such absorbing detail.

As we completed the last inspection and interview in the final line, we saw immigrants embracing and being embraced by their American loved ones. Laughter mingled with tears.

Mother looked for Father, but he was not there.

"Simche! Simche Gussow! Simche . . . we are here! Where are you? Simche," Mother called at the top of her voice. But Simche was not there. She looked everywhere, asking one attendant, then another, and all she heard was: "Madam, just wait. Your husband is here someplace. He will be with you."

After almost an hour of searching and wandering through several rooms, halls, and corridors of Ellis Island, still there was no sign of Father, and no one seemed able to enlighten us as to where he might be, or when he might come for us. Mother with her bundle of belongings under her arm continued to look for Simche. Ruvke and I, each with a small bundle, followed her. We were now outside the building area and at the front of the ramp near which stood a ferry boat. As we noted that other immigrants and their relatives were boarding it, Mother made a quick decision.

"Chaimele, Ruvkele," she cried out. Let us go on this boat, along with the others." Clutching a piece of paper, Mother said: "Here, I have Father's address. Also Uncle Shleme's address. We will take a carriage. If father will not come to us, we will go to him."

And onto the ferry we went, following the other immigrants and their relatives. It was a big boat, able to carry many passengers, hundreds of them. It took almost a half hour before the ferry was filled. And it seemed to me that all the immigrants, all our fellow passengers from the S.S. *Susquehanna*, and many from other ships, were now on the ferry. Soon the boat began to move.

The closer we came to shore, the more beautiful the skyline of New York seemed to be. It was a calm but thrilling ride. But not without anxiety since we were wondering what had happened to Father. Soon the ferry crossed the harbor and we were in New York. All the while, Mother kept reassuring us (and herself at the same time) by saying, "Don't worry, Chaimele. We'll find Father. I have his address. It is here, clearly written out."

I was too excited with the trip across the harbor and viewing the New York skyline to worry much about Father. Besides, I thought if Mother had been able to get us to New York, she would surely find a way to locate Father.

As we got off the boat, we were enveloped by a horde of people rushing in all directions. What to do? Where to go? Suddenly, out of the onrushing crowd, a not very tall, middle-aged man, with a small graying pencil-stripe mustache, with a dark

haired smiling young man at his side, rushed over to Mother and embraced her.

"Sonia! Sonia!" he uttered, and then he began to cry.

"Simche! Simche! Where have you been?" And then Mother started crying, tears of joy, tears of relief this time.

Father then embraced Ruvke and me. His face, particularly his mustache, was scratchy.

"I am Peter, your cousin," the young man said to me as he shook my hand. "You're Chaim. You're Ruvke." He talked in Yiddish, but it was American Yiddish.

With fast-moving zigzagging Peter leading, we managed to get through the crowd and out into the street.

We got in a taxi, a yellow painted automobile, not a carriage, and off we went to our new home.

In the taxi, Mother kept asking Father, "Where have you been? I was so worried. I didn't know what to think, what to do, without you at Ellis Island."

"It is all my fault, Tante Sonia," Peter said, as Father looked in his direction. "I was supposed to meet Uncle Simche very early this morning—at six—to make sure that we wouldn't be late. I overslept. Uncle Simche was a nervous wreck by the time I arrived in his flat. We rushed to the subway on the way to Ellis Island. When we arrived here, where the ferry departs, it was too late. The last early-morning ferry had gone. The next one was not due to leave until two in the afternoon. There was nothing we could do except wait. As we waited, I began to worry about Uncle Simche. Always restless, with *shpilkes in his tochis* (or sitting on pins and needles), Uncle Simche was going crazy. How will I ever find Sonia and the boys? What will happen to them? He did everything except swim, trying to get over to you—to Ellis Island. I am very sorry, Tante Sonia, and I am so glad that we are together now."

As Mother and Father were now looking at each other endearingly, with Peter at Mother's side, talking away, I looked out of the window (Ruvke and I were sitting in small seats facing them). We passed through narrow streets, crowded with people.

Tall buildings were all around us. Then we were on a street facing the water, with old shuttered buildings on the other side. I learned later that this was South Street, facing the East River. The taxi moved at a fast pace, much faster than a carriage.

Finally, we reached crowded, noisy streets, with pushcarts all around and an assortment of smells. The babbling noise of Yiddish, mixed with other languages, could be heard. It was a symphony of sound that was vibrating with life, of which we were soon to become a part.

We stopped at a tall, old brick building of considerable size. With Father and Peter helping, we carried our belongings up the stairs—one floor, then another, and another—until we reached the sixth and top floor. Mother was out of breath and stopped several times to rest. Then we walked through a long, narrow, dark hall, passing an open, smelly toilet. We came to a door which Father opened with a large key. He smiled and said, "Sonia, Chaim, Ruvke, this is your new home."

The first thing I saw was a kitchen, newly painted and washed, with sheets of newspaper (in Yiddish) on the cleanly washed linoleum floor. While Father was showing Mother the rest of the flat, Peter led us to a smallish room.

"This is your bedroom, cousins," he said.

The room had one window. Ruvke and I rushed to the window to take a look.

"We're high up, very high. Look, Chaim," Ruvke said. I looked. He was right. We were high up. The people down below, including children who were playing ball, looked like midgets.

On the other side of the room was a metal bed. Ruvke jumped on it to try it out and as he jumped on it, he almost reached the ceiling.

"Come, try the bed," Ruvke said with excitement. "It bounces . . . it bounces. What a funny bed . . . it bounces. Come and bounce with me."

I jumped on the bed and Ruvke and I began to bounce and bounce, laugh and laugh, and bounce some more.

"What makes the bed bounce, cousin?" I asked Peter, who stood there watching us.

"It's the new spring."

"What is a spring?" I asked Peter in Yiddish.

He explained . . . and Ruvke and I continued to bounce on our first bed with a spring. My first bed with a spring and a mattress.

While it is a long time from that moment of early September in 1920, at times I can still relive the thrill I experienced when I discovered that henceforth I would sleep on a spring and a mattress. A spring in a bed? Something I had not even known existed, let alone expected to have for our own. Ruvke, who was soon to be called Robert, and I jumped and jumped on that spring and mattress in that flat on Cherry and Scammel Street on the lower East side, until we couldn't jump anymore, and as Cousin Peter almost died laughing.

That was my first touch of Paradise, and it is a good place to end the story of my Mother's successful struggle—and what a struggle it was—to attain the goal of her life.

TWENTY-FOUR

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY after our arrival in New York I was no longer the little Chaimele. Or even Chaim. I was now Hyman, Herman, or Hymie. Among my newfound school friends I was simply Hy or Gus.

Because I was determined not to talk like a foreigner, a greenhorn, I learned English quickly. Within six months I lost my accent. I spoke like an American. I began to behave in the American fashion. I dressed like an American lad of the twenties. My favorite piece of clothing was a pair of knickers. Just about everything I did seemed different from what I had done and how I had done things in Pumpian, Gomel, Vetka, Berdichev, Schlutzk, or Warsaw. It was instant assimilation for me.

Mother was different too. Now that she had arrived in America, the land of her dreams, and was an Amerikanski, she seemed to have lost her purpose. The struggle had been everything. The struggle to survive. The struggle for the day-to-day existence. The struggle to reach America. To reunite with her husband. To bring new opportunity to at least part of her family, her two sons. It was not the end of struggle, of course. But the struggles that followed were minor for Mother compared with the struggle of reaching the New Land. And so Mother no longer had a major all-pervasive goal. Instead she now had to face a new lifestyle, a series of different problems, both physical and psychological.

While Father was not demonstrative, there was enough evidence that a love affair, a second honeymoon, was in process. The way Father looked at Mother, the way they walked together arm in arm, the way they talked to each other endearingly. And at

the beginning, they slept together. Yes, Mother and Father were sexually active. Very much so. At first.

It wasn't long, though, before Mother discovered that Father did indeed have a *geliebte*. I never learned how, but Mother discovered her name and address. The woman was married now. And pregnant. She lived in Williamsburg, and one day Mother and I went to see her. I was embarrassed. Father's old *geliebte*, not a bad-looking woman in her early thirties, a bit on the heavy side, with an abundant bosom and a hefty behind, was embarrassed. Her full cheeks turned red when Mother began to ask her questions.

At first she did not want to let us in. "Who are you and what do you want?" she asked in a loud voice as she opened the door a crack. Mother told her and also threatened that if she didn't let us in, just for a friendly chat, she would be sorry since she, Mother, would go and talk to her husband.

"Come in, come in, Mrs. Gussow," Father's old *geliebte* said, as she opened her door to us.

Father's *geliebte* did not deny that she had dated Father. She had met him in the shop where they were co-workers. "What did you expect?" she asked. "Simche was a lonely man, but a nice man, a good man. We did nothing wrong. It was just a casual friendship, and he is all yours now. You see I am married. And with child."

That was exactly what Mother wanted to ascertain. That there would be no more carrying on.

"What do I want with Simche now? I have a good man for a husband. Simche knows him. The three of us worked in the same shop. He is a fine man and good provider. What do I want with your husband now? Besides, he has you."

Then Mother became a little crass and commercial. She wanted to know how much money Father had spent on her, whether she still had some of his money. At this point, Father's old *geliebte* became angry and her face took on a much redder hue.

"Look here, Mrs. Gussow," she said in Yiddish (she spoke a good Yiddish). "I never took a penny from your husband. A whore

I wasn't. Yes, Simche did take me to the Yiddish theater on Second Avenue now and then. And he bought me a meal once in a while. Even an occasional, inexpensive present. But he gave me no money, and I asked for none. He was a lonely man and going out with me made him a little less lonely. That was all. So, goodbye my dear woman, he is all yours now. *Lebt gezunt* (live healthily)."

When Father left Mother in Pumpian he was forty-two and in the prime of his life. Obviously, he did not live without sex during his eight bachelor years in New York. He may have had other *geliebtes*. Certainly, he had other girls. Maybe even whores.

But now that he had Mother, that was enough for him. He found Mother, who was almost twelve years younger than he, "pretty and young looking." He said so. For a reserved man like Father to say that his wife was attractive was something. But he did say it—to his brothers and sisters. And even to some strangers. I heard it. And Mother blushed. So, potentially Mother was a desirable and comfortable sex object for him. He probably could have had sexual intercourse with Mother every night, for at almost fifty he was still vigorous and youthful. Only Mother did not let him have all that much. I don't know what kind of sex life, if any, Mother had in Europe. She said she had none. I heard her tell Father that she had remained a pure abstainer throughout his absence.

Mother was now thirty-eight, although to me she looked much older, but then she always looked older to me than she really was. At first she responded to Father as would any fairly young wife. Especially one who had been away from her husband and sexually inactive for eight years. She was of an age for sex to have been important to her, but as time went on she became less and less responsive. Covertly rather than overtly. She disguised her feelings nicely. Or perhaps not so nicely. She started getting headaches. Then pains of all kinds. And, of course, she always had her double hernia, which began to give her more trouble than she had had with it in Europe. So, while she never really outrightly refused Father, she found many ways of saying no. Politely. She was a master at finding new and creative ways of sexual avoidance.

The situation worsened with time. A woman who was hardly ever sick during the eight years in Europe without her husband, a woman who rarely complained about headaches or any other physical discomfort, now became a hypochondriac, suffering from all sorts of illnesses, most of them more imaginative than real. She went from doctor to doctor, and her collection of medicines grew in variety and quantity. Aspirin became part of her steady, daily diet; she consumed as many as eight tablets on many days. And she tried just about every over-the-counter headache remedy sold. Pills, powder, and liquid. Often she was in bed with a wet hot or cold towel on her forehead.

Following the arrival of his wife and two sons, Father changed too. For eight years he was a free man and he could do what he wanted to do, including having a *geliebte* or two and chasing girls generally. Now he had new responsibilities, caring for a wife and two growing sons. Now he had to turn over his weekly pay envelope (sealed) to his wife. It was she who decided what to do with the money that he worked hard to earn. He missed his eight lackadaisical years of single life. However, being basically a simple man, with simple creature needs and tastes, Father made an adjustment. And in making the adjustment, especially in catering to the needs of his "sick" wife, Father changed too. It did not take long before he changed radically from the way he behaved during the eight years in New York on his own, and from the man-about-town of his Kharkov days.

Soon all that mattered to him was his work, three satisfying meals a day, particularly the supper Mother cooked so ably, to read his *Daily Forward* (one of the three Yiddish-language newspapers published in New York at that time), a walk after dinner, sex with Mother when he could get it, and to provide for those of his children who lived with him. At the beginning he had asked about his daughters, particularly Pashke, his favorite, but as time went on he hardly mentioned her or the others; it was as if they had never existed. He lived for the moment, rarely talking about the past or of plans for the future.

On a sunny summer Sunday, he would take us to Central

Park. Or for a leisurely walk on East Broadway, where he would buy us an egg cream soda, a malted, or just a plain ice cream cone. Some Sundays he took us for a visit with one of his brothers and sisters and their families up in the Bronx. Occasionally, he took us to see a Yiddish play in one of the big and fancy theaters on Second Avenue.

Otherwise, Father paid little attention to Ruvke or to me. I am sure he must have been proud of my scholarly accomplishment (I completed my elementary education in a year and half, with honors, and my picture published in the *Forward*), but he never showed it.

Father was a good man and an honest man. He did not know what dishonesty meant. He had a good job (after all, he had golden hands), and he was a reliable, solid provider. But he knew nothing about saving. During his absence from his family, he spent everything he made, or gave away part of his earnings, to his *geliebte* or relatives. He had no bank account. Mother, on the other hand, opened a savings-bank account, virtually from the moment we arrived in New York. And she deposited a few dollars in the bank every week.

Mother could have amassed a small fortune through her regular savings plus the interest. Except for three things. She spent (or wasted) a good part of Father's wages on doctor bills and medicines. She put Father in the tailoring business knowing full well that Father was no businessman. And she enjoyed improving her standard of living by moving from one apartment to another, not necessarily always a better one—but more expensive. The moving itself was a costly affair. She had her own private moving man, on contract.

Father always had a job—even during the Depression of the thirties. When the business she put him in turned out to be a total flop, it was Mother who went to Father's employer and with abundant tears in her eyes begged him to give his old job back to her husband.

Because religion, God, and the synagogue continued to be important to her, Mother made sure that Father put on his *t'fillin*

(phylacteries) every morning, except on the Sabbath when only the *tallis* or prayer shawl was required, before breakfast. She got up with Father and like a dutiful Jewish wife made him breakfast, alternating between two soft-boiled eggs or hot oatmeal with milk. On the Sabbath and all other major Jewish holidays we all went to the synagogue.

Ruvke liked athletics and played basketball. He was a natural athlete. He also became a prizefighter. At first he was an amateur, then a semiprofessional. He liked the idea of making money. He quit school in the eighth grade. His taste in food was limited. The one dish he enjoyed tremendously was "*chicken cotletten*" (chicken hamburger), and Mother made it for him almost every day. He gave Mother part of his earnings as a prizefighter, later as a cutter for an underwear manufacturer.

While Robert (that is his name now) and I remained friendly, we were not social friends. I had my group of friends, he his. He began to spend evenings and most of his time on weekends with a family across the street that had three daughters but no sons. He soon became their "adopted" son and received the attention and respect he craved but did not get in his own home. Later, he would.

I started working at fourteen in a summer job as an errand boy for an embroidery manufacturer. I worked after school and every summer at all kinds of jobs, from nailing cases for a can factory to teaching English to some of the many foreigners in New York in the twenties.

Mother's strength of character, her singlemindedness, her persistent goal orientation, and her struggle for survival rubbed off on me. More unconsciously than consciously, I followed Mother's dictum and philosophy of life in an effort to attain a specific career goal. I worked hard and studied hard, and even before I finished my college education (which I continued during evening sessions), I landed a position which turned out to be the beginning of a successful career in communications. I didn't become a rabbi, did complete a teacher training program and received a license to teach (but decided that I didn't like teaching for a lifetime profes-

sion), and I gave up an opportunity to go to medical school. Instead, I became what I wanted to become—writer, editor, and principal stockholder of a substantial and growing business-magazine publishing company.

How I did this is material for another story, perhaps another book. This is my mother's tale, the story of her fortitude and her determination. Eventually, the day came when I had to take over the responsibility of caring for both my mother and father and despite a host of problems, a good many with psychological implications, I was able to manage it. And doing it while my wife, Betty, and I raised a family of our own—three sons, each of whom grew into a fine human being.

At the beginning of our life in Paradise I resented Father deeply. Unconsciously I still wanted Mother all for myself. I did not like the competition from the middle-aged man whom I hardly knew. It took a little time, but eventually I realized what was happening. It was then that I decided that I was not going to be Mother's surrogate husband. It was a struggle that I won—in the long run. But she fought hard to keep me from winning. She talked often to me about her dreams, for herself and the family but mostly for me and her. She would be so proud to live to see me a teacher and eventually a principal. Or a great doctor.

Often after school she and I went to the theater, usually a combination movie and vaudeville show. I saw a great many movies and a great deal of vaudeville. And on many an afternoon and on Sunday mornings the two of us, just Mother and I, traveled a lot, combing Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx to look for a tailoring establishment for Father. There was no future in being a worker, Mother reasoned. Father, with his golden hands, could become a rich man only if he owned and ran his own business, she insisted. "But Father is no businessman," I said hesitatingly. She did not seem to listen.

Eventually, she found a store. A real bargain. In Greenpoint. In a middle-class Polish-Irish neighborhood with many churches, but with not a single Jewish family living within walking distance and with the nearest synagogue in Williamsburg,

miles away. And with neither Mother nor Father able to speak English. Some bargain.

While Mother in her frustrations in the futile attempt to make Father a businessman and me her surrogate husband became more of a hypochondriac each day, I was no longer the delicate child. As a matter of fact, I began to blossom out as a healthy young man with a strong intellectual bent and still stronger ambitions to "be somebody." I loved school and my teachers at P.S. 147, especially my English teacher in Grade 8A. She was a superb grammarian who could (and did) make even syntax interesting. I enjoyed the freshman year at DeWitt Clinton and the next two and a half years at Boys' High School in Brooklyn, completing high school in three and a half years. I could hardly wait to go to college and launch my career. And marry Betty, my beautiful blonde, green-eyed cousin, Uncle Shleme's daughter (he was my father's oldest brother, who was first of his family to emigrate to the United States and then help his brothers and sisters to do likewise), with whom I fell in love when I first met her shortly before my *Bar Mitzva*. Mother approved of Betty. "Such a nice girl and so pretty," she said. Betty's parents and sisters were not so sure. "Remember, if you marry Hymie, you will have Tante Sonia on your hands," she was warned.

Failing in her campaign to make me her surrogate husband (she continued these efforts even after Betty and I were married), Mother escaped into ill health. In addition to the headaches, she began to "suffer" from a long list of imagined ailments, especially "heart attacks," resorting to telephoning me at two or three in the morning, warning me of her impending death. For a while she got attention in this way. As time went on, however, Betty and I began to take her middle-of-the night "heart attack" calls in stride although they did disturb our sleep.

When we stopped showing concern for her imagined heart attacks, she resorted to calling the police (also at two or three in the morning), who in turn sent an ambulance. This produced a series of hospital stays for her, usually of very short duration. On one such occasion, we found Mother in an oxygen tent. When she saw

me, she said, 'Take me out of here. I am cold, I am freezing to death."

Father retired at eighty-six. His employer thought he was seventy and that it was time to retire good, old reliable Simche with "the golden hands" because occasionally he would doze off while sewing toward the end of a busy day. That was the beginning of the end for him, although he lived for another five years. He would have lived on longer had he not been taken to a nursing home, at Mother's insistence, and despite his vocal protestations.

It was during this period of Father's forced retirement that the warmth of his personality, something I never knew he had, revealed itself in unexpected ways. He always wore a hat when he was out in the street. Often he wore it in such a way that a lock of his gray, full head of hair, now becoming white, showed under the front brim of his hat, adding a certain careless charm to his persona. Once when I visited my parents shortly before a Jewish holiday, he was wearing his hat in the apartment, having just returned from one of his regular walks. I noticed that the hat was shabby. So I suggested that we go buy him a new hat "for the holiday." He objected, protesting that he didn't want to bother me. I insisted, took him by the arm and off we went to Thirteenth Avenue, the "Fifth Avenue" shopping area of Borough Park.

It was interesting to watch him select a hat. When he finally had picked two that he liked, he asked for my opinion. I pointed to the one I thought best suited him. He was pleased. Most pleased. He smiled. He went to the mirror to try it on again. He smiled some more. As he continued to smile he said to the salesman, "This is my son, my son the redactor (the editor), this is my son who is buying me a hat for *yom tov* (the holiday). Isn't he a fine young man, my son?" Tears came to my eyes. I was touched. It was a rare thing for him to do. Obviously, he had more feeling than he showed or was able to show. There was more warmth in this man, my father, than I had realized. We had very little man to man, father and son, conversation over the years. How much had I really tried to break through the barrier, or whatever it was? Now, it was too late.

Father was rarely ill. He had no use for doctors or medicine, except for an occasional piece of chocolate-flavored Ex-Lax to keep his bowels moving. He told one of my physician friends that he still enjoyed sex—in his eighties—but that he was slowing down a bit. He asked him if there was anything he could do to slow down the "slowing down." His only physical handicap was his failing eyesight, and in his last years he was practically blind. Nevertheless, he kept going on errands for Mother and on his usual walks. Like a drunkard, he walked across the gutter without paying any attention to cars or trucks.

Eventually he was almost killed. It was on a drizzly afternoon when he was crossing Ocean Parkway, a very busy thoroughfare. He did not bother to look for the traffic lights. He just walked. He was in front of many onrushing automobiles, all blowing their horns. One car hit him hard, throwing him onto the hard pavement. He was taken to Coney Island Hospital, "practically dead." Since he had no identification with him, neither Mother nor Robert who also lived in Brooklyn was notified. When he failed to return after several hours, Mother called me. We traced him to the hospital. When he arrived in the ward, he was breathing, but otherwise there was not much evidence of life. The resident in charge explained this and told us that Father had a fractured skull and that there was no way to know whether he would recover or whether any part of his brain would be permanently damaged.

Insofar as Mother was concerned, Father was as good as dead, and she began to plan her upcoming widowed existence. Suddenly, she became well. By the time we took her home she said that should Father die, she would not remain alone for long. She could marry again. "After all, I am only sixty-five." She was approaching eighty.

Soon Father started to improve. Before a week was up, he regained consciousness. He did not know where he was, but he began asking for Sonia. When we came to see him, he hardly recognized us. Not even his Sonia. But each day he showed improvement, and at the end of five weeks he was ready to go home.

Father's mind was not affected by the accident. Yet he was not quite the same. And as time passed, his memory began to fail. But he was happy in his slowly oncoming senility. He hummed a tune, ate and slept well. But he was no longer much use to Mother. He could not take on such chores as going on errands for her, and his household "duties" were spotty and ineffectual. He broke too many dishes. It was then that Mother launched her campaign to put him in a nursing home. "I can't take care of him. I feel so sick myself. If you don't put him in a home, both of us will die."

I hated the idea of placing Father in a "home," because I knew that that would be his end. So I got them a maid, a very able and considerate middle-aged black woman. For a few days everything was fine. And Mother thanked me profusely. Then she called to say that she fired the maid, "the *negudnick*." Actually, the maid left when Mother tried to make a slave of her as she did of Father. *Do this and go there and this is wrong, so why don't you do it this way and, please, my darlingke, before you go be sure to stop at the store and buy this and that and make a good chicken soup for my sick husband.*

This maid was followed by others, including practical nurses. None were as good or as considerate as the first. And some were mighty inconsiderate. None stayed more than a few days.

Then came the cockroaches. In droves. Because of a persistent accumulation of dirt and debris. No exterminator, no maid could eradicate the hundreds, soon thousands, of quick-moving, hungry cockroaches. We tried everything. Then the neighbors complained since the cockroaches began to move to other flats in the building.

So, with the onslaught of cockroaches and our inability to obtain the services of a maid, we finally placed Father in a quiet Jewish nursing home on East 17th Street, off Second Avenue, in Manhattan. He was very unhappy. He made efforts to leave. He was sedated. For a man who rarely took any medicine, that was the beginning of the end. Within weeks he died, on August 27, 1959. He was ninety one. This was a most unworthy end for a man who cherished the simple life and who should have died in his own bed in his own home.

TWENTY-FIVE

MOTHER TOOK Father's demise in stride. She stayed with us—at least during the seven days of sitting *shiva*, the custom of remaining indoors for seven days of mourning after a death in the immediate family, receiving visitors while sitting on low stools. We asked Mother what she wanted to do and where she wished to live. With us for a while longer? Back in her apartment? Or in a nursing home? Her answer: "Back in my apartment. In a nursing home—never. I can manage if you will get me a good maid." So back to her apartment she went and we got her a "good maid," who lasted a whole week.

After a half dozen different maids, none remaining longer than a week, and with the cockroaches now back in droves, we finally convinced Mother to try a "home." "All right, I will try it for a few days, but keep the apartment. If I don't like the home, I will have my own apartment to which I could return."

The establishment we selected was a converted mansion on Ocean Parkway. It was more of a residence for the elderly who were able to care for themselves, than a nursing home. Ill or infirm patients were not accepted. Mother liked the Mayfair and she soon proceeded to take over the place. She had an eye for a clean-looking, neatly dressed elderly gentleman. She was going to make a play for that "nice widower," with marriage in mind. The Mayfair had a nurse and doctor on call. And if she didn't like the Mayfair doctor, she could call or go to any of her own physicians, of which she had a fairly large selection (or collection.) Good. Unfortunately, this very acceptable situation did not last. Within a year or so, the owners of the Mayfair sold the property for a handsome profit. The Mayfair Residence would be replaced by a

high-rise apartment house. It was a good piece of property in an excellent location.

What to do with Mother now? Why not try to have her return to her own apartment, for which we kept paying rent—"just in case." She liked that. We gave the place a professional, thorough cleaning, eliminating the cockroaches once again, and Mother moved back into her apartment on 39th Street at the corner of 16th Avenue. It was a ground-floor, three-room, one-bedroom apartment, and she could go outside, sit on her chair in front of the building, and gossip with the neighbors. For about two weeks Mother seemed to be making a surprising adjustment to her life in her old apartment. The new maid we hired for her remained the entire two-weeks period, a record. Then a procession of maids followed, the cockroaches returned en masse, and the middle-of-the night phone calls became more frequent. *I am dying Chaim. You must come—quick.*

Containing Mother became difficult. Then impossible. I couldn't get anywhere with her over the telephone. Which meant frequent auto trips to Brooklyn. So, we met in consultation with Robert and his wife, Esther, and decided that Mother must be placed in an institution once again. We found a new, very modern, immaculately clean nursing home, with gardens, potted plants, and a staff of professional nurses in attendance around the clock. It was located in Borough Park, not too far from Mother's apartment. The weekly rates were much higher than those of the Mayfair, which was not cheap, and almost twice as much as the nursing home on the same block as the Mayfair. I wasn't sure I could afford it, but nothing was too good for Mother. Mother liked what she saw. I paid a week's stay in advance and hoped for the best. The director, the wife of the owner, a recent Viennese immigrant, assured me that Mother would be in good hands. "Don't worry, we'll give her our best of care."

Unfortunately, what seemed like a great place, wasn't. Not for Mother. Here, they expected the residents to be docile. That was not Mother's style. She could not be docile, and she could not or would not sit or remain in bed for long. When we visited her

over the weekend, we did find Mother in bed and she was quiet. Almost comatose. I inquired and was told by Madam Director (in her best Viennese style) that Mother had been too noisy and much too obstreperous and disturbing to the other residents, with the result that they had no choice but to sedate her. Of course, with the approval and under the supervision of the home's physician. "Your Mother will be all right. We will cut down the sedation and perhaps eliminate it altogether just as soon as we think she is making the necessary adjustment to her new environment."

It seemed to make sense, but I was not entirely convinced. It didn't work. So, we put Mother in a less fancy nursing home. It was a *haimisheh* (homey) place, and Mother seemed comfortable.

When we visited Mother during the weekend, she was in much better shape. She shared a room with another woman, a neat-looking person but who soon decided that she could not get along with Mother. So Mother was moved to another room, at first with another woman, then to a room by herself.

Maybe, it was the reaction to the heavy doses of the tranquilizers that had sedated her in the fancy home or the change in her environment, but Mother began to fail. One of her great fears, among many, throughout her later years was of becoming senile. She never did become senile, but as the months passed during her residence at the "homey" home her memory began to fail. Toward the end, she did not remember our most recent visit. With each of our subsequent visits, I noticed a steady worsening of her physical and mental condition.

It was heartbreaking to see this onetime tiger of a woman losing her grip on life. It was also strange that in her later years, her religious fervor started to diminish, too. When she needed God most, she ceased her daily "conversations" with him.

On the last Sunday we visited her, she was in bed. She was very weak. Her eyes were half closed. We helped her with her dinner but she ate very little. I held her hand, and we talked a little. I told her that at last we had a letter from Pashke, her favorite daughter, who was living in Minsk with her large family.

Mother had difficulty following what I was saying. I repeated

the news several times, speaking slowly and putting what I had to say in simple language, but her thoughts were now inward. Had this letter come a year or two earlier, it would have been most welcome, exciting news for her. Now it was too late.

Mother had corresponded with Pashke from the time of our arrival in the United States in 1920 until the thirties. She beseeched Pashke to leave her husband and come to the United States. After inquiries Mother felt that she could arrange for Pashke and her children (she had three at that time) to be brought to the United States. But the immigration doors were closed to her husband for reasons never fully explained. But Pashke would not hear of it. While there was no love between her and her husband, she felt she could not leave him. Mother had never given up hope of having her daughter "someday," but nothing came of it. From the mid-thirties until the late fifties, her last days in the nursing home, she had not heard from her beloved daughter. Nor from Oilke nor Mainke. Nor did she know whether any of them had survived the Hitler holocaust. She had no contact with any other member of her family, her sisters or her brother, since her arrival in the United States. Rumor had it that Uncle Avrom and his family migrated to South Africa (or was it South America?) while Tante Esther and her family lived "somewhere" in Soviet Lithuania. But Mother did not really know where they were. So the news that Pashke was alive and well, and the mother of six grown children, two sons and four daughters, and the grandmother of six, should have elated her. But it was too late. I tried to tell her that Betty and I planned a trip to Russia to visit Pashke and her family. There was no reaction.

So I held her hand and tried to talk to her about herself. I asked her how she felt. She seemed to ignore my question. Then she asked, "Chaim, *men veist nit ven men starbt . . . der moment ven men starbt*" (One doesn't know when one dies . . . at the moment of dying)? I was stunned. Such profundity coming from this weak, dying woman. I never heard that thought expressed before. Then I answered, "No, Mother you don't know when you die—not at the moment of death . . . this is true."

I was on the verge of tears. Here was a woman who had died a thousand deaths during the past thirty years because of her morbid fear of dying but was now accepting the idea of dying—of her death—so calmly, rationally, and in such an insightful way. I squeezed her hand. I kissed her on her big forehead, which was moist. She died in her sleep that night, September 7, 1962. She was eighty-two.

The following spring Betty and I embarked on a thirteen-day trip to Soviet Russia, which included a week's visit with Pashke and her family in Minsk. Fifteen of them met us at the Minsk airport at midnight when our plane arrived. Pashke presented us with a bouquet of flowers, consistent with the Russian custom.

With Pashke were her older son, a battle-scarred war veteran, her four daughters, three of their husbands, and six grandchildren, ranging in age from five to thirteen. It was an unusual family group, the most aggressive of whom was Avrom. He was the husband of Lena, my sister's second-oldest daughter, a dark haired, healthy-looking, full-bosomed woman in her thirties.

The prettiest, brightest, and most responsive was Rosa, a blonde with blue eyes. She was married to her second husband, who was not Jewish, a fine, friendly young man who seemed to be very much part of the family. Rosa had an attractive, dark-haired, brown-eyed daughter, Lena, aged eight, from her first marriage. Pashke's oldest daughter, Esther, also blonde like Rosa, was more on the hefty side. She was the most emotional of the group and resembled her mother and grandmother in mannerisms. She was married to Avrom's older brother, Shmuel, who seemed like a good natured *shlemiel*. He had a lot of teeth missing and his Yiddish was practically incomprehensible to us since he interspersed a lot of Russian words with his special kind of Yiddish. The absence of teeth in the front of his mouth did not help his speech and our comprehension. Sarah, the third oldest of Pashke's four daughters, was a sad sack and did not resemble any of the others. She had been separated from her husband and was cared for by Esther, her older sister, who practically adopted Sarah's only son, Welvel, a bright nine-year-old lad. Esther had four children of her own, three boys

and a girl. Avrom and Lena had two children, a bright, pretty little girl of eight, and a son of five.

Avrom it seemed was the family mover and doer. He located us through the Russian and American Red Cross. While he lacked an education since he had spent his youth in the war, he was sharp and he had a business orientation. He actually built and "owned" his own house and another nearby, although ownership of property was not permitted in Soviet Russia. He was a truck driver by trade.

Pashke, six years my senior and then sixty years old and a widow for almost twenty years, looked just like my mother did at the same age. It was an unbelieveably fantastic resemblance. Not only was her physiognomy the same as Mother's, the round face, short and hefty body, with an overabundant bust, but she actually behaved like Mother. It was Mother reincarnated. Like Mother in her later years, Pashke was also a hypochondriac. Like Mother she complained of terrible pain in her "weak heart," which wasn't weak at all. She was a compulsive complainer. But like Mother she believed that nothing was impossible. That was why she and her family were able to survive years of misery, want, and desperation, including periods of starvation in the Urals to which they had escaped just before Minsk was occupied by the Nazi Wehrmacht. She told us of the slaughter of Oilke and the younger of her two sons by the Nazis. The older son, who had served in the Russian Army, survived and now lived in Riga, (Soviet Latvia). She told also of the death (through an accident) of Mainke, whom she adored and who had been of great help to her. And all this she narrated in the same dramatic way Mother told a story. Like Mother, she interspersed her recital with tears.

Minsk is only about thirty five miles from Schlutzk. Naturally, I had a desire to visit Schlutzk. I wanted to see the Catholic orphanage, where I lived for almost a year. Or at least its location. The river where we went swimming during the summer. I also wanted to see Grandma Yente's house or the spot on which it once stood. Schlutzk was closed to tourists. Nevertheless, Avrom was ready to drive us there, but we decided that it would not be smart to

take the chance of getting involved with the authorities. Besides, I felt that Schlutzk in 1963 would not be the same town in which we lived in 1918.

I had an even greater desire to visit Pumpian, the *shtetel* of my birth. I made inquiries through the Russian national tourist agency but received only vague answers. I knew, of course, that most of Lithuania, with the notable exception of Vilna, now the capital of Soviet Lithuania, was closed to tourists. It is also generally known that all Jewish *shtetels* and ghettos were razed by the Nazis in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, the Ukraine, and the other areas which they overran and occupied. While I have not been successful in learning whether there is still a Pumpian, I have had the feeling that whatever happened to it, Pumpian is no longer the Pumpian that I knew and cherished during my very early years. Besides there is no going back. You really can't go home again as Thomas Wolfe, one of my favorite authors of the thirties, proved so ably in his massive and emotion-packed novel by that name.

Several years later, we arranged for my sister to visit us in New York, living with us for three months in our Sutton Place apartment. In one important way she was different from Mother; she seemed to have a very low emotional quotient, except for her habitual, repetitive complaints about her "weak heart" and the troubles she had had to endure during most of her lifetime. She was not impressed with our lifestyle, with New York as a metropolis, with our American freedom. *What is this freedom? What is this democracy?* We started her visit by throwing a party for her in our apartment. In addition to our immediate family we invited cousins and other relatives. We also invited a few of our friends to this party. She remained in low outward emotional key throughout the evening (probably not to excite her "weak heart" or for other psychological reasons), but I had the feeling that she enjoyed the party, in her own way. However, she made little comment about the event during the evening or at any time afterward.

We took her to the best restaurants, to the movies, to the theater, to the Metropolitan Opera, and to a concert of the Philharmonic Orchestra. She took all of that in her stride as if this

had been her normal lifestyle. I was particularly surprised and distressed that she did not react to a most unusual concert to which we had taken her. We sat in our usual excellent subscription seats. Yehudi Menuhin was the soloist, Leonard Bernstein the conductor. It was an enchanting, melodious evening. The applause and the bravos after each piece, especially after Menuhin's solo, were deafening. I looked at my sister. She sat passively through all this, her hands folded. She did not applaud once. At dinner at home the following evening I asked her why she did not applaud at the Philharmonic concert, and she answered, "*Ich hob nit gevelt*" (I did not want to).

When we showed her some of the more unusual sights of New York such as the tall skyscrapers and Radio City and took her shopping at the great department stores and shops on Fifth Avenue, she failed to display any enthusiasm or make any special comments or even routine observations. When I asked her her reaction to such sights, her answer was: "*By unz hoben mier doz nit*" (we don't have these things). She reacted with no more feeling when she visited my handsome, modern office with its panoramic view of New York and the East River with its bridges. She hardly looked at anything in the office, including the large, beautiful paintings, including the work of my son Alan, a fine and highly regarded painter.

At the end of three months (the duration of her exit and entrance visas) we drove her to the airport, with trunks full of gifts, mostly of wearing apparel for herself and the members of her family.

We sat quietly while waiting for her departure. When it was time to leave, she shed a few tears, kissed us all (Robert and his wife Esther, were with us), and as she went to enplane she said, "*Chaim, forges nit dine svester*" (don't forget your sister).

In the years that followed, she continued to bombard us with letters, all of a repetitive nature. She could have used a form letter. Each epistle contained the same admonition, usually in the form of a question: "Chaim, why have you forgotten your sister, your only sister? I ask you, do not forget your sister. Remember, we come from the same flesh and blood."

What intrigued me most about my sister were the very special qualities she demonstrated, both during our visit with her and her family in Minsk and her three-month stay in our apartment in New York. While she hadn't seen her mother since the age of seventeen, she was so much like her that it was uncanny.

Not unlike Mother, my sister experienced a series of traumatic situations. The untimely death of her husband, leaving her with six young children and a stepdaughter, fending for herself and her brood during a most difficult period in Russia, especially during the latter days of World War II. In the Urals to which she and her family escaped prior to the occupation of Minsk by the Nazis, conditions were so bad that often she and her family members (except the husbands of her daughters who were in military service) faced starvation. She told us of the time they lived in the open fields and scratched the terrain for edible grass on which to subsist. But as bad as such conditions were, she and her family escaped the Nazis and the extermination ovens in concentrations camps.

Like Mother, she was a survivor. Almost miraculuously, Mother's traits to survive difficult, often traumatic events, passed to her children. Not all of her children survived but three of us did. In her own independent ways, Pashke is the nearest thing to a clone of my most remarkable mother.

How did this happen? Is this strange phenomenon really that difficult to fathom? Maybe not. Certainly there is nothing more remarkable than the human condition, our human behavior. While there can be a long series of varied and complicated explanations for the manner in which we behave, from my own experience, I am convinced that we are what we are because of what happens to us in our early years. That plus the basic gene we inherit, of course.

Early on, almost from the very beginning of her growing up in Pumpian, Pashke became Mother's helper. Mother chose her for this part for the same reasons my father selected her as his companion on his travels as an itinerant tailor. Of their three

daughters, she seemed the most pleasant, the most self-reliant, and the most responsible.

Having been chosen as Mother's helper, Pashke, in an effort to please, began to emulate Mother, moved to behave like her, thus assuming the role "assigned" to her. A good deal of this was unconscious. So much so, in fact, that in the years to follow she did this same thing with one of her own children, her oldest daughter, Esther.

Finally, the impact of the impression made on her by Mother in the early years remained with her throughout her life, and it served her in good stead. Especially the qualities that made her a survivor.

AFTERWORD

IRVING HOWE, literary critic and social historian, has written a monumental book, *World of Our Fathers* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976). The result of a great deal of research, over a period of more than a dozen years, this work represents a social and cultural history of the journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the life they found and made there. While the particular lives of a number of Jews are touched upon in its seven hundred and fourteen pages, they are mentioned primarily as examples of what could and did happen to the thousands upon thousands of Jews who arrived on our shores from the numerous areas of Eastern Europe beginning in the 1890's and continuing to the early years of this century. But no personal story is included or intended.

My story is distinctly a personal one. It tells what happened to one family unit in this enforced exodus from a *shtetl* in Lithuania and its unique experiences in what seemed like an insurmountable task, to reach the *goldeneh medina*, the land of gold. It is an account of the indomitability of the human spirit as exemplified in the life experience of one very special person, my mother.

It is largely the story of her struggle for survival and the survival of her family. The singlemindedness, the dedication to a particular goal, even if it meant losing something or hurting someone in the process. Her all-pervasive, unending hope, her very special Jewish hope. And in the matter of hope she followed the dictum so aptly expressed by Sholom Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman: "As we say on Yom Kippur, the Lord decides who will ride on horseback and who will crawl on foot. The main thing

is—hope! A Jew must always have hope." There were times when she did, indeed, crawl on her feet, but she never lost hope.

And as in *World of Our Fathers*, this book deals with the subject of identity. Not the problems relating to the identity of a people or group of people but the very personal involvement of a number of people in one family unit. As Mr. Howe explains: "The immigrant Jews gained immeasurably and lost immeasurably. Insofar as they chose still to regard themselves as Jews, even if nonreligious Jews, they were left with a nagging problem in self-perception, a crisis of identity, as it came to be called, which seems beyond solution or removal, except perhaps through a full return to religious faith or a complete abandonment of Jewish identification."

While many of the older Jewish immigrants of the eighties, the nineties, and of the early years of this century remained true to their cultural and religious heritage, a good many even speaking only Yiddish to the end, the majority of the young immigrants assimilated quickly, a few actually experiencing instant assimilation. These chose to blend their lives into the full perspective of the American scene, just as soon "forgetting" their Jewishness.

But in reality they could not forget entirely, no matter how hard they may have tried. This factor persisted even with those who made an attempt at "passing" as non-Jews. And they paid a very high price, particularly as this situation involved *their* children and their grandchildren. What has happened is that in the latter part of this century we have witnessed a marked acceleration of intermarriages—between Jews and non-Jews, with the result that Jewishness, and especially *Yiddishkeit*, has started to die.

Too many Jews, particularly the second, third, and more distant descendants of the immigrants, continue to have identity problems. Even converted Jews and offspring of converted Jews are not entirely free of the identity "burden."

Will Jewishness die? At least for the second, third, and future generations of the assimilated Jewish descendants of the East European Jewish immigrants? It is difficult to say. Only time will tell. However, it is more likely that the *Yiddishkeit* will come

to an end more quickly among children, grandchildren, and later descendants of the immigrants who have been part of the intermarriage experience.

My two older sons, Alan and Mel, married Protestants. Both have proved to be exceptionally good, compatible alliances, largely because of the absence of doctrinal religious observance in either homes, with minor exceptions. Christmas is observed to a certain degree in both homes (in which my wife and I and our younger son, Paul, take part). There is a Christmas tree, we exchange gifts, and we enjoy a typical American Christmas dinner.

All of us join for the active participation of the traditional Passover Seder in our house. Several years ago, Joan (Alan's wife) made the Seder at her house, with a number of non-Jewish guests taking part. As usual, I officiated, and it proved to be a memorable occasion.

Joan and Alan were married in the Jewish faith, by the late Rabbi Jonah Wise at Central Synagogue in New York, a Reformed synagogue to which my wife, my younger son, and I belong, despite the fact that both my wife and I, but especially I, come from an Orthodox Hebrew background. Ann and Mel preferred a civil ceremony.

The children of Alan and Joan (Adam, twenty-one, who graduated from Princeton in 1979, and Seth, nineteen a senior at MIT) have not practiced any religion. They know and sometimes talk about their Jewish background. Do they have an identity problem? There is no outward evidence. But there is no question that each is very much interested in his heritage. Joan's Protestant roots represent a combination of Welsh/Dutch/Iowa/California.

Our youngest grandson, Ethan, who is thirteen years old, showed an interest in religion when he was six. He asked my wife and me such questions as: "Do you believe in God?" and, "What do you think of Jesus Christ?" He asked these questions because he had been attending a Protestant Sunday school. Prior to the Hebrew New Year in the fall of 1978, he expressed a wish to join us for a Rosh Hashona service at our synagogue. During the

entire service he was attentive and displayed a keen interest in the proceedings. Following the service, as we walked to our apartment for lunch, I asked him his reaction. "Very interesting," he said. He also commented on the rabbi's sermon. "I liked the first part, but not the second part." Also, Ethan was with us for the Yom Kippur service in 1979. Again, it was his own idea.

Today, even more than six years ago, Ethan knows his Jewish origin, that he is "half Jewish." He refers to this fact often, even more than in the case of Adam and Seth. Like his cousins, he is very much interested in his total heritage. Ann, his mother, comes from a basically New England background, plus a dash of early settlers from several countries. Our Jewish origin (and tradition) is more specific.

Will Adam, Seth and/or Ethan follow any part of their Jewish tradition? There is no way of knowing. What will happen to their Jewish heritage insofar as their offspring are concerned, providing they marry and have children? That will depend on whom they marry and on an assortment of other factors. Again, there is no way of knowing. Only one thing is certain: Each of my three grandsons does have a Jewish heritage. And they know it. And they may even know—or soon find out—that to be a Jew is more than being part of a religious denomination. For better or worse, a Jew is special. As the late Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, the first Jew to be appointed to the high court (and in the face of considerable objection), said before a group of rabbis in 1915: "Jews are a distinct nationality of which every Jew, whatever his country, his station or his shade of belief, is necessarily a member." I could (and I do) argue with the use of the word "nationality" since I prefer "people". It does not matter. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Whether one is one hundred percent Jew. Half Jew. A quarter Jew or one-eighth Jew. Whether he is a member of the Orthodox, Conservative, or Reformed synagogue or whether he belongs to no synagogue at all. And even if he practices (or believes in) any other form of religious dictum. And if he has a strong identity problem, which unfortunately many people have, whether they are Jews or not.

This book is the result of my promise to my grandson Adam

to write him a letter as a way to answer some of his questions dealing with his identity. Fifteen years ago when Adam was six he asked me many questions, all relating to the subject of identity. Because he wanted to learn more about himself, he asked me about me, about my parents, where I was born, how I chose my profession, what made me what I am. I tried to answer him but after each answer, he asked more questions, some rather profound for a six-year-old. Finally, I said: "Adam, I will write you a letter."

When I started writing the "letter" I realized that it would be much too long for a single piece of "correspondence." Nor could I compose such a huge "letter" at one sitting. Instead, I decided to write him a series of "letters." They eventually became the basis for this book.

Actually, I started writing the story of my mother and our Eastern European odyssey as a novel when I was twenty. I did not get very far with it, for a long series of reasons, including a few that were psychological. I tried again some years later, again without much success. By then, my mother wanted me to write her life story. She said, "Chaimele, my dear son, you are an editor and a writer, so write the story of our lives."

It was not until Adam began to ask his penetrating questions that I felt it was time to put this story on paper and in the form of a series of "letters" to him. The theme and purpose of this narrative deal with the *Yiddishkeit* of my heritage, which I cannot ignore or want to forget.

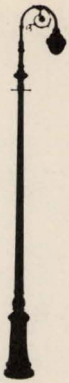
I wanted to tell this story, not especially for my sake, since I came to terms with my identity problem a long time ago, but for the sake of the children and grandchildren of today, for future generations, and for all those who may gain greater understanding by learning how one family resolved its struggle to retain its *Yiddishkeit*. And in memory of my parents (my mother had no identity problem at all; she was Jewish, she was deeply religious, she was American—Amerikanski—even before she came to the United States). Also, just as much for anyone, regardless of his or her country of origin, their particular heri-

tage, creed, or color, who may be concerned with their identity and that of family, past, present and future.

What this book sets out to do is to describe a set of situations involving one family, which, while specific and in many ways unique, is representative of what probably happened to many other families that made their trek, each in its particular way, from just about every country of the world to the United States. And in doing so experienced some form of identity crisis. Why? By stubbornly resisting any sort of change, clinging to the mother tongue and customs, blending in various degrees to the new situations and environment of the new land, or quickly moving toward instant and total assimilation.

Because of the element of universality of this story, I hope that just about every immigrant or descendant of immigrants—Italian, Irish, Armenian, Scandinavian, Chinese, Japanese, African, or others—may be able to associate in feeling, understanding, and appreciation of his or her own particular roots, heritage, or identity. That is the intrinsic purpose of the telling of this particular tale.

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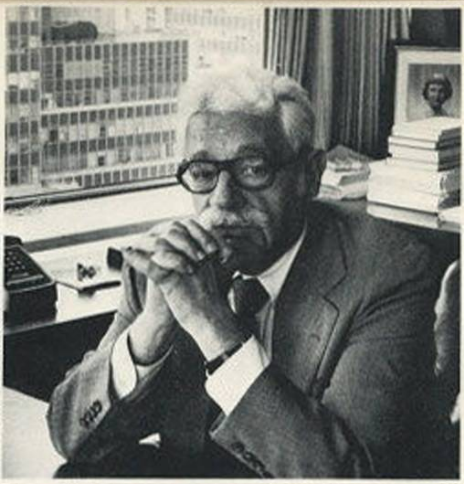


PHOTO: MARIE ATTMORE

About the Author

DON GUSSOW, a product of the lower East Side of New York, was educated in the New York City public schools, the University of Vermont, and New York University from which he holds a BA in journalism. He founded Magazines For Industry, Inc., in 1944 with one trade paper. Now as chairman, chief executive officer, and editor in chief of MFI, he heads a multimillion dollar business and professional magazine company that is among the twenty largest of the two hundred and fifty multiperiodical publishing companies. The firm he launched now publishes twenty different periodicals, most of them leaders in their respective fields.

Despite the constant demands of a thriving publishing company, Mr. Gussow still finds time (on weekends and during the month of July on Monhegan Island, Maine) to write books—in addition to writing two newsletters, *Inside Industry* and *Briefing the Doctor*, and a monthly column for MFI. With three books already published, Mr. Gussow will have a fourth, *Business Journalism As a Career* late in 1980, with four other books in the planning stages, one a novel set in the depression thirties.

Mr. Gussow resides in Manhattan with his wife Betty, an amateur painter of considerable talent. They have three sons, Alan, a renowned painter, conservationist, university lecturer and author; Mel, drama critic for *The New York Times* and winner of the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism, and author; and Paul, who is with MFI. They also have three grandsons.

Professional Views of the Book

"The reader whether Gentile, Jew or whatever becomes personally involved." **Evan Thomas,** vice president, editor, W. W. Norton & Co.

"A most compelling story." **Howard Cady,** senior editor, William Morrow & Co., Inc.

"The story is a tribute to the invincibility of the human spirit when faced with extinction. . ." **Daphne Abeel,** editor, Houghton Mifflin Co.

From reviews of author's previous books

Todd Fandell, assistant financial editor, Chicago Tribune: *"Don Gussow's fascinating book The New Merger Game illustrates the highly personal side of the merger game, a vital side that is often overlooked, even by the direct participants."*

Peter Whitney, San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle: *"Gussow has one chapter in his book, The New Merger Game, called "Sexuality in a Merger," and if it doesn't carry the metaphor beyond the bounds of good taste, it does extract some nuggets of wisdom that Ann Landers might envy. . .There are corporate merger-makers, whom Gussow compares to marriage brokers in Old World terms. "Have I got a bride for you!" the agent phones. And in fact, he has a kind of book—or portfolio—for the nervous would-be groom to choose from."*

John S. McClenahen, Industry Week: *"In the first sentence of The New Merger Game author Don Gussow states: 'Few things in business are more exciting, stimulating, or exhilarating than the merger game.' Mr. Gussow's book is extremely readable. He achieves a nice blend of narrative and case history—a knack for pointing up the personal consequences of acquiring and being acquired—the thrill of success, the gloom of failure."*

Joe Hanson, publisher, Folio magazine: *"The first edition of Don Gussow's book The New Merger Game was sold out within a few months. It is now in the second edition. Don's previous book, Divorce Corporate Style, about his experience in selling his company to Cowles Communications Inc., and then buying it back, was also a delight."*