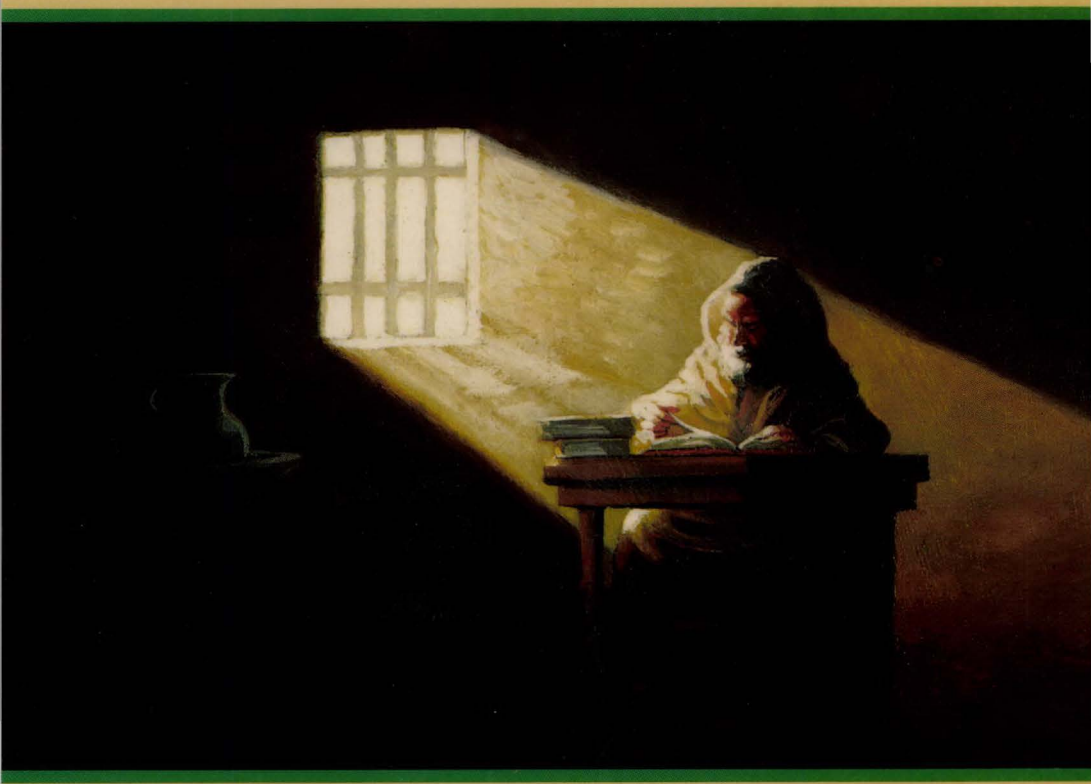
# The Captivity of the Maharam



**A narrative of the events surrounding the arrest and captivity of the Maharam of Rothenburg**

**SHMUEL ARGAMAN**

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**SHMUEL ARGAMAN**

**translated by**
**Tziril Salel**

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New York · London · Jerusalem

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# 1

# BEGINNINGS

The German city of Rothenburg was buzzing with activity. The narrow streets of the Jewish ghetto were swept, houses were whitewashed and a banner was strung across the main street of the ghetto welcoming the new Rabbi. Then, at the appointed time, the entire Jewish community—men, women and children—went out to meet their new Rabbi, Rabbi Mayer the son of Rabbi Baruch.

At last, his chariot was sighted in the distance. The community officials went to meet it, and they asked the *Rav* to ride the rest of the way into the city in the chariot that they had prepared for him. It was a chariot fit for a king, decorated with golden chains and precious stones. The *Rav* reluctantly agreed, to satisfy his new community. As the chariot approached the city's gates, the entire community

cried, "Welcome! Welcome Rabbi Mayer, our Rabbi and teacher!"

As soon as Rabbi Mayer left his chariot, the city's young Torah scholars flocked to him and led him to his lodgings under a canopy.

The community of Rothenburg was so happy with their new *Rav* that they wanted to extend the welcoming celebration for an entire week. But Rabbi Mayer would not hear of it.

"We must not waste time," he told them. "Time must be used for Torah and *mitzvos*."

The Jewish community heeded Rabbi Mayer's first teaching well. They strengthened the existing Torah study groups and established new ones. Businessmen, silversmiths and money-lenders, who previously could not find time in their busy days to learn Torah, now found themselves attending *shiurim*. The spirit of Torah study in Rothenburg became so strong that Torah was learned from the early hours of the morning until well after midnight.

The members of the community strengthened their performance of *mitzvos*, too. They looked for new opportunities to help each other, visit the sick, lend money and help the elderly.

Rabbi Mayer established a *yeshivah* in the city and young men from all over Germany flocked to hear his scholarly *shiurim*. Not only was Rabbi Mayer concerned about the spiritual advancement of his students, but he was also actively involved with them, befriending them and advising them.

Soon Rabbi Mayer's responsibilities multiplied. Not only

was he the *Rav* of Rothenburg, but all of German Jewry recognized him as their spiritual leader. Every day, he received letters from all over the country with *shaalos* in *Halachah* and in community matters. And he was instrumental in strengthening Torah and *mitzvos* throughout Germany. Today we know Rabbi Mayer as the Maharam of Rothenburg, one of the last of the Tosafists.

How did Rabbi Mayer achieve such greatness? Let us look at his background.

He was born in the year 4871 (1215) in the German city of Worms to his father Rabbi Baruch, who was the *Rav* of Worms. Little Mayer's first teacher was his father. Every day after *davening* and breakfast, Mayer would learn with his father for several hours. After the learning session was over, young Mayer would review the lessons and then prepare for the next lesson. The boy was a diligent and intelligent student. How his father enjoyed learning with him! And so it continued for several years.

It is no wonder then that at a young age he was already an accomplished *talmid chacham*. At that point, he travelled to the city of Wurzburg to learn under Rabbi Yitzchak, the author of the *Or Zarua*. In Wurzburg, he also learned under Rabbi Shmuel and Rabbi Menachem. He spent many years there learning from these three great Torah teachers.

Then Rabbi Mayer decided that to enhance his Torah studies he would have to travel to France to learn from the great Torah teachers there, the Tosafists. In those days, travel was not a matter of just reserving a ticket and then boarding a train or plane to arrive at one's destination in a few short hours. Rather, travel meant weeks of arduous

journeying by wagon over bumpy roads. But Rabbi Mayer found the long and difficult trip from Germany to France well worthwhile in order to learn from great Torah teachers.

Once in France, Rabbi Mayer learned under Rabbi Yechiel of Paris, Rabbi Shmuel of Falaise and Rabbi Shmuel of Evreux. After several years in France, Rabbi Mayer decided to return to Germany. Word of the young Torah genius and scholar spread throughout the land, and many communities approached Rabbi Mayer with offers of the rabbinate. After serving as *Rav* for several years in small German communities, Rabbi Mayer came to Rothenburg.

# 2

# STORMY TIMES

The Jewish community of Rothenburg was happy with its new role as the Torah center of Germany. They were content with their renewed attachment to Torah and *mitzvos*. But this peaceful life did not last long. Storm clouds arose on the horizon of German Jewry and the condition of the Jews deteriorated daily with new taxes, harsh decrees and massacres.

The massacres often began with the finding of a dead body of a Christian child. For example, in the city of Mayence, during the spring, before *Pesach*, a Christian child was found dead by a passing merchant. As soon as the merchant reached the city, he called his neighbors to help him bring the dead body into the city. They brought the child into the city square and soon a large mob gathered to

view the dead body.

"I'm willing to guess that the Jews killed him," one man commented to his friend.

"You're right," his friend answered, a little more loudly. "I heard that the Jews use the blood of Christian children to bake their *matzohs*."

"And you know what?" said the first man. "Their *Pesach* holiday is coming up."

A third man took up the cry and shouted, "Not only do the Jews use the blood of Christian children to bake *matzohs*, but they cook the legs of the children."

"The child was killed by the Jews!" another yelled. "They drained his blood for their *matzohs* and cut off his legs!"

If only the man would have looked at the dead body, he would have seen that the child's legs were still in place! But he was not interested in punishing the true murderer. Rather, he wanted to find an excuse to kill the Jews.

Soon the entire mob was shouting, "Death to the Jews! Death to the Jews!" while wildly waving their fists. They stormed into the Jewish ghetto, grabbing knives, axes and other weapons on the way.

The Jews were unaware that a dead body of a Christian boy had been found, and they were going about their everyday business, when they spotted the angry, bloodthirsty mob storming into their section of the city. Everyone ran for shelter. Those that were not fast enough were captured and cruelly murdered, to the delight of the mob.

"Death to the Jews!" was the shout as the frenzied mob combed the streets for Jews. Then they started to break down the doors of the houses to kill the rest of the Jews,

when the local priest interfered.

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop, my friends."

The surprised mob stopped for a moment to listen to him.

"Before you kill, give the Jews an ultimatum: 'Convert to Christianity to save your souls. Otherwise, you'll die.' And that way, you'll be doing your duty as good Christians."

The mob agreed. "Convert or die," became the cry.

The Jewish people were not swayed. "We will not convert, even if it means that we and our children will die," they called from behind their locked doors.

The mob broke down more doors and killed more Jews. Had Bishop Werner not interfered nothing would have been left of the Mayence Jewish community.

Bishop Werner was the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Germany. Being in charge of the treasury, he knew that the Jews supported the country's finances. "If the Jews will be killed, there will be no one upon whom to impose high taxes," he said. "Then, how would we fill the country's coffers?" So he turned to the mob and ordered them to stop. Twenty-six Jewish people were killed on that day in Mayence.

In Munich, a Christian couple had to leave town and they entrusted their son to an old widow. The boy felt that the widow was cruel to him and he ran away. A farmer found the boy wandering aimlessly about and took him in as a farm hand. When the widow discovered that the boy was missing, she started a rumor that the Jews had kidnapped him. The rumor spread and the story became exaggerated. Soon the rumor became, "The Jews kidnapped the boy and killed him."

Cries of "Death to the Jews!" "Slaughter them!" "Kill them all!" were heard in the streets of Munich. A crowd gathered and took up the cry. They stormed into the Jewish quarter of the city and killed every Jew in sight. The Jews that managed to escape ran to the *shul.*

The *shul* was a strong building. It was built with thick sturdy walls and a strong door with a dead bolt. The Jewish people who escaped to the *shul* bolted the door and pushed chairs and benches against it for extra security.

The mob turned to the *shul.* They tried to batter down the door by banging it, kicking it and heaving their combined body weights against it, but to no avail. Someone ran to bring axes.

"Death to the murderers of our children!" they cried wildly.

"Death to the murderers!" they yelled.

They tried to break down the door with their axes, and when they were unsuccessful, some tried the thick walls. The frustration of the mob increased their fury.

"Why waste your time and energy," someone shouted. "Let's burn down the building."

Within moments, the ground around the *shul* was soaked with oil and branches were piled up against its walls.

"Stop! Wait!" someone shouted.

Everyone turned to see who had dared interrupt their almost successful campaign against the Jews.

It was the monk Rudolf Bernard.

"It's true that the Jews killed the boy," began the monk. "And it's true that they are deserving of death. But remember, friends, we are Christians. As Christians we do

not just kill heretics, we try to save their souls. Give the Jews a choice: tell them, 'Either convert or die.' "

The mob agreed to the monk's advice and appointed him as their spokesman.

"Listen, you Jews!" the monk shouted. "We soaked the ground outside your synagogue with oil and piled branches against its walls. All we have to do is set a spark to the wood, and then we'll watch you burn to death. However, being that we are good Christians, we are giving you an opportunity to save your lives. All you have to do is allow yourselves be baptized. I am giving you one half hour to make a decision."

The mob cheered.

The allotted time passed, but not a sound was heard from the synagogue.

"Jews, your time is up!" called the monk.

"No, we will not convert," said the *Rav*. "Nor will any of us enter a church to be baptized."

"Stubborn heretics," cried the enraged monk. "You will die!"

The mob set the branches on fire and within a short time the building went up in flames. One hundred and eighty Jews of Munich died on that day.

Other Jewish communities in Germany suffered in similar ways. Life became more difficult with each passing day. Therefore, many Jews decided to emigrate. Jews from Mayence, Worms, Speyers and Oppenheim, among others, sold their houses and businesses, packed their belongings and left the country. Many hoped to settle in Eretz Yisrael.

Emperor Rudolf was worried about the mass emigration

of the Jews. Something had to be done to stop it, he reasoned, for if not, upon whom will I impose high taxes to fill my coffers? After convening with his advisors, he decided that the way to curb the emigration would be to prevent Rabbi Mayer of Rothenburg, the spiritual leader of the Jews, from emigrating. For if he were allowed to emigrate, all his compatriots would follow their leader's example. Therefore, preventing him from emigrating would keep many Jews in Germany near their leader.

# 3

# THE ESCAPE

It was several hours after midnight and the city of Rothenburg was asleep. Apart from a few stray cats, there was no sign of life in the narrow streets. Outside the Jewish quarter, a child awoke. As his mother took him in her arms, she heard the distinct clip-clop of horses' hooves. She peered out the window, and to her amazement, she saw two wagons rolling down the streets.

"Who could be travelling at this hour of the night?" she asked aloud.

Unaware of the curious eyes, the first wagon carrying the Maharam, his family and several *yeshivah* students passed by. The second wagon followed close behind carrying Rabbi Yitzchak, the brother-in-law of the Maharam, his wife and their children, the Maharam's pupil Rabbi Shlomo, his

wife and their children, and Rabbi Avraham, the secretary of the *bais din* and his family.

Earlier that evening, Rabbi Mayer had bidden a tearful good-bye to the community and to his students. How they wished that they could accompany him. But it was imperative that the Maharam's journey remain a secret from the gentile neighbors. For if Emperor Rudolf would hear of the Maharam's escape, he would certainly punish the *Rav* with death.

The travellers stopped at the city gates. Nearby slept the night watchman, the keys to the gates in his hand. One of Rabbi Mayer's students stepped out, whispered to the watchman and pressed a small money bag filled with coins into the watchman's hand. Within a few moments, the city gates swung open. They were on their way.

The two wagons had arranged to travel on different routes to avoid arousing suspicion. They were to meet in the forest beyond the castle of the duke of the locality.

Throughout the entire trip, Rabbi Mayer learned Torah continuously. He seemed not to realize that he was sitting in a bumpy wagon escaping from Jew haters. He was learning with the same enthusiasm and intense concentration as always. It was as if he was still sitting in his *yeshivah*. Even his immediate family was surprised at his ability to concentrate during the journey.

At last, the wagon carrying Rabbi Mayer and his family arrived at the prearranged meeting point. They spent the night in the forest. By morning the second wagon had not arrived. By sunset, the Maharam's pupils became anxious. Yet another day passed, and there was no sign of them.

Everyone looked to Rabbi Mayer for reassurance. But he said nothing and continued to learn. What could have happened to the others?

The occupants of the second wagon had decided to spend that night by the roadside and continue their trip in the morning. There was, of course, some risk of their being observed. However, it seemed peaceful as they set out the following day.

Nestled in the quiet countryside outside of Rothenburg to the west, stood the castle of Duke Heinrich, the duke of the locality, an intimate of the Emperor. The castle was built like all castles of the Middle Ages, like a fortress surrounded by a moat.

The duke happened to be out riding when he saw the wagon travelling away from Rothenburg. His suspicions aroused, he sent his men to investigate. Upon hearing that they were Jews, he had them immediately arrested and imprisoned in his castle.

Rabbi Yitzchak, Rabbi Avraham, Rabbi Shlomo and their families were taken by surprise. Why had they been arrested? So many other Jews had left the country. There was no law against emigrating.

"Orders, Rabbi," the soldiers had said. "We're following orders."

Now they were confined to a dark room with only a small window. Night fell and no one came to explain to them the reason for their arrest.

"It certainly must be a mistake," said the sister of the Maharam.

"They probably brought us here to squeeze us dry of our

money," said Rabbi Avraham's wife.

"Are we going to stay here forever, Mommy?" asked her son David.

"Don't worry, David," his father Rabbi Avraham said. "Someone will come soon to free us. It must be a mistake. Let us pray for our release. Everything is in the hand of Hashem. If He wills it, we will be freed."

# 4

# DIGGINGS

The next morning, the three families were awakened by heavy footsteps outside the door. There was a jingle of keys and the sound of a key scraping the inside of the keyhole. The door opened letting in a flood of light.

The prisoners squinted. After several moments, they were able to recognize the features of a man.

"The duke has decided to transfer you to another room," said the man flatly. "Take your things and follow me."

"Why were we arrested?" asked Rabbi Yitzchak, the brother-in-law of the Maharam.

"Tomorrow you will probably be called for a cross-examination and then you will be told everything you have to know," said the man.

"Why can't we know now?" asked Rabbi Yitzchak.

"Because you're Jews," said the man. But after pausing, he continued, "But I'm a good Christian, so I'll tell you. The duke suspects that you were planning to emigrate—something which is against the wish of the Emperor."

The man's voice seemed so familiar to Rabbi Yitzchak. Where did I hear this voice before? he asked himself, while searching his memory. If only there would be more light in the room, I would be able to see his face clearly, he thought.

Finally, he asked, "Did you ever visit the Jewish ghetto of Rothenburg?"

"Why do you ask?" said the man.

"Because your voice is very familiar to me, and I'm trying to place it," answered Rabbi Yitzchak.

"Indeed, I have frequented the Jewish quarter of Rothenburg," said the man.

"Oh?" said Rabbi Yitzchak, hoping the man would offer more information about himself.

"I collected the duke's tax on occasion," he explained.

The duke's tax-collector, thought Rabbi Yitzchak. Who is this man? he asked himself again. In a flash it came to him.

"Hermann!" he exclaimed.

"Correct," said the man. "But who are you?"

"I am Yitzchak the Silversmith. You visited me about five months ago."

Duke Heinrich, like many other princes, lived a reckless and unrestrained life. He threw expensive parties and often overspent his budget. Then he would tax the Jews to refill his purse. Hermann was the duke's tax collector and he often visited Rabbi Yitzchak, who, as the Maharam's brother-in-law and a silversmith, was the natural choice to

hold the money of his fellow-Jews. Hermann was impressed by the kind Rabbi and had an occasional interesting conversation with him. Now he hesitated.

"What can I do? I have been given personal charge of all of you," he said.

Rabbi Yitzchak pressed some coins into Hermann's hand.

"Hermann, can you help us escape?" he asked.

"How? If I wouldn't lock the door to your cell and then you escape, all fingers will be pointed at me," said Hermann.

"Perhaps, you can tell the duke the truth, that we didn't do anything wrong, and persuade him to let us go," suggested Rabbi Yitzchak.

"It's no use," said Hermann. "The duke is a stubborn man and I won't be able to influence him to change his decree."

Rabbi Yitzchak pressed another coin into Hermann's hand. "I will make it worthwhile for you to think of a viable method of escape for us," he said.

There was silence for a few moments. Finally, Hermann said slowly, "There may be a way. But I have to check it out."

He left and locked the door behind him.

"What kind of idea is he going to come up with now?" asked Rabbi Avraham.

"What's the difference?" said Rabbi Yitzchak. "As long as we get out of here and return to the Maharam. They must be worried about our absence." He paused and then added, "We have to remember that our freedom is not up to Hermann or anyone else; it's up to Hashem. We have to pray for our freedom. Let's say some *Tehillim*."

At once, Rabbi Shlomo began to lead the group in the recitation of *Tehillim*.

"Father," David whispered urgently to Rabbi Avraham. "He's here! I hear steps outside the door."

The group fell silent immediately.

Hermann entered the room and closed the door.

"I was right," he said. "I recalled the escape tunnel which runs beneath the castle. I thought that it might run directly beneath these cells. I checked on it, and I believe that I was correct in my assumption. The tunnel begins in the duke's bedroom and leads out of the castle. I will provide you with the necessary digging tools. But I must warn you that you may get lost in the damp and gloomy passage."

There was silence in the cell.

Rabbi Avraham broke the silence. "But our horses," he said meekly.

"Be happy that I'm helping you escape," muttered Hermann. "And you want your horses?"

"Tell me, Hermann," said Rabbi Yitzchak. "Won't our escape through the tunnel throw the suspicion on you?" He wanted to ascertain that Hermann was telling the truth and that he was not just setting a trap for them.

"Well," said Hermann. "The door will be locked from the outside. And when you go, you will take the digging tools with you. Then it won't be apparent that someone provided you with them. So why should they suspect me?" Hermann stopped, took a deep breath and said, "Now, give me the money."

Rabbi Yitzchak was not totally satisfied with Hermann's answer. "You'll receive the money once we escape," he said.

"No! I want the money now. If I don't get it now, I won't help you escape," threatened Hermann.

After about a half hour of arguing, Rabbi Yitzchak and Hermann agreed that Hermann would receive half the sum then and the other half after they would escape. And if he would return their horses to them, he would receive a larger sum.

"I'll be back soon with digging utensils," said Hermann as he left the room.

Soon he returned with a small sack.

"Here are your digging tools," he said as he handed the sack to Rabbi Yitzchak.

Rabbi Yitzchak opened the sack and took out a small hoe and two small spades.

"How can we dig an escape hole with these toys?" asked young David, expressing the sentiments of the adults.

"No, we must not lose hope," said Rabbi Yitzchak in an effort to reassure the others. "It is not Hermann who will save us. Everything is up to Hashem. 'My help is from Hashem,' says David Hamelech. (*Tehillim* 121:2) We must always remember that."

Each of the three men took a digging utensil and set to work at once. When they tired, the women took over, and when they tired, the children took over. Hour after hour, they dug.

"The hole is so deep," David remarked, "but it doesn't go anywhere."

"Perhaps we have to dig even more," said Rabbi Yitzchak, and the men continued to dig with renewed vigor.

In the wee hours of the morning, the men allowed themselves some respite, and they laid down their digging utensils.

"Could it be that Hermann tricked us? He took our money to help us escape through a tunnel that doesn't even exist!" said Rabbi Avraham.

"Why be pessimistic?" said Rabbi Yitzchak. "Look, the room is large. Maybe the tunnel runs under a different part of it."

"That's a thought," said Rabbi Shlomo.

The men rested for several hours, arose and *davened Shacharis*. They ate something and then continued digging.

Now, during the day, they had to be more cautious to hide their activity. They covered the first hole that they dug with one of the cots. As they dug anew, they deposited the dirt under another cot. A third cot stood alongside the new digging site, ready to cover it, if necessary.

They dug deeper and deeper, hour after hour. The work was tedious and monotonous.

"I hear footsteps," cried David. "Someone's coming in."

The work stopped at once. The cot was moved over the hole, and everyone sat on his bed, looking despondently toward the ground, as was arranged.

As he looked toward the ground, Rabbi Avraham saw some loose dirt that had not been swept under the bed. Oh no, he said to himself, the man will surely notice it and deduce that we've been digging, and that will be the end of us. He mentally began to review verses of *Tehillim*.

The man entered the dark room. "The duke wishes to cross-examine you, you and you," he said as he pointed to Rabbi Yitzchak, Rabbi Avraham and Rabbi Shlomo. "Come with me."

# 5

# IN THE TUNNEL

The three men were brought into the duke's lavishly furnished meeting chamber.

"Sit down and wait for the duke," the man ordered coldly.

Rabbi Avraham looked toward Rabbi Yitzchak for reassurance. How dusty his clothes are, he thought. Then he looked down at his own clothes. They, too, were dusty. And Rabbi Shlomo's clothes were also dusty. Oh no, he thought, the duke will surely deduce that we are trying to dig our way to freedom. He brushed off the clothes to the best of his ability before he sat down on the upholstered chair.

The duke entered the chamber. The men arose.

"You may be seated," said the duke. "I have arrested you because I feel that you have trespassed the Emperor's desire. You are surely aware that the Emperor is unhappy

with the recent mass emigration of Jews. You have tried to emigrate. Therefore, you deserve to be punished."

"But the Emperor never issued a law against emigration," countered Rabbi Yitzchak.

"A decree is not necessary," said the duke. "The Emperor's desire is equivalent to a decree."

Rabbi Yitzchak countered the duke's words with arguments and then counter-arguments.

"This is all irrelevant," said the duke when he could no longer counter Rabbi Yitzchak's arguments. "I have decided that your punishment will be an unlimited term of imprisonment here in my castle. But your wives and children may return to the city. Discussion closed."

The duke stood up and left the room. The men were escorted back to their cell. They informed their family of the verdict.

Rabbi Avraham's wife broke down in tears. "I was sure that it was a mistake and that we would be freed," she said between sobs.

"Did you offer the duke money to ransom yourselves?" Rabbi Yitzchak's wife asked.

"Yes," her husband answered. "We offered him a huge sum of money. He refused it. He said that as political prisoners, our property reverts to the Imperial treasury, and that the Emperor would undoubtedly compensate him well for his involvement in this case."

"As Rabbi Yitzchak always says, we must not worry," Rabbi Shlomo added. "It's not Duke Heinrich or Emperor Rudolph who controls our destiny, but Hashem. If Hashem wills it, we will be freed. We must pray to Hashem for our

freedom." He immediately began to recite *Tehillim*, and the group followed suit.

"It's time that we resume digging," said Rabbi Yitzchak.

No sooner had they begun than there were footsteps outside the door. They quickly covered the hole with the cot, and everyone sat on their beds.

It was Hermann.

"I managed to convince the stable man to join me in this venture," he began. "He will let your horses graze outside the castle grounds at about the time you should reach the end of the tunnel. Then you'll take them and flee. Sounds good, no? But he'll need fifty marks for his effort."

Rabbi Avraham's wife's mouth dropped open. "Fifty marks," she murmured.

"Listen here, Hermann," began Rabbi Yitzchak boldly. "We think you tricked us. We've been digging and digging, and we still have not reached the tunnel. Remember, if we don't escape, you won't receive the rest of your money."

"Yes, I know. But, according to my information, the tunnel does indeed pass under this room," said Hermann, and he left the room.

"Maybe we should try digging at yet another site," said Rabbi Shlomo.

"We have nothing to lose," said Rabbi Yitzchak.

They turned to the northern corner of the room and began digging with renewed vigor. After a short time, Rabbi Avraham's spade slipped.

"It's the tunnel!" he exclaimed.

Soon they were ready for their escape. It was decided that Rabbi Avraham would be the first to descend into the

tunnel. He helped Rabbi Yitzchak down. Then, together they helped the women and children down. Rabbi Shlomo threw all the dirt from the digging down into the tunnel, pulled a bed over the hole, and finally descended into the tunnel himself.

The tunnel was dark and narrow. A musty odor filled the air. Rabbi Avraham inched along feeling the walls for guidance. The others followed close behind.

"Ow," cried little David, as he fell to the ground.

"What happened?" asked his mother worriedly.

"I hurt my ankle on a rock," he said, holding his foot in pain.

"Pick him up," Rabbi Avraham said to his wife. "We must continue."

The tunnel curved sharply to the right, and after a few steps, it curved sharply again.

"Maybe we're heading the wrong way—back toward the duke's apartment," said Rabbi Avraham's wife.

"I don't know," answered her husband. As he turned around to speak to her, his hand brushed against the wall of the tunnel, bringing down a shower of dirt and pebbles.

"We must *daven* to Hashem to direct us on the right path," said Rabbi Yitzchak.

The group inched their way on and on. It seemed like they had been in the tunnel for hours.

Sarah, Rabbi Shlomo's young daughter, began to cry, "I'm tired. It smells in here. I want to go home," she said between sobs.

"Sara'le," began her father. And there was another shower of dirt and pebbles, just in front of them.

"Who knows?" said Rabbi Shlomo's wife. "Maybe we'll be buried alive, here."

"It's unlikely," said Rabbi Shlomo. "This tunnel has probably been in existence since the castle was built, and it didn't collapse until now. Why should it collapse now?"

The tunnel was widening. As they walked, it widened even more. Were they approaching the end of the tunnel? they wondered. Their steps became lighter with the anticipation of their upcoming freedom.

But Rabbi Avraham remained skeptical. The tunnel was not getting lighter, as it should have if they were indeed approaching its end. After several minutes, he realized that he was correct. This was not the end of the tunnel, but the entrance to a large underground room.

Not a word was said, but sighs filled the air. Rabbi Shlomo took his cue and led the group in the recitation of a chapter of *Tehillim*. "*Shir Hamaalos*," he began, and the others repeated after him. "From the depths, I called You, Hashem. My Lord, hear my voice. . ." (*Tehillim* 130:1-2)

Reassured, the group began to search the room for a trap door. They circled the room several times, but in vain.

"Perhaps there was a fork in the tunnel and we took the wrong path," suggested Rabbi Shlomo.

"Let me check it out," offered Rabbi Yitzchak.

He set out into the tunnel and within a short time reached the fork.

Shlomo was right, he said to himself.

# 6

# DEEPER IN THE TUNNEL

It was dark in the tunnel. Rabbi Yitzchak did not have a torch or lantern. He felt like a blind man, his only means of investigation being the sense of touch in his hands and feet. As he walked he touched the walls of the tunnel on both sides in an effort to familiarize himself with his new surroundings.

Suddenly he felt a slight breeze. This is it! I've come to the end, he told himself excitedly. The breeze must be blowing from outside. Let me just review the way once more, and then I'll return to the group, he said to himself as he retraced his steps.

He reached the place where he had felt the slight breeze and was about to turn back when he reminded himself that he hadn't even investigated the source of the breeze. It's

true that I'm almost certain that this is the end of the tunnel, but "almost" isn't good enough when others are involved. I must be absolutely certain that this is the correct path before I bring the others here, he told himself as he inched along in the direction of the breeze.

This is strange, he thought. The breeze should be getting stronger if I were indeed approaching the end of the tunnel, but it isn't. Just then he came to a dead end. It was a smooth wooden wall. This is it! he told himself excitedly. This is the door to the outside. He felt along the side of the wall, looking for a handle or latch with which to open it.

"Who's there?" he heard someone ask drowsily, half-asleep.

Oh no! This is the duke's apartment! He took a few steps back, but dared not go further afraid that he would awaken the duke. I'll have to wait here at least a quarter of an hour until the duke falls back into a deep sleep, he told himself. He stood as still as he could, only twitching slightly as the beads of perspiration that were forming on his forehead dripped down his face. Even his breathing seemed as loud as that of a panting dog.

At last he felt it safe to go. He began retracing his steps.

What's this? The wall on the right is curving. It can't be that I have already reached the fork, he told himself. This must be another path. Perhaps this is the correct one.

It must be, he told himself as he inched along. I see light and from where else would light be coming if not from outside. But I must not jump to conclusions, he told himself. I must be cautious.

Again, he found himself face to face with a wall, again of

wood. But there was a distinct difference. This wooden wall was unfinished; it seemed to be a crude door. The faint glimmer of light he had seen was coming from beneath it. He felt the wall for some sort of handle.

Ah! An indentation. He pushed. The door did not budge. He pushed harder. Again, it didn't move. Finally he heaved his body against it and it opened.

He fell into a dark room. This was the same room from which he had started!

But what is this? Opposite him, a portion of the wall was moving, letting in light. Rabbi Yitzchak glanced about, looking for the rest of the group. Perhaps they could explain this strange phenomenon. But they too stood frozen in their places, their eyes glued on the moving wall.

The opening got larger, and a hand was thrust into the room. Suddenly, a stifled scream pierced the silence. It was Rabbi Avraham's wife, who had managed to stifle her scream with her hand but could do so no longer.

Soon a man entered the room through the opening. The group was blinded momentarily by the light that entered the room from the outside. It was Hermann.

Rabbi Avraham's wife took a deep breath that was so loud that everyone heard her. Young David giggled. The tension in the room broke.

"Why are you still here?" asked Hermann. "The stable man and I calculated that you should have been out of the tunnel hours ago. We've been waiting long enough for you. Now, follow me!"

# 7

# WHERE ARE THEY?

The kitchen-boy balanced the tray of twelve bowls of soup with one hand as he fiddled with the rusty lock of the cell. The tray teetered dangerously, but with precise, quick movements, the boy skillfully straightened it.

"Supper, wretched Jews," he called as he entered the cell.

There was no answer.

"Supper," he called again.

Again, there was no answer.

"That's strange," he said, as he left the room, leaving the door unlocked.

"Hans!" he called, searching for the prison warden. He found the warden lazily eating supper.

"Hans, the Jews are gone," said the kitchen boy.

"Can't you see I'm eating," said the warden. "Anyway, go

tell Hermann. He's in charge of them."

"I have to get back to the kitchen," said the kitchen boy as he turned to leave. "You tell Hermann."

Let me go see what the boy was talking about, said the warden to himself after he finished eating.

"They're really gone," he said after inspecting the room himself. "I'm not going to tell Hermann. If I find the missing Jews myself, I'll get a big reward."

Perhaps Hermann has moved them to another room, he thought, and he proceeded to check in all the cells. But the Jews were nowhere to be found.

Soon the whole castle was talking about the Jews who had disappeared. It didn't take long before Duke Heinrich found out about the escapees. He called for Hermann to clarify the matter, but Hermann could not be found. In the meantime, he ordered all employees of the castle to stop whatever they were doing and take up the search for the missing Jews.

The servants spread out in the castle, in the courtyard and just beyond the castle. The search party in the castle found nothing, as did those who searched outside the castle, as it was already night, and without a moon in the sky, the night was very dark. The duke agreed to postpone the search until the next morning.

After the duke arose the next morning, he called for Hermann.

Hermann answered the call immediately.

"Where were you last night, when I called you?" the duke demanded.

"I was sick," Hermann lied.

"The Jews I entrusted in your care are missing," said the duke sternly.

Hermann feigned surprise. "Speak to the prison warden," he said. "He was in charge while I was out."

"Let's go," said the duke.

"The Jews are missing," said the duke to the prison warden.

"Yes, sir, I reported their absence," said the prison warden waiting for his reward.

"But why are they missing?" demanded the duke. "Why weren't you doing your duty by guarding the cell?"

The warden paled. He knew that if the duke was dissatisfied with him, he would have him killed. "I swear that no one stepped over this threshold to escape," he said trembling.

"Let's go see the cell in question," ordered the duke.

The prison warden looked around the room. With a suspicion, he moved a cot in the southern corner of the room.

"Look, they've been digging," he said.

"But it doesn't lead anywhere," said Hermann.

"This hole does lead somewhere," said the warden as he uncovered the hole in the northern corner of the room.

Is it possible that the Jews dug into my escape tunnel? the duke asked himself. How can it be? Only a handful of people know the tunnel exists, and even fewer people know where it is.

"Let's check it out," the prison warden was saying.

He brought a lantern and descended into the tunnel, while Hermann and the duke waited in the cell.

They waited and waited. Finally, after an hour, the warden returned.

"The tunnel is damp and as I walked dirt and stones fell from the walls and ceiling," he explained. "The road forked: the path to the right ended in a wooden wall and the path to the left ended in a large room. I honestly don't know what happened to the Jews."

Thank goodness, this fool didn't follow the tunnel into my apartment, thought the duke. "I'll have to investigate the matter further," said the duke, and he left the room.

Once out of earshot of the warden, the duke sent Hermann and another trusted servant who was aware of the presence of the tunnel to search it to discover the whereabouts of the Jews. They descended and proceeded directly to the large room. The hatch door to the outside was stuck. As much as they tried, it wouldn't open.

They returned to the duke and reported their findings.

I wonder who closed up the tunnel, thought the duke. I must have it opened—after I find these wretched Jews, he decided.

"Hermann, order in my name eight men to search for the missing Jews," said the duke. "Two men shall search two days distance to the north, two men to the south, two to the west and two to the east."

Hermann relayed the message and the riders set out. They asked all the passersby they encountered, "Did you see a group of Jews travelling in this direction?" Finally, the riders to the west found one man who answered in the affirmative.

"I saw a wagon carrying three men, their wives and their children," he told the men. "But that was yesterday."

"At least we're on the right track," the men told each other.

Someone else informed them of a wagon carrying an old man with a radiant face and a white beard.

"Who can that be?" the riders asked each other. "We weren't told to search for a person that fits that description."

"Perhaps others joined the Jews we are searching for," suggested one.

"Maybe that old man has no connection to the Jews we are searching for," said the other.

"Whatever," said the first rider. "Soon we'll reach them and find out for ourselves. Heinrich will reward us well for this catch, don't you think?" he added gleefully.

The riders rode on and on, but they still did not reach the Jews. Their two-day limit was quickly approaching.

"Where could those wretched Jews be?" they asked each other.

# 8

# REUNITED IN ESCAPE

The sun set. The peacefulness of night descended upon the forest. But in this stretch of the woods anxiety prevailed. The third day had passed since the second wagon should have met the Maharam and his family. There was talk among the students of returning to Rothenburg to look for Rabbi Yitzchak, Rabbi Avraham, Rabbi Shlomo and their families. Only the Maharam remained calm, totally engrossed in his Torah studies. When the subject was broached to him, he indicated that they should continue to wait for the wagon to arrive.

Another day passed, and there was no sign of the second wagon. The Maharam's wife was beside herself. Where was her sister and her family? But the Maharam remained silent, indicating that they should continue to wait.

The next morning, one of the Maharam's students went to the edge of the road to see if the second wagon was approaching. After several hours of staring at an empty dusty road, he sighted movement in the distance.

Could it be the second wagon of our entourage? he asked himself. He waited for the wagon to approach before jumping to conclusions. Indeed it was the missing wagon! The student directed the wagon through the forest to their camp.

"My sister," cried Rabbi Mayer's wife as she embraced her sister in tears. "I was so worried about you and your family. I'm so happy that you're alive and well." She sobbed quietly on her sister's shoulder.

The others shook hands and exchanged a few words.

Rabbi Mayer expressed his happiness by quoting from *Tehillim* (136:1), "Give thanks to Hashem for He is good, for His kindness endures forever."

"Blessed is He and blessed is His Name," everyone answered.

Rabbi Yitzchak interrupted the happy reunion.

"We must leave this camp immediately," he said. "As soon as our escape is discovered, Duke Heinrich will send a search party after us."

The Maharam agreed and the two wagons set out once more. They prodded their horses to trot at their maximum speed. By late afternoon they reached a Jewish city. They stopped to *daven Minchah* and immediately returned to their wagons to resume their travel.

"How fortunate we were that the people of this community did not recognize my illustrious brother-in-law and our

teacher," commented Rabbi Yitzchak. "I only hope that we will be as fortunate in the future."

"Amen," answered the others.

"Mommy, I don't feel well," complained young David, the son of Rabbi Avraham several hours after they passed the city.

"What's wrong, my son?" she asked.

"My head hurts," he said.

"Try to sleep, David," she suggested. "Perhaps you are tired."

David continued to complain. "Mommy, I don't feel well. My head hurts and I ache all over," he sobbed.

His mother took him in her arms. "Oh, my goodness," she exclaimed. "You're boiling hot!" Then, turning to her husband, she said, "Avraham, he needs a doctor. We have to return to the city."

"I'll ask Rabbi Mayer for his advice," said Rabbi Avraham.

"We must not retrace our steps," said Rabbi Mayer. "Soon we will reach the forest, and we will stop there."

"But he needs a doctor," argued Rabbi Avraham's wife. "And his condition may worsen with further travel."

"Don't worry," assured Rabbi Mayer. "We'll care for him once we stop in the forest, and with the help of Hashem, no evil will befall him."

Once they reached the forest, Rabbi Mayer himself got out of the wagon and walked to and fro among the trees, his eyes cast downward, as in search for something. Then he stopped. He leaned down and plucked a small plant.

"Prepare this herb and give the preparation to the boy," he instructed.

Within the hour, the boy's temperature dropped, and he fell into a peaceful sleep.

"We will remain here until the boy is strong enough to travel again," said Rabbi Mayer.

"But that may take time," countered one of his students.

"Nevertheless, we will wait," said the Maharam.

By now the group knew that Rabbi Mayer had reasons for his apparently irrational decisions. Twice before, his inexplicable decisions proved to be correct. Who could know what Rabbi Mayer now had in mind by ordering them to wait?

# 9

# IMPRISONED AGAIN

Rabbi Mayer's house in Rothenburg had been open for visitors at all times of the day and night. The Jewish people of Germany had flocked to him to seek his opinion on *Halachic* problems, to ask his advice on communal and personal matters and to seek his blessing. This was besides the *yeshivah* students who came from all over to study Torah in his *yeshivah*. It is no wonder that people all over Germany felt as if they knew him personally.

As the two wagons approached the town of Heidenheim, Rabbi Yitzchak silently prayed that they should be allowed to stop just to *daven Minchah* and then board their wagons to continue their journey.

But it was not to be.

After Rabbi Mayer finished *davening Minchah*, he turned

to leave. One of the local townspeople was watching the venerable Rabbi make his way to the door. The Rabbi looked so familiar. If I would be standing in the *shul* in Rothenburg now, I would say that this is the Maharam, said the man to himself. It has only been two years since I was in his house to ask his advice, and he still looks the same. But I am not in Rothenburg. I am at home in Heidenheim. Why is Rabbi Mayer here?

The man approached Rabbi Mayer and welcomed him.

Rabbi Yitzchak pleaded with the man. "Please," he begged. "We are fleeing, and our presence must remain a secret. Please let us continue with our journey."

"But our *Rav* has an important question to discuss with Rabbi Mayer. He was planning to take a trip to Rothenburg. But now that Rabbi Mayer is here . . ." After a pause, the man continued, "I must tell just the *Rav*."

Rabbi Yitzchak was firm. "To reveal his identity would endanger him. No one must know that Rabbi Mayer is here."

A crowd gathered.

"Welcome our master and teacher, Rabbi Mayer of Rothenburg," someone shouted.

The local *Rav* invited the group to stay with him. Within a few short hours, the *Rav's* house resembled Rabbi Mayer's house in Rothenburg—it was full of people who came to see the Maharam to ask his advice and to seek his blessing. The Jewish community of Heidenheim felt privileged to be the host of the Rabbi and spiritual leader of all of German Jewry.

When the duke of the locality, the notorious Jew hater Hans Friedreich, heard of the upheaval in the Jewish quarter, he sent his men to investigate the situation.

With the report of the investigation in hand, Hans Friedreich paced his study.

"How can I use this information against the accursed Jews?" he muttered over and over again.

He remembered an old law that had fallen to disuse—that visitors to the city must receive permission before entering.

"I'll arrest them on that basis," he said. "Then I'll accuse them of disrupting the peace of the town."

He immediately dispatched the arrest warrant for the new Jewish arrivals.

The policemen entrusted with the arrest arrived at the house of the town's *Rav* and found it full of Jews.

"How are we to know which Jews are the new arrivals?" one of them asked.

"Simple, just make an announcement," one of them suggested. "Like this." He raised his voice and, in an authoritative tone, announced, "The new Jewish arrivals are hereby under arrest."

Immediately, the Jews in the room surrounded the new arrivals in an effort to protect them. The policemen had no way of reaching the new arrivals without resorting to physical violence.

"Rabbi Avraham, come quickly," someone called to Rabbi Avraham who was then entering the house, unaware that he was under arrest. "They want to arrest you."

Rabbi Avraham and his son dashed into the center of the confusion—straight into the hands of the waiting officers.

"You're under arrest," the officers cried.

They dragged the rabbi and his son to the duke's castle and threw them into a dark cell.

Duke Friedreich entrusted the care of the new prisoners to his personal advisor, a priest whose sole mission in life was to convert Jews to Christianity. The priest was delighted with his new assignment. The first thing he did was separate the father and son. Then he left them in solitude to brood over their situation.

After a day's time, he entered the cell of Rabbi Avraham and said, "You are guilty of a severe crime." He spoke slowly, in a low-pitched, serious tone, his words carefully chosen.

What could the priest have in mind? wondered Rabbi Avraham. I was just returning from a short walk with David when we were arrested.

"You incited the good Jews of Heidenheim to revolt," the priest continued. "This crime carries the death penalty. You and your son will die." He stopped and waited for his words to have the desired effect.

"I don't understand," said Rabbi Avraham. "I just arrived in the city two days ago. I was taking a walk with my son and then I was arrested. I didn't even know the reason for my arrest until this moment."

"You entered the city without first receiving permission," continued the priest in the same low-pitched tone. "This proves that you attempted to enter the city for some illegal purpose. Indeed, not long after you arrived, all the Jews left their homes and mobbed the house where you were staying. If not for our loyal police officers, who knows what could have happened?"

Rabbi Avraham attempted to vindicate himself, but to no avail. The priest would not take any other explanation for the gathering of the Jews at the *Rav's* house.

"No," said the priest in that same tone. "You incited the people, and you must die." The priest paused. "But you can save yourself." He paused again. "With baptism."

"The answer is no," said Rabbi Avraham forcefully. "I will not convert nor allow myself to be baptized."

"Then you will die," said the priest in the same slow manner. He paused. "And your son will die, too. Let me bring him in so you can share your last moments together."

The priest thought that when Rabbi Avraham would see his son, he would have mercy on the child, and agree to baptism in order to save him.

David was brought into the room. He was pale and his eyes were red and swollen.

Rabbi Avraham turned to his son and, with tears in his eyes, said in Yiddish, "My dear child, this *rasha* wants us to convert. I raised you for ten years, and during those years, I showered you with my love. I love you, David. I beg of you, don't give in to him. He will try to persuade you, but don't listen to him. Let us die as Jews!"

David broke down in tears. When he was able to speak, he said, "Don't worry, father. I am not crying because I am afraid to die. I would have never given in to this *rasha*, even if you would not have warned me. I will willingly join our nation's many heroes who have died *al kidush Hashem*."

Rabbi Avraham ran to David and, with tears streaming down his cheeks, kissed him. David wrapped his arms around his father's neck and, while sobbing, embraced him. They said nothing but continued to cry.

# 10

# RANSOMED

The Heidenheim community was distraught over the unwarranted arrest of Rabbi Avraham and his son. The community president Rabbi Yekusiel called a meeting of his committee to discuss how they would obtain the release of Rabbi Avraham and his son. At the meeting, one of the committee members, Rabbi Moshe, mentioned that a business acquaintance of his was an intimate of the duke. It was decided that Rabbi Moshe would approach his acquaintance and ask him to arrange for the Jewish community's representatives to meet with the duke.

Rabbi Moshe met with the man, presented him with a large monetary gift and the man agreed to attempt to set up an appointment.

During the next few days, *Sefer Tehillim* was completed

several times daily by the Jews of Heidenheim. At last, Rabbi Yekusiel received notice of his upcoming appointment with the duke. He decided to take Rabbi Moshe and another committee member, Rabbi Shimon, with him.

At the appointed time, the three men stood at the gates of the duke's castle. The guard led them through a beautifully landscaped garden to a marble staircase which led to the interior of the palace. From there, the doorman led them through a maze of corridors, carpeted with Persian carpets and decorated with ornate carvings, to the duke's antechamber.

"Wait here until you are called in," instructed the doorman. The men sat down. They said nothing to each other but they each began to recite *Tehillim* silently. They knew that the duke was a rabid anti-Semite and he might possibly accuse them of insolence and imprison them. On the other hand, though, the duke could not harm them if Hashem would not will it.

"Jews of Heidenheim," announced a servant dressed in purple velvet. "The duke is waiting for you.

The group entered the duke's meeting chamber. They could not help but admire the luxurious room. An elaborate crystal chandelier hung in the center of the room and Arabian vases studded with rare jewels glittered from their display shelves. The duke was seated at the head of a highly polished table. He nodded at the three rabbis, who then took their seats.

"What is it now?" he demanded.

"We have come to ask for the release of Rabbi Avraham and his son," began Rabbi Yekusiel.

"Release?" exclaimed the duke. "But they incited a revolt against us."

"Your excellency, they are innocent of such a charge."

After much discussion, it became clear to the rabbis that the duke would not give way. It seemed as if the visit to the duke would end without accomplishing anything. The three rabbis desperately racked their brains for a way to move the duke.

The duke looked at them and, to end the appointment, said, "It is clear that your compatriots are deserving of the death penalty. But we will be willing to consider their release for a sufficiently large ransom."

"We will be delighted to redeem them," cried the three men.

Rabbi Yekusiel detected a change in Duke Friedreich's eyes. A limitless greed had filled them. His hands twitched feverishly, and his feet moved involuntarily.

"One thousand silver marks to be paid now," he murmured.

"How will we obtain such an enormous sum?" exclaimed Rabbi Yekusiel.

"You Jews are very wealthy. The sum is not exorbitant," purred the duke.

"Your excellency, with all due respect, we must inform you of your mistake," said Rabbi Yekusiel, trembling. "We are not wealthy. This sum represents a great fortune. Do you wish us to sell the clothing off our backs to obtain it?"

"Not at all. Just give me some of your jewels," he said. His eyes were glittering with excitement as he thought of the money.

After further haggling, Duke Friedreich finally agreed to lower the ransom. The three men left the castle and hastened back to Heidenheim to collect the necessary funds. In Heidenheim, the people gave generously, and the three rabbis collected the entire sum within a few short hours.

The duke's personal advisor, the priest, was furious when he heard of the amount of ransom set for his charges. Not that he was against the principle of ransom. But he could not understand why the duke let this wonderful opportunity to extort even more money from the Jews slip through his fingers. The priest was determined to be present when the Jews would return with the sum of money. Perhaps he would be successful in persuading the duke to raise the ransom.

The three rabbis arrived at the castle gates. They were immediately called into the duke's chamber. The duke couldn't wait to get his hands on the money. The rabbis entered the room carrying bags of silver coins. They placed the bags of coins on the table in front of the duke.

"See how easy it was!" exclaimed the duke. "So much silver in a few hours!" He ran his fingers through the coins. He sat up straight in his chair and, looking directly at Rabbi Yekusiel, said, "But I have changed my mind! Let us return to the original amount."

"Your excellency, that is utterly impossible!" cried the rabbis.

The negotiations continued for some time, while the prince played idly with the coins. This seemed to satisfy some urge in him. The priest stood at the side and watched warily.

"I've had enough!" cried the duke suddenly. "Let the Jews go free."

"But," protested the priest, "the Mother Church needs funds urgently."

Duke Friedreich was playing with the coins and did not seem to hear.

# 11

# RABBI MAYER STAYS BEHIND

Rabbi Mayer was overjoyed at the release of the prisoners, but he was very disturbed at the arbitrary accusations and extortion of such an enormous sum from the Jewish community. These thoughts were constantly on his mind.

He had planned to leave Heidenheim as soon as Rabbi Avraham and his son were released, but the community begged him to remain, as his advice was urgently needed on many matters. He agreed to stay, but insisted that the others leave at once. For he suspected that the priest would attempt to persuade the duke to arrest Rabbi Avraham and his son again.

The *yeshivah* students refused to leave their teacher. But Rabbi Mayer ordered them to go ahead, permitting only Rabbi Arye to remain at his side. On that day, two wagons

left Heidenheim to continue on their journey. For safety's sake, it was arranged that they would travel along different routes and then meet further along the road.

Several hours after the second wagon left Heidenheim, Franz Brandt, the duke's personal secretary, was standing at the door of Rabbi Yekusiel's home.

"Where are the Rabbi and his son?" he demanded.

"They're not here," said Rabbi Yekusiel's wife evasively.

Franz Brandt proceeded to the house of the *Rav* from where Rabbi Avraham and David had been previously captured. When he didn't find them there either, he and his men attempted to capture the aged Rabbi sitting at the head of the table.

Suddenly, Franz Brandt found that he had to contend with a mob of screaming Jews waving their fists and fighting the Rabbi's arrest.

"Stop," someone shouted above the din. It was Rabbi Yekusiel. Rabbi Yekusiel had recognized Franz Brandt from his several visits to the duke's castle.

"Honorable Franz Brandt," Rabbi Yekusiel addressed him, once he found his way through the crowd. "With all due respect, I believe that you are making a mistake by trying to arrest this Rabbi. The entire Jewish community would agree, I'm sure, to be imprisoned in his place. Then from whom will the duke extort his taxes? No, I believe, it is not in the duke's best interest to imprison this man." Rabbi Yekusiel paused to catch his breath. He pressed several coins into the hand of Franz Brandt and said, "Please relay this message to the duke."

Franz Brandt departed with his men, and Rabbi Mayer

continued where he had left off, also addressing the complex *Halachic* questions that the *Rav* referred to him. After several days, Rabbi Mayer's student Reb Arye suggested that perhaps Rabbi Mayer should make an effort to leave Heidenheim and continue on his journey.

"But, Arye, these Jews really need my help," said Rabbi Mayer. "How can I possibly abandon them in their time of need."

As Rabbi Mayer answered *halachic* questions, hour after hour, those present were amazed how he constantly quoted pages of the *Gemara* and other *sefarim* word for word, although he didn't have the *sefarim* before him. The *Rav* of Heidenheim witnessed this, and an idea began to form in his mind. Maybe, he thought, I can ask Rabbi Mayer to write out from memory the missing pages of our town's Talmud. That way our Torah learning will no longer be hindered by missing information.

At that time, before the invention of the printing press, all books were written by hand, making them very expensive. Generally, there was only one Talmud in each community. And when pages of that Talmud got torn or lost it presented a major hindrance in the progress of the community's Torah learning.

Yet the *Rav* of Heidenheim was reluctant to ask Rabbi Mayer to write out the missing pages. Would it be considered an imposition for the elderly Rabbi? It would be time-consuming, and Rabbi Mayer was in a hurry to leave Heidenheim and continue his journey, he thought. But on the other hand, the *Rav* reasoned, it would make our Torah learning so much easier. After weighing all sides of the

question, the *Rav* decided to ask Rabbi Mayer to help their community in this way.

Rabbi Mayer answered in his characteristically humble way. "Of course. I will gladly help you in this way to promote Torah study in your town." And he immediately began with the project.

# 12

# AN IMPERIAL LETTER

In Rothenburg, Duke Heinrich was pacing his private chamber with quick strides. He was breathing heavily and muttering to himself, "How did those accursed Jews slip out of my fingers? The Emperor would have rewarded me well for keeping the Jews in Rothenburg. Instead, I have been shamed."

He paced his chamber several more times.

"I'm going to teach those Jews a lesson they'll remember for a long time," he said triumphantly.

He sent an investigator to the Jewish quarter in Rothenburg to learn more about the Jews who were emigrating. After a period of two weeks, the investigator returned to the duke with a thick folder of information.

The duke thirstily drank in each word of the investigator's

report. "Yes," he said while rubbing his hands gleefully. "Now I'll have my revenge."

The next morning, Duke Heinrich set out to the castle of Emperor Rudolph of Hapsburg.

He announced his arrival and the nature of his visit to the Imperial secretary. The secretary relayed the information to the Emperor.

"Did I hear correctly?" thundered the Emperor. "Did you say that the Jewish Rabbi has left Rothenburg to emigrate?"

"Yes, your highness," said the secretary meekly. "That is the report of the prince."

"Bring him in at once," the Emperor ordered.

"Yes, your highness," said the secretary, and he left the room.

"You are here to report the flight of the Jewish Rabbi, correct?" said the Emperor coldly.

"Yes, your highness," replied Duke Heinrich.

"How could you allow such a thing to happen?" thundered the Emperor. "Do you not realize that this will affect all the Jews living under the jurisdiction of the Crown? Who knows how many Jews will follow their leader's example?"

Duke Heinrich was taken aback. He had come to avenge the escape of the Jews and to perhaps collect a reward, too. Now the Emperor was reprimanding him.

The Emperor was still ranting. "Now a good portion of our Imperial revenue is as good as lost. We must take steps to prevent other Jews from leaving Germany."

As he spoke, his mind was feverishly working to devise a suitable punishment for the Rabbi. The death penalty? he thought. That's no use. The already terrorized Jews would

leave in greater numbers than ever. Prison, then. He would place the Rabbi in a fortress used for political prisoners, until he knew what to do.

"The first step in our campaign against Jewish emigration will be to bring the town of Rothenburg and its environs directly under our imperial jurisdiction," he continued.

Duke Heinrich could not believe this. Not only was the Emperor not rewarding him for his report, he was even stripping him of some of his territory.

"That way all German princes will understand the necessity of keeping the Jews in Germany," the Emperor explained.

This was too much for Duke Heinrich. He had come to avenge the Jews for his shame, and now shame was being heaped upon him.

"The next step in our campaign," continued the Emperor, "will be carried out by Prince Joseph Luther, the head of the Imperial Guard. You are dismissed, Heinrich."

The Emperor waited until the duke left the room and then turned to Joseph Luther. "You know the escape routes of the Jews, Luther. This man must be apprehended or our Imperial treasury will suffer."

"Yes, your highness," said the warrior bowing deeply.

"Now then," said the Emperor. "We will dictate a letter to all our loyal princes throughout the German Empire to search their cities for fleeing Jews. The identities of any fleeing Jews shall be reported to the Crown." He beckoned to the Royal Scribe who scuttled over.

"Begin the letter in the usual way, His Imperial Majesty and so forth," the Emperor ordered.

The Emperor stopped for a moment and closed his eyes to compose the letter. He frowned as he reminded himself that all the princes of Germany were not subject to the Crown in the same way. Some, like the Duke of Rothenburg, were lieges of the Crown. Others were independent and resented any interference in their affairs. How shall I word this letter to guarantee universal acceptance by the princes? he thought. Then it came to him. Although the dukes were quarrelsome, they were united in one aspect—their hatred of the Jews. He would play on this hatred in the letter.

He opened his eyes and dictated the letter. When the scribe finished writing the required number of letters, the Emperor approved them and sealed them.

"Joseph Luther," he said, beckoning to the warrior. "Take these letters and deliver them personally to the princes along the escape route of the Jews."

"Yes, your highness," said Luther, and he immediately set out with his Guard westward towards France.

# 13

# BETRAYED

The Maharam and his student Arye finally left Heidenheim and headed toward the south towards Italy, on the way to Eretz Yisrael. As they left Germany behind and entered Lombardy, a region in northern Italy, Arye said, "*Baruch Hashem*, we've left Germany. We're safe now."

"No, Arye," said Rabbi Mayer. "We must not be lulled into a false sense of security. We must always trust in Hashem for our safety wherever we are, whether in Germany or anywhere else."

As they travelled, Rabbi Mayer constantly learned Torah. He learned *Gemara*, *Midrash* and other things without the *sefarim* in front of him. For the entire Torah was like an open book to him. Despite all the difficulties of the journey, he remained calm and continued to learn.

How fortunate I am to be accompanying such a *tzaddik*, thought Arye.

Riding through the mountains of Lombardy at about a half-day's distance away from Rabbi Mayer was the Bishop of the city of Como in Lombardy, with his escort Albrecht a converted Jew. They were returning home after a conference of priests which took place in Mayence, Germany. While in Mayence, Albrecht heard of the search the Emperor was conducting for the Rabbi.

Although it had been more than twenty years since Albrecht had seen Rabbi Mayer, he remembered him well. Why do these wretched Jews persist in their stubborn behavior? he wondered. Look what honors were bestowed upon me when I embraced the Mother Church.

"We must condemn the Rabbi's disloyalty to the Crown," he said turning to the bishop.

They turned off the road to a wayside inn. Below them lay a magnificent view of the mountains and valleys. Again, Albrecht marvelled at the peace and richness that belonged to the order that he had embraced.

"Who would dare challenge this mighty Empire?" he said aloud.

The bishop glanced at the landscape. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a wagon cross the valley.

"They must be heading for Como, perhaps to visit the church and enjoy the resort," he said.

Could it be that these are the important visitors I am expecting at the archdiocese shortly? he asked himself. From their progress, it seems as if they will reach the city before us. No, we must not allow that to happen. I'll go

down to greet them and then they'll accompany us to Como.

"Albrecht, we're going down to meet the wagon," said the bishop to his companion.

"It's important that we treat these visitors properly," he explained as they rode along. "They are wealthy and perhaps they will contribute to our Church."

As they approached the wagon, it was clear that they had been mistaken. Look at those Jewish hats and cloaks, said the bishop to himself. How absurd to have mistaken them for the wealthy German burghers. He heaved a sigh of relief. At least, I will be able to meet my visitors after all, he told himself. He glanced at the Jews as they passed. What could they be doing here in the mountain passes? he wondered.

"We have made a mistake, Albrecht, let us go back," said the bishop. "There is no one here that we wish to see."

But Albrecht had seen enough. Yes, it was indeed Rabbi Mayer, thought Albrecht gleefully. The German national treasure is in my hands! True, he has aged since I've last seen him and his beard has grayed, but there is no mistake about it. It's the same Rabbi Mayer.

Albrecht followed the Bishop of Como back to the inn. "We are rich men," cried Albrecht.

The bishop looked at him questioningly.

"The Rabbi we just saw is Rabbi Mayer, the Rabbi for whom the Emperor of Germany is searching. If we turn him over to the Emperor, we'll surely be rewarded richly."

The bishop's eyes widened. "Let us discuss this with the Governor of Como," he said. "He will know how to best proceed."

The two immediately rode to Como to inform the governor of their find. To their dismay, the governor was away on vacation; he was to return within the week. They had no alternative but to wait until the governor would return.

When he returned, he immediately went to welcome the bishop back to the city after his three month's absence. The bishop enthusiastically told the governor of the Rabbi—the German national treasure he saw riding toward Como.

"In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he is in Como now," ended the bishop.

"I'll arrest him at once," cried the governor, caught up in the enthusiasm of the bishop and his companion Albrecht.

"Then what will you do with him?" asked the bishop, the most level-headed of the three.

"I'll send a message to the Emperor Rudolph that I have his Rabbi in my custody, and I'll wait to collect my reward," he said excitedly.

Being that Como did not have a Jewish community, it was not difficult for the governor to locate Rabbi Mayer. They found him in his wagon with his student Arye, camping at the outskirts of the city.

When the governor's guardsmen arrived, Rabbi Mayer was explaining a complex Torah topic to Arye.

"Rabbi, you come with us," the men said.

Rabbi Mayer did not seem surprised to see the men. It was as if he had expected them to come.

"Yes," he said, and he followed them.

It happened so quickly that Rabbi Mayer was gone before Arye had grasped the gravity of the situation. Then it hit him. I was made responsible for his well-being, and now Rabbi

Mayer is gone. It's my fault that the *Rav* of the entire German Jewry has been imprisoned. He broke down in tears.

This is no use, he told himself. Crying will not get me anywhere. I'll just have to ask Rabbi Mayer's advice on how to proceed now.

Arye approached the governor's secretary and asked for permission to see his Rabbi. The permission was granted.

When Arye entered Rabbi Mayer's cell, Rabbi Mayer arose to greet him.

"Everything the Eternal does is for the best," he told Arye.

Arye broke down in tears. "*Rebbe*, I was to accompany you to Eretz Yisrael, and now you are in prison," he began.

Rabbi Mayer put his hand on Arye's shoulder.

"Arye," he began gently. "During these past few months you served me like a father, and you are as dear to me as my own son. Do not feel responsible for my capture."

Arye swallowed. "*Rebbe*," he said. "You know that I have always asked your advice before I have gone ahead with any major undertaking. Please advise me now, too, on how I should proceed to obtain your release."

"Arye," said Rabbi Mayer. "If Hashem wills it, I will be released. But I would appreciate it if you would inform my family of my imprisonment. Be sure to tell them, though, that I want them to continue with their journey to Eretz Yisrael. Also, please inform my student Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel of Cologne of my imprisonment." He paused and then said, "Thank you, Arye. Go in peace."

# 14

# THROUGH A BATTLEFIELD

Arye could not bring himself to leave the city of Como as long as his Rabbi Mayer was nearby, for he had received permission from the governor to visit Rabbi Mayer every day. They learned together in the same way they used to before Rabbi Mayer was imprisoned.

How I wish I could continue to learn with Rabbi Mayer in this way, thought Arye each day as he left Rabbi Mayer.

But it was not to be.

The Emperor sent a message that Rabbi Mayer would be transferred to the fortress prison of Ensisheim in Germany.

The day the Emperor's guard came for Rabbi Mayer was a day of mourning for Arye. He felt orphaned.

I must pull myself together and carry out the Maharam's wishes, he told himself. He immediately set out to find the

Maharam's family and inform them of the misfortune. Then he turned toward Cologne to inform the Rosh, Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel, the son of the Maharam's great teacher Rabbi Yechiel of Paris, the favorite student of the Maharam.

When Arye reached the home of Rabbi Asher in Cologne, he immediately understood why the Rosh was the favorite pupil of the Maharam. The Rosh was just like Arye imagined his *Rebbe* was thirty years ago.

Arye informed the Rosh of the purpose of his visit. At once, the cheerful countenance of the Rosh changed. His forehead became furrowed with wrinkles as his mind feverishly worked to think of a method of obtaining the Maharam's release.

"I think we will have to travel to Emperor Rudolph to plead for Rabbi Mayer's release," said the Rosh to Arye. "We will travel through the Rhineland, stop in Mayence and ask the *Rav* of the city Rabbi Yechezkel to accompany us. Then we will proceed to Frankfurt and ask the *Rav* of the city Rabbi Yaakov to accompany us. Then, with our delegation complete, we will travel to the Emperor."

The next morning, Rabbi Asher bade his community farewell and left on his journey with his son Rabbi Yehudah and Arye. After Rabbi Asher left, the Jewish community of Cologne did not return to their homes but headed to the *shul* to pray for the success of the mission of their *Rav*, the Rosh.

At that time, the land along the River Rhine between the cities of Cologne and Mayence was ruled by two dukes, Duke Freiherr von Hermann and Duke Manfried Goldager. For many years, they lived in relative peace, impoverishing

their serfs in order to pay their own taxes to the Crown. So it continued until the death of Duke Manfried. After his death, his son Reinhard succeeded him. Reinhard looked toward the land of Duke Freiherr and hoped to annex it to his territory. Toward this end, he gathered an army and set out to wage war against Duke Freiherr von Hermann.

It was just at this time that Rabbi Asher, his son Rabbi Yehudah and Arye were travelling toward Mayence. After travelling several hours, they found themselves trapped in a meadow, with arrows whizzing past them.

"What shall we do?" cried Arye.

"We can only pray to Hashem to deliver us from here unharmed," said Rabbi Asher in response. "And whatever He wills will be."

Rabbi Asher turned to the wagon driver and instructed him to proceed.

As they travelled on, the battle became more heated, and one of the arrows pierced the wagon. This frightened the horses, and they galloped wildly through the battlefield. When the wagon driver finally managed to bring them under control and steer the wagon to the edge of the field, he turned to Rabbi Asher and said, "Rabbi, I can not go any further. Either we stay here or we turn back."

"There is no point in turning back now," said Rabbi Asher. "Let us wait here until the fighting subsides."

The fighting seemed to subside, and Rabbi Asher ordered the wagon driver to proceed. Suddenly, they were stopped by a knight in heavy armor. Behind him were his men with their swords at their sides.

"Where are you from?" he demanded.

"From Cologne," answered Rabbi Asher.

"Follow me at once," ordered the knight. "You are in the territory of Duke Reinhard." Evidently Reinhard, with his fewer but more heavily armored men, had been victorious over Freiherr von Hermann.

"But we are not his subjects," objected Rabbi Asher.

Rabbi Asher, Rabbi Yehudah, Arye and the wagon driver were taken to a nearby poverty-stricken village and locked in a room in the local inn. The room was small, dark and dank. From outside, they heard one of the local soldiers say, "Reinhard will get a handsome ransom for these Jews."

The wagon driver complained bitterly. "I'm not Jewish," he said. "Why should I have to suffer because of them?"

Rabbi Asher reassured the others. "We must remember," he said, "that everything comes from Hashem. That we are imprisoned here is His will, and let it be His will that we be released. So there is no reason to worry." He paused and then said, "With that in mind, let us *daven Minchah*."

Meanwhile, Freiherr von Hermann had returned to his castle to reflect upon his loss. It is true that most of my men took to flight, but at least they weren't killed, he consoled himself. Reinhard's men with their heavy armor couldn't have overtaken my men if they had wanted to. The next morning, he visited the villages still in his domain and reunited his men. With him, he brought yards of strong rope, and he explained to his men the new strategy they were to use against Reinhard's knights. Elsewhere, Reinhard Goldager continued his triumphant progress.

Each morning, all the able-bodied men left their homes for the battlefield, leaving the villages deserted. Rabbi Asher

took advantage of the peacefulness in their village and learned Torah with Rabbi Yehudah and Arye. They sustained themselves with the few fruits and vegetables they were given. As evening fell, the noisy troops returned to their villages and headed to the inns to review the day's action over a drink. One night, the noise in the inn where Rabbi Asher and his group were being held was particularly loud.

"Did you see how we lassoed those knights?" said one villager.

"And how they fell off their horses!" shrieked another.

"They couldn't run even had they tried!" said a third.

"Where's Reinhard now?" asked a fourth villager.

Arye gathered from the conversation of the drunken villagers that Reinhard's army had been defeated and that Duke Reinhard had taken refuge behind the high walls of his fortress.

"Here's Duke Freiherr von Hermann now," said one of the more sober villagers.

"What's he doing here?" asked another.

Arye heard the scraping of chairs across the floor. It seemed as if they all arose to greet the duke.

"I wish to thank all my men for their outstanding performance today," said the duke when he entered.

A cheer went up from the drunken villagers.

"I heard that Reinhard had Jews imprisoned here," continued the knight. "Where are they?"

Arye was surprised at the duke's concern for them and his pleasant demeanor. He spent time with them and asked about their welfare. When he heard they were from

Cologne, his face lit up.

"From Cologne!" he exclaimed. "I am well acquainted with the Jews of that city. Some time ago, I was desperately in need of funds, and two wealthy Jews from Cologne lent the money to me. I was unable to repay them on time, and they graciously extended the loan. I have long wished to express my gratitude for their generous behavior. Therefore, I will set you free."

When Rabbi Asher arose, the duke expressed his concern over the Rabbi's frail condition. "Didn't they bring you enough to eat?" he asked. He turned to his soldiers and ordered, "See that they are amply provided for their journey."

# 15

# TO THE EMPEROR

Rabbi Asher and his group made their way to the capital city of Mayence—not the capital of the German Empire but the capital of Torah scholarship in Germany. It was the city where Rabbeinu Gershom, the founder of Talmudic learning in Germany, had once lived. Ever since then, the Jewish community of Mayence was famous for piety and support of *yeshivos*. They also provided for the married Torah students to allow them to continue their Torah studies undisturbed by financial concerns. This illustrious community was headed by the saintly Rabbi Yechezkel.

When they arrived, Rabbi Asher immediately informed Rabbi Yechezkel of the purpose of his visit. "I came in person with this message," explained Rabbi Asher, "because I wanted to impress upon you the urgency of the

situation. We must act quickly. Will you join me as part of my delegation to the Emperor?"

Rabbi Yechezkel agreed and they set out early the next morning escorted by the entire Jewish community of Mayence. After Rabbi Asher, Rabbi Yechezkel, Rabbi Yehudah and Arye had left, the community of Mayence gathered in the *shul* to pray for the success of their mission.

The group headed toward Frankfurt to ask the saintly *Rav* of the city Rabbi Yaakov to join their delegation before making their way to the Emperor's castle.

On the way, the group met two wagons full of people and personal belongings. It was evident that these were fleeing Jews. Rabbi Yechezkel inquired after their welfare.

"From where do my fellow Jews hail?" he asked.

"From Fulda," they answered.

"But Fulda boasts a large Jewish community," said Rabbi Yechezkel in a half-question.

"Indeed," they answered. "But of late the persecutions have grown so unbearable that we were forced to leave."

Rabbi Yechezkel grimaced as if in pain, feeling the pain of his fellow Jews. "What happened?" he asked.

"A safe containing jewels was allegedly stolen from the duke's castle. Of course, the Jews were accused of taking it."

"Did the duke have a basis for his accusation?" asked Rabbi Yechezkel worriedly.

"None at all," they replied. "But the duke claims that the Jewish delegation that visited him a week prior to the robbery was in some way connected to the missing safe. Of course, there is no reason for anyone to believe that these two incidents were related. But the duke maintains they

were connected in order to impose a huge fine on us."

"It's possible," said Rabbi Yechezkel, "that the safe was never even stolen and that the duke fabricated the entire story in order to extort money from the Jews."

"We were thinking along the same lines," said the people from Fulda. "Now we are on our way to France where the Jews fare better." With those words, the people from Fulda continued on their way.

Although Rabbi Asher and his group were not far from Frankfurt, they headed toward a nearby Jewish village as it was time for *Minchah*. As they were ready to leave their wagon, a stranger came galloping towards them.

"Turn around and ride away from here as quickly as possible," he cried. "The local knight and his men are trying to convert the Jews by force. Go and hide in the forest." Then the stranger rode away.

Rabbi Asher and Rabbi Yechezkel decided to follow the stranger's warning. They ordered the wagon driver to enter the nearby forest. They *davened Minchah* there and were encamped there for two days. When they were certain the danger had passed, they emerged from the forest and continued to Frankfurt.

The delegation was received warmly by the Jewish community of Frankfurt. They wasted no time and informed Rabbi Yaakov of the purpose of their visit. The next morning, Rabbi Yaakov joined them on the final leg of their journey to the Emperor's palace.

# 16

# A ROYAL AUDIENCE

After another week of travel, the group reached the ancient imperial city. Rabbi Yechezkel got off the wagon and presented himself to the gate-keeper. "We are a delegation of German Jews and we wish an audience with His Highness, Emperor Rudolf."

"Return tomorrow and present yourselves to the Imperial secretary," said the gate-keeper gruffly.

The delegation had no choice but to leave, find lodgings and return the next day.

The next morning, the gate-keeper allowed them in, and they were escorted to an antechamber. After some time, a chamberlain appeared. He examined their credentials and took note of their request for a royal audience.

"This matter will not be resolved quickly," he told them.

"Return in one week."

The Jewish delegation returned to their lodgings.

"We have gone through so much to get here," said Arye, frustrated. "Now we have to sit here and wait until the Emperor decides he wants to see us."

"No, Arye," gently reprimanded Rabbi Asher. "We must look at the situation in another light. *Baruch Hashem*, we have successfully reached this stage of our mission. And with Hashem's help, we will successfully complete our mission. We were given an extra bonus, too—time for learning Torah. We must always be thankful for everything, Arye."

There was no news after one week, nor after two. Throughout Germany, the Jewish communities prayed for the welfare of the delegation and for the success of their mission.

Finally, the delegation was informed that they were granted an audience with the Emperor.

The reception chamber was busy as usual. But the Jewish delegation stood quietly at one side, their plain clothes vividly contrasting with the magnificent garments of the courtiers, visiting princes and governors. At last, a chamberlain motioned the Jewish delegation forward while the Imperial Secretary presented their request.

Finally, Emperor Rudolf spoke. "Your Rabbi left Germany contrary to our desire. He deserves a severe punishment for his crime. However, in response to your request we have decided to keep him alive." The Emperor paused. "No harm will come to him. But he will remain in confinement in the fortress of Ensisheim. His disciples may visit him there, but I

repeat, he must remain in confinement."

Rabbi Asher stepped forward to speak. "Your Majesty," he began. "We do not wish to arouse the royal displeasure, but is there any other way in which we may calm His Majesty?"

Emperor Rudolf smiled. These Jews would do anything to have their Rabbi back, just as I thought, he thought to himself.

"You must know how badly the Imperial treasury needs funds," he said. "And you need your Rabbi. Therefore, let us make a bargain. Your Rabbi will be freed upon our receipt of a fair sum, which will be determined by the Imperial Secretary. And you, my dear Rabbi," he said as he motioned to Rabbi Asher. "You will be the guarantor for the payment of the sum."

The Emperor arose, and the delegation bowed deeply. When the Emperor left the room, the chamberlain motioned the Jews to an anteroom where they were told to wait for the Royal Secretary.

"We have determined that upon our receipt of twenty thousand silver marks, solid silver, we will release your Rabbi," said the secretary coldly.

Rabbi Asher gasped. "How can we possibly collect such a sum?" he protested.

"I feel sure you will find a way to collect it," said the secretary with a smile.

The Rabbis attempted to persuade the secretary to modify the sum, but to no avail. The amount had been set. The secretary then furnished them with passes to allow them to see Rabbi Mayer in the fortress, and the delegation left the palace for their lodgings.

There, it was decided that Rabbi Asher, his son Rabbi Yehudah and Arye, would set out for Ensisheim to ask the opinion of their beloved teacher, while Rabbi Yaakov and Rabbi Yechezkel would return home to their communities. When Rabbi Asher returned from Ensisheim he would inform them of the procedure for fund raising. The group parted with blessings of *hatzlachah*.

# 17

# ENSISHEIM

Rabbi Asher entered the great iron gate of the prison fortress of Ensisheim and found himself in front of a small keep where the doorkeeper apparently lived. He knocked at the door. After some time, the door opened a crack and an angry voice asked, "Who is it?"

"Asher of Cologne, bearing a letter from the Imperial Secretary," answered Rabbi Asher.

The door opened.

"One moment, please. I must call the governor of the prison," said the doorkeeper.

Within a few minutes, the governor appeared, smiling. Rabbi Asher handed him the letter.

"No, no, it's not necessary," said the governor.

But Rabbi Asher pressed the letter into his hand. He

opened it and read in an undertone:

To the Governor of Ensisheim:

Allow Rabbi Asher and his group to enter the fortress to visit with the prisoner, Rabbi Mayer of Rothenburg.

Prince Gottlieb Wuhlmann
Imperial Secretary

"I shall have the privilege of guiding you to your Rabbi. He is a most saintly gentleman. It is our honor to host such a guest," said the governor with a smirk.

When they reached Rabbi Mayer's cell, the governor opened the door and called, "Rabbi Mayer, you have a visitor." The governor allowed Rabbi Asher and his group into the cell and then locked the door behind them.

Although it was morning, it took Rabbi Asher a moment to adjust to the dimly lit narrow room. Through the small window near the ceiling of the room he saw the shadow of a tree. Rabbi Mayer was sitting at a table, his head slightly lowered. He turned when he heard voices.

"Asher, my beloved son, my dear one," said Rabbi Mayer. His face was radiant with joy. He stretched out his hands and took Rabbi Asher's hands in his own. Rabbi Asher wept as he held his beloved teacher's hands.

"Tell me how you are," said Rabbi Mayer.

Rabbi Asher told him what had transpired, about his journey and the interview with the Emperor.

"He was not without mercy," Rabbi Asher said. "He agreed to release you from here as soon as a certain sum is

paid to the Imperial Treasury."

Rabbi Mayer raised his eyebrows.

"Twenty thousand marks," said Rabbi Asher in answer to the unspoken question. "And then our beloved teacher will be free."

Rabbi Mayer said nothing. Rabbi Asher looked at Rabbi Mayer expectantly.

Finally, Rabbi Mayer said, "There will be no ransom."

"What does the *Rav* mean?" asked Rabbi Asher incredulously.

"My dear Asher," said the Maharam gently. "You most certainly know the teaching of *Chazal* that one must not redeem a captive for more than his actual worth."

"But in this instance it is not more than his actual worth," argued Rabbi Asher.

"Twenty thousand marks!" exclaimed Rabbi Mayer. That's not more than his actual worth? That's a fortune!"

Rabbi Asher thought a moment. He was aware of his teacher's great modesty, and he had to choose his next words carefully. "It is true that twenty thousand marks is an enormous sum. But how can a price be fixed for the leader of all of German Jewry, one of the Tosafists and a great Torah scholar?"

Rabbi Mayer continued on his own train of thought. "Should such a sum be paid to the Imperial Treasury, the rulers, princes and governors will make a regular practice of imprisoning Jews in order to extort high ransoms from their compatriots. Before long, the Jews will be totally impoverished. Therefore, I have decided that I will not allow a ransom to be paid on my behalf."

Rabbi Asher attempted to convince his teacher to change his mind. But he was unsuccessful. Rabbi Mayer had made up his mind, and apparently he would not be easily swayed. Nevertheless, thought Rabbi Asher, once we collect the money, he might allow it to be paid. Rabbi Mayer's decision is based upon his humble opinion of his worth, but when he sees all German Jewry gladly give for his release, he might change his mind.

"Asher, my son," Rabbi Mayer was saying. "Let me bless you before you leave."

Rabbi Asher and his group left Ensisheim and headed back toward Cologne. As they passed through the city of Speyers, Rabbi Asher decided to stop to inform them of the situation of the Maharam and begin the collection. From there he stopped in Worms. In Worms, the *Rav* suggested that rather than visiting all the Jewish communities in person, Rabbi Asher send a message to their leaders and invite them to a meeting. Rabbi Asher agreed and immediately returned to his home in Cologne.

Once at home, he sent a message to Rabbi Yechezkel of Mayence and Rabbi Yaakov of Frankfurt and told them of the outcome of his meeting with Rabbi Mayer. And he informed them of his plans to call a meeting of the leaders of all of the Jewish communities in Germany to discuss how to best proceed.

Rabbi Yechezkel and Rabbi Yaakov responded in earnest. And Rabbi Yechezkel suggested the conference be held in his city of Mayence. Rabbi Asher agreed and a date for the conference was set.

On the set date, all the invited *Rabbanim* were present in

Mayence. The *Rabbanim* of Magdeburg, Erfurt, Frankfurt, Mayence, Worms, Wurzburg, Nuremberg, Neustadt, Regensburg, Augsburg and Speyers were all present. Even the president of the community of Rothenburg was there. The community of Mayence joyfully hosted their distinguished guests.

Rabbi Asher opened the meeting by informing the delegates of the latest developments. He then spoke of his meeting with the Maharam. "When I told Rabbi Mayer of the amount of the ransom set by the Emperor, he steadfastly refused to allow himself to be ransomed," he began.

Someone in the crowd gasped.

"However, I believe," continued Rabbi Asher, "that once we collect the money, Rabbi Mayer may change his mind. In his great humility, Rabbi Mayer thinks that he is unworthy of the huge sum that must be collected from the Jewish communities. He says the Jewish communities have been impoverished enough without him."

Rabbi Asher paused to give the group a chance to digest his words. "Therefore, I am presenting you with this question," said Rabbi Asher. "Is there anyone present who thinks the ransom exorbitant or inappropriate?"

"No, not at all," answered the delegates. "We must free Rabbi Mayer at all costs."

The *Rav* of Speyers jumped up. "I'm willing to sell my house and possessions to ransom Rabbi Mayer!" he exclaimed.

"Likewise," exclaimed the *Rav* of Regensburg.

"For who is greater than Rabbi Mayer?" called the *Rav* of Worms.

When the meeting concluded, each community leader had pledged a certain sum of money on behalf of his community, according to its financial standing, towards the ransom of Rabbi Mayer.

The delegates remained in Mayence several more days. They spent the extra time discussing community matters and complex *Halachic* questions with Rabbi Asher. On *Shabbos*, the main *shul* in Mayence was filled to capacity. Rabbi Asher spoke on the weekly portion, quoting the Maharam. He ended his speech with words of encouragement and reassurance regarding the daily persecutions. After *Shabbos*, Rabbi Asher blessed the delegates, and they all returned home.

Rabbi Asher, too, returned to his home in Cologne. But he did not remain there for long. He could wait no longer to relay the outcome of the convention to Rabbi Mayer. He was sure that Rabbi Mayer would now agree to be ransomed.

# 18

# STEADFAST IN HIS DECISION

Rabbi Mayer was overjoyed to see his pupil Rabbi Asher once more. Rabbi Asher related to his teacher all that had transpired since he had last seen him. He told him about the convention of *Rabbanim* in Mayence and their decision to redeem him.

"My dear Asher," began Rabbi Mayer. "I am extremely grateful to you and to all of German Jewry for the efforts they have expended on my behalf." Rabbi Mayer paused, stroked his long white beard and looked directly into Rabbi Asher's face. "But I shall not change my mind. I can not allow myself to be ransomed for this huge sum of money. As I told you before, should the money be paid to the Imperial treasury, the Emperors and princes will make a practice of abducting *Rabbanim* in order to extort money from the

Jewish community. And the Jewish community will become impoverished."

"But, but," was all Rabbi Asher managed to stammer. His mind was working wildly. There has to be a way to convince Rabbi Mayer to allow himself to be ransomed, he told himself. We can't allow him to remain here in this dungeon.

"If I must, I will remain here for the rest of my life," Rabbi Mayer continued. "But I cannot allow myself to bring more suffering upon our fellow Jews. They suffer enough already."

"Perhaps," said Rabbi Asher, "Rabbi Mayer is under the impression that our compatriots are donating these funds involuntarily? No, that is not the case. Everyone who donates money toward the *Rav's* ransom is doing it because he is anxious to see Rabbi Mayer free once again."

"Indeed," said Rabbi Mayer. "I am moved that my brothers are so united in their efforts to save me. But I have responsibilities regarding their welfare. Were this a unique incident and not likely to be repeated, it might be possible to accommodate their wishes. But it is obvious that if this transaction were to be completed there will be no end to abductions of *Rabbanim*. How will German Jewry live if they will constantly be forced to pay high ransoms for their *Rabbanim*? No, I can not agree to be ransomed. These men have no pity. Easy money blinds them." Rabbi Mayer paused. "Now, Asher, let's learn Torah. Let's discuss *Halachic* questions."

At once, they were catapulted into a complex Torah discussion. They were aided in their study by the *sefarim* that Rabbi Asher had brought along. It was almost like old

times when, in his younger years, Rabbi Asher had learned in Rabbi Mayer's *yeshivah* in Rothenburg. But now Rabbi Asher's mind wasn't totally involved in the Torah learning. In the back of his mind, he was trying to think of a way to save Rabbi Mayer.

By the time he left Ensisheim, several days later, Rabbi Asher was desperate. He had not yet thought of an alternative method to save his teacher. The only solution seemed to be to approach the Emperor once more and request that he reduce the ransom. This, too, was not a viable solution since it was unlikely that the Emperor, in his love for money, would agree to let this opportunity for easy money slip away. But to save Rabbi Mayer, any effort—even a far-fetched effort—was worthwhile.

When Rabbi Asher reached the Imperial city, the Emperor was away in the provinces, trying to establish peaceful relations between two warring princes. So Rabbi Asher turned to the Imperial Secretary with his plea.

The secretary looked at Rabbi Asher. "You must know that originally your Rabbi was sentenced to death for his crime of fleeing Germany. In our kindness, we have reduced his punishment to imprisonment. And still further, we have reduced the punishment to eventual freedom on payment of a fine. If you truly wish to free your Rabbi, why does this sum present such difficulties?"

"This is an enormous sum, and the Jewish communities are not wealthy," answered Rabbi Asher.

"Not wealthy?" exclaimed the secretary. "I know several Jews who lack nothing!"

"Has the Imperial secretary ever been in the Jewish

neighborhoods?" asked Rabbi Asher.

"No," answered the secretary. "But I know how wealthy Jews are."

"Believe me," said Rabbi Asher, "many Jews are poor."

The secretary knew that Rabbi Asher spoke the truth. But it did not change matters. "Rabbi," he said. "The amount of the ransom has been signed and sealed by the Emperor. There is no way it can be altered now."

Rabbi Asher realized that further discussion would not change matters. In his disappointment, he quickly reviewed the entire situation mentally. At once, an idea occurred to him. He asked the secretary for permission for Rabbi Mayer to have unlimited visiting rights. The secretary granted the permission contingent on the Emperor's consent. Rabbi Asher thanked the secretary and left the palace more hopeful.

# 19

# A LAST ATTEMPT

Rabbi Asher did not return home. Instead, he headed to the city of Nuremburg. He wanted to discuss his new idea with his good friend and colleague Rabbi Mordechai, son of Rabbi Hillel, the *Rav* of Nuremburg. Rabbi Mordechai had studied in the Maharam's *yeshivah* in Rothenburg together with Rabbi Asher. Like Rabbi Asher, he was a distinguished Torah scholar who had entered the ranks of the great *Poskim*. He authored a *Halachic* compendium on the *Gemara* known as the *Mordechai*.

"My dear friend, Asher," said Rabbi Mordechai. "First tell me how you are, and then tell me how our teacher is."

Rabbi Asher smiled. "*Baruch Hashem*, I am fine," he said, then his face clouded with concern. "I am just returning from a visit with our teacher Rabbi Mayer. He refuses to

allow himself to be ransomed. I even returned to the Emperor's palace a second time to try to convince him to reduce the ransom. The Emperor was away, and the Imperial Secretary wouldn't hear of it. But he did allow Rabbi Mayer unlimited visiting rights."

"Oh?" said Rabbi Mordechai, unsure about what Rabbi Asher was leading to.

"I thought that perhaps if we arrange a delegation of all Germany's prominent *Rabbanim* to visit Rabbi Mayer, perhaps," said Rabbi Asher, "he will change his mind and agree to be ransomed."

"Perhaps," said Rabbi Mordechai. "It's worth a try, anyway."

"Good," said Rabbi Asher. "Would you agree to head the delegation?"

"I don't mind to do my part to save my teacher," said Rabbi Mordechai. "But why should I be chosen to head the delegation?"

Rabbi Asher convinced his friend to head the delegation. Then he sent his student Arye to the communities of Speyers, Frankfurt, Wurzburg, Worms and Neustadt to inform the *Rabbanim* of Rabbi Asher's new idea and to ask them to participate in the delegation.

The *Rabbanim* were all anxious to join the delegation. Not only were they happy to join the effort to save Rabbi Mayer, but they were happy for the chance to discuss community matters with the great *Rav*.

At last, they arrived in Ensisheim. But their persuasion was to no avail. Rabbi Mayer had made up his mind, and he could not be swayed. They each stayed a few days discussing

*Halachic* questions and community matters with Rabbi Mayer. It was unbelievable, they marvelled, how Rabbi Mayer continued to study Torah undisturbed in the prison.

"Please keep me informed about your communities," Rabbi Mayer told them as they departed.

Thus, Rabbi Mayer remained in Ensisheim, but he never became a true prisoner. He continued to study Torah, answer *Halachic* questions and lead German Jewry as before. Many of his Torah novella and *Tosfos* were written while he was in prison. His students continued to visit him, and Rabbi Asher was a regular visitor. Another one of Rabbi Mayer's students, Rabbi Shimshon, son of Rabbi Tzadok, compiled his *Sefer Tashbetz* in his *Rebbe's* presence, compiling the customs, rituals and *Halachic* decisions of his master.

Yet, life for Rabbi Mayer in Ensisheim was in no way easy. In one of his letters, he describes his wretchedness.

> I am sitting in darkness, in the shadow of death, without knowing the hour of day or night. I am like a poor man, deprived of all his possessions, like a threshold over which everyone treads.

Rabbi Mayer remained in Ensisheim for seven years, until he passed away on *Iyar* 19, 5033 (1293). When Rabbi Asher and other *Rabbanim* came to bury him, the prison governor informed them that the Emperor ordered him not to release the body to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Although Emperor Rudolf of Hapsburg had died two years earlier, the legend of Rabbi Mayer and how he denied

the Imperial Treasury a huge sum of money remained alive, and the new Emperor, Adolf of Nassau, forbade his burial.

Rabbi Mayer's body remained in the prison for an additional fourteen years. Finally, on *Adar* 4, 5067 (1307), Rabbi Alexander ben Shlomo Wimpfen, a wealthy Jew from Frankfurt, donated most of his fortune to the Imperial authorities in order to bury the Maharam in a Jewish cemetery. It is said that at the burial of the Maharam, his body was found completely intact, without any signs of decay. In return for this great kindness, Rabbi Wimpfen asked that upon his death, he be buried next to the great sage.

Rabbi Mayer of Rothenburg was of the last of the Tosafists and of the first of the *Poskim*. He had many students who became leaders, teachers and *Poskim* in their own right, the most famous being Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel (the Rosh) and Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel (the Mordechai). The Maharam left a great legacy of writings. His responsa and *sefarim* were used as a basis of *Halachah* by the *Poskim* that came after him. Twenty of his *piyutim* (liturgical hymns) are known, the most famous being his lamentation *Shaali Serufah Ba'aish* on the burning of the Talmud in Paris in 5004 (1242), which is recited in the *Kinos* (lamentations) of *Tisha b'Av*.

# 20

# OUT OF THE FLAMES

As Rabbi Mayer's body lay in prison, Germany erupted into civil war. A pretender to the throne arose by the name of Albrecht of Austria and Emperor Adolf of Nassau mobilized his army against him. Taking advantage of the anarchy, the nobleman Rindfleisch, a notorious anti-Semite, went to work. He charged the Jews of his town, Roettingen, with a serious crime against the church.

As the story gained credence, a mob formed, with Rindfleisch at its head. They surrounded the Jews of Roettingen and offered them the all too familiar choice—baptism or death. The Jews chose death.

Rindfleisch had his men erect a huge pyre. Parents and children were thrown into the flames. In this way, the entire Jewish community of Roettingen was slaughtered.

Pleased with his work, Rindfleisch went from town to town with his mob, inciting the local communities against the Jews. Everywhere he went he offered his choice—convert or die!

In Wurzburg, relations between Jews and Christians had always been pleasant. As Rindfleisch and his mob made their way to the town, the local Christians opened the city's shelter for the Jews. But the murderers found their way into the fortress and murdered the entire Jewish community.

Then came the turn of Nuremburg, where Rabbi Mordechai son of Rabbi Hillel was *Rav*. The Jews had nowhere to hide, so they locked themselves in their houses. Rather than break down the doors of all the Jewish houses, Rindfleisch decided to burn down the Jewish quarter. He changed his mind when it was pointed out to him that the wind could carry the flames to the rest of the city and destroy it. So Rindfleisch turned to the house of the *Rav*.

The mob banged on the doors, windows and walls. "Death to the Jews," they cried.

Rabbi Mordechai and his wife held their children close.

"In a little while, the murderers will break down the doors," said Rabbi Mordechai. "We must prepare ourselves to sanctify the Name of Hashem when they offer us the choice to convert or die. Let us sanctify His Name as our forefather Avraham did in the fiery furnace, like Chanah and her seven sons and like our ancestors during the Crusades. Let us not abandon our faith!"

His wife spoke next. "My dearest children," she said in a tear-choked voice. "For nine months I carried each one of you. I devoted all my energies to raise you. I showered my

love upon you all these years. How terrible is the suffering we are about to experience!" She stopped and sobbed quietly for a few moments before continuing. "But we will bear it with love because of our faith. We will be separated in this world, but we will be united in the next world."

She burst into tears once again, and her children joined her in her tears.

"Yes, Mother," they said through their tears.

"Death to the Jews!" was heard over their sobbing.

Another blow and the door gave way. The bloodthirsty mob burst into the room, crushing one another on the way. Rabbi Mordechai, his wife and their children were dragged to the center of town, where a huge pyre had been prepared.

Then the mob broke into other Jewish houses and brought their occupants to the site of the pyre. Around it stood many who were glad to help the murderers. Especially helpful were those who had borrowed money from their Jewish neighbors. These people milled about, shouting encouragement to the mob and offering assistance.

In the crowd stood a man, who had been abandoned as a child by his parents. A Jewish man named Rabbi Shaul had rescued him and raised him for several years, until he found a suitable Christian family to take him in. Now, as Rabbi Shaul was dragged to the pyre, even this young man also called, "Death to the Jews!"

Another man who stood in the crowd owned a small store. He had many debts and would have been bankrupt had it not been for the help of a Jewish man, who had lent him money. He, too, rejoiced when his benefactor was

thrown to the flames.

By now, Rindfleisch had a well-established routine. Just before the victims were to be thrown into the flames, they were asked whether they wished to convert and remain alive. Here, too, the question was repeated. None of the Jews accepted.

"Have pity on your children!" said the evil Rindfleisch to a young mother who had been dragged to the site of the pyre together with her children. "Let them convert and live!"

"We will never give up our faith!" cried the children.

The mother and her children were thrown to the flames.

"*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokainu Hashem Echod*!" was heard from the flames.

Suddenly, the resonant voice of the town's *chazan* was heard from amidst the leaping flames. "*Hashem Hu Ha'elokim*," he called, with his hands uplifted toward heaven, the flames dancing around him. It was a ringing, strong voice, a voice no longer of this world.

"*Hashem Hu Ha'elokim*," the Jews around him responded. "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokainu Hashem Echod*."

On that day, six hundred and twenty eight Jews of the Nuremburg community sanctified the Name of Hashem. Rabbi Mordechai, his wife and their five children were among the martyrs.

# 21

# A SURVIVOR'S EXPERIENCE

Rindfleisch and his mob swept Bavaria and moved on to Austria. In Krems, they burst into the house of the family of Arye, the student of Rabbi Asher. Although his parents resisted the murderers with all their strength, the murderers easily overcame them and dragged the family outside towards the site of the pyre in the village square. At the outskirts of the Jewish neighborhood, the murderers made a brief stop to rest.

"Here is your chance to escape," whispered the mother to her skinny twelve-year-old son Yonasan. "Run for your life!"

Yonasan jumped over a barrier and crouched to the ground. There he waited until it would be safe to move on. Every so often, he peered about to survey the situation.

Suddenly, one of the murderers saw his head! At once, Yonasan ran to and fro through the backyards of the nearby houses and then slipped through a small hole in a fence. The murderer lost sight of him, and Yonasan climbed up a leafy tree. Soon Yonasan saw the man return with a friend, and they searched the place thoroughly.

Yonasan was trembling with fear. What if the men would just happen to glance upward? he asked himself. But then he consoled himself. Hashem has protected me so far, let me pray that He continue to protect me. And he began reciting as many chapters of *Tehillim* as he could remember.

Unable to locate the elusive Jewish boy, the men left. Yonasan waited until night, when he was sure they would not return, and then climbed down from the tree. He crept along a nearby street, from corner to corner. Instinctively, he headed towards the Jewish quarter. Where are my parents now? he asked himself as he crept along. Are they still alive?

Within moments, his fears were confirmed. He heard the cries of "*Shema Yisrael!*" from the site of the pyre in the town square several blocks away. He shuddered and crept closer to the town square. Are my parents still alive? he asked himself over and over again. He strained his eyes, but he could not see them.

At once, Yonasan felt someone grab his jacket.

"Look what I found!" his captor yelled gleefully. "A Jewish boy!"

The man's grip was strong. Yonasan consoled himself that he would now be joining his parents and family, but his desire to live prevailed. He grabbed his captor's dagger and

wounded the man, causing him to release his grip.

Once again, Yonasan was free. He ran as fast as he could. Soon he found himself in another section of the city. There, too, the people tried to capture the Jewish boy, and they even threw stones at him. But Yonasan continued to run. He ran in and out of courtyards in order to confuse those who were chasing him. And when he couldn't run any further, he found himself in front of what seemed to be an empty house. It's as if Hashem has prepared this house for my escape, marvelled Yonasan.

Yonasan climbed through a window and hid himself in a small crawl space. There he made himself as comfortable as he could and tried to rest his exhausted body.

Meanwhile, the occupants of the house returned. They are probably returning from the pyre, Yonasan reasoned. Yonasan remained in his hiding place until he was sure the family had retired for the night. Then he slowly crept out of the crawl space and tried to find an open window. But the house was completely dark.

Crash! Bang! The noise startled Yonasan. He had overturned a piece of furniture. At once, the family awoke and lit a lamp.

"Why, it's a little Jew," they cried. "Quick, grab him."

Yonasan ran under a table and kicked at them from all sides. But he had no chance—there were five adults against a skinny twelve-year-old. It wasn't long until the father grabbed him.

They bombarded him with questions.

"Who are you?"

"How did you get in?"

"What did you steal?"

Yonasan ignored all the questions and concentrated on finding a way to escape. The father left Yonasan in his son's charge while he went to inform the constable of the thief he had caught red-handed. At once, Yonasan mustered all his strength and gave the son a hard punch in his abdomen. The son relaxed his grip on Yonasan, and Yonasan made for the door.

He ran as fast as he could into the night. Again, he found himself heading to the Jewish quarter. He found his way to his house and collapsed on his bed.

As soon as he caught his breath, he began to think. *Baruch Hashem*, I'm alive, he thought to himself. Hashem has helped me escape so many times these past few days. I have a lot for which to be thankful. But I'm alone here, he reminded himself, and he burst into tears. He didn't allow himself the luxury of crying for long. The mob is likely to return to the Jewish quarter and loot the houses, he reminded himself. So he dragged himself off his bed and hid under it.

"I'm not alone," he said aloud, his voice so loud that it startled him. Hashem is with me, he thought. And I'll go join Arye in Cologne where he studies under Rabbi Asher. And he fell asleep.

The next morning, he was awakened by the cries of the looters. They stripped the house of everything worthwhile and then continued to the next house. Yonasan waited until nightfall, when he was sure the looters had left the Jewish quarter. Then he immediately began to prepare for his long trip to Cologne.

Several weeks later, Yonasan arrived in Cologne.

"Yonasan!" exclaimed Arye when he saw him. "You're still alive! *Baruch Hashem*!"

They cried on each other's shoulders for several minutes, and then Arye said, "When I heard that the *rasha* reached Krems, I didn't stop worrying about the family. *Baruch Hashem*, someone is still alive to tell the story of the Krems massacre."

# 22

# A NEW EXTORTION

Rindfleisch had accomplished what he had set out to do—and more. He annihilated almost all the Jewish communities in Bavaria—only two communities escaped the fate of the others; Regensburg and Augsburg were saved by their city magistrates. In Austria more than 100,000 Jews were murdered and one hundred Jewish communities perished. And Rindfleisch would have continued, had not Albrecht of Austria been victorious over Emperor Adolph of Nassau.

When Albrecht ascended the throne, he put a stop to the massacres, tried the murderers and fined the cities that had allowed the persecutions to take place. But his kind disposition towards the Jews did not stem from a love for them, rather, he desperately needed to fill the Imperial coffers that

were emptied by the civil war.

He called his ministers to a meeting.

"Let the dukes pay triple their liege money," one suggested.

"But from where will they obtain these funds?" asked another. "If they were to impose a higher tax upon their tenants, it is likely that the tenants will revolt. And it is useless to tax the Jews now, because Rindfleisch has impoverished them."

Prince Gottlieb, the Imperial Secretary, was present at the meetings. As the discussions continued, it occurred to him that twelve years prior, when Emperor Rudolph was alive, a Jewish Rabbi was imprisoned. He checked the chronicles to refresh his memory. Indeed, Rabbi Mayer had been imprisoned in Ensisheim and died there. But what had happened to the ransom money? At once it struck Gottlieb. They could order Rabbi Asher to pay that ransom money.

Cautiously, Gottlieb suggested his idea at one of the meetings. Albrecht was delighted.

"But on second thought," he said to Gottlieb. "The Jews are ruined."

"Worry not, Emperor Albrecht," said Gottlieb. "This sum was collected long before the Rindfleisch massacres. The Rabbi probably still has it in his possession."

"Good thinking, Gottlieb," said the Emperor. "Let us send the Rabbi a letter to jog his memory."

A Royal courier walking through the streets of the Jewish section of Cologne, towards the home of Rabbi Asher, attracted attention. What could he want at Rabbi Asher's house?

At that time, Rabbi Asher was in his home studying Torah. Since the death of the Maharam, Rabbi Asher had become the leader of German Jewry. Following the Rindfleisch massacres, he convened a congress in Worms to decide complex *Halachic* questions that arose in the wake of the massacres, and he introduced new enactments. By this time his fame had spread, not only in the Jewish world, but also among the Gentiles.

"Rabbi Asher, an Imperial letter," announced the courier. Rabbi Asher took the letter and broke the seal. As he read, his eyes widened in astonishment.

To the honored Rabbi of Cologne, Rabbi Asher,

You must surely recall that twelve years ago you applied to His Imperial Majesty, the late Emperor Rudolf of Hapsburg for the release of the prisoner, Rabbi Mayer of Rothenburg. At that time you guaranteed the delivery of the sum of twenty thousand silver marks as ransom. In the name of His Imperial Majesty, Albrecht I, you are instructed to honor your commitment within thirty days.

Prince Gottlieb Wuhlmann
Imperial Secretary

"There must be a mistake," said Rabbi Asher at once. "It is true that the Emperor made me responsible for the sum. But I never guaranteed that it would be paid. And there was no reason to pay it as Rabbi Mayer never agreed to allow himself to be ransomed." He immediately drafted a response to the secretary indicating that there must have been a mistake. The courier left at once for the palace.

Rabbi Asher showed the document to his wife.

"Why have they remembered this after twelve years?" she asked. "The Maharam has passed away and a new Emperor is on the throne."

"Evidently they need funds," said Rabbi Asher.

"What will you do if the Emperor insists you pay the sum?" she asked, troubled.

"I will have no choice but to flee the country. The sum has been returned long ago. I can not ask my fellow Jews for such an amount again."

They didn't dwell on the matter long as Rabbi Asher had to hurry to Worms for a meeting of his congress. Several days after his return, a royal courier arrived with a reply from the Imperial secretary. Rabbi Asher was outraged when he read the letter.

> . . .There is no mistake. You are indeed responsible for the ransom money, even though your Rabbi was never ransomed. Twenty thousand silver marks are still outstanding. . .

"I will not be held responsible for a sum which we did not have to pay," said Rabbi Asher indignantly.

"But, the emperor himself named you guarantor," his wife reminded him.

"Excuses!" retorted Rabbi Asher. "He needs money and he's looking for a reason to extort it from the Jews."

"Perhaps you should seek an audience with Prince Gottlieb," suggested his wife. "He may be able to persuade the Emperor to change his mind."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Rabbi Asher.

Rabbi Asher immediately began to prepare for his journey to the palace. On the day of departure, his community accompanied him to the outskirts of the city. Once he was out of sight, they gathered in the *shul* to pray for the success of his mission.

Prince Gottlieb had expected Rabbi Asher. He greeted him graciously.

"The decree was issued long before Albrecht took the throne," he said. "And it is still outstanding."

Rabbi Asher countered the claim, but to no avail. But he did manage to convince the secretary to extend the period of payment to four months.

As Rabbi Asher was leaving the palace, with his head lowered and downcast, he heard someone call his name. Startled, he turned, but before he could speak, the man had grasped Rabbi Asher's hand in a warm handshake.

It was Prince Gerard Lange, an intimate of the late Emperor Rudolf. Twelve years ago, on the occasion of Rabbi Asher's first visit to the palace, he had helped arrange his interview with Rudolf and he had acquainted Rabbi Asher with the court procedure. At that time Rabbi Asher had blessed him. Since then, the prince had benefited from the Rabbi's blessing. And of late he had wanted to communicate with him to thank him.

The prince invited Rabbi Asher to his private office. Once they were behind closed doors, the prince said quietly, "You must know that the Emperor is aware of the injustice in demanding this payment. But he is so desperate for funds that he is using any pretext he can think of. You will be held responsible for the payment of the sum."

Rabbi Asher started indignantly. Prince Gerard held up his hand.

"I was present at one of the meetings with Prince Gottlieb and the Emperor," he continued. "At that time, the objection was raised that the Jews have been impoverished by Rindfleisch and his mob. But Gottlieb countered that the money was collected before the massacres."

"It was," said Rabbi Asher. "But it was returned when Rabbi Mayer refused to be ransomed."

"This point was raised by the Emperor," continued Prince Gerard. "But Gottlieb reassured him that your fame has spread beyond Germany and you can turn to your fellow Jews world-wide to aid you in the collection." He paused, and then continued. "Therefore, I advise you, my dear friend, that should the Emperor persist, you flee the country."

Rabbi Asher considered the words of Prince Gerard carefully. Then he asked, "Why, is there a possibility that the Emperor will not persist in the collection of the monies?" asked Rabbi Asher hopefully.

The prince nodded.

"What makes you think so?" asked Rabbi Asher.

"I am an intimate of the Emperor," answered the prince proudly. "Deep down, the Emperor is afraid that you will be unable to raise the huge sum, and as a result he will be obliged to imprison you. Your arrest, following your teacher's arrest twelve years ago, will be likely to frighten German Jews to the extent that many will flee the country, which will ruin the German economy."

"But how will I know if the Emperor changes his mind?"

asked Rabbi Asher.

"Look, Gottlieb granted you four months' grace," said the prince. "And in three to four weeks I should clearly know the Emperor's thoughts on the matter. I will contact you as soon as I have any news. Don't flee the country until you hear from me."

They bade each other an affectionate farewell and Rabbi Asher left for Cologne.

# 23

# FLIGHT

As Rabbi Asher and his family returned to their day to day business, the questions of Prince Gerard's integrity was on their minds. Is he a friend or enemy? Will he honor his word? they wondered.

One month passed without any word from Prince Gerard. Tension was mounting in Rabbi Asher's home. They started making plans for their flight, should it be necessary.

A second month passed and there was still no word from Gerard.

"I guess the prince didn't honor his word in the end," said Rabbi Asher's wife.

"Let's wait and see," said Rabbi Asher.

Yet another month passed with no word from Gerard. Both Rabbi Asher's family and the community leaders of

Cologne advised Rabbi Asher to flee. Rabbi Asher agreed and began preparing for his trip, when a messenger with a letter from Prince Gerard arrived.

Rabbi Asher ripped open the seal and anxiously read the letter.

> . . .I am sorry for the delay, but it was just in the past few days that I have been able to assess the Emperor's intentions. I have learned that he is unlikely to revoke the decree, but he has decided to give you an additional four months' grace period for your payment, of which he will inform you. He has agreed to this further extension because, in the meantime, the financial state of the country has improved somewhat. It is possible that his coffers will be filled even without your payment. But don't depend on this and make plans to flee, should it be necessary.
>
> Prince Gerard Lange

The following day, as Prince Gerard had predicted, a royal courier arrived with a letter informing Rabbi Asher of another extension for the payment.

For the next three months, life continued as usual for Rabbi Asher and his family. Then, as they were awaiting a message from Gerard, they received another letter from the Emperor informing Rabbi Asher of yet another extension for payment.

"Is the Emperor playing a game with you, Father?" asked Rabbi Yehudah.

"No, my son," answered Rabbi Asher. "Evidently Albrecht doesn't need the twenty thousand marks badly enough to

demand it from the impoverished Jews. But, on the other hand, he is afraid to let this opportunity for money slip through his fingers. So he continues to postpone the payment."

For the next several months, life returned to normal and the idea of fleeing the country was not mentioned.

One day, Rabbi Yehudah opened the door to a messenger standing next to his overheated horse. It was evident that they had made a quick trip to Cologne.

"Come in. Sit down for a few moments to catch your breath," offered Rabbi Yehudah.

"I can't," said the messenger. "For I am carrying an urgent letter for Rabbi Asher and I was instructed by Prince Gerard to deliver it immediately."

Rabbi Asher took the letter and broke the seal. The letter was brief.

> As you were considering calling upon me, I am informing you that I am presently on a hunting trip. I was unsure whether to make the trip, since on other occasions, the deer eluded me. This time I am accompanied by a troop of soldiers and am planning to catch one at all costs.
>
> When I return, we will be able to meet and I will inform you of the exact date in my next letter.
>
> Prince Gerard Lange

"Why is Gerard telling you about his upcoming hunting trip?" asked Rabbi Yehudah.

Rabbi Asher said nothing until the messenger had left. Then he explained the contents of the letter to his family.

"We must flee at once," said Rabbi Asher.

The plan for their escape had been discussed numerous times in the past. The boys Yehudah and Yaakov would leave first, together with their mother. Rabbi Asher would follow with the other children several days later. And they would all meet in Worms.

The first family group left for Worms on schedule, but Rabbi Asher was unable to leave on time. His numerous obligations to his community and to German Jewry at large, kept him in Cologne. There were community matters to solve and complex *Halachic* questions from all over Germany to answer. Rabbi Asher did not want to leave any unanswered questions, but he did not know how close he was to danger.

# 24

# IN QUICKSAND

The Emperor dispatched fifteen of the best soldiers from his personal guard to arrest Rabbi Asher. They dallied along the forest paths and through the Rhineland villages until they arrived outside Cologne. There, among the trees and in a field of lush green grass, they decided to break camp for the night. The horses were let to graze peacefully in the field while the soldiers prepared their evening meal.

Suddenly they heard strange shrieks, like the yelping of a dog in trouble. One of the soldiers went to investigate, and within minutes he returned to the camp.

"Come quickly," he cried. "Two of our horses are sinking in the pasture!"

Two of the soldiers arose and followed their friend a few paces to get a better look at the strange sight. Two others

went with their friend to try to rescue the horses. As they approached the horses, they began to sink into the pasture, too.

"Help!" cried the three soldiers. "This is quicksand!" They grabbed onto nearby plants to support themselves. But soon the plants tore, leaving the soldiers unsupported, and sinking faster. The harder they tried to free themselves, the faster they sank.

"Help! Help!" they cried. "We're drowning!"

One soldier quickly broke off a long branch from a nearby tree. He held onto one end and offered the other end to one of the sinking soldiers. But the soldier couldn't reach it. He tried to stretch to reach it, but he just sank deeper into the mud.

"Wait a minute," called the soldier. "I'll look for a longer branch."

"We're dying," called the sinking soldiers. "And you say, 'Wait'?"

The soldier promptly returned with a longer branch and offered it to one of the sinking soldiers. The soldier grabbed the branch, and clung to it with all his strength. The remaining soldiers all pulled at the other end of the branch. And they freed him!

They offered the branch to the next sinking soldier. He, too, grabbed the stick and held onto it as tight as he could. Within minutes, he was also freed.

Then the soldiers turned to the last sinking soldier. He grabbed the stick as he had seen the others do. But as the soldiers pulled at the stick, the grip of the sinking soldier slipped, and he sunk deeper into the mud.

"I'm going to die here," he called desperately, and he burst into tears.

"Don't give up hope," called a soldier. "I'm going to make a rope out of strong stems and haul you out. But it will be a few minutes."

One soldier gathered suitable plants, while the others cut them and tied them as fast as they could. Finally the rope was made.

"Here we are," they called to the sinking soldier. "We'll toss one end to you, tie it around your waist, and we'll pull at the other end."

The sinking soldier followed the instructions with his last bit of energy.

"One, two, three," called the soldiers. "Heave, ho!" And the third sinking soldier was freed. But when the soldiers pulled him onto safe ground, they realized that he had fainted.

"We had better turn to the Duke of Cologne for help," said one of the soldiers. "Our horses are still sinking and our three friends need bed rest to recover from their ordeal."

"But by the time we get to Cologne, the horses will be dead," said another.

They decided that one of the soldiers would ride to the duke to inform him of their predicament, while the others would remain at the site of the camp to care for the sick soldiers and oust the horses from the mud.

Night had fallen by the time the soldier returned with several of the duke's soldiers, ropes, torches and medicine. Several of the soldiers ousted the half-dead horses from the mud while the others treated the wounded soldiers.

Several hours later, they were all back in the duke's castle.

"We were sent by the Emperor to arrest Rabbi Asher," the soldiers began to explain to the duke.

"Arrest Rabbi Asher!" exclaimed the duke incredulously. "Why would the Emperor want to do that? Rabbi Asher is a wise man, an honest man and a saint. Above all, he advises me on occasion."

"I don't know," said one of the soldiers. "But orders are orders!"

"Indeed," said the duke thoughtfully. He paused and then, turning to the soldiers, said, "You're tired from your ordeal. Sleep here tonight, and tomorrow we'll go arrest Rabbi Asher."

# 25

# ANOTHER DELAY

While Rabbi Asher was attending to community matters, his children packed all the necessary items for their escape: clothing, food, several *sefarim* and their father's precious manuscript. At last Rabbi Asher concluded his business and bade his students and the community good-bye.

The wagon was standing outside the house already loaded with their belongings and they were about to mount the wagon, when the *Rav* of the nearby community of Duren arrived at the house.

"Rabbi Asher," he pleaded. "Before you go I have a complex *Halachic* problem that I have been unable to solve. Please help me."

Rabbi Asher could not turn away a fellow Jew in distress so they all returned to the house and Rabbi Asher carefully

considered the problem. At once, it occurred to him that he had written about this very problem in his manuscript. He sent his son to bring the crate of his manuscripts.

The crate was brought and Rabbi Asher quickly flipped through the pages to the required page. But it wasn't there! Perhaps it found its way to another portion of the work, he told himself, and he quickly flipped through the pages to try to locate the missing page, but to no avail.

"I'll think through the problem again," Rabbi Asher told his sons. "While you search through my entire manuscript for the missing page. It is crucial that it's found."

As the boys quickly scanned the pages of that section of the manuscript, they found several other pages that were missing, too. They had no choice but to systematically search through the entire manuscript beginning with *Mesechtas Berachos*. The search took several hours, but at last they found the missing pages and they repacked the manuscript into its carton. In the meantime, Rabbi Asher had answered the *Halachic* question of the *Rav* of Duren, and the *Rav* had left. Once more, they were ready to leave.

"We have been delayed long enough," said Rabbi Asher. "Let's leave now, with the help of Hashem, despite the late hour."

Within an hour, they had left behind the city of Cologne and they passed the field where the Emperor's soldiers and their horses had sunk. By now the soldiers and their horses were fast asleep in the duke's castle.

They travelled throughout the night and the next day. By the next evening they arrived in Mayence. They stopped at the house of the *Rav*, Rabbi Yechezkel, for the night. Rabbi

Asher made plans to leave early the next morning. But after *Shacharis*, the community of Mayence made their way to their *Rav's* house to speak to Rabbi Asher, to seek his blessing, or just to see the *tzaddik*. Rabbi Asher did not have the heart to turn away his fellow Jews in need. He answered their requests until late that evening. He decided to remain one more night in the house of Rabbi Yechezkel, before they would leave for Worms, where they would meet with the rest of the family.

Rabbi Yechezkel and his family went to sleep, as did Rabbi Asher's sons. But Rabbi Asher left for the *shul* to study Torah.

# 26

# REFUGE IN SPAIN

The soldiers of the Emperor's guard slept well in the castle of the Duke of Cologne. The next afternoon, the duke accompanied them to Rabbi Asher's house to arrest him. To their surprise, Rabbi Asher had fled. The gate-keeper reported that he had left the city early in the morning.

"Why did you not stop him?" demanded the duke.

"I thought he was travelling to attend to business that could not wait," answered the gate-keeper. "It did not enter my mind that such a respected person would be fleeing."

"Well, which way did he go?" demanded the duke.

"That way," said the gate-keeper, pointing in the direction of Mayence.

"Well, boys," said the duke to the soldiers. "Take one of my men to direct you and go on your way. When you find

Rabbi Asher, send him my regards."

The soldiers thanked the duke for his help and rode into the night.

After riding for several hours at maximum speed, the scenery seemed unfamiliar to the guide.

"I think we might be lost," he muttered.

The officer of the group dismounted from his horse, grabbed the guide by his shoulders and violently shook him.

"What's the matter with you?" he cried. "We're in a hurry to arrest the Rabbi and we took you to help us. Now look what you did! Just get us to Mayence as fast as you can."

As it would be hard to find their way at night, the officer reluctantly agreed to spend the rest of the night in the forest at the side of the road; they would continue on their way early the next morning. The officer was the first to awake.

"It's late," he roared, waking up the other soldiers.

In the meantime, the guide had left to try to locate the road to Mayence. When he couldn't find it, he decided that rather than return to the group and risk physical abuse by the officer, he would return to Cologne.

Meanwhile, the officer decided that they couldn't afford the time to wait for the return of the guide, and they would have to find their own way to Mayence. A local farmer gave them directions, and they reached Mayence that evening.

Despite the late hour, they made their way to the castle of the Duke of Mayence and told him of their assignment to arrest Rabbi Asher. The duke directed them to the house of the *Rav* of Mayence.

"Open up in the name of the law," shouted the soldiers while banging on the door of Rabbi Yechezkel's house.

"What is the meaning of this night time visit?" asked Rabbi Yechezkel when he opened the door.

"We've come to arrest Rabbi Asher, the Rabbi of German Jewry," they demanded.

"He's not here," said Rabbi Yechezkel curtly.

"We're sorry for disturbing your sleep," apologized the officer, and the soldiers returned to the duke's castle.

After *davening Shacharis* at sunrise, Rabbi Asher returned to Rabbi Yechezkel's house, unaware of the night's search. Rabbi Yechezkel met Rabbi Asher at the door.

"You must leave at once," he said, and he filled him in on the events of the night.

Rabbi Asher and his sons gathered their belongings and immediately left the city.

It was about half way to the city of Worms, that one of Rabbi Asher's sons spoke.

"My dear, father," he began. "When the soldiers find we've left Mayence they will ride to Worms and search for us there. Therefore, perhaps we should turn off the road for some time and let the soldiers precede us to Worms. They will search the city, not find us there and leave. Then we will be safe to ride to Worms."

"Good thinking," said Rabbi Asher.

"Look, father," said one of the other brothers. "Here is the ideal place for us to stop." As he spoke, he pointed to an old watch tower hidden among the trees at the side of the road.

"Indeed," said Rabbi Asher, and they turned off the road to the watch tower.

They remained there for three full days.

In the meantime, the soldiers of the Emperor's guard

reached Worms. Their first stop was the castle of the duke to seek his help. He directed them to the house of the *Rav* of Worms. They searched every corner of the city, but to no avail. Rabbi Asher was nowhere to be found.

"It seems the Rabbi isn't here," said the officer of the group after hours of fruitless searching. "Let's move on to Speyers, perhaps he's there."

As Rabbi Asher rode through the gates of Worms, tears welled up in his eyes. How wonderful were my years in Worms as part of the *bais din* of my dear teacher, the Maharam, he thought.

The reunion with his family was warm and emotional.

"We were so worried about you," said his son Rabbi Yehudah.

"Especially when the soldiers came here to search for you," added Rabbi Yaakov.

"But we are thankful we are together now," said his wife.

They all left Worms together the next morning to continue on their journey. They travelled along the River Rhine to Provence in southeastern France.

From there, Rabbi Asher contacted the leader of Spanish Jewry, the Rashba, Rabbi Shlomo son of Aderes, in Barcelona, to tell him of their plans to come to Spain. For the government in Spain was favorable to the Jews, who enjoyed freedom and prosperity in most parts of the country. Many owned plantations or were cattle-owners. Others leased mines from the king. There were Jewish shoemakers, weavers, dyers of wool, cotton and silk, silversmiths, goldsmiths, bookbinders and watchmakers. There were dealers in cloth and general ware, dealers of grain, wine, oil, flax and wool.

Jewish merchants sailed to Africa and travelled along the great spice routes to the Orient. And Jews were selected to serve as diplomats between the king and the Mohammedan States.

In this climate, the Jews were able to devote themselves to Torah undisturbed. Thus, it was Spain that produced the Jewish poets, philosophers and grammarians.

As Rabbi Asher and his family were approaching Barcelona, the Rashba was informed of his imminent arrival by two travelling businessmen who had seen the German Rabbi approaching the city.

"The great Rabbi Asher is on his way!" exclaimed the Rashba happily. "Let's go greet him."

The Rashba hired a wagon and, together with his students, went to greet Rabbi Asher. Everyone who saw their illustrious *Rav* going to greet a great personality, joined the delegation, although many of them had never heard of Rabbi Asher. That night the *yeshivah* students lit torches and unfurled banners welcoming Rabbi Asher and his family.

The two great sages remained together, studying Torah for the next eight days.

On the advice of the Rashba, the community of Toledo invited Rabbi Asher to be the Rabbi of their city. And so began a new chapter in the life of Rabbi Asher.

Once again, Rabbi Asher became the spiritual leader of his country. He established a *yeshivah* in Toledo where he taught *Gemara* according to the teachings of the Tosafists. Students from all over the world came to the *yeshivah*, from Spain, France, Germany, Bohemia and even from Russia. Jews from all over Spain turned to him for advice and with

*Halachic* questions. Those that couldn't come in person sent letters. And Rabbi Asher also received letters with *Halachic* questions from all over the world.

The Rosh passed away in *Cheshvan* 5088 (1327). He left a legacy of *Halachic* decisions in his collected responsa, *Teshuvos Harosh*. And his monumental *Halachic* compilation is until this day found in every full edition of the Talmud. This code became the authoritative work of *Halachah* in many regions of Spain and in other Sephardic communities of North Africa, until Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulchan Aruch* codifed it.

Among his many students, were his eight sons, the most famous of whom were Rabbi Yechiel, whose *Halachic* decisions are often cited in *Tur*, Rabbi Yehudah, who succeeded his father as *Rav* of Toledo, and Rabbi Yaakov, the *Baal Haturim*, the author of the book known as *Arba'ah Turim*.

It was as a commentary to this *sefer* that Rabbi Yosef Karo wrote his monumental work, *Bais Yosef*, and then its abbreviated version, the *Shulchan Aruch*. And in the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Yosef Karo adopted Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher's system of classifying *Halachos*.

Thus, Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel, the Rosh, can be considered as a great forebearer of the major *Halachic* works. He and his teacher, Rabbi Mayer of Rothenburg, the Maharam, were Torah giants, who in their times illuminated world Jewry, and their legacy lives on until this day.

The Crusades are over, but the Jewish communities of Germany continue to be shaken by one convulsion after another. Blood libels, pogroms and barefaced extortion make life in Germany almost unbearable for its Jews, and a wave of emigration begins. As the Jews begin to leave, Rudolf of Hapsburg, Holy Roman Emperor and supreme ruler of Germany, is worried that the loss of the Jews will impoverish the German states and stop the flow of gold into the Imperial coffers. He decides that the only way to stop the Jews from leaving Germany is to prevent the Maharam of Rothenburg, one of the last Rishonim and the acknowledged leader of all German Jewry, from leaving Germany. But before the Emperor's order can reach Rothenburg, the Maharam has already set out in the dead of night on a desperate flight to freedom.

*The Captivity of the Maharam*, by Shmuel Argaman, is a dramatized account of the historical events leading up to the flight of the Maharam, the escape, arrest and imprisonment of the Maharam and the colossal struggle of wills that follows.

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