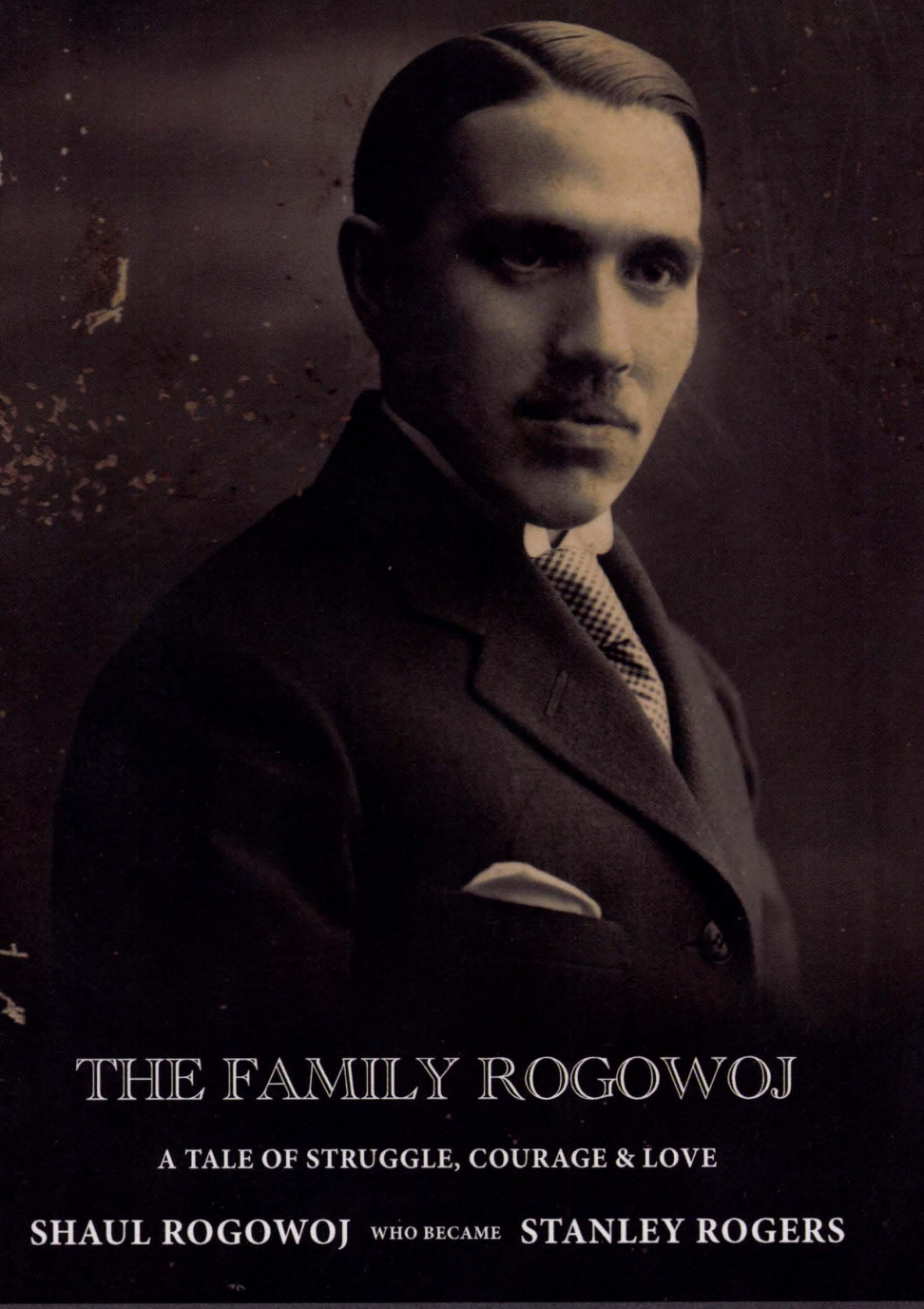


THE FAMILY ROGOWOJ

A TALE OF STRUGGLE, COURAGE & LOVE

SHAUL ROGOWOJ WHO BECAME **STANLEY ROGERS**

Ormuzi

Filja w Ciechocinku p.f. „ ALPERN"

WARSZAWA

Leszno 24.

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THE FAMILY ROGOWOJ



A NOTE FROM WILLIAM ROGERS, SON OF SHAUL ROGOWOJ

After my father died in 1961 I discovered a manuscript in a manila folder, hand-written in Yiddish on foolscap paper. As I am unable to read Yiddish I did not realise the significance of the document. The manila folder was put away with other family papers until 1970, when my sister returned to Australia with her family. That was when Irene and I decided to have the document translated into English. It became clear that it was the beginning of my father's memoir which unfortunately he was not destined to complete. Sadly, I no longer recall the name of the translator.

My father was a prolific writer and fluent in Russian, Polish, German, English and Yiddish. He wrote long letters while on overseas trips not only dealing with business but also describing the places he visited and the people he met. He was greatly influenced by the writings of Sholom Aleichem and in his early years in Australia he wrote a weekly column in the Jewish Herald.

My father was among a group of migrants who arrived in the late 1920s and became an unofficial spokesman in dealings with the government. A highly intelligent man, he was often chosen as mediator in the Jewish process of Din Torah.

He was a charismatic man with a strong personality and was a good public speaker. He was also a wonderful husband and a loving father who instilled in his children a love of family and a strong attachment to our heritage.

On the voyage to Australia my father acted as interpreter for the Polish migrants in their dealings with the captain, who declared he could not pronounce the name Rogowoj and said he would call him Rogers. Upon his arrival in Australia my father adopted the name Stanley Rogers.

My father died of a heart attack while on a business trip in Tokyo.

William Rogers, son of Shaul Rogowoj
Toorak, Melbourne 2015



Shaul Rogowoj with his son Berel, born 1922
(Berel in Polish; Bolek in Yiddish; later known as William)

CHAPTER ONE

My mother was the only daughter of the esteemed Aaron Maiseyevich Polikov. My grandfather was a wealthy and well-educated man, a true Russian Jew of the second half of the nineteenth century. My grandmother was a healthy Jewess who cared for her household. She appreciated her husband and showed him great respect. Grandfather's business was in grain and even though he did not own land, he supervised thousands of leased hectares.

My grandmother told me my grandfather was a *schlimazel*, with no talent for commerce and gave all his money to landowners. It often happened that my grandfather had to buy a field before the grain was harvested because the landowner needed money urgently for his gambling at cards. Whenever this happened he would come home to his wife and say, 'My wife, today we lost 50,000 rubles.' Whenever G-d helped him and he made some money, he would tell his wife, 'G-d has not forsaken us. Dear wife, make us a *cholent* because we have earned a few rubles.'

When I knew my grandfather he was in his sixties and I was about seven years old. He was a tall man with a long grey beard who had the impression on me of looking like a prophet. In his own home he went about without a hat and wore a white collar and tie. He spoke literary Russian

and knew Pushkin, Lermontov and other Russian classic writers by heart. Grandmother said he needed his learning for business. All the landowners in the Kiev region came to consult him and whatever Aaron Maiseyevich said was considered 'the holy of the holies' by them.

My grandfather lived like a Russian landlord and travelled three times a year to see the Makarover Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak'l. He travelled in his own wagon with six servants, both male and female. My mother, his only daughter, was bathed daily in milk so that her skin would be soft and a special tutor was brought in to teach her Yiddish, Russian and music. There was no lack of milk because my grandfather had six cows.

When my mother was fifteen her father went to the Makarover Rebbe to confer with him over a proper match for her and in this way the Rebbe became the matchmaker between the Polikov and Rogowoj families.

At the age of sixteen my mother was married to Berel Rogowoj, who also came from an aristocratic Russian-Jewish family. He was twenty-four years old at the time.

My paternal grandfather, Shaul Rogowoj, lived in Kiev with his large family of twenty-four children: twelve boys and twelve girls, from three wives. His first wife died after bearing him eight children; he then married her sister who bore him another eight children. When she died he married again and his third wife bore him a further eight children. My father, Berel Rogowoj, was the eldest of the children born to the third wife.

My grandfather lived a long life and died at the age of ninety. Unfortunately, my father had a short life and died at the age of forty-six, leaving my mother with seven children.

During the twenty-two years of their marriage, my mother bore twelve children, of whom five died at various young ages, leaving six boys and one girl, my sister Beile. I was the fourth surviving child with three older brothers, Chaim, Itzik and Shloime. My sister was born after me and then came two more brothers.

I was born in Kiev on 15 January 1890. Although I was the fourth surviving child, my parents paid more attention to me than to the others and considered me to be rather special, either because of my great love and respect for my parents or because I was physically weak. I cannot say.

When I was four years old my father came home one day and said, 'Shelig [short for Shaul] my son, you are going to go to school. I am counting on you to bring our family honour, learning and good behaviour.'

My father had a very strong personality and was very stern with his children. He was really a dictator in our house and although he loved my mother dearly, she had to obey his every command. I remember how she begged him not to send me to school while I was so young and fragile and wanted me to stay home for one more year, until I was five years old. But my father was determined and I had to go to school. I was carried there every day by Karol, one of our servants. He was about fifty years old and he and his wife had been with our family since before I was born. His wife cleaned our house, and, among his other duties, Karol polished all our shoes and attended to the samovar. My father got up every morning at 5.00 am to say Psalms before his other prayers. Karol got up at 4.00 am to put on the samovar so my father could drink a few glasses of hot tea.

From the day I started school Karol woke me, dressed me and brought me to my father. I sat at his side drinking tea and listening to the Psalms. I knew not a word of Hebrew, but my father translated certain passages for me. When he came to a particularly important passage he dramatised his translation and when translating gentle, loving words the family dictator became a child himself and shed tears of love and affection. These early morning Psalms became very fascinating to me as I shared all the horrors with my father as well as all the beauties in his narration. An unusually strong bond grew between us. When we finished at 7.00 am my father always said, 'Saying Psalms and drinking tea can do no harm.'

At 7.00 am my father began saying his morning prayers while I got ready for school. We both left home at 8.00 am, with my father going to his office and Karol taking me to school. In winter Karol carried me on his back. We had great fun together and developed a special friendship. I used to narrate to Karol what I learned in school that day and he had to repeat the lessons back to me. Karol was a very plain man but he was with our family for so long that he learned Yiddish from the other servants. Our parents spoke to him in Russian and he spoke to us in that language too. All the boys were addressed as *Panich,* which meant young master. When Karol had to repeat Hebrew lessons back to me, he was quite lost. He would stop, make the Christian sign of the Cross and say to me, '*Panich,* in G-d's name! I cannot repeat these words. I am old, uneducated and unworthy to repeat the great words of my masters.'

Karol was a loyal soul and a good fellow. Above all, he had great respect for our family. Every year at *Pesach* he became

the boss of my father's yeast business. According to Mosaic Law, yeast is *chometz* and during *Pesach* no one should eat or deal with or have anything to do with *chometz* for the whole eight days of *Pesach*. My father drew up an annual agreement with a notary and 'sold' the whole business to Karol, who was then the boss for those eight days. My father had already trained him to look after sales, receive goods, handle the money and open and close the store and offices. Karol was thus elevated in his own esteem and in the eyes of the servants and other employees. He could not write but had a good memory for names, dates and quantities. When a signature was required he marked the documents with a cross.

Shaul Rogowoj had his own mills and sold flour all over the world. He made a living, to put it mildly! Like my maternal grandfather, he dressed in a modern style and travelled three times a year to see the Makarover Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak'l.

He used to say that he set himself a goal, which was to reach a ripe old age. When he was already in his eighties he went to the Makarover Rebbe, presented himself and asked for a blessing. The Rebbe said, 'With what can I bless you? Respectable children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren you already have. No evil should befall them! Healthy, you are. Rich, you are. What more do you want?' But Grandfather stood his ground and reiterated his request for a blessing. Finally the Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak'l, blessed my grandfather saying, 'For seven generations shall

there be no boors or common labourers in your family.'

From that day on the Rogowoj family became Jewish aristocrats. My grandfather believed in the Rebbe as G-d, as did his entire family. In later years, when one of my cousins wanted to study engineering, my uncle would not allow it because his son might have been considered a labourer.

Soon after his wedding, and according to my grandfather's wishes, my father became independent. He was already familiar with the milling business and began working with a pressed yeast factory. As the representative of the Marer yeast factory in Kiev, he took over the marketing of yeast for Ukraine and Poland. This was towards the end of the last century when pressed yeast was a new product. Before that people used loose yeast that was kept in barrels.

The yeast trade was in Jewish hands in the ten Polish provinces in the so-called *Chertá osédlasti* (Pale of Settlement), the region where Jews were allowed to settle. In the smaller towns the yeast trade was placed entirely in the hands of the rabbis and their wives, which gave them a means of subsistence.

It seems the rabbis shared their work with their rebbetzins; they were occupied with resolving legal conflicts, observing *kashrut* and similar religious duties while their wives busied themselves with selling yeast. Thursday was an exception, because on that day the wives baked *challot* for the *Shabbes*. On Thursdays the rabbis had to help with the selling of yeast, even though it was rare for a rabbi to know how to give proper change. Most rabbinical families were blessed with many children, and despite their many household duties these *rebbetzin*s were not bad businesswomen.

In developing his business my father always had to consider the merchants and how they could get the yeast in time and sell more of it. Naturally he was not always successful and often suffered. My father told me that in many towns the rabbis communicated with him but in others they went to the Russian police to complain about him. However, my father was stubborn and as business deals became more difficult he worked even harder to develop his trade. He bribed the police and gave generously to all the community funds, such as the Talmud Torah and the burial society. Eventually he became the pioneer of pressed yeast in Russia and Poland.

The yeast which came from the Marer factory was sent out daily, according to my father's orders, and without payment. A complete account of the total amount due was made at the end of the month, but only ten percent of his customers would sell out their entire stock in that period. This created problems for my father, problems which ultimately led to our family leaving Russia to settle in Poland.

After two years of hard work developing the yeast trade, my father came to the factory one time to meet with his boss, Madam Marer. She greeted him with various Russian curses such as 'Jewish apostates, scoundrels, thieves!' and screamed at him, demanding to know why he was doing business with such swindlers. My father was livid with rage. He spat back at her that she should find herself an 'honest' *Pravoslav* (Russian Orthodox Christian) for an agent and left her office. In those days this kind of lordly insulting of Jews was an everyday occurrence and generally elicited no response. However, my father was a hothead – and an honest Jew – and could not tolerate such insults against Jews.

Soon after this incident my father went to see the Makarover Rebbe and told him the whole story. After hearing him out the Rebbe said, 'Being a hothead is a *goyish* trait. One doesn't do such things. One does not throw away one's livelihood. One must conduct oneself properly, even with a non-Jew. Moreover, in this case Madam Marer was right. But the thing is done. So go home and wait for Madam Marer to send for you. Then come to me and we'll see what has to be done.'

My father did not ask the Rebbe any questions, because what the Rebbe says, one does. He went home and told my mother nothing. Two weeks later he received a telegram on a Monday signed by Madam Marer and asking him to come and see her immediately. My father was not surprised by the telegram because he was certain things would be as the Rebbe had said. He went straight to Makarov, where the Rebbe told him he already knew that she had sent for him. He told my father he should go to her immediately and demand double for his expenses and double for his salary. Until then my father had earned 5,000 rubles a year, so it meant asking for 10,000 rubles. He said to the Rebbe, 'Rebbe, doubling the amounts may be a bit too much.' The Rebbe shouted back at him, 'If I say double it is double! Go and you will succeed!'

When Madam Marer was notified that my father had arrived and wanted to speak to her, she immediately came down from her office on the first floor. Greeting my father she called out, 'Berke, where have you been? What kind of nonsensical game are you playing with me?' Then she turned to the bookkeeper and said, 'Semia Andrevich, Berke should be paid everything doubled for the last six months. Figure it

out and add it on, whatever it comes to.'

Father was left speechless. He had always believed the Makarover Rebbe was a great man, but it was hard to fathom that he had such influence on the Creator of the Universe that G-d should do for him whatever he asked. My father's faith was strong and he realised he had no need to speak further with Madam Marer, but simply to listen to her words and do her bidding.

Taking my father's arm in hers, Madam Marer led him into her office where he tried to beg her pardon for the angry words at their last meeting. To this she replied, 'Dear fool, I need people like you – people with self-respect. If our customers don't pay it is not our fault. I promise you that as long as I live you will not hear such words of reproach from me.'

My father left the factory, but he did not go home to his wife, or to see his father to relate what had happened; he went to the Rebbe. The Rebbe received him immediately and said, 'Berel, once I helped you. But next time don't come to me with such matters. One piece of advice I want to give you now, though. Inasmuch as you travel around a lot, find yourself a good place where you can open your own sales outlet. That way you won't be dependent on anyone and need not worry about strangers. The time has come for you to care for yourself, your wife and your children.' For my father, this whole scenario seemed like a miracle sent from Heaven, and so he believed until his death.

My father had already died by the time I was nine years old, when I became a manager in the business [later in Chelm] and came to know the managing director, Nicolai

Vasilievich Barkovsky, a distant cousin of my father's. He was second in command in the yeast factory and people commented on the close relationship he had with Madam Marer, a young widow who had never remarried. Barkovsky was a doctor of chemistry, a bachelor, a handsome man with a head full of long black hair and was fluent six languages. He went hunting with Madam Marer and accompanied her to the theatre, to concerts and other entertainment. He was also very friendly with the Rogowoj family. It was he who told me the story behind the 'miracle' of my father's reinstatement at the factory:

The Makarover Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak'l, was a very clever Jew. Even Christians travelled to see him for advice and Barkovsky numbered himself among the Rebbe's Chassidim. The Rebbe understood Madam Marer's character and while he told my father to wait for her summons, he himself went into action. He called for a certain Herr Sabaliev, a great industrialist from Kiev and one of Madam Marer's best friends. He asked him to ask for her opinion on Berke Rogowoj on their next hunting trip together, but not to divulge anything else to her and to bring her reply straight to himself.

When Sabaliev did what the Rebbe had asked Madam Marer flew into a terrible rage and told Barkovsky to rein in the horses and start for home immediately. Later, when she had calmed down, she told Barkovsky, 'One can't even trust one's closest friends. Sabaliev wants to take away our best people. Tomorrow morning send a telegram to Rogowoj asking him to come straight away. I'll show that Sabaliev what the firm of Yosif Ivanovich Marer is!'

And so that was the miracle my father believed in.

My father took the Rebbe's advice seriously and began to look for a new place where he could be an independent marketer of yeast. He decided on the city of Chelm in Poland, where he settled with his entire family.

CHAPTER TWO

The Russians wanted to 'Russianise' the city of Chelm, take it out of the Lublin province and fashion a Russian province. Very few Poles lived there but there were a great number of Russian workers in the town. There were also quite a few soldiers, a few hundred Cossacks, some artillery and cavalry. All the foot soldiers, artillery and cavalry were Russians from Kavkaz (Caucasus), Siberia and Mongolia. There was a Russian High Church, two or three ordinary churches, a seminary for priests, a Russian high school and many priests.

Though not large, the Jewish population of Chelm lived there peacefully and in the years we spent in the city, anti-Semitism and pogroms did not reach us. All the commerce, transport, import, export, state postage and even the local water supply were in Jewish hands. Politics and defence were organised by the Russians while economic life was handled by Jews. Chelm was a rail hub for the surrounding cities and towns and as a larger commercial centre it had particular significance for the surrounding population.

The Jews we found in Chelm could be classified into three groups: simple Jews, religious Jews (as they understood the term), and Jews who believed they were divinely appointed to watch over their own religiosity and that of those around them. For them, *Yiddishkeit* meant going to synagogue,

praying, observing *kashrut*, helping with the bridal dowry, *mikveh*, keeping *Shabbes*, the Chevra Kadisha (burial society) and the cemetery. They knew nothing of Jewish or worldly learning. Chelm had *chederim* where boys finished learning *Chumash* and became complete Jews. When a boy began to put on *tefilin* and attend synagogue regularly, he became a fully fledged member of those who watched over the local *Yiddishkeit*, as they understood it.

The Chelmer Jews hated outsiders, particularly Russian Jews and called them *Tasalem Kop*, meaning that had a cross on their heads. The Chelmers tried very hard to convince the judges and rabbis that these people were *goyim*, non-Jews. My father had to bribe rabbis and judges more than once to stop them excommunicating him. Our living expenses in Chelm included not only the usual costs, but additional costs that enabled us to call ourselves Jews.

There was no chance that we might become part of local society, or that anyone would become friendly with us. To invite my father to the home of one of the local 'bigwigs' would have meant shaming Chelmers long laid to rest in the cemetery. Eventually the authorities stopped bothering us, but we were always to remain the *Litvak Tasalem Kops*.

To this day I do not understand the basis for the plethora of Chelm stories. The people were not fools, but being separated from the Jewish communities in Poland they allowed themselves to believe they were the only true defenders of the faith. They developed their own particular philosophy: that when the Jews left *Eretz Israel* to be driven into exile, they were given the task of keeping the faith. One can understand why Russia and Poland nourished so many

great Jewish writers, musicians and Talmudic scholars, but alas Chelm could not pride herself on such progeny.

Most Chelm Jews were very poor and the wealthy members of the community did not deign to give them even water for nothing. This was the society into which we were thrown.

Realising he was not being recognised as a true Jew, my father began to be friendly with the poorer class; that is, with those Jews with whom the business people were ashamed to mix. These were the trades people: the butchers, bakers, horse dealers and drivers. My father's first friend in Chelm was a Jew named Shmuel the Short.

When he was eighteen years old he had been a buggy driver with two horses carrying passengers from Chelm to Harubyashov. Shmuel was notable for his courage. Although short, he was quick and strong and when necessary he could use a knife. It was well known that on one of his trips bandits had attacked his buggy and although one passenger with a heart ailment died (possibly of fright) he managed to knife to death three bandits and save the passengers and their luggage. From that time on he was known throughout the area as 'the strong one'. He was injured in the attack and when released from hospital a rich butcher took him as his son-in-law and gave him two pairs of horses and a wagon.

Shmuel's dealings went well. A year after his wedding, he already had three pairs of horses and wagons. As the strong man he was, he soon became the virtual boss of the highways and his word became law among the wagon drivers. Shmuel decided who could become a driver and what his prices should be in order to drive competition away. When bandits

appeared he made short shrift of them. The police and all the inhabitants of the town stood in awe of Shmuel.

Yet Shmuel remained a loyal Jew. On Friday nights he put on his silk frockcoat and hat and went to synagogue; likewise on *Shabbes* morning. After the *Havdalah* ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath, Shmuel reverted to his role as the strong one. During the early Sabbath twilight between the prayers of *Mincha* and *Maariv*, the elderly Jews sat and recounted stories about the pogroms of Chelmnitzki's time and of how his bands would rip apart live Jewish children. Hearing these Shmuel expressed his desire to meet up with this Chelmnitzki and wreak revenge on him on behalf of all Jewry – despite the fact that Chelmnitzki had been dead for more than 100 years.

Once, in the great ecstasy of his emotions Shmuel's belt came loose. As he was tying it, someone tapped him on the shoulder and said, '*Gut Shabbos,* Reb Shmuel'. He turned around and could not believe his eyes because he had been wished a good *Shabbos* by none other than the great wealthy gentleman, Reb Aaron Goizen. Shmuel replied, '*A gut yahr.*' (A good year)

Reb Goizen continued: 'I want to ask you, Reb Shmuel, to come into my home for a glass of tea right after *Havdalah.* I have some business to discuss with you and as it is a very important matter, our discussion must take place today.'

It is no wonder that this invitation made a strong impression on Shmuel. Aaron Goizen owned two homes, was the yeast agent for Babroysk and had a small business in Chelm which his wife, Rivka'le, ran. Reb Aaron was the arbiter of Jewish life in Chelm. He was the first *gabbai* in the synagogue, had

the last word in the hospital for the needy, as well as in the giving of bridal dowries. He also decided who would be the city's *dayan* and *chazzan*. Even in the *mikveh* his influence could be felt.

Shmuel had never spoken to Aaron Goizen – not even a 'Good morning' because Reb Aaron would not have answered him. There was just one area in which Reb Aaron acknowledged the existence of Shmuel the Short and to that end he sent him a weekly gift of one gulden. Aaron Goizen had his own horses and wagons and had no need for Shmuel's transport.

Yet Reb Aaron left his honoured place at the eastern wall of the synagogue to go down to the lower level where Reb Shmuel and his like gathered, and right in the hearing of all his friends had wished him a '*Gut Shabbos,* Reb Shmuel!' This was a truly great honour for Shmuel, and had he met the Messiah he would not have been so overwhelmed. After all, Jews everywhere and in every age wait for the Messiah, but for a Jew like Aaron Goizen to come down from the eastern wall to the common Jews in the lower level – such a thing had never happened before in the history of Chelm.

Not only were Shmuel's friends dazzled by this event, the *chazzan* could not properly complete his chanting of the *Maariv* prayers. The *dayan*, Reb Binenel, turned as white as the wall while his yellow beard and *shtreimel* began to quiver. There could be no talk of proper prayer that Saturday night.

The *chazzan* quickly mumbled the *Maariv*, the mill owner Chaim Milner was trembling terribly, the *dayan*'s *Shmona Esrei*, a central prayer which always lasted twenty minutes,

was over in less than five minutes and even those who said *Kaddish* after *Aleinu* lost half their *Kaddish* on the way.

When the *gabbai*, Reb Eisha, chanted the *Havdalah* while rolling his eyes heavenward to mark the end of the Sabbath, three-quarters of the congregation had already left to rush homewards and tell their wives of the great event they had witnessed in the synagogue. That Saturday evening remained a great unrecorded historical moment and the story was retold from generation to generation.

CHAPTER THREE

Whenever Reb Shmuel forgot to say more than 'A good week, a healthy week!' after *Havdalah*, his wife Bracha'le stopped him and scolded him for not having added, 'A lucky week!' 'What is it, Shmulikel? Where is your "a lucky week"? Do you think that because you are strong you need not fear G-d? The Lord of the Universe has no fear of knife carriers!'

Shmuel replied that first of all he had simply forgotten to say 'a lucky week', and secondly, if Reb Aaron Goizen had a deal for him this would bring good luck and blessings, and he proceeded to tell her what had happened in the synagogue. Bracha'la was a Cossack of a woman, as befitted the wife of the town's 'strong one'. She had her head screwed on properly and a mouth one had to take great heed of if one were not to fall into it. She loved her husband very much but she told him that the whole deal didn't appeal to her. Of course she would never meddle in her husband's affairs, but if Reb Aaron the Pig had invited him for tea he should have realised that a Jew has a wife and she should also have been invited. Shmuel would not go to Reb Aaron Goizen by himself.

Shmuel loved his wife. He realised she was right and immediately said it had simply left his mind. Reb Aaron had truly invited them both. 'Why didn't you say so before?'

screamed Bracha'la, who then began to wonder what she would wear.

She told Shmuel to put on his silk frock coat and hat, an outfit in which he resembled a Talmudic scholar (and truly, that is how she addressed him on *Shabbosim*. She put on her silk dress and largest hat and they travelled to Reb Aaron's house in their own wagon. 'Let the world see that Shmuel the Driver is not just anybody. We'll show the wealthy that we know how to live!'

When Reb Aaron opened the door to his guests (and indeed, he awaited only Shmuel), he was aghast, but he needed Shmuel badly so had no choice but to welcome his wife. 'Welcome Reb Shmuel, and this must be your wife. Come in, take off your coats and sit down and rest awhile.'

'No,' answered Bracha'le, 'we are not tired. We came with a buggy.' 'Oh dear,' said Reb Aaron, 'with a buggy. That's quite expensive.' Shmuel replied saying, 'Buggies don't cost me anything,' for which he received a poke in his side from Bracha'le, who added, 'He means, Reb Aaron, that we are still *Shabbosdik* and shall pay tomorrow.'

'Yes yes, so take off your coats, make yourselves comfortable and excuse me while I call my wife.' Reb Aaron's wife was called Rifka'le. In the town people gossiped and said her father had been an important person in Cinerama's Circus and that Rifka had been born there. I met her as the wife of the city's wealthiest man and she had two clever and beautiful daughters, Sara'le and Raizl' le.

When Reb Aaron told his wife about the guests she went into a frenzy and began to scream, 'Heavens Aaron, I'll never live down the shame! Such a *yachna*, a guest in my home! A

knife-wielder and his wife – my guests!'

Reb Aaron reassured her quickly. Aaron Goizen was a tall man with a nicely combed beard. He wore golden pince-nez spectacles on his nose with a gold chain attached to his vest. Rifka was small and homely and trembled at the very look of her husband. 'It's happened,' he said to his wife. 'You must get her out of the room and leave me alone with him. It won't take long. Meanwhile, you must entertain her properly.'

Rifka'le entered the room where her guests were sitting. With an affected smile she called out, 'Oh what precious guests the Lord of the Universe has sent us in the new week!' She invited them into a beautiful salon furnished with elegant furniture and a piano, as befitted the town's wealthiest.

From the conversation I had with Bracha'le fifteen years later I got the distinct impression that after that visit Shmuel the Short and Bracha'le talked about that rich salon and the wealth so apparent there all night long, and I never forgot it.

In order to separate Bracha'le from Shmuel, Rifka'le took Bracha'le under her arm and took her around to all the rooms. She showed her all the furniture, the clothing and even the trousseaux already prepared for the daughters when they, please G-d, were ready for marriage. She told Shmuel to talk to her husband because what she had to show Bracha'le was of interest only to women, so Aaron took Shmuel into his office.

This was a large room dominated by a huge office desk. On one wall was a big portrait of Aaron's father, Reb Yitzhak, may he rest in peace. On another wall was a portrait of the Russian Czar Nikolai II. There was an ottoman where Aaron took catnaps, two armchairs for guests and a shelf containing some leather-bound volumes of modern Russian literature.

This was where Aaron Goizen received Russian officials. The Chelm police chief and the Russian representatives were often guests there. In town the talk was that the police chief was in love with Aaron's twenty-year-old daughter Sara'le and they had even been seen riding in the woods together. The Jews saw no sin in this. After all, a man who was so respected, who dealt with officialdom, sat in the municipality and generally sacrificed himself for his people, could do anything. Even Queen Esther lived with a non-Jew, Ahasuerus, in order to help Jews. So Sara'le was helping prevent sorrows being brought upon her fellow Jews. If a Jew was found guilty of a crime, Sara'le could take care of the problem. It just depended on the enormity of the crime: a substantial crime meant more money; a lesser crime less money.

In this way all the Chelm Jews remained fine upstanding citizens and Sara'le kept her friendly ties with the officials. It was in the office where Shmuel the Short and Reb Aaron Goizen now sat that all these practical matters were handled. Both of the portraits on the wall were witnesses to the good deeds of Reb Aaron and his daughter Sara'le.

Reb Aaron honoured Reb Shmuel with a cigarette, a luxurious one with true Turkish tobacco, one which the cigarette-maker Chaim Yankel brought especially for Reb Aaron from Warsaw. Reb Aaron told the maid, Hanna, to bring tea and she immediately produced a nickel samovar, the splendour of which blinded Shmuel's eyes. Alongside were two glasses, two dishes of jam and several cookies. Reb Aaron honoured Shmuel with the first glass of tea: 'This tea is the best that Russia can offer. It's Kosniezov's tea, which

cannot be imitated. Drink up, Reb Shmuel, and here's to your good health.' Once Shmuel had begun to drink, Aaron began the real *schmooze*.

'Reb Shmuel,' he began, 'we Jews in Chelm are in great danger. We are being threatened with the loss of our livelihood, our wealth and, G-d forbid, with becoming *goyim*. The *Yiddishkeit* our fathers worked so hard to establish and keep up, my grandfather and yours, is in danger. Therefore it is the duty of every Jew in Chelm, rich and poor, to prevent this great danger – with your help. Upon you, Reb Shmuel, has fallen the great honour of defending the *Yiddishkeit* of Chelm.'

Shmuel the Short turned pale after Aaron's introduction. Coming to himself again, he started to answer in a frightened voice. 'If, Reb Aaron, *Yiddishkeit* is in such mortal danger, how can I, a simple Jew, overturn G-d's decree? We must announce this danger in the synagogue. We must beseech at our parents' graves that they should go to the Holy One and ask that our sins be forgiven. We must bring the children from the *Talmud Torahs* that they should say Psalms.'

Reb Aaron interrupted him: 'No, no, the danger is not that great. What has happened is this. A whole family has come from Russia to Chelm and their name is Rogowoj. The name itself tells you that its head is a gentleman, an imitation Jew with Christian leanings. This Rogowoj wears a collar and a tie and his wife wears her own hair. His children wear red Russian shirts with black pants tucked into their boots. He has brought his own servants who will be going to church on Sundays. Rogowoj's wife sings Russian songs and plays on the harmonica and the mandolin. The older children play

the balalaika. And this Jew, if you can call him that, wants to settle here and to establish a yeast business which might take away the livelihood of a few hundred Jews. Who knows, he may even sell non-kosher –or even poisoned – yeast! From the telegraph clerk I received a copy of a telegram in which Rogowoj ordered a wagonload of yeast for 5,000 rubles. According to my reckoning, this wagon should arrive in Chelm on Monday. It would be advisable that this wagon did not arrive. You probably already understand what I mean...'

'Understand? Of course I understand! But what's the use of all this comedy? Tonight already I can make him a head shorter and his whole entourage will head back to Russia.'

'Oh no,' said Reb Aaron. 'There is no need for killing. Murder is not for Jews. What if he is really a *goy*? Then we would have a blood libel to deal with! After all, we are still in the *galut*. I know we have strong ties with government officials, but if he is truly a goy then we'll have to deal with investigators from Petersburg and we'll all end up in Siberia.

'My plan, Reb Shmuel, is better. Let him live but not do any business. Then he'll have to flee from here, penniless and hungry. I don't have to tell you because after all, you are a clever Jew. If the wagonload of yeast should arrive covered with kerosene, for example, and Venesenka, the train gendarme, should receive a ruble, he could take one whiff and the whole wagonload would end up buried in a pit near the railroad.

'And how many 5,000 ruble loads do you think this scoundrel has, Reb Shmuel? Inasmuch as the yeast trade is important to the entire city, and we understand this job entails expenses, our committee has assigned 50 rubles to the task.

The wagon is coming from Kiev to Kavla in order to make the changeover to the Polish tracks. Therefore it makes sense to travel there, taking along two trustworthy companions, and whatever will happen takes place there.

'No one dare know anything of all this – not my wife and not yours. We must shake hands that everything remains between the two of us. If anything should leak out there is the smell of Siberia. Remember, Reb Shmuel, that the Jews of Chelm are not murderers. We'll make this Rogowoj's life miserable, but he shall not die and neither shall he live. Have a good week, Reb Shmuel, be successful and may G-d be with you.'

CHAPTER FOUR

When Shmuel left Reb Aaron he was quite worried. Reb Aaron had touched upon his deepest Jewish feelings and when his Bracha'le asked him what had transpired, he could only answer that such matters were not for women. That night he dreamed he was in another world where only angels found themselves and he was received with great honour. Even the Lord of the Universe came to pay him respect because he had helped to rescue *Yiddishkeit* in Chelm.

That same night, in our new home in Chelm, my father recited the *Havdalah* and blessed all the children with a healthy and full week. Although my father's servants were Christians, they did not work on *Shabbes*, so immediately it was over he gave them instructions about setting up his offices. At home mother was busy arranging the furniture and preparing beds for seven souls. Karol, the servant, was busy setting up samovars, and the Jewish maid was busy cooking a potato soup for the *shtibl* of the Trisk *Hassidim* located downstairs and readying itself for the *melave malke*.

The *gabbai* of this *shtibl* downstairs had asked my father to contribute the soup and our soups had become a tradition for the Trisk community every Saturday night. My father would always say, 'What does it matter – the Hassidim enjoy it so much!' Needless to say there was no talk of being paid

for this. First of all, one simply didn't take money for such things and, secondly, the *Hassidim* were so poor that in later years my father supported the entire *shtibl* and several of its members who spent their days learning *Torah.*

My father could hardly have suspected that at the same time as he was occupied with his *Havdalah* and the Trisk *Hassidim's melave malke*, a plot was being woven to destroy him.

At six o'clock on Monday the train from Kavla arrived and the boxes of yeast were being unloaded. My father and his helpers stood ready to receive them when suddenly the gendarme Venesenka came out screaming at my father: '*Judowska morda!* [Jewish face!] Such yeast you bring us! You want to poison us all!' He ordered a pit dug and all the yeast buried there. Naturally my father had to pay all the expenses.

Thus everything transpired as Reb Aaron had foreseen: the yeast had been drenched in kerosene and buried. Father warned everyone not to – for G-d's sake – breathe a word of this to Mother.

Seeing that he was playing with fire, Father decided to travel to Lublin that very evening to see his cousin Simeon Vasilkovsky. Together they would hold council as to how best to deal with the Jews of Chelm.

Simeon Vasilkovsky was really my mother's cousin. Much later my mother told me Simeon had been in love with her but my grandfather never allowed the match. Not only was Simeon ten years older than her, he was also considered a rather wild fellow. During his years at the university more than one girl, both Jewish and Christian, went about with a

broken heart thanks to him. He graduated from Petersburg University as a certified lawyer and with a gold medal. While at university Simeon established a very close relationship with a wealthy landowner who later became the governor of the Lublin province. The first person he appointed as Jewish advisor was Simeon Vasilkovsky. Simeon was a handsome fellow, very clever and with a fabulous memory. His wife was a beauty from Kiev. She was of Jewish parentage but they had no children.

Vasilkovsky knew more about what was happening in the province than the governor and all his cohorts. Whatever Vasilkovsky recommended, the governor so ordained. Lawbreakers were punished according to the law, but with mercy. They were also treated equally be they Jews or Christians. He made money for himself as well as for the governor through great concessions, military supplies and contracts. Lublin Jewry appreciated him for his honesty and the non-Jews feared him. He was a master at card playing and other parlour games and no one could compete with him at chess. Simeon was always to be found at the governor's side, whether at cards, hunting or simply drinking.

Nonetheless, our Simeon was a warm Jew who helped support all the synagogues in Lublin and gave huge sums to charity. The Lublin Rav was a personal friend of his and the two carried on arguments over various matters of *Torah* when they met weekly.

When my father arrived at Vasilkovsky's place on the aforementioned Tuesday, Simeon fell on him with great joy. 'You will stay here, Berel,' he said, 'not at any hotel.' Knowing that my father ate no *treife*, he assured him that his

tea was kosher and they could eat in a Jewish restaurant.

He was furious after hearing the story of our coming to Chelm and the wagonload of yeast being doused with kerosene. After thinking for a few minutes he told my father: 'We must think this through carefully and find a workable plan so that such knavery will not be repeated and your family can settle properly in Chelm. We must carry everything out slowly and carefully so that your enemies receive their due punishment when they least expect it.' Father and Simeon deduced that the 'enemies' had arrived as a result of the telegram my father had sent to Kiev and thus knew when the wagonload of yeast was arriving.

By the next day the entire plan was worked out. They would inform the yeast factory in Kiev that when Father sent a telegram from Chelm arranging for two wagonloads of yeast, they should send the wagons with the boxes closed. But the boxes should be filled with stones, not yeast. They calculated that the Chelmites would have to send more people to Kavla to deal with two wagonloads, so they would place six Lublin policemen, dressed in civilian clothes, to see who was carrying out the dirty work.

According to the telegram, the yeast would arrive in Kavla on Friday morning. Gendarme Venesanka had received his secret order about the arrival. He would smell the kerosene and not open the boxes but bury them immediately.

The two wagonloads of stones arrived in Chelm on time and Reb Shmuel performed the same service as before. On Friday night Reb Shmuel and Reb Aaron went to the synagogue to receive the *Shabbes* and thank the Lord of the Universe for His kindness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Simeon Vasilkovsky received an exact report about the entire operation of the unloading of the yeast boxes of stones and their burial, together with a list of all the names and addresses of the Chelm heroes who had participated in the escapade. While Reb Shmuel the Short was singing *Shabbes* hymns at his Friday night table and Reb Aaron thanking his creator, Simeon Vasilkovsky worked out a perfectly effective plan for the future.

On Monday morning the chief of police sent a policeman to Shmuel telling him to come immediately to the magistrate's office. When he arrived the police chief took him by the elbow and led him into his office. Shmuel knew the chief but had never had any dealings with him, as all his affairs were taken care of by the lower echelons, who knew how to lose an affidavit when necessary. But now he was dealing with the great one himself – eye to eye!

When he stepped into the office the police chief said, 'Be seated, please.' Even the lowly cops whose very living was provided by Shmuel had never invited him to sit down before. That the chief himself, before whom he trembled in fear, should invite him to sit was almost too much for him to believe. Offering Shmuel a cigarette, the chief began, 'It is my great pleasure to inform you that His Excellence the

Governor has read the report of your heroism and requests your presence for an audience with him in Lublin this coming Thursday. You must cut your hair, straighten your beard, go to the baths and dress properly. We will escort you to the train and you will travel first class at government expense. In Lublin a hotel room has been reserved for you and from there you will be taken to the governor.'

Shmuel sat, speechless. He thought it all had to be a dream. That the governor himself wanted to see and thank Shmuel personally – this could only happen in a dream! With tears in his eyes and a voice choked with emotion, Shmuel said, 'Herr Police Chief, I am not worthy of such an honour.' To this the chief replied, '*Nu nu*, don't cry. Those in power know better.'

The whole town buzzed with excitement at Shmuel going to see the governor. On Tuesday and Wednesday Shmuel prepared himself. Shlomo the tailor sewed a suit and a coat with a double row of buttons overnight. Moshe the barber cut his hair and straightened his beard and Bracha'le brought him fresh underwear. And Shmuel went to the sweat baths on an ordinary Wednesday!

It seemed the police chief had orders that he was to escort Shmuel to the train and see he had a comfortable trip. Therefore he arrived at Shmuel's house to collect him in his own coach. He was greeted by a new Shmuel, standing with a valise in which could be found his *tallis* and *tefillin*, two shirts and several handkerchiefs.

When the train began to move Shmuel looked out the window and could see half the city's Jews, along with his wife and friends who had come to see him off. The police

chief, his adjutant and the gendarme Venesanka stood in a straight line with their hands held at the brims of their hats.

It was a two-hour trip from Chelm to Lublin. When Shmuel arrived he was met by a high-ranking officer with a feather in his hat and his hand held in a salute, who greeted him in the name of the governor and his council. He took him to a hotel and said that the next day he would take him to meet the governor. Meanwhile he could tour the city or do whatever he pleased.

The hotel belonged to a Jew, Reb Chaim, who received Shmuel particularly nicely, on orders from Vasilkovsky. Around six o'clock in the morning Reb Chaim woke him up saying he was on his way to synagogue and since it was Thursday, when the *Torah* was read, it would be most fitting for Shmuel to come with him.

Reb Chaim added that he would see that Reb Shmuel was called up to the *Torah,* given an *aliyah*. Hearing of the possibility of being given an *aliyah*, Shmuel's joy knew no bounds. In Chelm he could not even dream of such a thing happening. Perhaps once in five years and then only on *Simchat Torah*, when all the simple folk got an *aliyah*, could he have such an honour, but here in Lublin he would get an *aliyah* in the middle of the week, on a Thursday. Shmuel the Short believed in *Yiddishkeit* with faith and love. Going to synagogue with Reb Chaim he felt that G-d had revealed Himself in His greatest majesty.

'You know, Reb Chaim, there is something in *Yiddishkeit*, a depth and a greatness that a simple person cannot even grasp. One must be fortunate to be able to look into the holy *Torah,* the beauty of which can hardly be understood.

Now take me, an ordinary flesh-and-blood person, and you Reb Chaim, who should now be in the hotel registering and billing guests. Instead you are taking me, a Jew you don't even know, to the synagogue. Does one find such a thing among other nations?'

'Oh, Reb Shmuel,' said Reb Chaim, 'of what importance are my other hotel guests when I have such an honoured guest as you? You know the *mitzvah* of receiving guests cannot be bought for money. Jews should not set any questions or hardships and this is the way is has been ordained from above.' In this way Reb Shmuel and Reb Chaim arrived at the synagogue.

The *chazzan* was chanting the service and at the *Torah* reading Shmuel got his *aliyah*. He was a Levi. After the prayers the *chazzan* came over to Shmuel and said, '*Shalom Aleichem*' (Peace be upon you), followed by the *gabbai* and later other congregants. Then the Lubliner Rav came down from his place on high, stretched out his hand and said, '*Shalom Aleichem, chaver Shmuel*' (Peace be upon you, friend Shmuel). Shmuel saw before him a handsome tall Jew with a long beautiful beard, a high forehead and two burning black eyes. The Rav told the *gabbai* to bring some brandy and tidbits in honour of their important guest. The *gabbai*, Reb Mordechai, was a little man with a pair of sharp pointed eyes. When Shmuel left the *Torah* after his *aliyah* he had handed the *gabbai* twenty kopeks, with which Reb Mordechai had bought a bottle of 90-proof vodka and for the beggars a bottle of 57-proof, as well as some cookies which could be eaten without special washing of the hands.

The rabbi, Reb Chaim, Reb Shmuel and the *chazzan* drank a *l'chaim* and Reb Shmuel was in seventh heaven as

he answered each one's blessing. At the end the rabbi invited Shmuel to his home for a warm meal.

(I wonder whether readers in the twenty-first century can comprehend the vast gap that existed sixty to seventy years ago between a simple Jew who could pray, keep *Shabbes* and other laws as he understood them, and an ordained rabbi, let alone a rabbi like the Lubliner Rav whose reputation was famous throughout Poland. It was these simple Jews who gave the greatest respect to the learned rabbis and for them it was a big honour to hear *Shalom Aleichem* from one of them, not to mention an actual conversation.)

Here is the great Lubliner Rav drinking with Shmuel, saying '*l'chaim*' and inviting him for a warm meal! When the Jews of Lublin saw how Shmuel walked with his big *tallis* bag under his arm at the side of the Lubliner Rav, they were sure that this tiny soul was no ordinary person. If the Lubliner Rav invited him to his home there must be a reason.

The Lubliner Jews were better than those of Chelm as they were the kind that helped one who was truly down. On the other hand, if a Jew started to go up in the world they'd rush to bury him. There was a saying: the Lubliners will not let you fall, but neither will they let you grow.

When Reb Shmuel entered the Rav's home the table was already set. The Rav invited Shmuel to sit near him at the head of the table. Three Jews were already seated. They were: my father, our cousin Simeon Vasilkovsky and the Rav's helper, Reb Zeinvil, who was about fifty years old. Because of my father and Vasilkovsky, special food had been prepared: fish, chicken consommé and meat. Shmuel had never heard of such foods at the home of Chelm's wealthy Jews, even on holidays. The rabbi introduced my father and Vasilkovsky as

Russian Jews.

After the meal Shmuel was again subject to miracles and wonders from Heaven. The Rav had honoured Vasilkovsky with leading the grace after meals and he and my father and the helper had said all the prayers by heart. Only Shmuel needed to read the grace from the prayer book, and so he came to realise that Russian Jews were neither illiterate nor unlearned.

After the meal the Rav's helper approached Shmuel and told him that my father, Reb Berel Rogowoj, was calling him to a *Din Torah* and the Rav would be the judge. 'Reb Zeinvil,' screamed Shmuel, 'what kind of a *Din Torah* is it when I don't even know this Reb Berel? *Din Torah*, Shmin *Torah* – I have no time for this!'

'Reb Shmuel,' the helper answered, 'my task is to call you to a *Din Torah.* Please come into the other room to talk to the Rav.'

Shmuel ran into the room expostulating excitedly, 'Rebbe, the time is short. I must go. They will soon be coming to take me to the governor and here Reb Zeinvil tells me that the Litvak Reb Berel, whom I don't even know, is calling me to a *Din Torah*.'

'Reb Shmuel,' the Rav replied, 'when one Jew calls another one to a *Din Torah*, let him be a Turkish Jew and not even a Litvak, then the Jew must go and the governor can wait. He must wait. You must know, Reb Shmuel, that there is a law in Israel which is above twenty governors. I'll see to it that this is finished quickly and we'll not keep you long.' To his helper Reb Zeinvil he said, 'Call in Reb Berel. Let us hear what complaints he has against Reb Shmuel.'

The Rav's appearance and his explanation that there is

a law in Israel made a rather strong impression on Shmuel. When my father came into the room where all such cares were heard, Shmuel was already seated in his assigned place and my father was shown to a seat opposite him. Reb Zeinvil was seated opposite the Rav with a piece of paper in his hand, ready to note down the complaints.

'Who is the complainant?' asked the Rav. Reb Zeinvil replied, 'The complainant is Reb Berel.'

'Then let Reb Berel state his complaint,' said the Rav. Shmuel the Short listened carefully and observed everything going on around him. He had never heard of a *Din Torah* at a rabbi's house before. It happened occasionally that two people in a Chelm synagogue had argued about something and one would say, 'Let's have a *Din Torah*', and they would go to an older person who listened to both sides and resolved their dispute. But here he had heard from the Rav that there is a law in Israel, which meant the Jews had rules and regulations, not like *goyim.*

Two candles were burning beside the Holy Ark in the Rav's room. He told Reb Berel to state his complaint and Reb Zeinvil wrote everything down, just like in a court. When my father got up to state his complaint Reb Zeinvil gave him a handkerchief to hold to emphasise that everything he had to say was the whole truth and nothing but the truth. At that moment Shmuel caught a glimpse of the Rav's face and a shudder of fear ran through him.

My father stated succinctly: 'Rabbi, this Jew, Reb Shmuel, has destroyed my very property in order to deny all means of sustenance to me, my wife and my children. I beg of the Rabbi to listen to my witness, Reb Shimon [Simeon].'

When Shmuel heard my father's complaint he became incensed. Banging his fist on the table he screamed, 'Rebbe, I don't even know this Jew!' But the Rav interrupted him saying, 'Reb Shmuel, take it easy. You are in the middle of a *Din Torah*. You can have your say later. Now call in Reb Shimon.' When Reb Shimon came in the rabbi asked him if he had anything to say as witness for Reb Berel's side. At his affirmative answer, the rabbi asked him to attest that he would tell only the truth. Again Reb Zeinvil handed the handkerchief and Shimon agreed to tell the truth.

Simeon presented his case in Russian. 'High court,' he began, 'according to Russian law that is binding on all citizens of the Russian empire, Reb Shmuel should get twenty years of hard labour in Siberia. For such a crime as Reb Shmuel committed there can be no *Din Torah* and no compromise. That was, great Rabbi, a criminal offense for which Reb Shmuel must be sentenced and punished according to the Russian law. Criminals cannot be defended. In the name of my friend the Governor I declare that all such lowly creatures, with no preference for Jews or Christians, should be gotten rid of. I ask that this man Reb Shmuel be turned over to the police. My cousin Reb Berel asked for a *Din Torah* so I brought the good-for-nothing to you. Shmuel has hundreds of families on his conscience – he is a lawbreaker who is ready to sell his wife and children for money. This person drenched three wagonloads of yeast with kerosene. Such a man cannot and should not stand before a *Din Torah* because he is a criminal. I want to inform the rabbi of all the details of the crimes in question.'

Vasilkovsky presented the events of the story of the first

wagon and later the two wagonloads of yeast that were drenched in kerosene. He handed over a list of all those who had participated in the crimes, adding that he was the one who had arranged for Shmuel's audience with the governor. He, Vasilkovsky, would only agree to forgive those crimes if Shmuel the Lawbreaker (which is how Vasilkovsky referred to him all through the *Din Torah*) would confess and reveal himself and promise the rabbi that as long as he would live and his cousin Berel would live, he would not raise a finger to do anything that might harm Berel's livelihood. For his part, he, Vasilkovsky, promised and gave his word of honour that neither Shmuel, nor the lawbreaker who hired him to carry out such a dastardly act, would be prosecuted. The acts of both would be confined to the archives of the governor.

Vasilkovsky was a brilliant speaker and Shmuel understood his words only too well. He sat the entire time with his head lowered while tears ran from his eyes.

When Vasilkovsky had finished his speech he bowed to the Rav and sat down in his place. The Rav then stood up and said, 'Let Reb Berel and Reb Shimon go into another room. And you, Reb Zeinvil, leave me alone with Reb Shmuel.'

When Shmuel was alone with the Rav he broke into bitter crying and said he could not divulge the name of the person who had hired him to carry out the crime. That person had tricked him into believing that Berel Rogowoj was planning to Christianise the Jewish life of Chelm, and he, Reb Shmuel, had given his pledge that he would never mention a word of it to a soul.

The Rav told Shmuel that it was true a handshake was a holy thing to Jews, but Jews don't shake hands on criminal

matters. Therefore his pledge was worthless and he, the Lubliner Rav, would annul it. In any case the whole matter was already in the hands of the Lublin governor. Also, he didn't believe that Shmuel really wanted to go to Siberia for the sins that others had prepared and only sought Shmuel out to commit the actual crimes.

'You, Shmuel, must confess immediately. If not I will be forced to hand you over to the police as Vasilkovsky demanded, because this Vasilkovsky is worth more to Lublin Jewry than 100 of your great Jews of Chelm. For us Jews Vasilkovsky is the governor himself and you should be grateful that Reb Berel is a man with a true Jewish heart. In spite of the fact that you caused him such great financial losses amounting to more than 15,000 rubles and much disgrace, he wants to save you. You, Shmuel, will not go to the governor. This is our governor, Vasilkovsky. And we Jews thank the Creator of the Universe for the privilege of having within our congregation such a person who protects us from evil when necessary and defends us properly.'

Shmuel the Short then proceeded to tell in exact detail, for more than two hours, the whole story of the yeast wagons which he and his cohorts had ruined and Reb Zeinvil wrote it all down.

The Rav then invited Vasilkovsky and my father back into the room and asked for tea to be served to his guests. At the same time Reb Zeinvil read aloud in Yiddish the entire declaration Shmuel had made.

As the reading came to an end, the Rav asked Vasilkovsky to strike the entire incident from his memory. At the same moment my father stood up and declared that he renounced

all his complaints and gave Shmuel his hand.

When Vasilkovsky requested that the Rav get Shmuel to promise that he would bring no further harm to the Rogowoj family, the Rav replied that he already had that promise in writing and would keep it himself.

Vasilkovsky then handed Shmuel a Testament of Bravery signed by the governor himself. Shmuel gave the rabbi his word that he would not tell anyone of all that had transpired in Lublin – not even his wife.

'Reb Shmuel,' said my father, 'I'll buy you a wagon and two horses with my own money and I will support them for you. You must supply a driver and you yourself must be at the train station every day to bring the yeast that arrives for me. You must watch over the horses and see they do not work more than twelve hours a day. [My father loved horses very much.] For this you will receive a gulden [15 kopeks] for every *pud* [16 kilos], even though the Chelmites pay only 10 kopeks per *pud.* You will be personally responsible for all damages.'

After listening to my father's words Shmuel begged his forgiveness. He walked over to the Holy Ark and swore by it that as long as he would live he would be a true friend of the Rogowoj family, and he kept his word.

Shmuel fell to his knees before Vasilkovsky and begged his forgiveness. '*Nu nu,* good. Get up and act like a man,' was Vasilkovsky's response. He then told him what he was to tell the authorities in Chelm.

When Shmuel got back to the hotel with his testament in hand, another gendarme was waiting to take him to the train. It was time for our hero Shmuel the Short to return to Chelm.



Berel Rogowoj

CHAPTER SIX

The very next day an order was issued to all the authorities, including the Chelm chief of police, that they were needed in other places. The manager of the post office was also called away and sent to another town. New people were installed in their positions.

The governor made it known to the newly appointed authorities that there must be a new Jewish representative to the magistrate. It was decided to appoint an old and good friend of my father's, a certain Binyamin Bakler, who became our bookkeeper at the same time.

This Reb Aaron Goizen lost everything in one day – all his authority and the respect accorded him in the Jewish community thanks to these connections. Even the large portrait of Nikolai II that hung in his office could no longer help him. Aaron Goizen's name lost all its worth in the eyes of Chelm Jewry.

All of Chelm eagerly awaited the return of Shmuel the Short from Lublin. This was no small matter, a Jew with a Testament of Bravery. As Shmuel rode home from the railway station accompanied by his friends, he could not help thinking that if not for the honest Litvak Reb Berel Rogowoj, he would probably never have seen his town of Chelm again.

On realising that Shmuel had returned from Lublin, Aaron

Goizen sent his servant to summon Shmuel the Short to his home. However, Shmuel refused and said that if Reb Aaron wanted to see him he could come to the home of Shmuel the Short.

This answer evoked great anger in Reb Aaron who ran post-haste to the magistrate, planning to use his power with the authorities there to teach Shmuel a lesson. However, on his arrival he found all new people and the former authorities, who were so subject to bribery, were no longer there. Reb Aaron Goizen then realised the game was up and his battle against my father was lost. As you can imagine, Aaron Goizen did not go to Shmuel's home.

Gradually my father began to develop his business without too many disturbances from the Chelm Jews. Shmuel the Short was an insider, guarding the yeast and making sure it was delivered properly: in summer to rented ice cellars and in winter to the cellars where my father kept his stores.

It was through Shmuel the Short that my father became part of a new company of friends: Chaim Shmuel, the butcher; Avram Nachman, the horse dealer; Yossel, the carpenter; and Chaim Wolf, the barber. My father prayed together with his new friends in the lower section of the synagogue because the others would not have been accepted in the higher echelons. Indeed it was in this way that their friendship was established.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My father went away to a health resort not far from Kiev for a rest. The place was called Biarchi and was famous for its birch trees.

Without warning my mother received a tragic telegram from Biarchi telling her that my father was dead. It was the fifth day of the month of Tammuz in the year 1899 and he was forty-six years old. The telegram had a terrifying impact on all of us, but more especially on our mother. With the telegram in her hand she ran out on to the balcony and tried to throw herself over the banister. We managed to stop her. Three months later she still continued to grieve and went about like a zombie.

Right after my father's death his brothers and sisters began to discuss how to help my widowed mother with her seven children, especially as she had never had any connection to business. Finally they decided to talk it over with the Makarover Rebbe, Reb Yitzhak'l. The Rebbe felt that first and foremost, the sale of the yeast from the Marer factory must continue as it had been when my father was alive. My father would have left the business in its prime.

Inasmuch as my father was highly regarded in the yeast trade, Madam Marer told Father's younger brother, Uncle Dovid, that he should travel to Chelm and stay there until we

children could take care of it ourselves. A month after my father's death, Uncle Dovid arrived in Chelm.

Uncle Dovid was a small man and a quiet person. His wife, Miriam, was a tall, healthy woman with a pair of burning black eyes, a head of black hair and energy enough for three men. We used to call her 'Holy Mary'. They had six children, three boys and three girls. It was she who carried on the business and raised the children as well. She was the kind of person about whom one said, 'She wore the pants in the family.'

Uncle Dovid was a rich man. When my grandfather died Dovid inherited everything. My grandfather left houses, a hotel, a restaurant, a wine cellar and flour and wheat enterprises. Dovid was the youngest son and had worked with grandfather in his businesses, unlike the other children who had independent businesses. Therefore it was decided that he would be grandfather's heir.

Aunt Miriam behaved very badly towards her workers, who were Christians. If a worker did not carry out her orders immediately and exactly as instructed, she would slap him and drew blood many times. Their oldest worker was named Peter and he was at Aunt Miriam's bidding from early in the morning until late at night. One could hear her: 'Peter do this, Peter do that!' He took her children to school and brought them back home, and also made sure the other workers did their jobs properly. Everyone was in fear of Aunt Miriam, whether at home or at the business.

Aunt Miriam had the greatest respect for Uncle Dovid and watched over him carefully. He went to synagogue every day. As soon as he got there and stepped over the threshold, Peter

brought him a can of water and a bowl so he could wash.

Aunt Miriam would only eat with Uncle Dovid. He prayed, learned, occupied himself with community affairs and was a *gabbai* in the synagogue. He was active in the reception of visitors and in the *Talmud Torah* and exerted himself so as to have as many heirs as possible. But until today I still do not understand the reason for the great respect Aunt Miriam had for her husband.

Uncle Dovid had never interested himself in business before but on arriving in Chelm he took over completely. Small as he was physically, he was even smaller in his understanding of business. By nature he was very stingy and the first thing he did was look for ways to economise.

My father never tried to save money when it came to helping the poor and during his lifetime there was never a *Shabbes* without at least twenty guests at the table – Jewish soldiers, strangers and the local poor. On *Purim* Father called together all the *Purim* players in the city to eat the Purim feast with us. He kept two specially prepared sacks of money from which he would distribute *shalach monos*. With the arrival of Uncle Dovid, all this came to an end. Dovid claimed it made *shnorrers* of people who should be working.

There was one person my uncle Dovid feared, and that was Shmuel the Short.

When Shmuel heard how Uncle Dovid was behaving he came one *Shabbes* afternoon to say that he, Shmuel, and his friends the drivers, butchers and other tradesmen felt that Dovid was not treating Berel Rogowoj's widow and orphans properly. And if this continued then Dovid would not long enjoy his own wife and children. These words

frightened Dovid.

Uncle kept himself distant from us children. One small anecdote: While my father was alive, when I came home from school with a score of five (the highest mark) my father would give me twenty kopeks. In contrast, Uncle Dovid would give me a pinch on the cheek and say I was a fine fellow.

My mother began to sense that Uncle Dovid was preparing to take Father's inheritance for himself, so she started to take an interest in the business.

By chance there fell into my mother's hands a letter from Aunt Miriam to Uncle Dovid in which she wrote that she had received the first 1,000 rubles but it was too little. He should send more money. In any case the widow Sarah had enough money and Dovid should consider his own children first. The 5,000 rubles the factory could provide for a dowry for their eldest daughter.

After reading this letter my mother called me and my brother Shlomo, who was one year older, and told us we had to begin to carry on the business ourselves. We had to ensure that our father's inheritance was not taken away from us. From that day on we took over the work. I took over the correspondence and Shlomo took over the deliveries of yeast.

At the end of the year my mother wrote a letter to the factory, thanking everyone for their help in general, and my uncle in particular, and notified them that she, my mother, and her two sons could now carry on the business themselves. She also wrote that she was sending me to the factory in Kiev with the accounting for the coming year.

Uncle Dovid went home and my mother took over the administration of the business. Preparations began for my trip to Kiev. The first thing Mother did was ask our bookkeeper Binyamin Bakler to oversee my work. Not having full confidence in our bookkeeper, she also approached Rabbi Wolfson and asked if he would also supervise me, as he was considered an expert in these matters.

My mother then went to Leib the Scribe and asked him to correct my calligraphy, so that I wrote like an adult. Leib the Scribe was an expert in calligraphy and also wrote poetry. Father gave him twenty-five kopeks on every Purim holiday for writing a poem. Leib tutored me for four weeks, during which I rewrote words hundreds of times until they looked just how Leib wanted them to.

Three months after Uncle Dovid left, Mother bought me a half-fare train ticket, accompanied me to the train and handed me a valise while repeating endlessly that I must not lean out of the train window while travelling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I left Chelm in February, mid-winter. It was cold enough in Chelm. In Kiev I was met by a great frost and while travelling the five kilometres from the station to the home of my oldest uncle, Uncle Hershel, I froze. My hands and feet were so numb I had to be carried from the sleigh and lay in bed, unable to move. My uncle notified Madam Marer immediately. She sent two doctors who examined me twice a day and only allowed me to get up after a week had passed.

Uncle Dovid insisted on accompanying me to the factory, fearing I would not be able to present the accounts as they should be presented, and not know how to behave in the presence of Madam Marer.

After a long argument, my uncles Hershel and Dovid, as well as Hershel's son, my cousin Herzl, decided that Uncle Dovid and Herzl would come with me. They would introduce me to the entire procedure for both the accounting and being with Madam Marer.

I froze again while travelling from Uncle Hershel's house to the factory and had to be carried. Uncle Dovid massaged one leg and Cousin Herzl the other until I warmed up enough to limp inside.

My escorts instructed me that upon seeing Madam Marer I must bow and kiss her dress. For me, a boy of twelve, kissing

a dress was incomprehensible and even comic. My mother had taught me to kiss the hand of older women but had never mentioned kissing a dress.

On entering the waiting room on the ground floor, our presence was reported. Five minutes later there was a tinkling of bells, a sign that Madam Marer was leaving her office on the first floor. All those working on the ground floor stood up. Two huge hunting dogs suddenly appeared and I felt such fear that I trembled all over. Only then did Madam Marer appear.

She was a tall woman, aged between fifty and fifty-five, with a nicely set grey head of hair, an aristocratic face and an unusually nice figure. One eye was tied with a black patch (souvenir of a hunting accident when she fell from her horse and it kicked her in the eye). There is no doubt that Madam Marer made a fine impression on me from first glance.

Madam Marer approached us and greeted us with a smile. 'Blessings on you, family Rogowoj.' My uncle and cousin fell to and kissed her dress. I was left standing, frightened and not knowing what to do with myself. She approached and gave me her hand, which I kissed, and asked, 'Are you the young Berke?'

Leaving Uncle Dovid and my cousin standing on the stairs, she led me into her office with my pack of books under my arm. Sensing that I was terrified of the dogs, she reassured me. 'Have no fear, my dove, the dogs will not harm you.' My uncle and cousin stayed downstairs, and all their dreams of coming to my aid, for good or bad, were not realised.

I was still terrified when I entered Madam Marer's office, where the two dogs took their places – one to the right and

the other to the left of Madam Marer's desk. It was a very large office. At the right sat her second-in-command, her bookkeeper and our cousin, Simeon Andreyovich.

Madam Marer seated me across from her and her servant Ivan brought tea and a silver samovar. I warmed up after several glasses and gradually relaxed.

The first question Madam Marer asked concerned my mother, how she was feeling and how she managed with the children. I replied that Mother was feeling better and gradually adjusting to her bitter fate. Mother had loved Father deeply and respected him greatly. I also told Madam Marer what a terrible reaction Mother had had to the tragic telegram announcing Father's death.

I gave her a personal thank you from Mother for the assistance she had lent us by sending Uncle Dovid, and assured her that we now felt competent to carry on the business ourselves, without the help of Uncle Dovid.

CHAPTER NINE

The factory did not keep exact accounts and our credit was the same as that of all the other customers. Every day of the month we got a delivery of yeast and on the last day of the month the factory figured out the bill for the entire amount. However, my father had a special deal whereby at the end of the year he got a special bonus for the entire year. There was no specific sum set by the factory for this purpose and the only person who decided on the amount was Madam Marer, who might add twenty kopeks for every sixteen kilos of yeast. Because of the very special relationship my father had with her, he usually got more. The highest he ever got was fifty kopeks for every sixteen kilos.

My father always prepared himself very carefully for this yearly reckoning. While reviewing the accounts Madam Marer sat with her bookkeeper, the books and accounts in front of her. The customer had to prove what he felt was owed to him.

My mother had prepared me well. For three months she had trained me in how and what I had to discuss with Madam Marer. She often got up in the middle of the night to tell me of something else she had thought of, which had to then be written down in my book of preparation.

My father had brought Uncle Dovid into the factory where

he became the agent for Fastov and that region for several years. Cousin Herzl had the agency for the Kiev region and they both knew about the special bonuses given out by the factory at the end of the year. However, they also came to the factory pleading for additional money, unlike my father, who only ever came for a proper reckoning.

I took out the account books and was about to carry out my mission when Madam Marer said, '*Nu, nu* [yes, yes], we know already!' Calling Simeon Andreyovich to come closer to her, she told him she could not understand how a mother could send a mere child so far in such frost and so poorly dressed. 'Give him,' she told Simeon, '3,000 rubles to buy a fur coat and proper winter clothing. Figure out the accounts for the year and add a bonus of seventy-five kopeks for every sixteen kilos of yeast.' As we had made a total reckoning of 15,000 *pud* of yeast, the bonus came to 11, 250 rubles. (Sixty years ago in Russia, that sum meant a fortune.) Simeon Andreyovich was overwhelmed, but of course he carried out Madam Marer's wish.

It goes without saying that my study of the account books, the calligraphy I had learned from Leib the Scribe and the talks I had prepared were all unnecessary.

When I told Uncle Hershel and Cousin Herzl about what had taken place in Madam Marer's office and that I had personally received 3,000 rubles to buy myself a winter wardrobe, they decided that my dead father had intervened on my behalf so that I found favour in the eyes of Madam Marer, for such a thing had never happened before.

The wardrobe they then bought me consisted of a suit, a fur coat, a fur hat, a pair of boots, woollen underwear,

leggings and galoshes. The cost came to 1,250 rubles and I sewed the remaining 1,750 rubles into the lining of the vest.

A very much changed boy returned from Kiev to Chelm. I told my mother all the details of my trip and the result of my mission to Madam Marer and she was thrilled with my success.

I sent Madam Marer a flowery thank-you letter which she framed and hung in her office to show all her friends what one of her representatives, a boy of twelve, had written to her.

The trip to Kiev and back of itself had not made any special impression on me. The fact that I as a twelve-year-old boy had come in contact with the famous Madam Marer, one of the wealthiest persons in Russia at the time, together with the marvellous treatment I had received, made an indelible impression on my character and helped establish my independence throughout my entire lifetime.

CHAPTER TEN

We children, together with our mother, managed to carry on the business and even to expand it. But life was rather hard for us, as we spent all day working in the business and our nights were for our studies.

Every morning I rose at 5.00 am to go to the train station and receive the yeast when the train arrived at 6.30 am. The only time I could rest and sleep a little longer was on *Shabbes*, when I would sleep in the afternoon too. That habit of sleeping on *Shabbes* afternoon has remained with me to this day. Altogether, when I look back it seems as though, with my responsibilities and behaviour, I've always been a grown-up. I never really had a period of so-called childhood years.

In spite of us having become old-timers in Chelm, the Chelmites still hated us and showed it at every opportunity. The nicknames '*Litvak*' and '*Tsalem-Kop*' were applied to us for as long as we lived in Chelm.

Suddenly, one Friday night three years after my father's death, my brother Shaike died. He had broken a bone in a fall when he was very young and this had resulted in a hump in his back and on his chest. My father had taken him to the greatest specialists in Warsaw in the hope of finding a cure, but alas none could help him. Shaike was a very clever boy

but suffered terribly from the treatment meted out to hum by his peers.

Father loved him so dearly. Before leaving for Biarchi on that last *Shabbes*, he said his farewells to all the children, but especially to Shaike, telling him his life would be harder than that of the others and assured him that three years after his own death Shaike would not suffer anymore. Right until today I cannot grasp how my father foresaw such a tearful prophecy.

Shaike died on Father's *yahrzeit*, the fifth of *Tammuz.* It was *Shabbes,* terribly hot and he had to lie at home until Saturday night. Because of the extreme heat his body gave off a bad odour and Mother and we children were at a loss as to what to do first. Very early on Sunday morning Mother sent me to look for the *gabbai* of the Chevra Kadisha (Jewish Burial Society) to ask them to come soon after *Havdalah* to bury the dead.

I went immediately to the main synagogue where I found the principal *gabbai* at his prayers. When I approached and started to speak he indicated that he did not want his prayers interrupted. When he had ended he asked me, 'What do you want, little boy?' I told him of the tragedy that had befallen us and asked, as my mother had instructed, that the funeral be held immediately after *Havdalah.* 'So, so,' said the *gabbai.* 'Go home and tell your mother that this will cost her 30,000 rubles. If your mother does not give the money, your brother will lie in his stench. Your father, the *Litvak*, went home to Russia to die. Therefore, your mother will pay for your father and for your brother.'

Young as I was, I already understood that a dead person was something of a holy being and not to be dishonoured.

Listening to Rev Abram the *gabbai*, a Jew with a long yellow beard, speaking so abusively about my dead father and poor brother, I wanted to gouge out his eyes and pull out his beard. I had to settle for screaming, 'Reb Avram, you are a murderer! You are not worthy of the name Jew!' And I left him.

I didn't go home but went instead to our best friend, Shmuel the Short. I waited until he had ended making *kiddush* and then told him about the tragedy and what Reb Avram had said. It was decided that we would meet with the *gabbai* at the synagogue at *Mincha* time, when Shmuel himself would speak to him. I stayed on at Shmuel's in order not to cause my mother any more suffering. After the afternoon nap, Shmuel went with me to the *gabbai.*

In my whole life I never heard such a conversation as these two carried on, with so much screaming! The upshot was that Reb Avram told Shmuel the Short not to mess with his business because he too has strong men. To which Shmuel retorted, 'Avrama'le, if you harm Berel's widow blood will flow!'

Shmuel the Short then took me aside and told me to go home and tell my mother they would make the funeral right after *Havdalah.*

Even today, some sixty years later, my blood boils when I recall what community leaders and those Jews in whose hands lay the lives and deaths of other Jews in Chelm could do in those times.

After *Havdalah* Shmuel the Short came with a wagon driver and a wagon in which he carried barrels of kerosene in order to transport the corpse. Me and my brother Shlomo, together with Shmuel the Short and the wagon driver, carried

out the remains of my brother Shaike and arranged the body in the wagon. At the cemetery Shmuel climbed over the fence and opened the gate. He told Mordechai, the gravedigger, to do the purification and his wife to sew the shroud from the white linen we had brought from home. The wagon driver and grave digger dug a hole and Shmuel went out on the road leading to the train station and brought in five more Jews to make a *minyan* with the other five men. In this way we buried my poor brother Shaike.

Shmuel went around with a lantern in one hand and a charity-box in the other, shouting, 'Charity fends off the angel of death!'. Shlomo and I said *Kaddish.*

While we were burying Shaike, Reb Abram the chief *gabbai* of the Chevra Kadisha, was sitting at a *melave malke* with his pals, drinking and praising his Maker who had sent him such easy and lucrative earnings.

Shmuel the Short left two strong men at the grave in order to guard it until he had procured death certificate from a Christian doctor, which was arranged for a few rubles. Our friend at the magistrate's office, Binyamin Bakler, took care of the other necessary formalities and Shmuel ended the matter with the Chevra Kadisha for 200 rubles.

How astonished we were a year later when we wanted to set a monument on Shaike's grave and simply could not find the place where we had buried him. What those Chelm Jews of the Chevra Kadisha had done with the grave is still a mystery to this very day.

This last episode made me consider seriously whether we wanted to remain in Chelm. I began to formulate a plan for leaving the city.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We had settled in Chelm in 1894, when I was four years old and the youngest of four boys. The first thing on my father's list was to find proper religious schooling, a good *cheder*, for his children, and made a great effort to find a trustworthy *melamed.*

The best Chelm had to offer was Reb Chaim Noz, a small man with a pointed beard and two black eyes which darted fire. On his head he wore a silk hat under which one could see his skullcap. His black frock coat was more grey than black and on his feet he wore a pair of boots he never polished or even wiped off the dirt that clung to them, so it was impossible to determine their original colour. The belt of his coat was apparently not for fastening because the coat was never belted. Over his shirt hung a long *arba'kanfot* and the front of his pants were always open, as though there were no buttons or need for them. Meanwhile he fussed all day with the threads of his *arba'kanfot.*

Reb Chaim was an energetic little man who spoke so quickly we seldom understood him.

The *cheder* was in a large house. In the middle of the room stood a long table with long benches placed on either side. There were around thirty pupils. Reb Chaim seldom sat down and if he did it was only for a few moments. Mostly he

walked around making sure the boys were learning properly. He had a helper who brought the younger boys to *cheder* and took them home again.

When my father arranged for us boys to learn in *cheder,* he agreed to pay Reb Chaim twenty-five rubles a term for each of us and paid one hundred rubles in advance for the whole year.

One must admit that despite his shabby appearance, Reb Chaim knew how to teach and made every effort to have his pupils understand what they were studying.

The house in which the *cheder* was situated was very dirty in general, but Chaim Noz introduced something special into it, a kind of holiness. As the sun started to sink in the west there seemed to rest on Reb Chaim an almost holy spirit that we boys could feel.

Reb Chaim's wife, Sheindele, wore a wig perched on the top of her head, from under which peeped out strands of her own badly cut hair. She always carried a tiny child nursing at her breast while the other five children tugged at her hem. She seldom came in to the *cheder*, but when she did we boys found out how Reb Chaim and his family lived.

The door opened and Sheindele appeared, the baby suckling at her open breast, while the other five children clung to her. She would then plead with her husband, 'Chaim, perhaps you have a few groschen. We must buy a few potatoes.' Or it would be, 'Chaim, Rochele has a hot head. Perhaps you can send someone for the *feldscher*.'

Most Chelm Jews paid ten rubles per child per term and most fathers did not pay their tuition on time, so Reb Chaim had to run after his money for months. When his wife

remonstrated with him he would answer, 'Oh woman, don't mix in! He'll pay, he'll pay!'

My father paid twenty-five rubles a term because we were Litvaks. When he paid the hundred rubles in advance Sheindele was overwhelmed and looked upon my brothers and me with special affection.

Unfortunately, this affection for us lasted about two weeks because when the Jews of Chelm learned that we were studying in Reb Chaim's *cheder* they issued an ultimatum: either he throw us out of the *cheder* or they would take their children out of the *cheder* – in which case Reb Chaim could say goodbye to his teaching career in Chelm. And when these Chelmites said something, they meant it!

Reb Chaim did not throw us out of his schoolroom, but he went to see my father and Sheindele went to see my mother to tell them of the problem. Chaim Noz apologised profusely to my father and did so in a very upright manner. He was really a very fine person with a sensitive nature and not a Chelmite but a Grabvitzer, coming from that small town near Chelm.

After that meeting my father no longer sent us to Reb Chaim's *cheder*, although there could be no talk of returning the hundred rubles. There is a saying in Chelm that nothing returns from the cemetery and so we children were left without a *cheder.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

There were two more Lithuanian Jewish families in Chelm: that of the brothers Weinstein and the Wohrhaftig family.

The Weinstein brothers had the first printer in Chelm. This was not, G-d forbid, for the needs of Chelm Jewry who took care of their own printing needs in Warsaw. The Weinstein printer carried out work for the high schools, seminaries and the military as well as for the magistrates and other Russian institutions. The Weinstein brothers had six boys. They were not religious Jews, but wanted to give their children a religious upbringing.

Herr Wohrhaftig was a very wealthy Jew from Petersburg who provided the army with all it needed from a needle to a cannon. He had settled in Chelm in order to supply the military of that area and his whole family worked in the business, including his father, brothers and an uncle. He had very close ties with the military elite, and the boots, leggings and long army coats he provided were a proper fit for the soldiers.

Night and day Herr Wohrhaftig sat in the Officers' Club playing the card game Preference. Being a good player, he won all their money. At this time Nikolai II was the 'Papa Czar' of the Russian people; his prime minister, the German

Vito, ran the political side of things while the Black Hundred carried out pogroms against Jews, screaming: 'Kill the Jews and rescue Russia!'. Meanwhile the Wohrhaftig family made sure that Russian officers sitting in the Officers' Clubs in Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev and the cities of the Urals had proper boots.

Wohrhaftig was an outspoken assimilationist but his wife, Sonyatchke, wanted to give their two sons a religious upbringing. Madam Wohrhaftig was not religious herself but she was not ashamed of her Jewishness.

My father discussed the religious education of the children of the three households with the two other families. He went to see Herr Wohrhaftig first. After this man had heard the whole story of Chaim Noz's *cheder* and the knavery of the Chelm Jews, he screamed out in anger: 'To the devil with them, cursed Jews! Our children will go to the city school!' Mrs Wohrhaftig called my father into the salon and asked what was going on. On hearing the story she said, 'For all that he is a fool. Our children must learn something of Judaism.'

My father also discussed the entire matter with the Weinsteins, where he met no resistance.

He then presented both families with a plan: all three Lithuanian families would bring a *melamed* of their own to Chelm, who would open a *cheder* the three families pledged to support. Father offered to take it upon himself to travel and search out such a *melamed.*

My father knew the Babroysker Rav personally. This rabbi was reputed to be a great scholar and a very clever person, so my father went to see him and in this manner made the acquaintance of Reb Avram Wolfson.

Babroysk was not a big city, but at the time of the *Haskalah* movement, it was one of the centres of Jewish liberalism. The movement was received with great enthusiasm by the Jews of Babroysk, among whom lived great thinkers and scholars of Hebrew, Russian and Yiddish.

Reb Avram Wolfson had been ordained a rabbi in Babroysk, had been educated at a Russian high school and university and was a military chaplain. With a wife and four children, he was not a man of means and earning a living was not easy. His wife, Locale, helped him a great deal by working as a salesperson in a business. She had been a student at Petersburg University and they were very happy together. Reb Wolfson gave private lessons and helped prepare students for their examinations, but still there was not enough income to support their household.

Meeting with my father at the home of the Babroysk Rav was like a miracle from Heaven for Reb Avram Wolfson and they worked out a detailed plan for settling his family in Chelm. The family would be given a free apartment and all the children he taught would pay so much per term. Moreover, it was decided that as Locale understood commerce, she would be loaned several thousand rubles with which to carry on the import of raisins, almonds, other nuts, oils and sardines. Within a short time my father had brought the whole Wolfson family to Chelm, and so another Litvak family joined the local population.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Reb Wolfson was a very learned person whose specialty was the Bible. He had a phenomenal memory and had written an almanac he later translated from Hebrew to Russian. He spoke perfect Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian and was a brilliant speaker. When he stood up to lecture about Bible commentaries such as Rashid, and so on, he never needed the help of books or notes but simply hypnotised his listeners. When I listened to him lecture in Yiddish or Russian I would be so mesmerised by his words I could literally see with my own eyes the personalities of whom he spoke.

He knew the works of the Russian classicists well and always added his own interpretations. At the time there was a great Russian critic and writer by the name of Ivan Alexandrovich Dabralyobov and Wolfson knew everything he had written by heart.

Wolfson certainly knew his Russian literature and had even written a book of his own interpretation of Josephus Flavius. Although unfortunately this was never published, I had the pleasure of reading the manuscript.

Western literature was also familiar to Wolfson through translations in Russian. He had also written philosophical interpretations of a whole array of Western writers like

Shakespeare, Byron, Schiller and Goethe, which he read aloud to a closed circle of listeners.

He considered Oscar Wilde to be the greatest English writer and intellectual, though he objected to his private lifestyle. Wolfson maintained that when a person was gifted with such overwhelming intellectual power as Wilde was, he had to sacrifice himself for humanity, which meant his private life ought to be as pure as crystal.

Wolfson did not care for Heinrich Heine and felt he was *milchig*, not *fleishig*. Heine was a Jew without Jewishness, though he was a literary giant. In French literature he loved Balzac, Victor Hugo and especially Voltaire.

I recall a conversation I had with Reb Wolfson about these writers and he said to me, 'Yes Shaulik [as he called me], my boy. These were the people who built our civilization. They are our great fortune because without them our lives as Jews would have been impossible.'

'Rabbi,' I said to him, 'we Jews have our own great people from whom to learn.'

'Right, my child,' said Wolfson, 'but you must not forget that we began to build human civilization several thousands of years too early, when humanity was not yet ready for civilization. Even the *Torah* had to be given to us Jews in bits and pieces and not all at once. We were too proud and thought all life began and ended with us. We have forgotten that even in those days we were the smallest people. True, we were spiritually strong, but because we were a minority among nations we were always physically weak. Humanity profited from the French Revolution, but very little. That is because although it arrived with a strong force, life must go

slowly and systematically, which takes much time. The trees, the fields and all of nature developed slowly. According to the age of the world humanity should have progressed further, but one cannot – and dare not – hurry the development of hundreds of millions of people with hundreds of millions of aptitudes.'

Wolfson was a great intellectual. All my life I have been grateful to my father for having brought me into contact with such an interesting person. I have met thousands of people in my lifetime and among these only two impressed themselves deep in my heart and my memory. One of these was Reb Avram Wolfson.

My rabbi, teacher and dear friend revealed to me the great secrets of G-dliness and of life on our planet. Even today his fine, tall and intelligent figure stands before me like a living apparition. When thinking through a problem, more than once have I asked myself what Reb Avram Wolfson would have said of such a matter.

Our *cheder* was arranged in exemplary fashion. Two apartments in the house where the Wolfson family lived were used for the *cheder* with one of them serving as the synagogue. In the middle stood a *bimah* and the *Aron Kodesh*, the Holy Ark, with the *Sefer Torah* were on the Eastern wall. Every boy had his *shtender* in the synagogue and every morning we prayed with a *minyan*. On Mondays and Thursdays we read the *parsha* of the week. Every day a different boy led the prayers and we all had to know how to read the *Torah* and the *Megillah*. Wolfson put special emphasis on our proper reading of the *Haftorah*. On *Purim* the *Megillah* was read by the boy who had proved that he could do the best job of it.

During prayer time Wolfson stood in his *tallis* and *tefillin* and paid attention to every detail of our recitation, particularly the Hebrew. In the middle of a prayer or a reading he would often stop the reader and ask the meaning of a word that had just been chanted.

This system of prayer and the thought that every one of us was a person fit to lead the prayer, or read the *Torah*, or call up others to the *Torah*, gave us a great deal of confidence. We were fortunate boys who understood even then the greatness of the voluntary responsibility that was ours as Jews. Perhaps because of this we developed a particular pride.

'Our' synagogue has remained for me the most beautiful memory of my youth. In our *cheder* Wolfson established a great innovation for that time: In all other schools discipline was entirely in the hands of the teachers, but Reb Avram Wolfson initiated a court system which was run entirely by us boys. We were tried and punished by each other.

The court room was our synagogue and we chose two judges for every trial, as well as a prosecuting attorney and a defence attorney. Any boy who had to appear as a witness during trials could not serve in any of these roles. The boy judges sat on the *bimah* with Wolfson nearby to teach them how to state their questions. From time to time he might hint at his opinion with regard to one question or another, but would immediately warn the judges that his opinion carried no weight. He would not allow himself to influence the legal process and whatever the judges decided had to be carried out.

There was no corporal punishment – rather the punishment was moral. For example, it might be that for three days one

could not speak to the offender; or the offender might have to stand in class for two days, or spend three days cleaning the synagogue and classrooms alone. The worst punishment was not to lead the prayers or read the *Torah* for two weeks.

Every case was written down and Wolfson had records of every trial. After every legal process he would make a critical analysis, always emphasising that the judges had to take into consideration the circumstances surrounding the particular offensive behaviour.

With a particular passion Wolfson also took it upon himself to teach the boys the art of oratory. Once a week every boy had to give a lecture on a theme he had chosen himself, but before giving the talk he had to rehearse it with Wolfson. Only after he had improved it, and in some cases reworked it completely, did he allow the lecture to be delivered.

Wolfson was especially mindful of the effects of touching and dramatic moments in keeping the boys interested in the content. These student lectures had to include emotional overtones.



Shaul Rogowoj (on the right in winter clothes) with his teacher

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Our classrooms were in the other part of the house. A platform with two steps leading up to it stood in the middle of the classroom and on it stood a table around which were placed individual desks at some distance from each other. On one wall hung a huge map and on the other was a blackboard on which we boys wrote with chalk.

After saying our prayers we came to this classroom every day for our studies. Our learning program included the following fifteen subjects:

Chumash
Tanach
Gemara
Tosefot
Shulchan Aruch
Yiddish – reading & writing
Translation from Hebrew to Russian
Russian – writing & reading
Russian grammar
Russian history
Mathematics
Calligraphy
Russian poetry
Natural sciences
Geography



Before beginning the lesson Wolfson gave a lecture with his own interpretations, after which ten minutes were allotted

for questions. At the end of the week every one of us boys received a note from Wolfson on which was written the results of the week's progress in every subject.

Because of the freedom we enjoyed in the *cheder* and the liberal approach of Reb Avram Wolfson, I felt a special love for him and great respect as well. Learning was easy and pleasurable for me.

Wolfson's friends and colleagues were the teachers from the Chelm *gymnasium*, the principal of which was Papov. They were all Christians and every day at around 4.00 pm, an hour after the *gymnasium* closed, they came to our *cheder* for an inspection. Papov and the teachers were ebullient in their praise for our system of learning and the entire staff sent Wolfson a special letter of recognition, which he had framed hung on the wall.

As a good student, and one who handled all the problems that arose in the *cheder* easily, I won the affection of Reb Avram Wolfson. In the conversations he had with my father they always arrived at the conclusion that I would surely grow up to be a genius. Alas, I disappointed them both.

When I recall my Rebbe Wolfson there stands before me a light-filled countenance. He was a person of medium height with a high forehead and beautiful blue eyes. He wore a nicely combed, round-cut beard and dressed cleanly in a short coat. His appearance was wonderfully sympathetic.

He was especially friendly with my father and told him that while the Weinsteins and the Wohrhaftigs were truly fine and intelligent people, they lacked a Jewish heart. If only we Jews were blessed with more such Jews as Reb Berel Rogowoj they would be better off in the *galut* than in Jerusalem.

Needless to say my father had a similar appreciation of Wolfson. One *Shabbes* afternoon when our Rebbe came to father to convey our progress in learning and our behaviour in the *cheder*, my father turned to him with a new plan for doing something for the backward Chelm trades people from whom the so-called better Jews held themselves aloof.

My father said, 'We must approach these Jews and make them feel that they are as good as anyone. If you will help, Reb Avram – because without you nothing can be accomplished – then we can do much for them. My feeling is that we ought to build a synagogue in which all the congregants are equal in their rights and feel like *menschen*. If you, Reb Avram, can promise me that you will accept the position of rabbi in this congregation, then we can take steps to realise the plan.'

Wolfson was enthusiastic about my father's plan, not because he wanted to be a congregation rabbi as much as he welcomed the opportunity to raise the consciousness and cultural level of the townspeople. 'Reb Berel,' he cried out, 'that is a brilliant idea. We will establish a synagogue which will be the only one of its kind in Poland. I give my full agreement to the plan. You need to merely tell me what to do and I will follow your suggestions.'

On Sunday morning my father went to the Weinsteins, the Wohrhaftigs and to another Russian Jew called Shlomo Becker, and presented them with the entire plan, exactly as he had put it to Reb Avram Wolfson. He added, of course, that Reb Avram had agreed to serve as rabbi for the new congregation and that he himself promised to pay half the costs.

Father's friends received the plan warmly. Herr Wohrhaftig would not accept the notion of father paying half the costs

and felt the cost of building the synagogue should be divided equally among the four of them. It was also decided that the entire building plan should be presented by Reb Avram Wolfson.

That same day Wohrhaftig invited a Christian architect to discuss the project and in the evening all four Litvak householders and Reb Avram Wolfson met in our home to discuss matters. They adopted Father's plan, with some minor changes, and chose Reb Avram Wolfson as leader and rabbi of the synagogue. It was also decided that a large conference of local trades-people would be held on the following night in order to present the entire project and choose *gabbais.*

On that Monday night Shmuel the Short brought all his friends: drivers, bakers, carpenters, millers, tailors, shoemakers and so on, though the majority turned out to be butchers. The gathering therefore decided to name the congregation The Butchers' Synagogue. As *gabbais* they chose three of the foremost butchers as well as Shmuel the Short. Reb Avram Wolfson was officially appointed rabbi with a special salary and it was agreed that the synagogue should have one thousand seats.

While the architect was a Christian, all the working men, such as carpenters and painters, were Jews. Father paid the best workers the highest wages.

Meanwhile, steps were taken to make *Torah* scrolls for the synagogue. Father ordered the first one and Wolfson brought a special scribe from Babroysk. Wohrhaftig bought a *Torah* in Warsaw and the Weinstein ordered one from the Babroysk scribe, to be made after Father's.

It is impossible to describe the joy we boys had from the

building of this synagogue and especially from the writing of the *Torah* scrolls. We stood for hours watching each letter being written. The scribe was a young man of around thirty and a religious person in every sense of the word. He went to the *mikveh* every day and prayed in our little synagogue. Once, Reb Avram Wolfson gave him the honour of leading prayers and reading from the *Torah.*

Every time the scribe completed writing a *parsha*, Father made a *seudah* (feast). Shmuel the Short guarded the writing of the *Torah* as closely as the eyes in his head and came to the synagogue three times a day to follow its progress.

Meanwhile, the synagogue building progressed with Reb Avram Wolfson following the work daily to ensure all was going according to plan.

As usual, my father did nothing without consulting the Makarover Rebbe and had written to him immediately about building the synagogue. He received a reply with the warmest good wishes and blessings, in which the Rebbe indicated his desire to be present at the festive dedication of the synagogue.

Mother also took an active part in preparing for the opening of the new synagogue. She went to the Wohrhaftig and Weinstein wives to discuss how to adorn the *Torah* scrolls, with the result that the women decided to send Rev Avram Wolfson to Warsaw to purchase the covers, silver crowns and bells. He would also bring back three sets of curtains for the Holy Ark. Smaller items were sown in our home according to Wolfson's direction.

Rev Avram also bought lamps, hanging chandeliers, candelabra and other necessary items in Warsaw. We started

readying ourselves for the opening of the synagogue.

The *gabbais* of the other synagogues could not make peace easily with this phenomenon and came to Father complaining there was no need to divide Jewish strengths. But Father laughed at them and said that with more synagogues our faith would spread.

The coming of the Makarover Rebbe to Chelm for the opening of the synagogue did not depend solely on the Rebbe's wishes. The Rebbe was considered a holy and G-dlike person by many Christians in Russia and when news of him reached the ears of Czar Nikolai II, he saw a competitor in the Rebbe. It seemed to the Czar, and perhaps rightly so, that the Russian people believed more in the Makarover Rebbe than in the Russian Czar. He prohibited the Rebbe from travelling more than forty kilometres from Makarov and made the local police chief responsible for enforcing this strict decree.

But for my father, the Russian Czar's decree was not sufficient to prevent him bringing the Makarover Rebbe to Chelm for the dedication. After all, the local authorities were all his good friends and Father's cousin, Vasilkovsky, was the Lublin governor's closest friend. Father went to Makarov and simply smuggled the Rebbe out of the town and brought him to Chelm.

The Butchers' Synagogue opened on a Friday night and news spread at lightning speed through the entire city that the Makarover Rebbe had come for the dedication. Thousands of people gathered in the streets and accompanied the Rebbe to the synagogue. Shmuel the Short organised a special crew of twelve people who guarded the Rav and allowed no one

to approach him, not even to say '*Shalom*'. That was my happiest day because the Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak'l, held my hand along the way as he questioned me about my *cheder.*

The Rebbe was of medium height with a long grey beard and a *shtreimel* on his head. His head, and indeed his whole body, seemed to thrust forward and, looking at the figure he cut, one felt the power of a learned mind which exuded knowledge and wisdom.

Rav Wolfson stood at the entrance to the synagogue with my father, Herr Weinstein and Herr Wohrhaftig. All were dressed in black frock coats with white collars, black ties and on their heads black cylindrical hats.

I already knew about everything connected with the reception of the Makarover Rebbe and the opening of the synagogue, but I did not know these men would be dressed like that and I found it overwhelmingly exciting. I think it made a strong impression on Reb Yitzhak'l the Makarover as well.

Rav Wolfson was the first to receive the Rebbe and present Herr Weinstein and Herr Wohrhaftig. All bowed deeply before the Rebbe who entered the synagogue, still holding me by the hand.

A comfortable place on the Eastern wall had been prepared for the Rebbe, complete with bookstand and a cushioned seat. When he was seated Rav Wolfson brought over all the duly elected *gabbais*, with Shmuel the Short leading the group, and presented them to the Rebbe. Soon after that Rav Wolfson went to the Holy Ark and began to chant the *Mincha* service.

After *Mincha*, Rav Wolfson went up to the *bimah* and

struck the leather cushion with a polished wooden board that lay there for the purpose, in order to calm the congregation. He then turned to those assembled and said the following words.

'Gentlemen! Thanks to the efforts of our esteemed Reb Berel Rogowoj, we have among us today in our new synagogue the great *gaon* and Talmudic scholar, the Makarover Rebbe, Reb Yitzhak'l. The Rebbe agreed to grant us the great honour of welcoming the *Shabbes* with us here for the first time in our synagogue. Therefore, on behalf of our *gabbais* and our congregants, I want to invite the Rebbe to take part in our synagogue and consider it as his own.'

When the Rebbe stood up and approached the place of the prayer leader, all of the nearly one thousand congregants present stood up. The Rebbe, Reb Yitzhak'l, led the *Maariv* prayers in the new Chelm synagogue. His praying was almost magical and the Hebrew and the tunes made a wonderfully strong impression on the entire congregation. The people of Chelm had never heard its like before and all of them stood through the entire service. The synagogue was overflowing and masses of people stood on rooftops and in the windows of houses surrounding the synagogue so as to get a glimpse.

After *Maariv* the Rebbe went up on the *bimah* and asked that all the children join him as he chanted *kiddush*.

The *tish* was carried out in the women's section, where tables were beautifully laid out. The Rebbe honoured my father with the *kiddush* and thus the *seudah* began. The Makarover Rebbe was a vegetarian who ate no meat, only dairy foods. That Friday night he tasted the fish and later distributed the *shirayim*.

After the festival meal the Rebbe spoke to the people. His whole speech was directed at the dedication of the Butchers' Synagogue and he chided the Jews of Chelm for having separated the Russian Jews from *Klal Yisroel* (the whole of Israel).

'We Jews,' said the Rebbe, 'are all G-d's children and it makes no difference where we live, in Poland, Russia, England, or whatever country. All the Jews in the world share a single faith and serve the one G-d of our forefathers, our grandfathers and fathers. For us Jews the highest and most important commandment is "Love thy neighbour as thyself." Among themselves Jews are not just companions, friends or acquaintances, but rather brothers and sisters. Our belief is based on this and it is a virtue of our people which distinguishes us from other peoples. In the name of Jewish holiness and of Jewish people-hood, the Makarover Rebbe calls upon you to unite, to forget the petty problems of livelihood and live among yourselves in peace.'

This talk by the Makarover Rebbe completely electrified the Jews of Chelm. I am sure that the wonderfully good impression the Rebbe, Reb Yitzhak'l, left on the Chelmites that Friday night, with his welcoming the Sabbath, his actions at the *tish* and the *seudah*, and especially the speech, left an indelible impression in the minds and hearts of Chelm.

The next morning the Rebbe joyously accepted the invitation to lead the *Musaf* prayers and again, just as on Friday night, the congregation were thrilled by his prayers. The entire Sabbath the Makarover Rebbe spent in Chelm constituted for the local Jewry the holiest day of Chelm's Jewish life. The *melave malka* was also led by the Rebbe in

the new Butchers' Synagogue.

The Weinsteins, Wohrhaftigs and Rav Wolfson did not take their high hats off until late in the night. After the *melave malka* Herr Wohrhaftig said, 'This is a holy man.' The Weinsteins were speechless.

To himself Rav Wolfson said, 'This is a man on whom rests the *Shechinah*!' To me he said, 'Looking more closely at the Makarover and having him participate in the opening of our synagogue, I can understand why the Russian government and Nicolai are so afraid of him. For us Jews it is a divine blessing to have been granted in our generation such a personality as Reb Yitzhak'l Makarover. This Rebbe is endowed not only with *Torah* and wisdom, but also with a very high intelligence.'

As the initiator of the idea of building a synagogue for the so-called common Jews of Chelm, and of bringing the Makarover Rebbe to its dedication, my father's joy was indescribable. He was extremely happy and very proud that he had managed to carry out such an undertaking in Chelm. He once said to my mother, 'My wife, if that which I have accomplished should be the only thing I could do for the Chelm Jews, it would have been worth all the sorrows we have suffered until now. Now I can die with a clear conscience.' My father was already a sick man and knew his years were numbered.

The women of Chelm could not allow such an opportunity to pass and began to attempt to reach the Rebbe for advice or a blessing. The Rebbe was staying in the home of a Trisker Chassid who lived across the street from our home. For the duration of the Rebbe's visit the Trisker Chassid, his wife

and two children went to live in his father's home and the entire house, which consisted of four rooms and a kitchen, together with the furniture and all the household goods, was given over for the Rebbe's use. The Rebbe had brought three people with him, the *gabbai*, Reb Yehezkel, the first *gabbai*, Reb Mordechai, and the second *gabbai*, Reb Benyamin.

Early on Sunday morning the Rebbe began to accept *kvitelach* from the women of Chelm. Reb Yehezkel was the main writer of the replies to these letters in which the women asked for the Rebbe's help. For less important matters the letters were written by Reb Mordechai and Reb Benyamin. This letter-writing and acceptance of *kvitlach* went on without interruption from early morning until late at night.

My father met with the Rebbe three times a day and came home very late at night.

In spite of the fact that the Jews of Chelm were thrilled by the Makarover visit, there was one among them who wrote a message to the police telling them that the Makarover Rebbe was to be found in Chelm, and that this person was forbidden to leave Makarov. As soon as my father heard of this he took counsel with his cousin Vasilkovsky who happened to be in Chelm then. They decided the Makarover Rebbe had best leave as quickly as possible.

On the second *Shabbes* of his visit to Chelm, the Rebbe again prayed in the Butchers' Synagogue and prepared to leave for Makarov the next morning. Before his departure Rav Wolfson gave the Rebbe a poem he had written himself in the name of the congregants of the Butchers' Synagogue of Chelm. Reb Avram Wolfson promised the Rebbe he would be recognised as a permanent member of the synagogue and

that his place there, together with his name, would remain forever in the hearts of all who prayed there.

Thousands of people were at the train station to bid farewell to the Rebbe before his departure from Chelm for Makarov. The Rebbe parted from me with a pat on my cheek, saying 'Be a good boy. May your father and mother have pride in you.' That Sunday morning my father accompanied the Rebbe to Makarov; the trip from Chelm took twenty-four hours by express train.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After the Makarover's departure, Wolfson began to set the synagogue in order and enlighten the working people. First of all he started the custom of giving a lecture every *Shabbes* about the *parsha* of the week. Every week he tried, in various ways, to point out that being a Jew did not mean merely going to synagogue; that the first and foremost of all the 613 commandments is to 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'.

Every Wednesday night Wolfson learned with the people and many came to hear him. The listeners were interested in every detail because everything he said was relevant to the times.

Wolfson gave special emphasis to matters connected to the keeping of *Shabbes. Shabbes* was the holiest concept to him and he would say to me, 'Shaulik, my child, *Shabbes* is the highest attribute we Jews possess!' Naturally, as a youngster I couldn't yet understand the great meaning *Shabbes* has for a Jew.

At first Reb Avram Wolfson himself led the prayers and read the *Torah* on *Shabbes* and the holidays. Later he taught a young Chelm man to read and to blow the *shofar.*

Aliyot were sold before *Shabbes* and there was no solicitation carried out in front of the *Torah* as in other

synagogues and prayer houses. Other than when the person called up made a voluntary contribution, the word money was never mentioned.

The first front row of seats was reserved while the rest were sold to regular congregants at a set price, the same for everyone. Those who bought first got a closer or better seat. Reb Avram Wolfson left two rows of seats in the middle of the synagogue for those who wished to pray in such a place but did not have the money to pay for seats. Such persons had to turn to the *gabbais,* who then designated seats to be used on just that occasion. The *gabbais* considered such requests, along with other matters, at a general meeting held every Monday evening.

Rav Wolfson created his own choir for the synagogue. It consisted of fifteen people, twelve boys and two adults. It was pure pleasure to hear Wolfson pray with his choir. The congregants of the Butchers' Synagogue were very proud of their membership and participation in such an enterprise.

For my father and we boys, there were permanent places in the synagogue along the Eastern wall – near the seat of the Makarover Rebbe, which remained empty. The seat next to my father was taken by Rav Wolfson and then came the seats occupied by the brothers Weinstein, Herr Wohrhaftig and Shlomo Becker. All these seats were along the Eastern wall.

On the other side were the permanent seats of the *gabbais*. Although our seats were considered 'permanent', we all paid for them at the highest prices.

Rav Avram Wolfson was not only a good rabbi; he was also a good bookkeeper and a brilliant organiser, talents well utilised in his leadership of our synagogue.

Our rabbi also organised lessons for the girls, which took place on Tuesday evenings in the women's synagogue. These classes were led by Wolfson's wife.

Din Torah were held in Wolfson's home. He himself never sat at these court proceedings, but he always chose three men who had to serve as judges. Wolfson provided direction when the litigation concerned a so-called clean matter: something which could be decided according to Jewish law. Generally the cases ended with a compromise.

Wolfson also accepted *Din Torah* from non-congregants who were required to agree that there would be three other men present besides the rabbi. The rabbi assured the person that all those present were sworn to secrecy regarding the proceedings.

Shmuel the Short protested to Rav Wolfson about his taking on the legal suits of non-congregants: 'They are taking advantage of you,' he said. 'You can't kill yourself!' Rav Wolfson replied, 'Reb Shmuel, there is law in Israel. And the word Israel means ALL Jews. Therefore, if a Jew needs help, then this help must be given him.'

Shmuel the Short was never appointed one of the three men to serve as judges. Understandably, this hurt him and finally he asked Rav Wolfson, 'Why, Rabbi, don't you ever call me as a third for a judgement?'

Rav Wolfson answered him, 'You, Reb Shmuel, have many sins of the past on your conscience. It will take much time until you can cleanse yourself of them. Patience, Reb Shmuel, the time will come.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Reb Avram Wolfson devoted much time to the educational and social needs of the Chelmites. He received twenty rubles a month for his work in and around the Butchers' Synagogue; income from *Din Torah*s, weddings and *bris*es also contributed to the synagogue's expenses. His untiring efforts were certainly worth much more than the salary he received. However, it was he who had decided on the amount.

Wolfson's *shammes* was Reb Yossele. He wore a four-cornered silk skullcap and always ran around as though someone was chasing him. When someone asked him, 'Reb Yossel, why are you running?' he would say, 'There is no time!' He had great respect for the rabbi and the *gabbais.*

Every week one of the *gabbais* had to be on duty in the synagogue, presenting himself three times a day to make sure everything was in order. The *gabbai* on duty was responsible for everything that went on in the synagogue during that week. At the weekly meeting he had to give an account to the rabbi and the other *gabbais* of all that had gone on.

The ambitious and innovative program of the Butchers' Synagogue attracted the attention of congregants of other synagogues. Many small businessmen began to turn to

the Butchers' Synagogue with requests for admission as members. Alas, there was not enough room for all who wanted to be part of Rav Wolfson's flock.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Notwithstanding the fact that the Jews of Chelm couldn't stand us, and tried to hurt us in every way, my mother demanded that we children drive ourselves to work hard in the business so as to prevent the liquidation of the concern my father had built up with so much effort.

I returned from the factory in Kiev with Madam Marer's promise to help us, exactly as she had helped us when Father was alive. Shlomo and I settled down to work seriously in the business and tried hard to expand it.

Knowing that our Chelmite competitors wanted nothing better than to drive us out of Chelm and ruin my father's hard work, we exerted ourselves to get more and more customers. We worked from five in the morning until late at night and did our best work in the early hours. As everyone knows, bakers work at night. Just before daybreak my brother and I visited them, carrying some boxes of yeast on a little wagon. We went to all the bakers, not just our regular customers, and they were quite pleased to see us, as they were often short of enough yeast to complete the night's work.

They demanded that we bring them yeast at 2.00 am and 4.00 am and we accommodated them. In the main these were the bakers Chelm Jews looked down on as lower class. They

helped us a lot and appreciated the intensity with which we worked. Gradually we acquired nearly all the bakers as clients.

Mother came into the business every day at 7.00 am, summer and winter.

The Chelmites realised the Litvaks could not be stopped by any hardships; instead they constantly improved their businesses. This situation could not be allowed to continue and they decided to challenge us again.

One fine morning, as we were sitting down at the business and our servant Karol had prepared tea in the samovar and Feivke the Jew had brought in some of the hot chick peas he sold, a small Jew with a pointed beard and two very green eyes came running in and asked breathlessly for me, the youngster Shaul. When mother asked him what he wanted he replied that he did not speak to women. Mother called me in immediately and the man told me his name was Zeinvil and he was the *shammes* for Reb Benyamin. He also told me the *Dayan* of Chelm, Reb Benyamin, wanted to see me right away as he needed me on a business matter.

As I mentioned earlier, it was the *rebbetzins* who handled the yeast, so I though the *dayan* wanted to discuss something connected to his wife's trade. On the other hand I knew the *dayan* was a rich man who did not depend on his wife to make a living. Well, if Reb Benyamin beckons, one must heed. Not being shy, I told the *shammes* I would drink my tea and then come to the *dayan*.

'No!' said the little man. 'When a rabbi calls you must come immediately. You must come with me because they are waiting for you.'

My answer was a bit *chutzpadik*: 'Not only couldn't the rabbi tear me away from my tea and hot chick peas, even the Czar Nikolai II would not manage it.'

On hearing how I expressed myself, Reb Zeinvil softened and said, 'Okay okay, I'll wait. After you drink your tea you will come.'

On entering the *dayan*'s house I began to feel frightened. Reb Benyamin, the *Dayan* of Chelm, sat at a table wearing a *shtreimel*. His little eyes peeped out from a heavily bearded face and he wore a silk frock coat tied with a *gartel*. The long table at which he sat was covered with a green cloth. At one end of the room stood a cupboard on which candles were burning, and the *Aron Kodesh* was nearby.

There were two more men at the table besides the *dayan*. All of this made a very strong impression on me, then a thirteen-year-old boy, and I became most curious to know what Reb Benyamin had to say to me.

The *shammes*, Reb Zeinvil, explained to the *dayan*, 'Rabbi, this is the youngster, Sarah's Shaul.'

'Sit down,' said the dayan. 'We have called you here in order to talk things through. Boys must learn *derech eretz* from their elders. You are an orphan, therefore it is my obligation to teach you. A business is not run the way you and your brother are running yours. This is not a game of *glitshka.* In business dealings there must be integrity. One must not – and dare not – take away another's customers. If your mother continues to teach you and your brother to behave poorly, tell her I will put her and the whole Rogowoj family into *cherem*. No one will buy from you, no one will socialise with you and no one will even speak with you.

Young man, do you understand what I have said to you or not?'

I was left sitting like one who had been roasted alive and felt that if the *dayan* had been fit enough he would have added a few slaps to emphasize the point he was making. That he did not was probably because he was afraid that I might give him two for every slap he gave me. He was as thin as a rail. Other than his two small angry eyes and a worm-like mouth, there seemed to be nothing to him.

Although I was only thirteen, I was dressed in a red shirt with black pants tucked into shiny boots and wore a hat with a shiny brim, so I probably appeared to be a lot bigger and older than I was.

Yet truly, this could have been a situation in which I hit the *dayan*. We children understood our position all too well and the Jews of Chelm embittered our lives at every turn. The hatred and ostracism they demonstrated were simply unbearable, which caused us to defend our rights as Jews all the more forcefully. Interestingly, the Jew standing before us and leading this battle against us always wore a *shtreimel*.

I sat at the *dayan*'s, burning inwardly that such Jews wanted to teach us how to carry on business and how to live. Even more hurtful was the fact that besides wanting to teach us proper respect, this *dayan* had the nerve to threaten the whole Rogowoj family with excommunication.

'Reb Benyamin,' I said to the *dayan*, 'the Jews you represent have already tried to ruin us through various underhand ways, without excommunication. And they can tell you that none of their nefarious deeds brought about the results they wished for. As *dayan* you have certainly learned

Torah and therefore know that the *Torah* and Jewish law give you no right to excommunicate us. If you wish to act in a manner contrary to Jewish law, then what have we to fear from such excommunication? In any case you don't let us into your schools and synagogues and you don't even talk to us. Despite all this, Berel Rogowoj's children are well learned in *Yiddishkeit*. Perhaps it would not be amiss if you yourself, Reb Benyamin, and those Jews who told you to call me here for upbraiding and to threaten us with excommunication, should go to our rabbi, Reb Avram Wolfson whom our father brought here from Babroysk to teach us *Yiddishkeit* and the laws of the *Torah*, and ask him to instruct you in the proper Jewish religious laws.'

'You, *shaigetz* that you are!' called out one of the Jews sitting at the table. 'Is that the way to speak to a rabbi? Respect, *shaigetz*!' At the time I did not know who that man was and later found out it was Reb Motel, the *gabbai.*

'Reb Yid,' I said to him, 'be careful of what you say and don't mind other's business. The *dayan* can take care of his own matters and if it were not for his presence here I would hit you over the head with this chair.'

'Motel, Motel, don't interfere! You can see we are dealing with wild people!' screamed the *dayan.*

'Reb Benyamin,' I said, 'if this is all you have to tell me I will convey the same to my mother. But I can answer you on the spot by saying that with threats of excommunication you will get nowhere with us. Perhaps you think, Reb Benyamin, that you might get somewhere with beating us. I can promise you that for every slap we get we will return double. Don't worry, Reb Benyamin, we are not alone in this. We might

admonish you that as city *dayan* you ought not to tarnish your honour by allowing yourself to sink into dirty dealings with a gang of hoodlums whose only aim is to take the bread out of the mouths of a widow with orphans.'

This *dayan*, Reb Benyamin, was no fool. He gathered from my speech that threatening would get him nowhere, so he soon changed his tone.

'Reb Shaul,' (no longer the young boy or the *shaigetz*), said the *dayan*. 'After all, we must make some order in the yeast trade. We must live like *menschen* and not compete with one another.'

'If you want to talk to me about business, I can only talk to you in private,' I replied. 'I must insist that these other Jews leave the room and only then can we discuss it.'

The atmosphere in the room became tense as my words sank in and the other men were requested to leave. One of them was Reb Shmerl, the yeast agent for Chelm, whom I had not met before this.

When the others had left the room I presented my plan for how all the yeast dealers could make a living and do away with all the nasty, underhand tricks. The Chelm yeast dealers were very clever at devising troubles for us in the hope of liquidating our business. If it were not for our cousin Vasilkovsky in Lublin and Shmuel the Short in Chelm, they might have succeeded. Every day they brought different accusations against us to the new chief of police in Chelm. Every day they found new ways to make our lives miserable.

'Reb Benyamin,' I said, 'this is my opinion. If you really want to meddle and help lighten the load, not only for our family but for all the Chelm yeast dealers, then try to arrange

for a partnership to be signed by everyone, agreeing not to lure away customers from another Jew and to maintain a standard price because the price of yeast is almost the same in all the factories. One office must be established where everyone's yeast will be delivered and from where it will be distributed to all the dealers. There should be a bookkeeper to note down the amount and the price of the yeast. There should be an accounting at the end of the month. I believe this is the only way we can bring peace to our trade. My proposal is not complete for I must discuss it with my mother. Meanwhile you, Reb Benyamin, discuss it with our competitors. If they agree I will prepare an exact and detailed plan, after which we can all meet and thrash out the matter.'

'Reb Shaul', (again I am addressed as an equal!) said the *dayan,* 'I see you are growing up to be a wise man. Don't tell your mother that I threatened you – I mean no evil and only want the best for all Jews. Go home and come back in three days with your plan. Then we will discuss everything in private. I must tell you already that your plan sounds fine to me and you can be sure the others will agree too.'

'Rabbi,' I said, 'you must realise that we Rogowojs are equal partners – equal to all the other importers – and we must be considered that way. All the underhand dirty tricks that have been used against us must stop immediately. We don't ask friendship of anyone but we don't want enmity and we must be treated as humans.'

When I came home and told my mother all that I had seen and heard at the *dayan*'s, I had to work hard to control her anger. 'Bandits! Swindlers!', she screamed, 'and you, Shaulik, deigned to talk to them! Your answer should have

been to spit in their faces!'

'Mama,' I replied, 'we must live with these swindlers. So why not make our lives a little easier? Almost all the bakers are our customers and we sell to the seminary. So we declare that these are our customers and there will be no need to work so hard to keep them.'

'And you believe those bandits?' my mother returned. 'Mama,' I said, 'we will be careful not to let them swindle us. There are three days before I have to give an answer. I'll travel to Lublin tonight to see your cousin and we'll do whatever he says. If Vasilkovsky agrees to my proposal I'll ask him to write out the whole plan in detail.'

'That is a good idea,' said Mother. 'Send a telegram to Vasilkovsky saying you will be there tonight and go. We will see what he has to say because not only is he our cousin, he is our truly good friend.'

My brother Shlomo agreed with me one hundred percent. He too felt we could not go on working as we had been. Besides, we youngsters also wanted to enjoy something of what is called 'youth'. We worked all day long and in the evenings we learned from 6.00 pm to 8.00 pm with Leibel the teacher, then from 8.00 pm to 10.00 pm with Rav Wolfson. Our young years were passing us by and every day we grew older without knowing what it meant to be young.

That evening at 8.00 pm my mother accompanied me to the railway station, bought me a half-price ticket and saw me inside the carriage. I travelled to Lublin while thinking about what was happening to our family in Chelm.

Vasilkovsky himself was waiting for me at the Lublin station and received me as though I were his own child.

After eating a meal I told him all about the invitation from the *dayan* and how he had received me, the nonsense with excommunication and my answer. Then I set forth my entire plan.

Vasilkovsky listened intently and after a brief consideration said, 'It is an extraordinary idea, but your mother is right. They are a group of swindlers. However, as I see it from all you have told me, the Chelmites are in serious trouble. Just as you need time in order to work peacefully, so do they. Surely they will break the partnership within a short time, but meanwhile for a year or two you can breathe more easily. This can only help your business. Tomorrow I'll give you a written plan which you will have to rewrite and present to the *dayan*.'

The next day Vasilkovsky handed me his detailed plan presenting the legalities of a corporation. It was a masterpiece. I have the impression that even today's great conglomerates do not have such exact and comprehensive statutes.

When I came home and read the legal brief to Mother she smiled and said, 'Yes, my child, Simeon Vasilkovsky knows the game well.' When I told her that Vasilkovsky corroborated her lack of faith in the swindlers, she smiled again and said, 'You see my child, your mother is not altogether a fool!'

After rewriting the entire brief I suggested to Mother that an older person accompany me when I go to see the *dayan*. True, the *dayan* himself had reckoned with me, but I had to meet there with eight other men, our competitors, of whom the youngest was over fifty. As a presumptuous lad of thirteen I was afraid I might say something for which we would pay dearly later. I suggested to Mother that Rav Avram Wolfson

accompany me. After all, he was my first rebbe who came to us from Babroysk and instilled in me so many beautiful concepts of liberal humanity.

Mother and Rav Avram both agreed to my proposal and so we went to the *dayan* with the brief. After reading it Reb Benyamin smiled and said to Wolfson that I would be a very wise man and that he would present the paper to our competitors, after which he would call everyone together. I then told the *dayan* that my mother asked to have Reb Wolfson represent us at that general meeting, to which the *dayan* agreed.

The others made no great changes to the brief. It may have hurt them to ratify such rules but they were ashamed not to and all thought I had proposed it. I felt we ought to consult Vasilkovsky again about the changes the *dayan* and the others had made, so Mother and I travelled to Lublin again.

After perusing the so-called improvements, Vasilkovsky said, 'Nonsense! Sarah, sign the thing and good luck. Sarah Aaronovna, you should be thankful that your husband left you with such children. They are so competent! Go home, it will be okay.'

The legal brief was written in Russian and the job of rewriting the rules was given to Rav Wolfson.

On a Tuesday evening Mother, Rav Wolfson and I went to the *dayan* with the brief entirely rewritten in Yiddish. All the yeast dealers were already sitting in the room and Mother sat in a separate room with the *rebbetzin.*

When the *dayan* Reb Benyamin learned that Reb Avram Wolfson had been ordained in Babroysk, a city of *Talmudic* geniuses, he invited Wolfson to sit with him at the head of

the table and help him carry out the religious formalities. Black candles were burning on the table and in the corner.

When everything was ready, Mother was called in. The *dayan* pulled a long red and green scarf out of his back pocket which Mother and I solemnly agreed to accept and to carry out all the statutes as agreed. As the organiser of the newly formed partnership, I felt I had accomplished a great deed. Unfortunately, children can be naive.

Not long after putting their signatures to the legal agreement the Chelm yeast traders, our so-called partners, began to devise new ways to destroy the Rogowoj family and the statutes. Until today, sixty years later, I cannot understand this wild hatred the Chelmites had towards my father and all the family.

It is also hard for me to fathom why Jews use the Hebrew phrases, '*Kol Yosroel chaverim*' (All Jews are friends) and *'Kol Yisroel averim ze b'ze'* (All Jews are responsible for one another). From my experience I find that only our enemies believe in these two sayings, whereas Jews themselves, with very few exceptions, are very far from expressing these ideas in their daily lives.



Sarah Rogowoj

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It can readily be seen that Wolfson kept the promise he had made to my father. Every one of those so-called lower class Jews was quickly transformed into a Jew with a purpose in living. Every driver, horse trader and the others began to understand the responsibilities inherent in all his Jewishness and the need for every Jew to consider the good of all Israel.

We boys helped Wolfson greatly in carrying out this awesome task. For example, under Wolfson's tutelage we taught the beginners to read and write. Wolfson taught the more advanced people. The other Jews of Chelm began to look differently at the working people who were applying themselves so diligently to their own advancement.

Reb Avram Wolfson never limited the time he devoted to his work. He gave the impression that with the little time he had, and given the colossal task he had set for himself, the hours would never suffice. Observing his great efforts I once remarked that he worked too hard and under such pressure it seemed to me he would not achieve too much with his students. He agreed it would not be easy to change their spiritual essence, but he had given his word to my father that for as long as he could function, his private life would not exist for him. He realised that the program devised by my father – that Wolfson should serve as leader, teacher

and spiritual guide for the Jews of Chelm – was correct and meaningful. The children of these working people would be altogether different from their parents.

'Yes, Shaulik,' Wolfson said to me, 'your father was a true Jew with an upright Jewish heart. We Jews will be able to uphold our faith only when we manage to instil in the older generation, as well as the younger, the love of Jew for Jew, of man for man. This can be accomplished through an educational program like that prepared by your father, may he rest in peace.'

Our studies in *cheder* were not weakened by this situation; rather, they were strengthened. Not only did we have to do our own homework, we also had to learn to be teachers in order to teach the beginners in night class.

Wolfson took no separate salary for his teaching and the night classes for the poor people became the program of his synagogue work. Reb Avram Wolfson was the rabbi and head of the *gabbais* at the Butchers' Synagogue and felt that teaching was part of his duties there.

In his *Shabbes* speeches he always emphasised G-d's love for fine people, the learned and knowledgeable. And if G-d wants this from his chosen people, then it is our duty to show our children the proper path. We must show our non-Jewish neighbours that the name 'Jew' carries divinity which is honourable and merciful.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As an orphan I had to begin laying *tefillin* at the age of twelve. As the time drew nearer to my bar mitzvah, Reb Avram Wolfson began to prepare me in earnest for the great event. Months earlier I had already begun to study the *parsha* of the week and the *Haftorah*. I would have to chant aloud in the synagogue. I would also have to give a speech and lead the *Musaf* services. This was not an easy task for me, so I made sure that by the appointed Sabbath I knew almost everything by heart.

The celebration of the first time I laid *tefillin* fell on a Monday in January and took place in our *cheder* synagogue. My mother, the Weinsteins and their wives, Herr Wohrhaftig and his wife, Shlomo Becker and his wife, Binyamin Bakler and his wife, Rabbi Wolfson and his wife and of course, all my friends from the *cheder* came to the event. Another guest came unexpectedly and uninvited with his good friend Wohrhaftig. This was the district doctor, Genrich. Wohrhaftig had said to him, 'Come, Genrich, I'll show you a real synagogue where you will have the opportunity to see what we do for our children.'

Dr Genrich had converted to Christianity from Judaism and sat on military commissions as their representative. He was born to Russian Jewish parents in Petersburg, but

converted because of his important post. He was a tall, handsome man with fine features, lively eyes and a grey-black head of hair.

In spite of his conversion, Dr Genrich loved Jews and Jewishness, and from time to time sneaked into a synagogue in disguise so as not to be recognised by the congregation. He mainly went for *Kol Nidre* on *Yom Kippur* and was quite friendly with Reb Wolfson and often came to his office.

When everyone came to congratulate me after the service, Genrich came to press my little boy's hand and I could not help thinking and regretting that our people had lost such a good person.

Our synagogue was packed on the Sabbath. People came from other synagogues, great and small, and even from the Chassidic *shtiblach*. People found it hard to believe that the Litvak Wolfson's bar mitzvah student, indeed the deceased Rogowoj's twelve-year-old, would be reading from the *Torah parsha* and doing the *Haftorah,* as well as leading the additional service, and wanted to see this for themselves. Amongst themselves these same people also murmured that it was a *chilul Hashem* to allow such a young boy to lead the service and read from the Holy *Torah*. However, I prefer to assume that Reb Avram Wolfson knew the law better than those Chelmites. He had repeated to me several times that on my bar mitzvah day I would become a fully fledged Jew.

It was Shmuel the Short and his friends who led me to the synagogue and masses of people ran after us. The synagogue was overflowing. Reb Avram Wolfson was already seated in his usual place so I bowed to him and went to my father's place. After Wolfson had wrapped himself in his *tallis*, he

came and showed me how to put my own *tallis* on. He told me to make the blessing out loud and all the congregants answered 'Amen'. Wolfson then whispered in my ear, 'Courage Shaulik. Don't put me or yourself to shame.'

After *Shacharis*, Wolfson read from the *Torah*. When it was time for the *Maftir* reading, he called me up. 'Let the bar mitzvah boy Shaul son of Dov stand and read the *Maftir*.' When I stood up from my place to go to the platform from where the *Torah* was read my legs began to tremble and soon all of me was shaking uncontrollably. The two *gabbais*, Shmuel the Short and Chaim Katzav, noticed this. They came to me and literally carried me up. When my glance caught Wolfson's and I noticed his sweet proud smile, all my nervousness left me.

As I was short for my age, I had to stand on a stool in order to reach the table. The fully packed synagogue turned its attention to me and the silence was deafening. Reb Avram Wolfson stood beside me.

I was wearing my father's *tallis* with the silver collar, which Mother had adjusted to fit me. Nearby were the *gabbai* on duty that week and the *shammes*. I recited the blessing over the *Torah* slowly, word for word, with a Litvak *nigun*. When the entire congregation answered 'Amen' I found myself frightened again. Wolfson noticed this and let me wait a few seconds. In order not to attract the attention of the congregants he appeared to be looking for the pointer with which he would later show me where to begin reading.

At that moment I felt a higher power seem to give me a nudge and I began to read. I no longer noticed those around me – not Wolfson, not the *gabbai* nor the *shammes*, and not

the congregation. I felt I was standing on holy soil and that I, the Bar Mitzvah boy, Shaul, son of Dov, was approaching the Creator of the Universe as a co-worker and an example. My words flowed like pearls and the Litvak tune enhanced the reading.

When I ended the reading, and after the *Torah* scroll was removed from the table, I began to chant the *Haftorah*. Here, I truly saw and felt the holiness that seemed to envelop me. This mood was created not only from faith, but also from the beautifully innocent illusions that can captivate a twelve-year-old. All this had been implanted in me by Reb Avram Wolfson in his teaching and his heartfelt love.

Wolfson's face was shining and he felt fulfilled in seeing the results of his education. Not only did I not shame him, but my bar mitzvah made a name for him in Chelm and all its surrounding areas.

Before the *Torah* scrolls were returned to the Holy Ark, Wolfson announced that the Bar Mitzvah boy, Shaul, son of Dov would speak to the congregation in honour of this occasion.

My speech, which had been written by Wolfson, was well prepared. I had learned it well. However, when it came to actually delivering the speech it came out differently to what I had prepared. Before this large congregation, what came forth from the thin voice of a twelve-year-old was full of enthusiasm and gratitude but also full of pain.

As far as my memory will allow me, here is the content of that speech:

My dear mother, Rabbi Wolfson, *gabbai* and congregants!

Today it is my fate to tie myself heart and soul to the

Jewish people and become a fully fledged Jew, as are all of you. Together with you I will defend our holiness, enjoy and suffer the *Torah* from which stems our belief – for only we Jews understand the godliness of our faith and greatness of our G-d.

I pledge myself to guard *Yiddishkeit* in every sense of the word and so remain a faithful, trustworthy member of our people.

It is very painful for me that my father, Reb Dov, may he rest in peace, did not have the privilege of being among us today to take pleasure in his son's bar mitzvah. However, I feel certain that his soul is among us. I must admit that when I first came up here I was so taken aback by the great honour accorded me that I was terrified. But when I started to read the *parsha* of the week I soon felt the power of the Holy Word that tied me to the *Torah* and to all of you.

I thank you all for the great honour you have given me and my whole family – especially for the honour you have accorded my mother. She has certainly had great pleasure from the help you have given me.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Rabbi Wolfson, my friend, teacher and guide. Before this entire congregation, I give my word that I shall be thankful and remember him as long as I live.

I thank you again, everyone!

After my speech the entire congregation remained sitting, almost immobilised. Reb Avram Wolfson stood up and said *Kaddish* for our father. After the *Kaddish* he came over, kissed me on the head and said, 'Where did you get such a talk? Your words and your gestures have entranced everyone.

You are a born orator. But we must not keep the people. We must begin *Musaf.'*

The effect of my speech was indescribable. Indeed, from that Sabbath I was known in Chelm as 'the little orator'.

Again the two *gabbais* led me to the prayer leader's place, where I felt at home. Leading the congregation in prayer was something all of us had learned. Besides, one need not see the congregation and therefore one felt freer.

When I said the *Kaddish* before the *Amidah*, the synagogue choir accompanied me. Rabbi Wolfson stood near me throughout and I felt his pride in me.

After the prayers the congregants came to me with the traditional complimentary greetings. Everyone from the oldest to the youngest shook my thin hand. Finally, we left the synagogue.

My mother had left earlier in order to prepare a *kiddush* at our home. She had invited Rabbi Wolfson, the *gabbais,* the Weinsteins, the Wohrhaftigs and her friends, who had all been in the synagogue.

When I entered our home my mother greeted me with tears brimming in her eyes as she kissed me. She could only utter a few words, 'Oy, Shaulik, my child! Oy, Shaulik, my child!'

In my later years I understood my mother's mixed emotions. On that day of my bar mitzvah she was both joyful and sorrowful. She was joyful in her great pride for her child and sorrowful in not having her husband to share it with.

Mother had made her children her entire reason for living. We were her treasures and all that mattered to her. At the

same time she sorely lacked a soul mate. She was grateful to our father for the children he had left her, but broken by the overwhelming loss of a husband so warmly beloved. Whenever she mentioned our father's name it was with extraordinary respect.

My bar mitzvah made an indelible impression on the Jews of Chelm and became a topic for much discussion. Even the women who bought yeast from us on Thursdays to bake their *Shabbes challot* would say to Mother, 'Sarah, may you live long. When one has such a son one should not complain!'

Mother would answer, '*Nu*, what should I do? Run around in the streets praising my son? For me he is nothing extraordinary. He had a wonderful father and a fine grandfather. All bar mitzvah boys ought to be like my son.'

The Jews of Chelm now spoke differently to me. Something in their attitude towards us had changed. They saw, but hardly understood, that because they had embittered our lives and shown such animosity, our own faith had been strengthened. We didn't live for them but for ourselves. We no longer felt like outsiders because Rabbi Wolfson had placed us on a high plane from which we could look upon the Jews of Chelm with great self-pride.

On the other hand, Herr Wohrhaftig retained his long-held opinion of Chelm Jewry and would always repeat in Russian, 'They are unfortunate Jews. They have no worth, no faith and no love.' Although he may have been partially correct, we were not entirely in agreement with him. However, we felt we had to observe Father's injunction. He had always instructed us that no matter how bad the Chelmites might seem, they are still Jews and are therefore our brethren.

I received many gifts for my bar mitzvah. From the Wohrhaftigs I received a bicycle which I seldom had time to ride. From my Rabbi Wolfson I received a small set of *tefillin* with a bag on which his wife had embroidered my name in golden letters. The Weinsteins gave me a set of *Chumash,* the first books I could call my very own. Shlomo Becker presented me with a beautifully bound *Tanach.* Shmuel the Short gave me a small prayer shawl with its collar embroidered in silver, which I wore proudly to the synagogue every *Shabbes* and *Yom Tov.*

Reb Avram Wolfson also received a combined gift from my mother, the Weinsteins and the Wohrhaftigs: a sum of money amounting to 100 rubles, for which he was very thankful. After receiving the money Wolfson said to me, 'You know, Shaulik, they probably think the speech you gave was my doing. Only you and I know their mistake and that everything you said came from you yourself. I am proud I was able to implant the love of people in you and that you follow my guidance. To be able to love your fellow man, no matter what his creed, race, financial situation or intelligence, is the highest virtue and we must transmit this to our future generations. As you mature, Shaulik, you will better understand the things I told you on your bar mitzvah day.'

The competing merchants, our enemies, also wished my mother and me '*Mazel tov*!'. We received congratulations from all our customers and bakers, even from the Christian baker Grantievich. From that time on I was received with respect by all the bakers and for several years was known as 'the bar mitzvah boy'.

The Makarover Rebbe also sent me a hand-written letter in Hebrew with many blessings for my future. From my uncles Dovid and Hershel, and from my cousin Herzl from Kiev, I received a gift of fifty rubles together with a letter wishing me good luck and wishing that my mother may live to rejoice at my wedding. Madam Marer sent me a congratulatory letter with three hundred rubles enclosed.

Our cousin Vasilkovsky was particularly nice. He came especially from Lublin to Chelm in order to greet us and congratulate us in person. At this opportunity he gave me a cash gift of twenty-five rubles, saying this would be my first capital.

There were some expenses for my mother who had a new suit sewn for me by the best tailor in the city. She also bought me new shoes and new shirts.

My bar mitzvah celebration brought me so much joy, as well as my own money – all 375 rubles! I had become a member of the great Jewish brotherhood with the faith and the illusion that I could faithfully serve my fellow Jews all over the world.

After all the celebrating I began to feel like a grownup, especially when I entered the synagogue dressed in my new suit with a new celluloid collar and tie. As clearly as I can recall, such collars were in style then and had a great advantage in that one could wash them with soap and they were always stiff and clean. I think they were a new idea put out by a German manufacturer of the name May and Dietrich.

And so this time of my life which revolved around my bar mitzvah celebration – something very deeply rooted in my

heart and soul – came to an end. Perhaps I should admit, or rather confess, that I have never really been religious but have always been a faithful Jew, a member of our ever-tortured and persecuted people. And this I have remained to this day. Under no circumstances have I ever denied my Jewishness.

Whoever of my friends has ever turned to me for help, no matter what kind, has never been refused. I have never expected a return for my time, efforts or expenses.

I might point out that just as others have experienced in such circumstances, there have been many cases where people who took from me willingly returned the favour with enmity. I tried not to notice, going along on the assumption that such people simply do not understand the meaning of gratitude. Unfortunately, I could not always forget, especially the shame this sometimes caused me. Some of these people are still among the living.

CHAPTER TWENTY

In those days a Russian journal called *Novosti* (*News*) was published in Petersburg. It was a high-class literary publication to which the greatest Russian writers contributed work. My father had subscribed to a whole lot of Russian newspapers and journals, among which were *Russkaya Slava, Aganyak* and *Neuva*. These journals enabled us to maintain some ties with our former home. Everyone in our house read them from cover to cover. They were collected and eventually bound.

Reading these papers we did not skip over even the smallest announcement and somehow felt these articles and announcements were our own. Reading various critiques about theatre productions, especially operas and dramas, we felt as though we were actually present at the performances and often had heated discussions among ourselves about the critiques.

Once I found a half-page announcement in *Neuva* about a firm named Julius Zimmerman which sold musical instruments. The firm wrote that it was ready to send an illustrated catalogue of all its instruments with the price for each one. As I had always been a music lover, this intrigued me. That same day I wrote a postcard in Russian to the firm asking them to send me a catalogue.

Nine days later the postman Kashin came in to my mother saying he had a registered letter from Petersburg for me, Stanislav Rogowoj, and that Stanislav Rogowoj must personally appear and sign for it. Mother could not understand why a letter should be addressed to me and come all the way from Petersburg.

Kashin had already managed to drink a glass of tea by the time Mother called me into the store. When he saw me he pulled a long envelope from the leather pouch he wore hanging from a shoulder strap. He handed it to me and asked me to sign for it in his book. On opening the envelope I found inside the requested catalogue from the firm of Julius Zimmerman, together with a letter addressed to Herr Stanislav Rogowoj.

The catalogue contained 120 pages full of illustrations of musical instruments, anything from a mouth organ to a victrola. Harmonicas, fiddles, balalaikas and guitars took up most of the catalogue.

I couldn't believe that this was meant for me. The catalogue was printed on the best paper of extremely heavy weight and beautifully bound. I carried it around with me like a treasure.

First of all I took the catalogue to my Rebbe, Reb Avram Wolfson. While showing it to him I told him that my idea was to start dealing in musical instruments on my own account. I wanted to free myself from the yeast trade for three reasons: Firstly, the yeast trade was very difficult and I had decided I did not want my future to be tied up with it. Secondly, no matter how hard we worked Mother could not give us anything. Perhaps she was right. As a widow with seven

children, facing an endless struggle on her own with the Chelm yeast merchants, every ruble was important. She was terrified of being left without money. Thirdly, I had my own money from my bar mitzvah and wanted to do something independently with it. Wolfson was a good pedagogue and an amazingly fine organiser, but he understood nothing about business. After I had told him all of this he told me to do as I saw fit, adding that I should not put too much money into the musical instruments.

At that time there was a large shop in Chelm selling musical instruments and people said the owners made a lot of money. I went into the shop and asked for the price of a balalaika. The price I was given was twice that quoted in Zimmerman's catalogue.

I immediately wrote to Zimmerman saying I would like to become his representative in Chelm and felt I should get twenty-five percent of every sale. I asked them to send me some sample instruments. A few days later I received an answer in which the Zimmerman firm agreed to a twenty percent commission. I was willing and so found myself in business.

My first sales were a mandolin and a guitar. The customers were the chief bakers, soldiers of the Moskovski corps to whom we sold yeast. On this first venture I earned fifty percent. What cost me one ruble I sold for a ruble and fifty kopeks. One customer recommended me to another so that in a short time I sold mandolins, guitars, harmonicas, mouth organs, several fiddles and even a piano to a Russian priest.

Business was good and I made a lot of money. I began to develop a plan to open a business selling musical instruments.

Unfortunately, this was not to be my destiny. When the Zimmerman firm saw that its representative in Chelm was doing such good business, it began to make enquiries.

One fine morning a Russian representative of the Zimmerman factory in Petersburg arrived in Chelm in order to make the acquaintance of the firm's agent there. To his great astonishment he found the firm's agent in the person of a thirteen-year-old boy. In his conversation with me he appeared to be a fine and upstanding gentleman. However, this did not stop him from going – directly after our conversation – to the large musical shop in Chelm where he got an order worth several thousand rubles with the provision that the Zimmerman firm would not sell instruments to anyone else in Chelm.

The representative apologised to me later and explained that my connection with the Zimmerman firm had ended that day. He gave the following reasons for breaking off our relationship: I had no shops; the Zimmerman firm was interested in selling wind instruments not stringed ones; the military and other orchestras must buy their instruments in the same shop.

In that way I lost my connection with the Zimmerman firm even faster than I had gained it. In later chapters, readers will note that whenever I built up a business, others soon profited from it while I had to look for other sources of revenue. This fate seemed to follow me always, from Chelm onward.

I have always had great satisfaction in my work and never felt I had to get rich from it. I never had such aspirations. There are people whose goal in life is to accumulate more and more money but I never belonged to that category.

I developed an independent character and always strived for new ideas that would allow this independence. I always tried to be honest, but if anyone betrayed me, he lost me as a customer and a friend. If one of my merchants sold one of my business ideas to a competitor I found I could usually think up a new idea that was cheaper, better and nicer!

I have reached the conclusion that people who look for money for its own sake are miserly in nature and I cannot stand such people. All this may be related back to the education I got from Rabbi Wolfson. I believe the little stories he used to tell us children had a very strong influence on my character and helped me develop my own philosophy of life – what the English term 'a way of life'.

I'd like to repeat a little story we learned and had to memorise. It was written by Reb Wolfson in his almanac, in Hebrew with a Yiddish translation: A miser was sleeping and in his dream he saw a poor man taking some of his bread. When he awoke he swore that as long as he lived he would sleep no more!

Perhaps this tale is a bit exaggerated, but there are miserly men who sleep on their fortunes, no matter what form these may take. Personally, I have no use for such people.

I worked out an axiom that good and bad can be found in every person. My own intuition tells me that mankind was made to do good and live honestly, but life itself causes people with weak characters to take on the world's bad characteristics. Perhaps because it is easier.

In my philosophy, evil traits may be passed on from parents and educators, in contrast to the good which is inherent in man. How important it is to put education into

the hands of good people!

I am not in agreement with the old philosophers, not the Arab, the Greek or the Roman, who hold that there are two deities: one creating good and the other evil. I am of the opinion that holiness has nothing to do with our behaviour. One world was created and, generally, nature is good. Otherwise we could not live on planet Earth.

I do not intend to carry on a polemic with the great classical philosophers who searched for the reasons for our suffering, and believed that every man who tries to traverse this short existence with love for his fellow man is a good person. I have always esteemed and loved all those with whom I have come in contact and I think the feeling was mutual.

I was the representative of the Petersburg musical instruments firm Julius Zimmerman for six months and in that time I earned five hundred and sixty rubles, and with that ended my independent business in Chelm. As a boy of thirteen my own capital now amounted to 935 rubles.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After signing the yeast partnership agreement we went home with the hope that our competitors would keep their word and we would finally be free of their constant pressure on us. The partnership worked perfectly for two months. All the yeast came into one place and everyone bought the amount necessary for him at an agreed price. At the end of the month the profits were divided according to the sales.

However, our partners were very displeased when they realised that we were buying and selling much more yeast than they were, so our profits were greater than theirs. They began to look for ways to hurt our profits.

There were rumours that our partners were selling yeast at lower prices, but I was naive and did not want to believe what I heard. I could not imagine that our competitors, who had signed together with us, accompanied by black candles and solemn ceremony, would not stick to their word.

One of our customers took it upon himself to prove the truth of the rumours. When one of our partners came to him – and this was a Jew who could not utter two words without mentioning G-d – I was hidden under a counter and able to listen to the conversation between the 'G-d-fearing' partner and the customer. Alas, the rumours proved to be true.

I went to the *dayan*, Reb Benyamin, and asked him how such a thing could be possible and expected him to interfere in the matter. He answered that he was capable of making a business deal but was not a policeman able to watch over everyone. I asked him to call a meeting of all the partners in order to clarify the entire matter and the *dayan* agreed to this.

As we waited for the meeting we investigated further into our partners' business dealings and found a long list of other misdemeanours calculated to hurt us. We saw that we were losing more customers every day. It was obvious that my mother had been right before the agreement when she had said that with such swindlers as we had in our Chelm competitors, one could not form a partnership because they were not to be trusted.

I went to the meeting at the *dayan*'s with my mother. We did not take Wolfson with us. It was a very stormy meeting and the *dayan,* Reb Benyamin, was on our competitors' side throughout. When I dared comment on this partisanship, again Reb Benyamin screamed just as he had in our first meeting. '*Shaigetz! Derech eretz*!' He also renewed his earlier threats of excommunication and so on. This time the *dayan*'s yelling and scolding were even stronger, aided and abetted by all those present.

The meeting was one great scandal. When the screams and threats had no effect they began to hit me. Mother began to cry. In great agony at seeing my mother's tears, I pulled off the green tablecloth so that the candlesticks fell too and the room was in darkness. The *dayan* quickly retreated and I took my mother's hand and left the house, crying aloud, 'You are a band of thieves! I herewith break off our agreement.

From tomorrow we will carry on our business without you in any way we fell necessary!'

We left the *dayan*'s house with our partnership broken, along with our dreams of a peaceful coexistence. And so began our bitter battle with Chelm's 'bandits and swindlers' as mother called them, with renewed vigor.

We immediately informed our cousin Vasilkovsky about all that had transpired. He came to Chelm right away and after hearing all the details affirmed that our former partners had broken the terms of the agreement. Reb Avram Wolfson went to the office to make a reckoning and we returned to our work.



Shaul Rogowoj

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

All over the world Jews search for *tachlis* in life. What exactly this purpose is I did not know then and don't know now. If purpose means security, then the question becomes what to assure oneself with. Life, mankind and nature seem to go on endlessly, so how can one secure anything? At most, man can think ahead to the near future, but certainly not much more. Man's life is a brief one and he does not have the power to provide real security.

Applying this to our situation in Chelm at the time, what could we do? Could a family consisting of a widow and two teenage boys constantly carry on a battle with a heartless gang that could hurt us in so many ways and possibly destroy us? And if we did succeed in our hard work, would this assure our lives and living?

After all these experiences we children began to understand life better and realised that some people had other businesses and lived peacefully. We didn't want to forget that one can be tainted by the bad traits of dishonest people when dealing with them. It was clear to us that out in the wide world there had to be a place for us where we could live peacefully and honestly. We did not have to stay in Chelm and handle yeast.

I have never forgotten my father's will which he left us children three weeks before departing for the rest cure in

Biarchi, where he died. It was a Sabbath afternoon. Father called us into his bedroom where he was resting and told us to listen carefully to what he had to say. These are his words:

'My children! I am a very sick man. My days, weeks or months are limited. Although my doctors assure me this illness will pass, I feel otherwise and I am in a position to know. I will soon leave for a cure in Biarchi, but I have a premonition that I will not return. Therefore, please listen to my last will and testament. I beg the promise that you will faithfully fulfil my instructions.

'In life there are two paths a man can follow. One is a straight way, which means dealing honestly, doing good, helping others and honouring G-d and man. This is the path I followed all my life and in it I found joy and happiness. It is not an easy way and it is bound with many disturbances, although you might think it is easy since that is how things should be.

'The straight way can enable you to live well and enjoy life, do good for others, help those in need and leave a good name after your death. But great wealth cannot be achieved in this way.

The second way is not a straight one and is an exact contradiction to the former. People who live out their lives in dishonesty, doing ill to others and not helping those in need, die in dishonour and leave a bad name.

'Sometimes the crooked path looks easier, but in the end those who follow the first way and do good for the world and for mankind – they are the ones who remain etched in our memories for generations. These are the people who brought

culture and civilisation to the world. My last request of you children is that you follow my way.'

Father then kissed every one of us and admonished us not to repeat any of this to our mother. That Sabbath afternoon remained engraved in our minds and even now, in my old age, I carry my father's will with me. Throughout my whole life I strived to carry out his testament and if at any time I involuntarily strayed from this straight path, I beg my father and those I hurt to forgive my bad deeds. Personally, I do not remember ever having gone off the straight and narrow path, but life is a great battle and a man is not always the hero he might want to be.

When we children realised the dangers confronting us by becoming tainted by our dishonest competitors, we decided we must remember our father's words and act accordingly. Despite the bitter battle we waged for our very existence, day in and day out, we felt we had the inner strength to build a better life and on the straight path.

We realised we had to concede the battle to our competitors, who never ceased in their petty crooked acts, and decided the time had come to give up our position which Father and we had created with such hard work. There was only one way out for us – to leave Chelm and begin a new life in the wider world outside us.

As with all other problems and decisions, I felt this too had to be discussed with my teacher and mentor, Reb Avram Wolfson. He had always conducted himself towards me as a father to his son and his morality, intelligence, special qualities and guiding principles were so much like my

own father's. Although fatherless, I was in a better position than most orphans who are often led astray due to lack of guidance. I always felt that in his conduct towards me and his very speech, Reb Avram Wolfson loved me like a father loves his child.

I went to Wolfson and told him of my decision to give up the battle and capitulate to our competitors. After listening to my words Wolfson stood up, came over to me and kissed my forehead. With tears in his eyes he said, 'Shaulik, my child! To capitulate voluntarily, to hand oneself over to fate and to the higher power that leads our lives, this is one of the most beautiful deeds of which man is capable. I am entirely in agreement with your decision. However, to go out into the wide world without proper preparation for weathering life's storms is something which I, your rebbe, cannot advise and cannot allow. This must take time. We must prepare you with more learning and greater knowledge. We must prepare you in such a way that your father in his grave will not be shamed. As I see it, your situation here in Chelm is not all that bad. On the contrary, after breaking off with your partners your position is better than it was. For you personally there is no great future in the yeast trade, so we must prepare you for an external course in the local high school. Being so equipped you can go wherever you please and I will be pleased to accompany you.'

It was agreed that Wolfson should talk it over with the head of the high school who would have to grant permission for me to sit for the examinations as an external student. From what I had already learned from Wolfson I could sit with high school students of the fourth class. I had to go through an

oral examination with the teachers and then prepare myself according to their decision.

Herr Papov, the high school director, examined me personally and declared that my preparation for the eighth class would be extremely difficult. However, Director Papov and Rabbi Wolfson were sure I could manage the exams. However, I could not be allowed to sit for them as I was too young.

I began the difficult task and for the next eighteen months Wolfson prepared me for the exams. The intensity of his preparation was such that I often felt it was not I who was the external student readying for a diploma, but rather Reb Wolfson. My mother was very pleased to see me preparing for a high school diploma, though she could not imagine my purpose in applying myself so enthusiastically.

On the first day of the examinations Reb Wolfson had a conversation with me in which, among other things, he said that faith and strong will are the most important factors in life and I had no need to fear. 'In my opinion you are already prepared for the eighth class; therefore, I expect you to get gold medals for the sixth. Go in peace and come in peace.'

I sat for the exams and received three gold and two silver medals. Director Papov took me around and introduced me to all the teachers and students, presenting me as an example of an outstanding student. In my heart I knew that without Wolfson I would never have passed and everything I had done was according to his teaching and guidance. I must admit though that I had not really understood much of what I had studied.

Once again Chelm resounded with my name. On the

Shabbes after the examinations Mother made a *kiddush* for all our friends. Everyone thanked Wolfson and gave him gifts.

Everyone anticipated great achievements for me, but unfortunately I disappointed everyone. It turned out that my later life was not an easy one and my struggle for existence got harder. I always felt gratitude for all that my rabbi and guide, Reb Avram Wolfson, had done for me. Without him there would have been a void that no one could fill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Chelm was considered one of the holy *Pravoslav* cities, home to the great Holy Diocese. The rising socialist movement in Russia had not yet reached the city. Nikolai II and his numerous servants, as well as his bodyguards, knew exactly what kind of people populated the city of Chelm. In the main, the Slavic population lived in wealth and luxury and were faithful to the Czar. The greater part of the Jewish population lived in poverty and was cut off from the outside world, so they had little interest in politics.

Under these circumstances Czar Nikolai II felt it propitious to visit the Petersburg archbishop in the Chelm diocese. Nikolai, as was known, was a Russian Orthodox priest.

Arriving in Chelm, Nikolai rode along the streets in an open coach with thousands of guards from all over Russia attending him. On both sides of the roads along which he travelled stood armed soldiers of the Chelm corps, and the entire population went out into the streets to welcome the Czar. Everyone could see him close up and even touch him. I too was among the masses and stood perhaps four metres from the passing coach. With my hat in my hand I joined the crowd in screaming 'Hurray'.

The high church of Chelm was situated at the top of a hill and to reach the entrance one had to climb sixty wide, stone

steps. The Czar and an Orthodox priest climbed these steps on their knees and a special prayer was created in honor of the visit.

Because Chelm did not boast even one hotel that could receive the Czar and his entourage, he stayed overnight in the royal train. During the five days the Czar spent in Chelm he visited almost all the government institutions and military installations. Riding through the streets he seemed freer every day and, on observing the warm welcome, he soon ordered that guards be removed from the route he was travelling. People threw hundreds of request notes into his coach and always greeted him enthusiastically, while he sat in his coach smiling and answering the greetings in a friendly manner.

In honour of this visit the Lublin governor and his closest friend, our cousin Vasilkovsky, came to Chelm and participated in all the visits and receptions held in the Czar's honour. I took special notice of Vasilkovsky. As a royal advisor he wore a special uniform decorated with gold embroidery. At his side was a small sword of which only the handle could be seen. It gave the impression the sword was in his pocket. The hat he wore as government advisor was quite elegant.

Special triumphal gates for the Czar to drive through were constructed and beautifully decorated. The gates were illuminated at night and fireworks lit. Every evening the populace strolled along the streets gaping at G-d's wonders – the illumination and the fireworks.

The Czar was very pleased with his reception and before his departure he left a silver ruble for every inhabitant, adult and child. And everyone received this silver ruble.

The news of this triumphant reception of the Russian Czar in Chelm quickly reached all the corners of Russia and Poland. Understandably, it also reached the central committee of the Bund in Warsaw.

The first political 'swallow' arrived in Chelm two weeks after the Czar's visit in the form of an emissary from the Bund whose name was Comrade Yankele. He was a thin and rather emaciated young man of about twenty-eight, of medium height with slight sprouts of a yellow beard and a narrow moustache. He had a long nose, sharp black eyes and a head of long black hair, resembling photos of Karl Marx. One might suppose that when Marx lived in London he had no money for haircuts and like a lot of other socialists of that time allowed his hair to grow. I am quite sure that Yankele also had no money for barbering.

Comrade Yankele was originally from Vilna and was a very intellectual and well-read young man. Being very poor he was easily attracted to the principles of equality and freedom espoused by the Warsaw Bund and gave himself to the party heart and soul, serving on the central committee.

The central committee gave Comrade Yankele a place to live where he could also eat. He became an agitator and organised groups of Jewish labourers under the wings of the Bund, which is how he made his living.

Comrade Yankele wrote to his parents in Vilna that he was looking for proper work and living from tutoring meanwhile. However, shortly he would be bringing them pride and joy. He believed firmly in what he had written. He was sure that revolution was near and the Russian Czar Nikolai would be overthrown. To him this meant that all people would then be

free and equal. He was certain that his work in organising Jewish labourers would help free everyone, including himself.

I got to know a bit more about him during a conversation. He told us that his parents were very respectable people. His father had worked in a wholesale house selling linen and silks and there were seven children in the family, five boys and two girls. Yankele was the eldest child.

His parents had sent him to Warsaw so he could help them financially and eventually assist in marrying off his two sisters. His parents waited impatiently for this assistance, while he firmly believed he would be able to help them through his participation in changing the political system in Russia and bringing freedom and equality to all mankind.

Yankele arrived in Chelm without any money. The party had given him a train ticket and sent him on his way, assuring him that by virtue of his great efforts in freeing the masses he would not suffer. Comrade Yankele fasted all week and on Friday night and Saturday was taken home as a guest by those very people who would be destroyed by the coming revolution.

It took Yankele several months of looking around to find the poor labourers who were so badly exploited by the bourgeoisie. The Jewish bourgeoisie of Chelm consisted mainly of shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, chimney-sweeps, butchers and wagon drivers. These so called bosses may have had one helper or apprentice. Chelm also boasted a cigarette-paper factory employing forty girls and a small soda-water factory.

Comrade Yankele started his work among the young

intelligentsia, the parents of whom he hoped to destroy. After spending several weeks with these young people, one Saturday afternoon he called his first meeting, which was held in the Rubyashov forest.

About twenty young men and two girls came to the meeting in the woods. The girls were sisters, daughters of a poor Chelmite named Long Yosef. The elder girl was Esther and her sister was Hanna. Hanna came along to keep an eye on Esther, who had become politically aware, having been convinced by Yankele who had managed to prove to her that her miserable position was caused by Nikolai II and when the Czar was overthrown all mankind would be happy and free.

'Long Yosef's', as Esther was known, was her parents' oldest daughter. They were blessed with four daughters, each uglier than the next one. Long Yosef's means of existence was lowly and the family lived in dire poverty. Long Yosef, his wife and Esther worked very hard but only on one day a week and that was the Sabbath!

When the *shammes* of the Great Synagogue, Reb Eisha, stood up on the stool (which he always carried with him) in Lublin Street on Friday evenings, he raised his eyes heavenwards (as though asking the Heavens) and began to call in a loud voice, 'Into the synagogue!'; only then did Long Yosef's work begin.

The soda-water factory was a shop in a cellar in Shkolna Street. The boss was a religious Jew who did no business on the Sabbath. Before sundown on Fridays he handed a certain amount of soda water over to Long Yosef, along with several jars of various fruit concentrates that he was to sell over the Sabbath.

After the heavy meals on Friday and Saturday, the Jews of Chelm went to the soda-water cellar to get a drink from Long Yosef. One didn't pay, as it was Sabbath in the land! The cellar shop was packed with thirsty people. 'Reb Yosef, a glass of water with raspberry syrup!' or 'Estherel, four glasses of water without syrup!' and so on, endlessly. Even while the reading of the *Torah* was going on in the synagogue some Jews went to the cellar for a glass of soda water.

Right after *Havdalah* Long Yosef began running around to the drinkers to collect money for the soda water they had drunk. Coming into a house he would say, 'A good week, dear sir. You were drinking water by me today?' Some of the drinkers told him how much they had drunk while some did not. Some would say they didn't even know where he sold his soda water. Long Yosef simply accepted such answers, saying 'Business is business. There are good customers and bad ones. One pays and another does not. If everyone paid me I would be as rich as Rothschild, and he too has a lot of customers who don't pay him. Still, he does not get poorer. I live too. What can you do? If you live in exile you must thank G-d for that.'

It is no wonder that Esther was the first to be attracted to Comrade Yankele. She often cautioned him, saying, 'Yankele, watch where you are going – don't argue with the bourgeoisie. You will accomplish nothing with them. Be careful of tale-bearers.' I'm sure Esther thought such a rare person as Yankele needed a wife who would be his equal, one who could understand him.

In the Rubyashov forest Comrade Yankele climbed up a tree in order to explain his mission in Chelm to the assembled

youth. Esther stood on one side of him and Hanna on the other and it looked like the two sisters were guarding Yankele.

He addressed us with the following words:

'Friends of the proletariat!

My purpose here today is to bring you heartfelt greetings from the Jewish workers of Warsaw who have united under the flag of the Central Committee of the Warsaw Bund. Indeed, I have come from this great party which I have the honour of representing here to explain and familiarise you with the fact that Jewish and Russian masses, as well as all the labourers of the other nations of Greater Russia, have decided to throw off the mighty economic and political yoke they have carried for hundreds of years. All these people demand freedom and equality.

'Our power is so great that Czar Nikolai must give in. We will free mankind from slavery and oppression. Our strength is in unity. We demand the immediate release of all political prisoners.

'We must open a branch of the Warsaw Bund here in Chelm and it should function according to the directives of the Warsaw Central Committee. We must help defend the great Jewish masses.

'Whoever can allow himself has the duty as a Jewish worker to register himself at our branch. I turn especially to the intelligentsia who can and must accept the responsibility of preparing the Jewish masses for the coming revolution. I ask all those who are interested to come and see me personally and I thank you all for coming to this get-together.'

It is worth noting that Long Yosef's Esther constantly interrupted Comrade Yankele, reminding him to tell those assembled that it was Nikolai II who was responsible for all their troubles. She knew the refrain by heart. When Esther wanted to swear to something she said, '*Oy, Ribbono Shel Olam* [Oh, Lord of the Universe], we should as quickly get rid of Nikolai or I am not telling a lie.'

Truth to tell, we boys assembled there had no idea who Comrade Yankele meant by the 'Jewish masses' and 'Jewish proletariat' in Chelm. We knew the poor Jews of Chelm, whose only thoughts all week long were directed toward the market day or fair day next Tuesday. We also knew the shoemaker and tailoring apprentices who laboured under so-called masters with little enough to feed themselves. In any case, these so-called masters did not pay their apprentices a weekly wage. If the master was given some clothing or shoes to repair, he shared what he earned with his helper. Therefore, we understood that we were not in a position to lead any economic sanctions. But we did maintain that we must make the poor politically aware through proper education, by spreading an understanding of literature and holding readings for them.

Still, we boys were intrigued by Comrade Yankele's talk. Reb Avram Wolfson's students had no difficulty in understanding the idea of educating the masses for we were already helping Wolfson with his work of teaching the poor of Chelm.

I was interested in the cigarette-paper factory where forty girls were being exploited. I turned to Yankele after the meeting and suggested he find out what was going on

in that factory; for example, who was the owner, how old were the girls who worked there, how many hours a day they worked and what kind of salary they received.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

My experiences in Chelm are deeply engraved in my memory and I think I would be cheating the reader if I did not present a few Jewish types. These Jews did not have an influence on my education, but they did have a certain influence on my future life.

There was a certain Avram Nechaner. Whether Nechaner was his name or simply a surname, I am not sure. I do know there were no Jews in Chelm without surnames and it is possible that this Reb Avram came from a little town near Chelm called Nechan. In any case, in my memory he has remained Avram Nechaner.

Avram was a tall man with a long beard, two big eyes and a long nose. His hands were extraordinarily long and seldom washed, with very dirty nails. He wore a threadbare, very greasy black coat that was probably a hand-me-down from his great-grandfather. His coat was never buttoned and underneath one could see his ritual fringes, which were also dirty. In summer he wore a kind of hard straw hat and in winter a hat of some very heavy fabric. Because no one in Chelm had ever had the privilege of seeing Reb Avram hatless, and no hair ever showed from beneath his hat, the Jews of Chelm decided Avram had surely suffered from head lice as a child and possibly cradle cap as well. On his feet he wore a pair of shapeless boots, the odour of which could

be sensed from quite a distance. He smeared his boots with a kind of grease the peasants in the villages used for wagon wheels.

Avram Nechaner always ran around breathlessly like a locomotive, as though someone was chasing him. He made his living from lending money on percent and was therefore called a 'percentnik'.

His clients were mainly Russian officers who needed money for drinking or playing cards. Avram Nechaner took a profit of one hundred percent for three months, which meant that if someone borrowed a ruble, after three months he had to pay back two rubles.

Reb Avram did not lend his money easily. The borrower had to give a note signed by a respectable citizen of the town, one whom Avram Nechaner had to know personally. He watched over his business carefully and visited his borrowers almost daily to see that they were alive and well. He would say 'Good morning' and comment that he just happened to be passing by.

Our business entailed considerable correspondence, so my father had to be on good terms with the postal officials; and not only with them, but also with the officials of various government institutions. My father often tipped these officials with a few rubles and gave them special gifts for new year. Chelm officialdom showed my father great respect because the consuls from the Lublin province had noted that our business interests should be protected.

Once my father received a letter from the postal chief in which he wrote that he would be most grateful if my father could step into his office concerning a very important matter.

When Father arrived the postal chief, Zachar Semyanovich, shook his hand and said, 'I must beg your pardon but I can speak freely with you. After all you are a Russian, one of us.'

He continued in this vein, labouring the point that he was terribly overburdened with work. The Chelm post office served the entire surrounding area because there were no railroad connections to the many little towns in the region. Therefore everything arrived in Chelm and had to be sent out to the specific addresses with special post horses. He had two helpers who carried the title of assistant managers.

Truthfully, this was all just talk. Good and honest as Father was, he believed every word and expressed his sympathy. Finally, Zachar Semyanovich came to the point. He had decided to borrow a hundred rubles 'on percent'. The lender demanded a guarantor, a small matter, as the loan was only for three months. He wanted Father to sign the promissory note for him and pushed a blank note for two hundred rubles across the table. Father asked no questions, neither who, what or where. He signed the note, bade the postal chief farewell and went away, giving little thought to the matter. To himself he thought the chief a fine man with a sick wife and such people should be helped.

The three months' borrowing period passed and it was time to pay the note. The chief could not pay the whole two hundred rubles at once so he went to Avram Nechaner wanting to pay one hundred rubles and present a new note for two hundred rubles, to be paid three months later. Reb Avram did not agree to this proposition, claiming that each transaction had to be finalised according to the signed agreement. After that, money could be borrowed again the next day. Zachar

Semyanovich went away with nothing.

At around 4.00 pm on a Thursday afternoon, Avram Nechaner came running to my father to tell him what the postal chief wanted and his own objection to such a deal, insisting my father pay him the two hundred rubles immediately. Father told him to return on Monday, after which he would have spoken to the postal chief and settled the matter. Avram Nechaner was incensed and, turning red in murderous outrage, he ran out of our office. Kissing the *mezuzah* he screamed, 'When one signs one must pay! Low life Litvak pig!' He then told the first person he met about how the Litvak had robbed and swindled him, taking away two hundred rubles.

Father was amused by Nechaner's behaviour and resolved to see Zachar Semyanovich at his home on Sunday.

Early the next morning Avram Nechaner went to court and took out a temporary injunction which put a lien on our household goods. He might have put a lien on our business, but since yeast spoils so quickly and the trial might take several weeks that was not feasible.

Father knew nothing of this. He was sure he would have to pay the two hundred rubles on Monday, but felt he ought to speak to Zachar Semyanovich first.

When we came back from the synagogue after the Sabbath service, Father chanted the *kiddush* as usual. We had finished eating the fish and were beginning to sing *zemiros*, when the door opened. In walked Avram Nechaner in his silk frock coat and behind him came the executor and a policeman. After the executor had read the court injunction, Nechaner opened the closet and credenza and pointed out which goods

to take. The executor stepped up to do his job.

Father observed the whole spectacle with a smile. Together with us boys he continued singing *zemiros* as though all this had nothing to do with him. This annoyed the G-d-fearing percentnik very much. He came closer to the table and screamed loudly that my father, the swindler, had taken his two hundred rubles and was now eating from his money.

At that moment my mother came out of the kitchen with a tureen of soup and behind her came our maid Marianne with a bowl of noodles. When Mother attempted to reach her place at Father's right, Nechaner gave her a shove and she fell. The tureen broke and half the soup spilled onto Avram's silk frock coat. Seeing what was going on, Marianna took the whole bowl of noodles and threw it at Avram's face, where the noodles stuck to his beard. Then she ran to help Mother get up, as at the time she was pregnant with my little brother.

Father and the rest of us continued singing *zemiros*. My older brother Itzik was then a strong and healthy man of sixteen. He turned to Avram and gave him two resounding slaps. Mother screamed, 'Police!' as Marianne began scolding the executor, the policeman and Nechaner. She opened the door and ordered them to leave because if they did not she would scald them with boiling water.

The first to leave was the executor and the policeman followed him. Avram was helped on his way by a kick from Itzik. What a sorry sight he was with his soup-stained frock coat and a full beard of noodles. Father continued singing *zemiros* as though nothing untoward was happening in our house.

When I later asked Father why he had sat so indifferently

and not reacted, he replied that a person who set out to disturb the holy Sabbath would be punished by G-d. Had he himself answered Avram by word or deed, he would not have behaved any better than him. Father assured me that the executor would get his judgment, the policeman would be transferred to another place and Avram Nechaner would get what he deserved. The whole thing was an ordinary affair and would be settled after the holy Sabbath. He told my brother Itzik that physical violence was not a Jewish attribute. One must show respect to an older person and not raise one's hands against him.

My father gave the postal chief two hundred rubles to pay Nechaner. My mother made a complaint against Nechaner in court, claiming physical insult, but when Nechaner gave two hundred rubles to the poorhouse she withdrew her complaint.

The final upshot was that the executor and policeman were transferred to a small town outside Chelm. Avram Nechaner had to give away two hundred rubles to the poorhouse and it cost my father two hundred rubles. The Jews of Chelm maintained that my father had handled the whole thing as a fine upstanding gentleman.

Afterwards Father called Shmuel the Short and warned him not to interfere and to leave Avram Nechaner alone. He told us children that *zemiros* should not be interrupted and the bad are punished by G-d. When I pointed out that we hadn't had our soup and noodles, and that the bandit had made Mother cry, Father replied that Mother could settle her own affairs. Next *Shabbes* we would ask her to make a double portion of soup and noodles – one portion to be served after the fish and the second after the meat.

The postal chief never even acknowledged that Father had given him two hundred rubles to pay his debt, but Father was pleased despite what it had cost him. Avram got nothing and the poorhouse was richer by two hundred rubles.

One should realise that the percentnik Avram Nechaner was not the type of usurer portrayed by William Shakespeare in his *Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare had never seen a Shylock. His fantasy and its surroundings may have brought him as far as Athens and Rome, and his Shylock may stem from this. The truth is that Shylock is a fiction. Jews have never extracted their pound of flesh, nor had anything to do with blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The owner of the cigarette-paper factory in Chelm was a Jew named Chaim Yossel. The factory made very good cigarette papers copied from the best made at that time which came from the Davan factory in Russia. He used the same paper, the same wooden boxes containing 250 papers, and even the same bands. One had to be quite an expert to tell the difference. The government taxed the paper and whoever paid the taxes could use it. The cigarette maker in Chelm boasted that he only used Davan's paper wrapper and tried to make customers feel that Chaim Yossel's papers were not so great.

There were thirty manually operated machines in Chaim Yossel's factory and the girls worked very quickly. Chaim Yossel walked around the factory from morning to night making sure the girls wasted no time. For those times the factory was quite modern in its set-up. The girls who worked there ranged from ten to sixteen years of age and were exploited terribly.

The factory occupied a considerable area. A bell hung from a block and Reb Chaim Yossel himself rang that bell at 7.30 am, again at noon and finally at about 8.00 or 9.00 pm. All this depended on Chaim Yossel and when he felt like ending the working day.

As you can see, Chaim Yossel had a well-organised sweatshop that made a good product and a lot of money for him. But he did not have many good friends in Chelm. However, he had a respectable place in the synagogue, got the most honourable *aliyot* and was considered 'a good Jew'. His business had carried on undisturbed until Yankele of the Bund arrived in Chelm.



We stood at the factory gate waiting for the workers to leave, then approached them and asked them how much they earned and how many hours they worked. Later we went to see their parents and spoke with them, trying to make them understand that we wanted to help improve working conditions at the factory; the girls should receive higher wages and work fewer hours. A good number of the parents did not want to believe we could accomplish anything. 'By that blood-sucker you will never get more money for fewer hours,' they said. Others replaced the word 'blood-sucker' with 'bandit'.

After acquainting ourselves with the work conditions, our next task was to call a meeting of the factory workers on Saturday afternoon. We decided the meeting should be held in the Rubyashov forest.

Ten- and eleven-year-olds might be able to work in a factory, but going to a meeting is a different matter, so we decided to invite the parents as well. Many people came and the meeting was a success. There was a stormy discussion and a committee was chosen which included Comrade

Yankele, David Wohrhaftig and me. We decided to present Chaim Yossel with the following conditions:

A hundred percent increase in wages

No more than ten hours in a working day

On Friday work should end at 2.00 pm

The formation of a workers' committee

The committee should be authorised to bargain with Chaim Yossel in the name of all the factory workers

Those working at machines should only perform labour connected to the making of cigarette papers

For work not connected with making cigarette papers, Chaim Yossel must hire older men or women

All new workers must be hired at the same wage as the old workers

Three days a year are due to each worker as paid rest days

The new wage scale had to be paid one month retrospectively

The committee had to present these demands to Chaim Yossel and discuss the whole thing with him. It was easy to say 'present Chaim Yossel with the demands and discuss the whole thing with him', but he didn't want to see us and did not allow us into his factory. He used to say that G-d himself couldn't interfere in his dealings with the workers.

Comrade Yankele could not rest. He notified the central committee of the Bund in Warsaw, which sent Chaim Yossel a letter warning him that if he wanted to prevent bloodshed, he had better receive the workers' chosen committee.

When Chaim Yossel received the letter he went immediately to the *dayan*, Reb Benyamin, to ask his advice on how to handle the matter. At that point Chelm was waking up to the fact that something was brewing. There were also rumours from Lublin and Warsaw intimating that the Bund was a Jewish socialist organisation.

Reb Benyamin had also heard all these new rumblings and tried to make Chaim Yossel understand that it was something like a *Din Torah*, though with some differentiation. It would hardly be respectable to pay heed to what the committee had to say. After all, he could fire them all and hire new workers. 'On the other hand, Reb Chaim Yossel,' said the *dayan*, 'we live in such a time that it may be more prudent not to start up with such a gang. Go. Listen to what they want, write it down and come back to me. Then we'll talk it through.'

Comrade Yankele had agreed that we, the committee, would go to Chaim Yossel the next day and present the demands of the workers.

It was two o'clock on a Monday afternoon when our delegation came into Chaim Yossel's home. He received us in a room where he would sometimes peruse his books, though it was not exactly an office. A chair and table stood in the middle, covered in scattered papers. The dust flew around. There were also various cigarette wrappers and old machines, and the one little window was hung with cigarette paper.

Chaim Yossel was a little man. He wore glasses which were always falling off and he was constantly picking them up. He had a trimmed black beard and from behind his glasses shone a pair of angry eyes. He sat in his caftan with a

skullcap on his head, spoke very slowly and tended to stutter, so that he repeated most words two or three times before he was understood.

We all had to remain standing in the reception room because there was no place to sit down. Pushing up his glasses he called out to us, 'So, you are the committee. What do you want, fellows?'

Comrade Yankele answered him. 'We are not 'fellows'; we were chosen as delegates by the workers in your factory.'

'So,' said Chaim Yossel. 'My workers? Who gave them the right to appoint you? Me, they don't have to ask?'

'You'll excuse us, Reb Chaim Yossel,' said Comrade Yankele. 'This concerns bettering your workers' conditions. This is all in their interest.'

This was too much for Chaim Yossel and he stuttered all the more. 'How do you come to my workers? What business do you have with my workers? Which evil spirit possessed you to settle the ills of the world? Any one of my workers who is not satisfied can come and talk to me. I am the boss here. Do you understand?'

David Wohrhaftig pointed out, 'The whole thing, Reb Chaim Yossel, is not as simple as you think. It would be better to discuss the whole thing.'

'Ho ho!' said Chaim Yossel. 'Not simple – only with bells!'

'Reb Chaim Yossel,' I said, having already lost patience. 'We haven't come here to carry on witty conversations. If you want to tell jokes, go elsewhere. We have come to inform you of your workers' demands in the name of the

central committee of the Bund.' I then handed him the carefully written demands, adding that if he did not accede to our demands within the next three days we would lead his factory workers on a strike. And he would have to pay for the days they were on strike.

Chaim Yossel spluttered in anger, 'And – if-if-if-n-n-not?'

Comrade Yankele answered him. 'If not, your workers will go out on strike on Thursday at 3.00 pm. You, Reb Chaim Yossel, will make sure they have food for the Sabbath. Don't worry, the workers will have a nice Sabbath while striking and you will pay for it.'

'Come, comrades,' Yankele called to us. 'We have not got more to say to this bourgeois. Good day, Reb Chaim Yossel.'

It was easy to say 'Come, comrades', but Reb Chaim Yossel and his big black dog Jenny seemed to have the upper hand. She was waiting for us at the door and panting away, seeming eager for her master's command to tear us to pieces.

In those days I feared nothing, but that dog Jenny terrified me, especially since Reb Chaim Yossel, like the mean person he was, seemed to have provided himself with an even meaner hound. I don't know what my friends from the delegation felt. David Wohrhaftig was a small boy and the same age as me and Comrade Yankele was physically a very weak young man. I think he feared that dog as much as I did. However, as a workers' delegation I felt we had to set ourselves above a dog. I yelled out, 'Reb Chaim, take away that dog and let us out. If not the dog will be shot.'

As soon as Reb Chaim Yossel heard the word 'shot' he remembered the *dayan*'s words: 'It may be more prudent not to start up with them'. He screamed at the dog to come to

him and then we left.

We decided that if we did not get an answer from Reb Chaim Yossel within three days, we would call a strike at the factory. It would be the first strike in Chelm.

We let the workers know about our visit with Chaim Yossel and our decision to call a strike in three days' time. The signal for the strike would come from the bell in the factory yard at noon, when Chaim Yossel rang the bell once. But when the workers heard three rings, one after the other, they were to get up immediately and leave the factory. The strike would begin from that moment. They need have no fear or worry because behind them stood the united workers' organisations of Russia and Poland, the central committee of the Bund of Warsaw.

We explained to every single worker that power lay only in unity. The Bund was a mighty organisation that took revenge upon strike-breakers who were considered traitors to the working class.

The strike committee gave me the job of announcing the strike. If we received no answer within three days I was to enter the factory at noon and ring the bell three times. David Wohrhaftig and Comrade Yankele were to stand outside the gate and guard me from any untoward tragedy or an evil eye.

As soon as we left his house Reb Chaim Yossel went directly to the *dayan,* Reb Benyamin, and threw our beautifully written demands on the table, saying 'Here you have it, Rebbe. This is what comes of talking to scamps. Do you know what they demand? Why, if I gave in to half of what they are asking, my wife and children and I would have to go begging from house to house!'

'My goodness, Reb Chaim Yossel!' screamed the *dayan*. 'Do you think that whatever these scamps say is the holy of holies? Thank G-d there is still a police force in Chelm and Czar Nikolai II still has something to say. Even though we are in exile, the Lord of the Universe will not neglect us and will not deliver us into the hands of a barefoot bunch. You and your household will not have to go begging. What, for example, would happen if we were to let the police know the names of the organisers? These so-called delegates would be thrown into jail with the rest of the rowdies. No more strike and you are rid of the problem.'

Chaim Yossel's heart felt lighter and he wondered why that idea had not occurred to him. 'That's a brilliant suggestion. Tomorrow I will give the police the names of the delegates and let them do what they please with them.'

Doubtless the reader remembers that the *dayan*'s first suggestion was to listen to the delegates and he even compared the matter to a *Din Torah*. However, when Reb Benyamin heard that Chaim Yossel might be reduced to begging, his Jewish quality of mercy was aroused. In Chelm at the time there was a virtual epidemic of Jews who went begging from house to house. How would it look if a respectable Jew who sat at the Eastern wall of the synagogue were to join them? Therefore, the best solution was the police. So while we were waiting for an answer, Chaim Yossel was following the *dayan*'s advice and handing our names to the police.

Comrade Yankele informed the central committee of the Bund in Warsaw of our preparations for the strike. They promised him help in the form of both money and people already specialised in strike work. Comrade Yankele himself

could hardly have accomplished very much and was more of a political propagandist.

We delegates awaited repercussions from the police. Being young boys, David Wohrhaftig and I were not very afraid of them, but we had to find a hiding place for Comrade Yankele where the police could not find him. We found a place where the police would never think of looking.

The third day came and Reb Chaim Yossel had not given us an answer. At twelve noon I went to the bell, rang it three times and left. The workers left immediately and the cigarette paper factory was strike-bound.

I went to Reb Avram Wolfson and told him the whole story. 'Indeed,' said Wolfson, 'you have become a socialist, and in Chelm! Truly, you should not have done this, but since you did, your place is no longer in Chelm. If you want to aid the socialist movement you should be in a bigger city where they won't bother boys. Here in Chelm the police still don't know about the democratic and socialist movements and might arrest you and Wohrhaftig. You must go away and not sleep at home. We'll send you to Warsaw in a few days' time.'

As always I followed Wolfson's plan. Meanwhile, we decided that I would live by the house of the dumb water-carrier. Wolfson made arrangements with his wife, and he and his wife agreed to arrange a place for me in their woodshed and keep me until I left Chelm. We knew the water-carrier and his wife well, because he brought us and Wolfson our water. We had confidence in them.

My mother and the Wohrhaftigs found out about the whole thing. David was also hidden away. That same night

the police came looking for us both in our homes.

Wolfson talked it over with Shmuel the Short and they decided to send me away in a special coach to Reivitz, forty miles from Chelm. The gendarme at the train station knew Shmuel well and there would be no danger from him. Comrade Yankele was hidden by a Russian priest with leftist leanings.

Meanwhile, the central committee of the Bund in Warsaw sent three specialists who took over the leadership of the strike. By letter, the central committee let Chaim Yossel know that he was playing with fire. On their second day in Chelm a small bomb exploded in the yard of Chaim Yossel's factory and broke the bell. At that point he realised that his workers were not alone and began to negotiate with the delegates.

The conference with the delegates took place at the home of the *dayan*, Reb Benyamin. After two weeks of negotiations Chaim Yossel gave in to all the demands we had cited.

The first strike in Chelm was won without bloodshed. As I learned later, Reb Chaim Yossel did not have to go begging from house to house and died wealthy, and for the first time in their lives his workers received their due.

You can imagine my farewell to my mother when it was time for me to leave Chelm. Shmuel the Short and my Rabbi Wolfson accompanied me to Reivitz. David Wohrhaftig and his mother travelled with us and from Reivitz he went on to Petersburg where his grandfather lived.

In Reivitz, Shmuel the Short arranged with the conductor of the baggage wagon that he should take me into his wagon, where he kept his documents, and get me safely to Warsaw.

It is fifty-eight years ago since these events took place and

I can still see Shmuel the Short and my teacher Reb Avram Wolfson as they pressed my hands with tears in their eyes. Wolfson's last words to me were, 'Go in good health and may success be yours.'

The conductor found me a place, for which he received a silver ruble, and the train began to move. And so I arrived in Warsaw in the year 1904.



Shaul Rogowoj, c. 1924

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

On arriving in Warsaw I got off the train and went to see the city. Understandably, no one was waiting for me at the station. I wandered through streets where lived tens of thousands of Jews, with a small satchel in my hand. I didn't have much money because my mother was sure I would be living with my older brother Chaim, who was married and had two children. (How he came to be living in Warsaw is another story.) My desire for independence and my view that I belonged to the world, and the world belonged to me, dictated that I not get in touch with my brother and make my own way in Warsaw.

I had some money for food but somewhere to sleep was a problem. Finding a place in the Jewish neighbourhood was full of hidden dangers because the guards and police were forever searching.

During the day the main streets, Nalevkas, Moranavska, Franciskaner and Genshe, were full of Jews and it was a problem to negotiate them because one got the impression that everyone was running somewhere. People jostled each other constantly. And so it went until it got dark and a man with a long stick turned on the gas lights. The streets gradually emptied until I was left all by myself.

I returned to the train station, sat down on a bench and

fell asleep. I was not the only one, as there were many lost, lonely and homeless souls like me, the difference being that they were in their twenties and thirties. The train station was a kind of hostel where such people could rest their weary bones and prepare them to join the rushing throngs the next day.

I slept at the station for two nights. On the third night my new home was patrolled by a different gendarme who probably could not sleep at night (the former one went to sleep at midnight) and began to clean up the station. The older people had no personal documents, so he arrested them. He simply kicked me in the seat of my pants and threw me out into the street at 2.00 am.

Out in the street all was still. Military patrols marched around with loaded rifles, but they didn't bother me except to joke, 'Where to young man, so late!' To which I replied, 'Just arrived and on my way home.'

By following the streetcar tracks I arrived at Makarov, about three miles from the train station that had come to feel like home.

Slowly the streets came to life again with Jews selling newspapers and hot bagels. The dealers who bought old clothes, boxes and empty bottles screamed out in the courtyards for merchandise and everyone was trying to make a living. It seemed I was the only one who was tired out and heading slowly for my 'home' in the train station. If I stopped someone on the way and began to ask, 'Excuse me, perhaps you could ...' I was immediately rebuffed with 'Leave me alone! I have no time!' And so I returned to the train station.

All around the station were screaming people running

back and forth. When I finally found a place to sit down and rest, a Jewish man with a long beard and lively eyes approached me, saying, 'Boy, where are you going?'

The man's smiling face appealed to me and I replied, 'Going? I am not going anywhere. I'm a stranger and I've come here to rest.'

'What do you mean, a stranger?' asked the man. 'And you are going to rest in the train station? I don't understand you.'

'I have no home and know no one,' I said.

'No, that won't do. Have you eaten?'

'I'm not hungry,' I answered. 'I'm just sleepy.'

'What does this mean, a strange boy in Warsaw, a city with hundreds of thousands of Jews and he should sleep in a train station together with drunkards? Where do you think you are, in Sodom? Wait here a few minutes and you will go home with me. You'll get washed and rest. I can see you are a good boy. What kind of a place is this for you?'

A few minutes later the Jew returned, took me by the hand and said he lived not far away. On the way he questioned me about my parents and when he heard I was an orphan he was terribly upset. 'Oh my G-d!' he called out. 'What does this mean? Is there no mercy in Israel? I don't understand.'

On the way he introduced himself as Chaim Laib. 'Wait, wait,' he said. 'My Sarah'le will hear this and go crazy. The train station a home for a Jewish orphan! You are going to live with us.'

Chaim Laib was a tall man and walked with his legs wide apart as though all of Warsaw belonged to him. He talked unceasingly, repeating many times, 'Where did one ever hear

of such a thing – a train station a home for a Jewish orphan!'

Finally, we arrived at his home in the Volkva Market on Franciskaner Street. The house was on the first floor and consisted of one room without a floor. When we entered my new home Chaim Laib's youngest daughter, a girl of about twelve, was spreading sand where the floor should have been. There were two beds and a chest with four drawers in the room. Between the two beds a curtain was drawn which divided the room into two parts, one for men and one for women.

Chaim Laib had four children: two girls and two boys. The older girl, who was fourteen, worked in a factory making metal buttons. She stood by a pressing machine that produced thousands of buttons daily. Both boys also worked. The older boy, who was eighteen, worked as a helper in a lamp business and the younger one was learning how to sew the uppers of shoes. Sarah'le worked at selling vegetables in the market and Chaim Laib was a carrier at the train station. He carried things for people without charging special fees, while one had to tip the conductor and the gendarme. Chaim Laib worked very carefully and honestly and everyone trusted him.

Besides his own family, Chaim Laib had two boarders: a girl, Hannah'le, and a young man, Motel.

Hannah'le was a sympathetic young girl with a head of black hair. She talked endlessly and the whole world owed her a living. 'People are worse than animals,' she would say. She was studying to be a dentist and, meanwhile, she occupied herself with improving the world. Her father sent her a few rubles every month to live on. By day she learned

to pull teeth and at night she went to meetings of the social democrats to remake the social order. 'Comrade Shaul,' she would say to me, 'the working class is a poor and unknowing mass. We must free them from their chains and their misery.'

Motel was a tall, thin young man who looked as though he was sick with tuberculosis. He often coughed, claiming it was nothing and would soon pass. He was a party member of the Bund, worked in a book store and earned five rubles a month, on which he lived. He was about twenty-five years old and very intellectual. Motel had come to Warsaw from a small town, having run away to avoid serving in the army. He felt secure at Chaim Laib's because no one came to search there. No one else lived in the market besides Chaim Laib's family and their boarders and Sarah'le herself opened the market gates every day.

When Chaim Laib introduced me to his wife she called out, '*Oy vay iz mir* [Oh dear], that such a child is allowed to roam the world by himself!' She only calmed down when I explained that I had run away from home, and why.

When all of us gathered together in the evening to eat, Sarah'le was bursting with pride. We sat around the table on beds and boxes while we ate and after the meal we carried on heated discussions until late at night. When it was time to sleep Sarah'le pulled the curtain and lo! – there were two bedrooms, one for men and one for women.

Sarah'le slept in one bed with her two daughters and Hannah'le. Chaim Laib, his two sons, Motel and I slept in the other bed. I don't know how the women arranged themselves, but we men had this arrangement: Chaim Laib's two sons and I slept on one side of the bed and Motel,

because of his cough, slept on the other side with Chaim Laib. They both had long legs which often strayed in their sleep until they were on our faces. Chaim Laib's younger son and I often allowed our feet to wander to such sensitive spots that Chaim Laib shuddered and uttered a deep groan. Much later I realised that he suffered from a hernia which was why he walked with his legs spread wide as though all Warsaw belonged to him.

My new-found friends represented a new world to me. They were simple people, honest and good. I especially enjoyed our discussions that lasted deep into the night. Only Sarah'le went to bed early because she had to rise before dawn to open the market. When she was not able to fall asleep she yelled from behind the curtain, 'Enough, enough of your talk! It's time to sleep. Let your enemies talk for you!' If not for her we probably would have talked all through the night.

Chaim Laib played the role of mediator in our discussions. He had leftist tendencies and would overthrow Nikolai and then empower him again. We did not quite know what to do with the Poles and knew we would have great problems with them, because according to our group the Poles never wanted to hear of international brotherhood and were always calling for Polish independence. Thus we prepared ourselves for the great day when the working class of Russia and Poland would be free.

Meanwhile there was the problem of finding work for me. I helped the younger daughter pour sand on the floor and helped Sarah'le carry and arrange the boxes of vegetables in the market. I also swept the 'barracks', which is what Hannah'le called our home. Chaim Laib insisted I rest

and recover my strength, after which he would find some occupation for me. And so a week passed.

One evening some of our little 'Soviet', as we thought of ourselves, posed the question of my working. Chaim Laib banged on the table, saying that he had found me and brought me to his home and he would be the one to find me work.

Next day Chaim Laib told me he had decided to take me into his business; I was to become a carrier at the train station, would earn fifty kopeks a night and work twice a week. Afterwards – well, time would tell. 'Meanwhile, you have to acquaint yourself with the streets of Warsaw so as to know where to go and see what is going on,' he said.

As I sat in the train on the way to Warsaw, I had promised myself that I would do anything – whatever came my way – in order to be independent. I decided that under no circumstances would I go to my brother who had been married for twelve years and happened to be very well established in Warsaw. So it is no wonder that Chaim Laib's suggestion appealed to me. It catered to my fantasy that in a few years I could have my own delivery service and employ a number of workers.

The agents lived in Jewish hostels on Navelsk Street. All day they ran around buying up goods for the storekeepers in the little towns and bringing those goods to the hostels. Every merchant had two trusted people like Chaim Laib, so-called carriers, who packed the goods into large baskets, tied them with heavy cord and transported them on heavily laden wagons to the train station twice a week. These trains left Warsaw later than other trains, half an hour after midnight, in order to avoid the controllers, who seldom bothered to come to the train station late at night. Only Jews travelled on these

trains with their agents' baskets.

And so I went to work. The first time I approached a wagon with a heavy basket on my back I confronted a gendarme who apparently had not been informed that I had joined the carrier's 'family'. Without a word he gave me a kick that knocked me over onto the tracks. Luckily, I was small and fell on top of the basket and not right on the tracks.

I gradually got accustomed to my new occupation, to the heavy baskets and to the gendarmes. In the matter of a few days I carried ten baskets and distributed them among several wagons. The agent Shaul Dicker was very pleased with my work and amazed at my quickness. As an expression of his pleasure he paid me a ruble per night rather than the agreed fifty kopeks.

When Sarah'le, Hannah'le and Motel heard about my new occupation they registered a sharp protest. Sarah'le cried out that such hard work would render me a cripple. Hannah'le and Motel told Chaim Laib that one dare not make such a young boy into a carrier. Hannah'le felt I should be learning a trade and said, 'It's time that the working class attracted intelligent and perceptive young labourers.'

The discussion about me became quite heated and in the end Chaim Laib had to concede. Our collective decided that Chaim Laib would hire me out as a learner to a cobbler for three years without pay. For this I would get food and a place to sleep and after three years I would become an apprentice.

One didn't have to wait long for Chaim Laib because his word was as good as his deed. Two days later I found myself with Avraham Kamashen-Shteper on a third floor on Moranaver Street. I began my occupation as learner

according to the conditions laid down by Chaim Laib and the boss, Avraham Kamashen-Shteper.

So ended my career as a carrier for the agents at the Nadvishlansker train depot.

In spite of the crowded and poor conditions, my life with Chaim Laib and Sarah'le could be considered the best days of my entire youth. The everlasting discussions that went late into the night were particularly vivid and meaningful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

My work as a learner consisted of providing breakfast for the apprentices in the morning. For one I brought half a herring, three rolls and a radish; for another, sour milk with blueberries; for a third, dark bread with half a pound of salami. In that way I ran up and down the three flights of stairs. The boss's wife took me along with her when she went shopping in the market so I could carry the baskets. For me, the worst part of the job was carrying down the slop basin. The building had no indoor plumbing.

The boss's wife was a nasty woman and didn't let me rest for a minute, from 7.00 am to 10.00 or 11.00 pm.

I found the work so disgusting that after five days of learning at the cobblers, I went back to my old home at Chaim Laib's on Friday evening and declared that a trade that begins with the carrying of slop pails was not for me. I would return to the train depot and carry baskets. Six classes at the *gymnasium* and shoemaking were no combination, I told Hannah, referring to her comment on the working class and its need for intelligent labourers.

On hearing that I had credits for six classes of high school, Motel wanted to know why I had not told them this before. I replied that no one had asked me. 'In that case, you will

work together with me at the bookstore at 6 Nalevkes Street. It is a big business and it just happens that they need a boy who can write and knows something of Russian literature. So, Shaulik, you remain with us.' I replied that I would stay with them, in any case.

On Sunday morning I accompanied Motel to the bookstore and was hired to take over the Russian section. The bookstore was also a lending library. Readers could borrow a book, read it and return it the next day in order to take out another book. Among the Russian intelligentsia of that time, the desire to read was so great that many readers returned day after day to find something new to read. The works of Maxim Gorky and Andreyev were particularly popular. There was a constant demand for these and other liberal writers' works. Understandably, in order to recommend a good book I had to keep up with the latest literature.

I met the most prominent leaders of the Russian and Polish Social Democratic Party in the bookstore and lending library. They brought forbidden literature in, which gave me the opportunity to acquaint myself with the program and platform of the party. Back at the 'barracks' we held heated discussions into the wee hours about the programs of the Bund and the Social Democrat Party. The Social Democrats appealed to me and Hannah'le was in seventh heaven when she heard this. She even got me invitations to their meetings. At these I heard speakers and orators who spoke beautifully and logically. I saw people of intelligence and education. Jews and Russians came, but not Poles.

There were no language problems and one could speak Yiddish, Russian or Polish. Some speakers spoke only

Russian; others only Yiddish, and their relations were quite friendly. People seemed like brothers and sisters, like one family. At these get-togethers I got a completely different impression of the meaning of 'freeing humanity'. In other words, I felt at home among the Social Democrats.

Meanwhile I continued to attend Bund meetings where I met with comrades Yankele had told me to see. Their meetings took place on Djika Street, where the bourse was located. Talking and distributing proclamations in which the Bund called for all to join in the struggle went on every night and even the leaders of the Bund participated in this constant march, which seemed to me like a mobilisation. Every minute one heard another order: 'Comrades, do not stand still!' 'Go faster!' 'Go slower!' 'Walk on the other side!' 'Don't push, comrades!' and other such banal admonitions. The masses seemed to be moving and me along with them.

My friend Motel pointed out their leader.

'Do you see, Shaulik? That is the great one himself. What a personality!'

'But what does he do?' I asked.

'Oh, don't ask. No matter, he works twenty-four hours a day. He's an angel,' said Motel.

'But Motel, a person has to sleep. If he does not sleep he is not a person,' I said.

'Leave me alone!' snapped Motel. 'You don't understand our movement.'

'What is there to understand?' I queried. 'We all want the same thing – we want freedom!'

'Yes, yes,' said Motel. 'One wonders what kind of

freedom we really want. Hershel our leader knows what we need, what we are looking to do for the broad Jewish masses and for the Jewish proletariat.'

'But Motel,' I said, 'why must it be such a secret?'

'Silly boy!', said Motel. 'Who do you want him to tell? Perhaps you? You, who are loaded with bourgeois psychology.'

I replied, 'That means, Motel, that because my mother handles yeast I don't belong to the general community. And if your father has a grocery store in Radom, aren't you loaded with bourgeois psychology? For whom do we want this freedom? Perhaps it is only for those whom Comrade Hershel can boss around, telling them to 'go there' or 'go there' and 'don't push!' No, Motel, your Hershel is not concerned with freeing the masses. He is simply preparing himself to replace Nikolai and continue to boss everyone. And you and I will remain bourgeois sons. No, Motel, I do not like it.'

Once, Comrade Yankele's friends invited me to a meeting where I saw and heard the leaders of the Bund. Aside from one young man, Comrade Itzik, who spoke with more emotion than logic, the whole affair seemed like child's play. Many times I heard the slogans, 'Down with the bourgeoisie!' (apparently that meant Motel and me), 'Down with slavery!', 'Long live the Bund!' and other such. It seemed to me that such 'sloganeering' belonged to mass meetings and not to party get-togethers. The affair did not interest me particularly and my soul was drawn even more to the Social Democrats.

Among the Bundists I had suddenly become a bourgeois son. Among the Social Democrats I learned a lot and received

recognition as a freedom fighter. What I had seen at the Bund impressed me as a personal battle between Comrade Hershel and the Russian Czar Nikolai II.

When the discussion began in our 'barracks' in the evening, I presented my views of the Bund and the Social Democrats. Even Sarah'le and Chaim Laib felt I was right in that freedom had to be for everyone. Chaim Laib commented that if my mother traded in yeast and his wife, Sarah'le, traded in vegetables and they were therefore considered bourgeoisie, then he didn't think much of Hershel, nor of Motel, nor of the whole Bund.

The truth of the matter is that Chaim Laib did not understand the issues involved and Motel simply repeated what he had heard from others. Comrade Hershel was not the Bund and probably didn't even understand their programs. Personally, the Bund leaders of that time did not appeal to me. I was looking for a higher and more intellectual leadership with a disciplined struggle that could be felt by all, not just the workers marching up and down Djika Street. They wandered around like lost sheep searching for a shepherd. I wanted a party with a different structure.

Hannah'le simply fell in love with me. 'Shaulik,' she said, 'you have seen the light!' She introduced me to the secretary of the Social Democrat Party and I became a member.



Herman and Balbintska Rogowoj, Bolek and Lola, 1925

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I continued to live with Chaim Laib and enjoy late night discussions when the family gathered together.

One morning my older brother Chaim walked into the bookstore where I worked. Someone had told him I was there. With him was my uncle Menachem Nachum Shapiro. My brother threw his arms around me and announced that he would take me away from there that very night.

As the eldest son, Chaim had become a kind of substitute father after our father's death. Not having heard anything from me, my mother had sent letters and telegrams to my brother every day, telling him he must find me and if he could not she would come to Warsaw herself. 'What does this mean?' she wrote in her letters. 'I send you a child and you don't even interest yourself. You should be ashamed to call yourself my son and Shaulik's older brother!'

By that time my brother was already known as Herman. Having no idea what the letters were all about, at first my brother told my mother I was not in Warsaw. Then he received a letter from Reb Avram Wolfson in which he wrote that he himself had accompanied me to the train and I was surely in Warsaw. 'It is your duty,' wrote Wolfson, 'to find Shaulik. As his oldest brother you must fill his father's place.'

Herman then went to our uncle Menachem Nachum

Shapiro to ask for advice. At this juncture it is interesting to acquaint the reader with my uncle. For many long years I did not know how we were related and it was only after my mother came to Warsaw that she explained the relationship.

Menachem Nachum's wife, my aunt Rachel, was my father's sister's daughter from my grandfather's first wife. She studied in Moscow, where she made the acquaintance of Menachem Nachum and married him. So that is how he became my uncle.

Shapiro was a Russian Jew born in Moscow and he was about forty-five when I met him. He was tall with laughing eyes and a short, dark-brown beard. In winter he wore a beautiful fur coat with a beaver collar; in summer, a fine suit and hat. He always walked with a cane – with a silver handle, or course. He was a religious Jew and served as a *gabbai* in the synagogue.

He came to live in Warsaw because in 1880 the Russian government drove all the Jews out of Moscow. At that time Menachem and his father, Boris Yapimovich (Berl, son of Chaim), worked in one of the largest transport businesses in Moscow, where his father held the position of managing director and his son was a member of the directorate.

The decree concerning the expulsion of the Jews from Moscow was a very complicated one. Among its various by-laws was one that said a Jew who worked in an industry connected to the state's security could remain in the city with his wife and minor children. However, children over the age of twenty-one had to leave. Menachem Nachum's father had to arrange a special 'right to remain' for himself, and Menachem Nachum had to leave Moscow. The firm then

decided to open a branch in Warsaw and Menachem Nachum became the director.

My brother found me in the bookstore with help from Menachem Nachum and the Chaim agents. That same night he took me to his home and telegraphed my mother, assuring her I was alive and well.

I took my brother to Chaim Laib to inform him I would be going to live with Herman. When my brother wanted to pay Chaim Laib for the time I had lived there, both Sarah'le and Chaim Laib categorically refused, considering it an insult. 'What do you mean?' asked Sarah'le of my brother. 'Are we some kind of low life? Thank G-d, we have children too and we know very well what it means to be a child.'

The first to bid me farewell was Chaim Laib, saying the door would always be open for me. Hannah'le fell all over me, kissing me and begging me to promise I would come and visit often. I promised. Motel began to cough and asserted that he had been right when he said I was a bourgeois son. He wanted to know if I would continue at my job because, after all, he had served as my guarantor to the owner.

My goodbye to Sarah'le was particularly emotional. When I told her that my mother was also named Sarah, she called out to Chaim Laib: 'Do you hear this? His mother is also called Sarah and until now, he never told us!'

'Don't yell so,' said Chaim Laib. 'Whether he likes it or not he is still one of ours.' He turned to my brother and said, 'Make a *mensch* out of him. Serve him as a father and a brother.' Then he turned again to Sarah'le and said, 'I'm off to work.' He put on his robe and left the house.

I took my valise and left with my brother, with tears in

my eyes. Having to part with the family and friends, even with Motel who considered me such a bourgeois fellow, was a terrible wrench for me. I had a pure whole-hearted love for these simple good people and visited them often.

In later years I considered it my duty to bring presents to all of them and until today I still mourn for Hannah'le, who believed with complete faith in the freeing of mankind but did not live to see it. Poor Motel did not live even twenty-five years before he died of tuberculosis. Chaim Laib and Sarah'le lived to middle age and died in the hope that their children would live to see the liberation of humanity.

And so ended the first phase of my time in the Jewish city of Warsaw. Since then I have travelled all over the world, but have found no place so vital and fascinating a Jewish existence as in Warsaw. Wherever there is vibrant Jewishness it probably owes something to the legacy of Polish-Russian Jewry, a legacy that serves as a way of life for Jews the world over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

That very night I went to my brother's house and met my sister-in-law, Balbintska (Bayla in Yiddish). My sister-in-law spoke only Polish, which I did not know at that time. She spoke Polish not because she did not know Yiddish, but because she had decided that was the way it ought to be. Her father, Reb Laib Hershaft, was a tall man with a long white beard that seemed to trail after him. Her mother was short, wore a large wig on her head and I don't believe she knew even a word of Polish.

My sister-in-law had six sisters and two brothers who lived on Navinyarska Street. My brother lived on Leshno Street. Reb Laib Hershaft had a clothing factory on Shventayerska Street. All these streets were populated mainly by Jews and here Balbintska had been raised, in purely Jewish surroundings. One would have thought she would have decided to speak only Yiddish. However, in those days the youth had two choices: the more intellectually aware attached themselves to the socialist movement, became assimilated and called themselves Poles of the Mosaic faith. They spoke only Polish, believing that in this way they would solve all the Jews' eternal problems.

Balbina met my brother while they were dancing at a ball. They fell in love and married. My uncle Menachem Nachum considered himself a father to my brother. He did not want to

agree to the match because Bayla had no dowry. While her father did have a good business, he also had six daughters and two sons!

When Reb Laib Hershaft met with Menachem Nachum to discuss the match, they had a very piquant conversation which I shall try and reproduce:

'There are times,' said Reb Laib, 'when children are lucky with their father. And there are times when a father is lucky with his children. G-d blessed me with beautiful daughters, one more beautiful than the next, and your Chaim has chosen the most beautiful for himself. In effect, this is his dowry. As for the wedding, there is one thing I'd like to ask: Too many should not come from your family because a big hall costs a lot of money.'

'In other words,' said my uncle, 'without giving her anything, you want to get rid of your daughter.'

'Reb Menachem Nachum,' said Laib Hershaft, now more subdued. 'You can try. But you don't know my Baylaleh. If he has fallen for her then a thousand like you won't pull him away. Go ahead and try. You'll see. Have a good day. And remember: This is what I have. This is what I give. And that is what she gets.'

My uncle and aunt argued with Chaim constantly. 'What are you doing? How can a young man like you take such a responsibility upon himself? How does one take a wife without a dowry? What do you think, that your mother, a widow, will send you money?'

'Uncle,' said Chaim. 'I love her. I don't need any money and I will marry her.'



And as we all know, Chaim got what he wanted. They were married and Balbintska bore my brother two lovely children, while beginning to lean towards assimilation through only speaking Polish.

My brother was a tall young man and my sister-in-law was a bit shorter than him. She was a truly beautiful woman, with dark hair, a lovely delicate face and black burning eyes.

My brother wore a moustache like Kaiser Wilhelm II. He was broad-boned and looked like a butcher. When they walked down the street or sat in the theatre, people would stare at them and marvel at what a well-matched pair they were. Although she had a Semitic appearance, in his company she was not taken for Jewish. Despite all this, all their friends were Jews, though Balbintska made an effort to see they were assimilated Jews.

This was unfortunate for me and my life became difficult. I spoke Yiddish and Russian with my brother, but my sister-in-law demanded that I only speak to her in Polish.

After I had been staying with him several days, my brother began to argue that I should go back to Chelm. 'The strike is long ended and the whole thing is forgotten. There is nothing to fear,' he maintained. However, I insisted on remaining in Warsaw.

I continued to work in the bookstore and from time to time ran into the 'barracks'. I also saw Hannah'le at the party rooms quite often. Whatever was asked of us by the party we tried to carry out.

One day while we were at dinner, my brother Chaim said I would have to leave my job at the bookstore because he had a post for me at a leather-working factory. The factory owner, Weinfeld, was a friend of his. I would learn to make wallets and pocketbooks but would not receive money while I was learning. After two years, with G-d's help, I might become a *mensch.*

I could not talk with my brother very much because as eldest brother he acted as my father. Whatever he said, I had to do. So I went to Weinfeld and his factory.

To tell the truth the trade appealed to me. The factory was a large one, employed fifty workers and Weinfeld was the big name in the trade. The younger Weinfeld had just returned from Paris, where he had learned to make the latest models. In those days that factory produced the most beautiful goods in Warsaw.

I began to enjoy the trade. Within a few days I was standing at a table cutting little pocketbooks out of leather remnants. Within three weeks I had begun to feel like the second-in-command to the cutter, who had come from Paris.

'Shaulik,' he would say. 'Give this to Moshe. This give to Feivel. Give this to Berel. This give Avraham.' In that way I soon got to know all the workers in the factory, from the stitcher to the cutter. They all looked upon me as some sort of intellect.

Little by little I learned how much the Weinfelds paid for such good fast work. They had introduced the Parisian work tempo, in which not one second was wasted. When I found out how much workers with ten to fifteen years of experience were paid, I was convinced all the workers were being exploited.

I saw Hannah'le every other day so I discussed this with her, and later with another friend from the party. We decided to call a meeting of Weinfeld's factory workers in a restaurant on Carmelitzki Street, where we would discuss the situation. The meeting was called for a Saturday afternoon. As a factory insider, it fell to me to invite the workers, supposedly for a glass of coffee.

I did my work well. All the workers came for a glass of coffee. Comrade Rachmiel ran from table to table speaking to the adults, while Hannah'le and I occupied ourselves with the younger workers. It was decided that Comrade Rachmiel would present our demands for higher wages, and if the Weinfelds did not agree the factory would strike under the leadership of the Warsaw Social Democratic Party. Comrade Rachmiel presented the demands to Weinfeld, who had just come back from Paris.

That same day, Weinfeld called me over and sent me home from work, saying he would talk to my brother. My brother met with Weinfeld immediately to find out why I had been sent away. Weinfeld told my brother all about the strike preparations – apparently one of the workers had related every detail to him. Weinfeld said that if I had not been Chaim's brother, I would already be sitting in jail. Anyway, I was costing the Weinfelds too much money – and they didn't need any socialists in their factory.

Comrade Rachmiel did not have to do too much work with the Weinfelds. The strike lasted one day and they conceded to all the workers' demands. However, my career was finished. I was no longer a cutter of pocketbooks from the leather remnants in the large Weinfeld factory.

My brother Chaim was terribly upset by the whole affair. He took me to Uncle Menachem Nachum, who lectured me in Russian. 'What do you think?' he asked me. 'You yourself are still a nothing and you want to take care of the whole world?'

I had nothing to answer him and stood, foolishly. I thought to myself: here I was, a boy of fourteen, without a home, who had come to Warsaw to help the working class which had no idea how to help itself. Uncle interpreted my silence to be regret for my misdeeds.

My brother insisted I become a leather worker. And when he was stubborn over something, nothing helped. Two days after the conversation with Uncle Menachem Nachum, my brother hired me out to another leather manufacturer, a certain Herr Reichman.

Reichman was a common tradesman who could hardly sign his name properly. He employed two older workers and three boys in his 'factory'. The oldest, Gesundheit, was a skilled labourer but a very coarse and crude person. He used very low expressions in his discussions, and as he was the oldest the others looked up to him and tended to speak the same way.

Never in my life have I heard such underworld expressions and I was simply repulsed by them. Even today, when I recall Gesundheit and company, and their manner of speaking, I am sickened. I felt that if I stayed working at Reichman's I would forget everything I had learned and become a total boor. I recalled the blessing given to my late father by the Makarover Rebbe, in which he said that until the seventh generation there should be no boors or common labourers in

our family. Since I belonged to the third generation, I decided I must leave the factory.

I went with my brother to Uncle Menachem Nachum and explained what I was doing at work and what I would be learning there aside from a trade. I tried to point out that I could not work in such company.

Uncle took the tip of his beard into his mouth and mumbled to himself. Suddenly, as though getting up from a nap, he said to my brother, 'Chaim Borsovich, Shaulik was not born to be a labourer. He is too fine. You talk to Yuri Ivanovich. Perhaps he'll take him into the business to work together with you. If you like, I'll talk to him.' Uncle Menachem Nachum's word was holy for my brother. 'Uncle,' he replied, 'I think it would be best if I spoke to Ivan Ivanovich and you to Yuri Ivanovich.'

The entire conversation between my brother Chaim and Uncle Menachem Nachum was incomprehensible to me. I did not know who Yuri Ivanovich or Ivan Ivanovich were.

When we first came to Chelm and suffered such outrages there, my father decided he had to settle Chaim, his eldest son, in some way. Thus, Father had sent him to Uncle Menachem Nachum in Warsaw and paid for his food, clothing and education. For his part, Uncle had taken upon himself the responsibility to raise my brother and make a businessman out of him.

Chaim grew up alongside Uncle Menachem Nachum's four children and when he was old enough, he was taken into the business to learn commerce. Uncle always concerned himself with his welfare and tried to arrange things for his best interests. In this way, through Uncle's intervention,

Chaim came to work for the firm of Bratshya Arshak, whose owners were the afore-mentioned Yuri Ivanovich and Ivan Ivanovich.

The office was at 17 Leshno Street, Warsaw. Yuri Ivanovich was the oldest partner in the firm. Ivan Ivanovich, also a partner, was the son of Yuri's brother. The third partner was Yuri's older brother, Yasif Ivanovich. These three owned the business.

These were the Ivanoviches of whom Uncle and my brother had spoken. As a consequence of that conversation I was taken onto work in the firm of Bratshya Arshak, where I stayed for sixteen years.

The Ivanoviches were Slovaks and came from the area known today as the Czechoslovak Republic. It was of such people that the English Prime Minister Chamberlain spoke in 1938 when he said he knew of no such nation as the Slovaks. The result of which was that Hitler occupied that area and annexed it to the Third Reich. I already knew the Slovaks existed in 1905.

Before that the Slovaks were citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a kingdom ruled by Franz Yosef. The Austro-Hungarian powers did not allow the Slovaks to develop for political and religious reasons: the Slovaks were Catholic and the Austrians mainly Protestant.

By nature, the Slovaks were industrious and entrepreneurial. The Austro-Hungarians feared them and forced them to migrate, especially to Russia, where Czechs and Slovaks were always thought of as brother Slavs. Slovakian immigrants were warmly received by the Russians and helped with all they needed.

Newly arrived Slovaks occupied themselves mainly with the repair of metal utensils. They went around the courtyards calling out 'Metal repairs!' They carried all the necessary tools and did the repairs right on the spot. This trade was like second nature for most of the Slovaks. They performed their work quickly and well.

The more intelligent, especially those who had managed to bring some money out with them, bought horses and wagons and drove around among the villages and towns selling various goods.

In their desire to help their brother Slavs, the Russians bought everything from them. There were those who even took them into their homes, gave them food and drink and even presented them with a horse and a wagon. The Russians would say, 'Our brother Slavs are poor. We must help them.' Being very clever and thrifty, and with the help of the Russian people, the Slovaks made a lot of money which they deposited in a bank in Warsaw.

It is from these Slovaks that my new bosses, Yuri, Ivan and Yasif Ivanovich, stem. For many years they travelled the length and breadth of the land, all over Russia and Poland, knocking on doors in villages and towns to sell their goods. In this way they learned to know the land, its laws and customs, the Russian folk and their needs.



Shaul Rogowoj, c. 1955

EPILOGUE

My father's memoir arrived at a point in the story where he was reunited with his older brother Herman and had settled in Warsaw. He was employed by Bratshya Arshak as an apprentice and lived in a dormitory provided by the company. During the day he attended commercial school and when not in class was required to do menial tasks in the warehouse. As the years went on he was given more responsibility and ultimately became manager of a department.

In January 1915 he married my mother and in December of that year my sister Irene was born. He stayed with Bratshya Arshak until 1920 when, together with a number of partners, he started his own business in the same field. I was born in 1922 and around that time he made the decision to leave Europe. He started learning English and by the time he was able to get a permit to migrate to Australia he was fluent in that laguage, with barely an accent. He was already fluent in Russian, Polish, German and Yiddish.

In 1926 the small family left Poland and in July of that year arrived as new migrants in Australia. From the very beginning my father loved the country. Shortly after arriving he got a job with a cigarette and tobacco wholesaler. He established a new product range for the firm and even through the Depression of the 1930s we did not experience any hardship.

In 1932 he opened a retail cutlery shop in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, under the name Stanley Rogers Cutlery Specialists. All the merchandise was produced in Sheffield, England. The shop existed until the beginning of the Second World War, when the business went into hibernation.

As the war came to an end, goods started to arrive again from Sheffield and the business restarted, but this time as a wholesale enterprise selling to retail outlets.

In 1946 my father left for England. While there he established a buying office in London and bought a small cutlery processing factory in Sheffield. Upon his return I joined the firm and spent two years in London learning the business.

Over the years the business grew and the name Stanley Rogers gained increasing recognition as a manufacturer of high quality cutlery.

My father was a highly intelligent, charismatic man, well-read and eloquent. He was a good father and loving husband. Our home was a warm and friendly place and there were always visitors. My everlasting memories are of my father holding court around our dining room table surrounded by his Jewish contemporaries. The conversation was always in Yiddish and full of stories of Russia and Poland. I could listen for hours.

My mother adored him and called him *'mój król'* (my king). My mother died in 1954 after which my father was lost for a time. He spent more time in London but was never the same. He died in 1961 from a heart attack in Japan while on his way to New York to see his granddaughter Lucy, who was born in 1960. I carried the business on until 1998, when it was sold.

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William Rogers

GLOSSARY

Aleinu	the closing prayer of morning, afternoon and evening services
aliyah pl. aliyot	in the synagogue it means being called up to the *Torah*
Amidah	the standing before G-d prayer, central to Jewish liturgy
arba'kanfot	ritual garment for men
bimah	raised platform from which the *Torah* is read
bris	circumcision of Jewish boy
challot	loaves of braided egg bread
chazzan	cantor
cheder pl. chederim	Jewish primary school run by the community
cherem	excommunication
chilul Hashem	desecration of G-d's name
cholent	traditional Jewish stew
chometz	leavened food
Chumash	Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch
chutzpadik	insolent
dayan	judge

derech eretz	proper respect
Din Torah	holy court
Eretz Israel	the land of Israel
feldscher	a kind of paramedic
fleishig	kosher meat products
gabbai	sexton
galut	the diaspora
gaon	wise man/genius
gartel	belt
Gemara	a part of the *Talmud*
glitshka	the ball used in a game of the same name
goy pl. goyim /goyish	Gentile/s/like a Gentile
gymnasium	secular high school
Haftorah	a selection from the Prophets read after the *Torah* reading
Haskalah	Jewish Enlightenment (1770-1880)
Hassidim	Chassidic Jews
Kaddish	the mourner's prayer
kashrut	Jewish dietary laws
kiddush	literally 'sanctification'; the blessing said over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Sabbath or holiday, often accompanied by food
Kol Nidre	first prayer at the service on evening of *Yom Kippur*

kvitelach	notes of request for blessings from a rebbe
l'chaim	'to life'
Litvak	a Jew from Lithuania or neighbouring region
Maariv	evening prayers
Maftir	concluding section of the *Torah* reading on the Sabbath and holidays
Mazel tov!	Good luck
Megillah	the Scroll of Esther
melamed	teacher
melave malke	traditional meal at the end of *Shabbes*
menschen	decent humans
mezuzah	a small piece of parchment inscribed with biblical passages, affixed to door posts of Jewish homes/buildings
mikveh	ritual bath
milchig	kosher dairy products
Mincha	afternoon prayers
minyan	ten Jewish men over the age of thirteen required for reading the *Torah* and certain prayers
mitzvah	good deed
Musaf	additional prayers for the Sabbath and holiday services
nigun	literally 'melody'; a form of Jewish religious song or tune sung by groups

parsha	literally 'portion'; the section of the *Torah* read on the Sabbath or holidays
Pesach	Passover
Purim	holiday commemorating the saving of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire
rebbetzin	wife of a rabbi
schlimazel	a clumsy person
schmooze	talk
Sefer Torah	handwritten *Torah* scrolls
seudah	feast
Shabbes/Shabbos pl. *Shabbosim*	the Sabbath
Shabbosdik	keeping the laws of the Sabbath
Shacharis	morning prayers
shaigetz	offensive term for non-Jewish young man
shalach monos	gifts at Purim
shammes	assistant
Shechinah	divine presence
shirayim	leftovers
shnorrers	layabouts
shofar	ram's horn
shtender	lectern/book stand
shtibl pl. shtiblach	small prayer house/s
shtreimel	fur hat

Shulchan Aruch	Code of Jewish Law
Simchat Torah	holiday celebrating the giving of the *Torah*
tachlis	purpose
tallis	prayer shawl
Talmud Torahs	privately run Jewish primary schools
Tammuz	fourth month of the Jewish religious year
Tanach	the Jewish Bible, comprising the *Torah*, the Prophets and the Writings
tefillin	two small black boxes with black straps attached to them; Jewish men are required to place one box on their head and tie the other one on their arm
tish	literally 'table'; a gathering of Chassidic Jews
Tosefot	medieval commentaries on the *Talmud*
treife	non-kosher food
yachna	gossip
yahrzeit	anniversary of the death of a loved one
Yiddishkeit	Jewish culture
Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement
yom tov	religious holiday
zemiros	Sabbath songs

We do not know when Shaul Rogowoj began writing about his family and their life in Russia and Poland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; we only know that he never completed his work. After his death in 1961, his son William found a hand-written document in Yiddish, which he could not read. Almost ten years later he and his sister decided to have it translated into English. Only now is this memoir being published. It is an unearthed gem in the tradition of wonderful Yiddish storytelling.

When the Russian-born Rogowoj family move from the Pale of Settlement to Chelm, they face the long-standing prejudice of the Chelmites against better-educated Russians and their life is a constant battle. Shaul recounts the story of how his father, Berel, skilfully negotiates his way through the many trials the family faces in a style worthy of Sholom Aleichem, with instantly recognisable characters and much skull-duggery. Faced with the town's open aggression towards his family, as well as its snobbishness towards simple workers, Berel founds the Butcher's Synagogue, with a well-known Chassid, Avram Wolfson, as the rabbi.

When Berel dies at a young age, his nine-year-old son Shaul and his brother take over the business in order to support the large family. The child is as clever, cunning, hard-working and as just and true as his father could have wished him to be. Rabbi Wolfson becomes his mentor and his wisdom and kindness guide the young Shaul through many hardships. When Shaul helps organise the first strike for workers' rights in Chelm, Rabbi Wolfson advises him to leave for Warsaw, where he makes his way in life and work, and where the memoir ends.

We know that he migrated to Australia in 1926 with his wife and two children. The captain of the ship declared his name unpronounceable and renamed him Stanley Rogers. He went on to found Stanley Rogers and Son, cutlers and silversmiths, which manufactured Australia's most recognised brand of cutlery. His memoir reveals the intelligence and strength of character that made him such a successful and influential member of the Melbourne Jewish community.

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